

The Use of Creative Visualization in Martial Arts

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Introduction

Martial Arts is a multi-dimensional discipline that necessarily entails the incorporation of physical, mental, and spiritual development and training. Creative visualization is a technique used by many athletes to enhance their performance through mental imagery. Creative visualization can be applied not only in sports, but to all aspects of life. The combination of intensive physical training and creative visualization in martial arts will maximize a martial artist's true potential.

What is Creative Visualization?

Creative visualization is a method to improve physical abilities and achievements through the use of mental imagery. It leverages the power of positive thinking. The basis for creative visualization is that most of the barriers encountered by an athlete who thinks she has reached the limits of her physical potential are primarily psychological barriers rather than physical barriers. Creative visualization is a way to break down these psychological barriers by visualizing perfect execution of the techniques. The mental imagery carries the athlete past her unconsciously self-imposed physical limits. By using her imagination to exceed these limits, her physical body will respond in kind achieve the excellence that has been imagined.

In Robert Scaglione and William Cummins' book *Karate of Okinawa: Building Warrior Spirit*,¹ the authors cited a Russian study that was done just before the 1980 Olympics in Moscow where groups of athletes were subjected to varying levels of physical and mental training to determine the effect on overall performance improvement. In this study, the athletes were divided into four comparison groups:

1. 100% physical training.
2. 75 % physical training; 25% mental training.
3. 50% physical training; 50% mental training.
4. 25% physical training; 75% mental training.

The fourth group with 25% physical training and 75% mental training showed the most dramatic improvement, followed by the third group, then the second, and then last was the first group with 100% physical training.

A later study by Jing Yu and collaborators showed how 41 weeks of attentive concentration and imagination training improved the marksmanship performance of eight student athletes at the Shenyang Military Sports Academy.²

In his 1998 book, *Creative Visualization: Using Imagery and Imagination for Self-Transformation*, Ronald Shone writes:

*Mental limits, personal mental limits especially, generally lower performance. They act like a barrier. They are invariably psychological barriers and, as such, cannot be eliminated by more training or by logically analyzing the problem. They require a different technique altogether. Creative visualization, being a right-brain function, is well suited to this task.*³

Creative Visualization and the Brain

Creative visualization depends heavily on the power of suggestion. To understand how creative visualization works, we have to first understand the makeup of the brain. Our physical brain is made up of right and left hemispheres connected by a thick band of transverse nerve fibers called the *corpus callosum*.

The right side of the brain, often referred to as the creative or intuitive side, processes information as visual images, seeing the whole picture at once. The right brain controls the left side of the body and is responsible for intuition, emotions, creativity, spatial perception, symbols, geometry, images, pattern recognition, and imagination. A person who is “right-brained”, focuses on images and patterns, processes ideas simultaneously, makes lateral connections, sees the whole picture at once, and is better at remembering faces than names. The right brain is subjective and unconscious.

The left side of the brain, often referred to as the logical or analytical side, processes information logically step by step. The left brain controls the right side of the body and is responsible for logic, language, reading, writing, math, science, analysis, and rational thinking. A person who is “left-brained”, focuses on words and numbers, processes ideas sequentially, makes logical deductions, works through an issue one step at a time, and is better at remembering names than faces. The left brain functions much like a computer. The left brain is objective and conscious.

The corpus callosum is responsible for relaying information between the two halves of the brain. It

enables the images generated in the unconscious right brain to be processed by the conscious left brain. Because of the very different ways each half of the brain processes information, the two halves basically “speak different languages”. As such, although information is relayed from right side to left side and vice versa, the information is not always understood by the receiving side. The right brain may remember images that conflict with what the left brain logically understands, leading to feelings of internal conflict and in some instances, leading the person to do something “irrational”.

