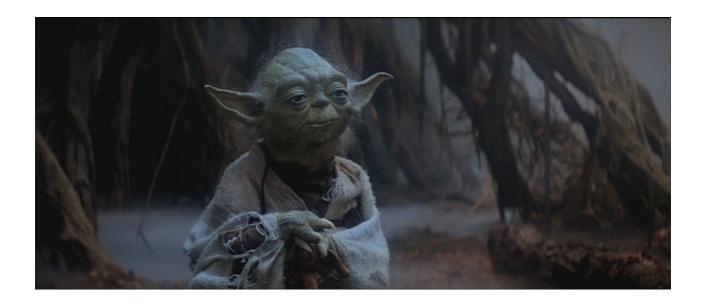# There is no try

Ok, so "try" is actually a pretty useful concept; there's a reason we have a very short word for it in the English language. Nevertheless, I have found it quite useful to occasionally spend a few weeks refusing to use the word "try" or any of its synonyms, at least when talking about myself, and especially when thinking about myself to myself.

This is a quick and easy way to put success in the background, as discussed last week. For example, compare these two responses to "what are you doing?"

> I'm trying to solve this math problem.

versus

> I'm pursuing a promising line of inquiry on this math problem. If it doesn't lead anywhere, I have two others to pursue next. If

For the first person, "failure" is either first or second on the list of things they expect to happen next: they're trying to solve the problem, and either they'll solve it, or they'll fail. If they fail, they can say "well, I tried", and move on. And because failing and moving on is such a prominent option, they must struggle against it each time they pause; they are like the person trying to sprint up and down a soccer field as much as they can, rather than the person playing soccer.

The second person, who does not have 'try' in their vocabulary, is forced to say what specific actions they are actually taking — and now, failure on the entire problem is much further down on the list of possible outcomes. Failure at this particular line of approach just drops them into the next line of approach. They're more like the person playing the soccer game, getting exercise ("trying to solve the problem") without that idea explicit in their mind. This sort of mindset, I find, is often helpful.

Imagine that I'm in the middle of flossing my teeth, when someone knocks on the door and asks what I'm doing. I wouldn't answer "trying to floss," I'd just answer "flossing" — unless I had been interrupted so many times that I was beginning to doubt my ability to complete the task. When we're sure of our ability to complete a task, we don't de-

scribe ourselves as "trying", we just *do it.* I don't get up every morning and try to dress myself, I just get up and dress myself.

Whenever you can honestly say that you are *doing,* rather than *trying,* then I suggest you do so — but often this is only honestly possible when you're quite confident in your own ability to succeed.

(Some self-help books and professionals advocate *always* saying that you are "doing" rather than "trying," but this often seems dishonest to me: when I'm trying to win a race, and I'm currently in tenth place, and you ask me what I'm doing, I have a hard time saying "winning a race" with a straight face.)

When removing 'try' and its synonyms from your vocabulary, you may find that you can't honestly say you're "solving a math problem," because you have no idea whether you'll succeed. And saying you're "working on a math problem" is only slightly better; it's mostly just using "working" as a synonym for "trying."

In these cases, if you want to remove the word 'try', I suggest not finding a near synonym, but increasing the granularity of your descriptions. Don't say "I'm trying to solve this math problem," say "I'm transforming the problem into a programming problem so I can see it from a different angle", or "I'm gameifying the problem so that my intuitions can get a better handle on it," or "I'm producing random algebraic

manipulations of this equation in desperate hope that one of them happens to be the answer," or "I'm staring at the problem waiting for my gut to say something for enough time to pass that I can give up without losing face." Describe what you're doing on the level of granularity where at each step you describe, it would be silly to say you were "trying" at that step, in the same way it would be silly to say that you wake up and try to dress yourself — describe your actions on a level of granularity where each step is definitely something you're *doing*, rather than *trying*.

Often, when I get down to the level of granularity where I'm doing rather than trying, I find that I'm doing something pretty silly — as in, I'll start out by saying "I'm trying to write the opening paragraph of this paper", and then I'll notice the word 'trying', and I'll introspect a bit and rephrase a bit and I'll eventually figure out that I was doing was "sitting in front of a screen holding the subject of the paper in my head waiting for my gut to figure out what to write" or something along those lines. With that description given, it's much easier for me to say "aha, my gut doesn't know what to write first; I'll make an outline on a whiteboard or some other place that feels non-committal."

"Try" is a useful word, but saying that you're "trying" to do something is a *high level description*, and it can often hide some very silly behaviors, like "sitting around staring at the problem waiting for enough time to pass that I can give up without losing face."

Occasionally, I tell people who come to me for advice that "try" is a fine and useful word, but saying that you're trying is something that *other* people get to say about *you*, not a thing that you get to say about yourself. *Others* get to say "they're trying to save that person's life," but *you* only get to say "I'm performing chest compressions while thinking back to remember my CPR training."

This isn't always the most useful advice; there is, after all, a reason why 'try' is such a short word. There are many situations where it's quite useful to communicate something like "I'm trying to prove this lemma; can you help?", and there are many other cases where it can be useful to use the word 'try' even when thinking about yourself to yourself. Nevertheless, there is a helpful sentiment buried in the above advice, and I have often found it useful to cash out my "try"s.

As such, I recommend, as an exercise, spending a few weeks refusing to use the word 'try'. This can help you train yourself to notice the difference between "trying" as in taking intelligent, concrete, fruitful actions; versus "trying" as in waiting for enough time to pass that you can safely say "well I tried."

This probably isn't what Yoda *actually* meant by "there is no try." Nevertheless, I like to imagine Luke nodding and saying "Oh, right; there is no try. I will close my eyes, relax, let the force flow through me, focus my mind, concentrate on a mental image of my X-wing, and then will it to lift, with no regard for its actual mass." That's the level of granularity at which you can tell whether a cashed-out "try" is a pre-emptive excuse for failure or an intelligent attempt to succeed.