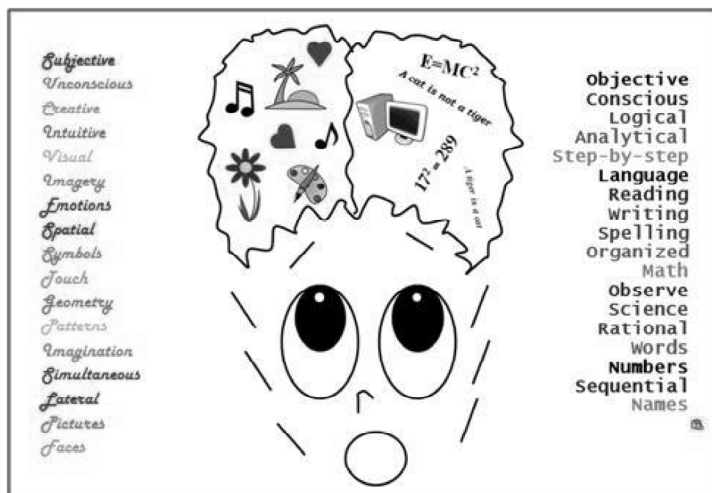


Figure 1: The Worlds of the Right and Left Brains

For example, a husband tells his wife that he is home late because he had to finish some work in the office. The wife's left brain will note that this is a logical explanation for the husband coming home late. The wife's right brain might note the husband's disheveled clothes, an unfamiliar scent on him, and

the untruthful tone to his voice. As a result, she slaps him and storms into the bedroom. Next day, all his belongings are out on the street. Is this an irrational response to her husband coming home late from work? It is! Because her left brain, which controls reason, would not have “understood” the outburst of emotion from the right brain or why she threw all her husband’s belongings out on the street as a response. However, the response was a natural reaction to the entire picture of what the brain (both halves) detected.

The power of suggestion depends on introducing ideas into the unconscious right brain to direct the body to respond accordingly. Hypnosis, for example, uses the power of suggestion on a subject in a hypnotic trance to induce the subject to display certain sets of behavior. The suggestions are implanted into the subject’s unconscious right brain. Because the subject is in a relaxed state, the flow of information from the right to the left hemisphere is unhindered by normal inhibitions. Similarly, creative visualization is a process by which images of oneself executing perfect techniques are created while the body is relaxed. The images generated in the unconscious right brain travel through the corpus callosum to be processed by the conscious left brain.

The Principles of Creative Visualization

In his book *Creative Visualization*, Ronald Shone lists 15 principles and proposals behind creative visualization⁴. These notions illustrate various approaches for tapping into the power of creative visualization to achieve previously unattainable goals.

1. Creative visualization is a subjective experience that uses imagery and imagination.

Subjectiveness, imagery, and imagination all are functions of the right brain. For creative visualization to work, subjectiveness is a key component. The subject has to surrender to the imagery being created.

2. Images can take many forms (e.g., visual, auditory, motor, tactile, gustatory, and olfactory), but the two most important are visual and auditory.

All five sensory functions are elements of the right brain. However, images by definition are visual, and thus the visual sense is the most important in this context. Auditory images take the shapes of “musical” landscapes in our right brain, and are the second most prevalent sensory map.

3. Images create corresponding body changes.

It does not matter whether the image is a memory or something unreal—the response can be equally effective.

Once an image is created, the image is communicated over the corpus callosum to the conscious left brain. Once the image is embedded in the consciousness, the body motor functions will respond in kind.

4. Images affect the body most if they are strong, clear, and the person believes in their influence.

The two hemispheres do not “speak” the same language. As such, any communication between the two hemispheres must be delivered clearly for proper interpretation.

5. Imagination can be trained by training the use of the right hemisphere of the brain.

This is obvious as imagination is primarily a right-brain function. The challenge is really HOW to train the right brain.

6. The will can be used to direct the imagination or oppose it. When the will opposes the imagination, then it is the imagination that will govern behavior.

For creative visualization to work, the will cannot oppose the imagination or the images generated in the right brain. The internal conflict created by the will opposing the created images would create too much distracting tension. As creative imagination is subjective, complete surrender to the created images is required.

7. Dreams belong to the subconscious and utilize features of the right hemisphere of the brain.

Because dreams are pure products of the right brain, we can learn from the substances of dreams what is required to effectively train the use of our right brain. Here are some characteristics of dreams:

Pictures are used almost exclusively in the conveyance of information.

Instead of remembering the names of the places you visited in your last vacation spot, picture what that spot looks like (the waves, the sun, and the beautiful coastline) and hear the sounds in your memory (the seagulls, the crash of the waves, and the sound of children running on the sand). You might

enhance the image by adding the smell of the sea and the feel of the sand between your toes.

You are the central character.

It is all about you. The person you are changing is yourself, so you have to be the main character. The image in your head that possesses the traits you desire is you. If the trait you want to change is to be less shy, then in your head, you have to be the life of the party. If what you really want is to execute a better flying side kick, then the image in your head is you executing the most perfect flying side kick on the bag—high in the air, body upright, kicking leg extended, supporting leg tucked, foot position perfectly angled downward, and the impact from the kick sending the bag flying against the wall.

Dreams are emotional and reflects our innermost hopes and desires.

Emotion is the fuel for the transformation. To be the image you generate, you have to really want it. More importantly, you have to really believe you can do it. If you doubt the picture, then you have lost half the battle.

- 8. There is in our personality a core that is the true self surrounded by the conscious and unconscious selves. The unconscious also includes the superconscious, and beyond all these is the collective unconscious. People rarely know their true self; they only know their false personality.**

In martial arts, the true self resides in the *center of Chi'*, which is a region about 2 inches below the navel.

There is a large amount of literature in martial arts that discusses the cultivation of Ch'i through the state of "*no mind*". In Zen and in *bushido*, the Japanese Art of War, the warrior strives to achieve the "no-thought, no-mind" state called *zazen*. In reality, the state of *zazen* is the state of "consciousness" where the warrior is tapped 100% into her unconscious right brain. The road to enlightenment must first achieve the *zazen* state.

The warrior is shaped by her experiences through life. These experiences create biases which effectively filter events through tainted lenses. By achieving the state of *zazen*, the warrior lets go of all her past experiences to sweep the corpus callosum bridges between her conscious and unconscious selves clear of debris. The unconscious is part of the "Collective Unconscious", which includes all the unconsciousness of everything around you. By clearing the road to the unconscious, the warrior has full access to the Collective Unconscious and can effectively alter the macrocosmic world through her inner mind.

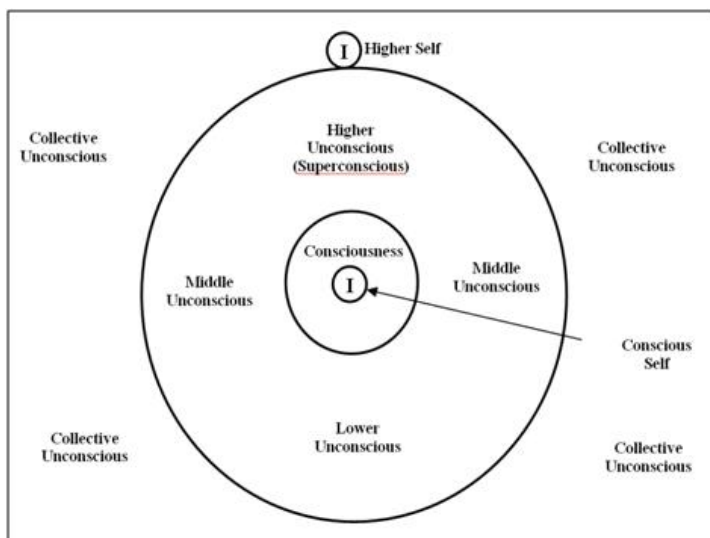


Figure 2: Mapping the Consciousness Mind

- 9. A person's personality has both a male and female component (the Yang and Yin), which can be called on in the form of "inner guides." These "inner guides" belong to the levels of consciousness beyond the conscious level.**

These inner guides are the complementary components of the "true self", which reside in the Center of Ch'i. The Yin is the rational "male" side. The Yang is the intuitive "female" side. Both align neatly with the characteristics of the two hemispheres. Whereas there is a yin and yang nature to one's true self, there is also a yin and yang nature to the Collective Unconscious.

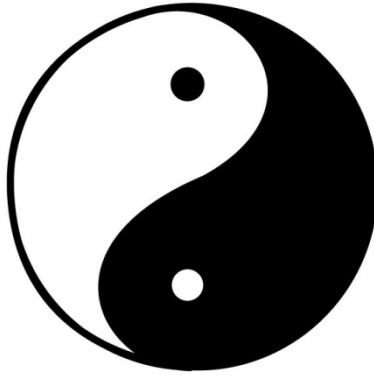


Figure 3: The “Great Ultimate” Tai Chi diagram of the Yin and Yang Symbols

Although the Yin and the Yang are opposite in nature, they complement each other completely. The dot in the belly of each part of the Yin-Yang symbol indicates the existence of a seed of the opposite nature even as one nature grows to its full potential.

10. Concentration and attention can be combined (in the form of one-pointed attention) to achieve efficient behavior.

The three features of one-pointed attention are concentration, attention, and complete absorption. To approach a task with one-pointed attention means to give that task your full and undivided attention. Anything not related to the task is put out of mind. One-pointed attention requires you to be fully and completely present for the task at hand.

In applying one-pointed attention to martial arts, it means giving your full and undivided focus and attention to each kick, strike, or throw that you execute. Nothing in the world matters except for the perfect execution of that technique.

11. Creative visualization employs goal-directed imagery to bring about desired outcomes. These can be for objects, lifestyles, and desired personality traits.

The process begins with a goal. Visualize yourself achieving that goal. If the goal is to break the world record in the 100-meter sprint, then you have to visualize yourself racing against and passing Usain Bolt of Jamaica, leaving him in the dust.

More importantly, believe that you can achieve that goal. Without believing in yourself, no amount of visualization will render your goal within reach. By believing, you can effectively break down the psychological barriers that are keeping you from achieving that goal.

12. Sports can utilize creative visualization to good advantage. It is the basis of inner games and autogenic training.

Creative visualization in sports is exactly the application for martial arts. An inner game is a game that you play in your head. In that game, every strategy is perfect. If the game is sparring, then you visualize responding to every technique with the perfect counter-technique. Every kick you throw is delivered with force and scores. Every head shot lands and is seen by every judge. In the inner game, you overcome all imperfections and get past every obstacle that is preventing you from achieving that goal.

Autogenic training is a relaxation technique that was introduced by German psychiatrist Johannes Schultz in 1932. The training involves daily meditative

sessions where the attention is focused on different areas of the body. The goal of the training is to restore the physical balance of the body.

Autogenic Training restores the balance between the activity of the sympathetic (flight or fight) and the parasympathetic (rest and digest) branches of the autonomic nervous system.⁵

When modified for sports, autogenic training not only brings balance to the limbs, but also promotes respiratory and cardiac balance. The program for the first two weeks of sports-modified autogenic training includes the following set of exercises:⁶

1. Encouraging feelings of heaviness (heaviness exercise).
2. Encouraging feelings of warmth (warmth exercise).
3. Encouraging feelings of calm and regular breathing (respiration exercise).
4. Encouraging feelings of a strong and quiet heartbeat (cardiac exercise).

For the first two sets of exercises, concentrate on the arms during the first week of practice and both the arms and legs during the second week of practice. In subsequent weeks, repeat the exercises above with additional exercises from regular autogenic training. This new regimen is:

1. Bring heaviness to both arms and legs.
2. Bring warmth to both arms and legs.
3. Calm and regular breathing.
4. Cardiac regulation.
5. Bring warmth to your solar plexus.
6. Bring coolness to your forehead.

Both inner games and autogenic training depends on creative visualization to work. By using autogenic training to balance the physical and creative visualization to drive the inner game, the athlete's performance will exceed any current physical limits.

13. A number of memory aids (e.g., link and peg systems) utilize creative visualization. A more recent development, also using creative visualization, is the construction of mental maps.

A mental map is a person's point-of-view of the world around them. Creative visualization can be used to change a person's mental map, effectively changing a person's view of themselves. Personal points of view are one of the main psychological barriers to overcome before full potential can be realized.

Most of us were introduced to the power of positive thinking at a tender age via the children's classic, *The Little Engine that Could*. A person that truly believes that she can do something will overcome all odds to succeed. A person that truly thinks she will fail will undoubtedly fail. It has been statistically proven that optimists tend to succeed 35% to 50% beyond normal while pessimists tend to fail.⁷

If you think you can do a thing or you think you can't a thing, you're right.⁸

14. Goal-directed visualization employs many features of the right hemisphere of the brain.

Goal-directed visualization requires that you clearly formulate a set of goals. To get what you want, you must know what you want. It is best to start with a list

of goals, then take the time to visualize the achievement of each goal separately. Each goal should be measurable. For example, putting down the goal of being “the best martial artist in the world” may be a bit too general. Instead, start with small goals such as perfecting the basic techniques (perfect front kick, perfect round-house kick, perfect spin-hook kick), then build up to loftier goals (use of techniques perfectly and effectively in a sparring match). As each set of goals is achieved, make the next list more ambitious. Eventually, the final list might just be “the best martial artist in the world”, but it is a series of achievements to get there.

15. Health can be improved by employing creative visualization.

Physiological responses are very closely linked to the mental state. If a person is depressed, the chances are that she will also feel ill. A person that is constantly ill should first look at her mental state. She may try visualizing a healthy and joyful body surrounded by light, and then anchor this image in her head. To help her with the image, she can surround herself with photos of her healthy self and happy times with loved ones.

Creative Visualization Techniques

Creative visualization is not complicated and yet it remains elusive to most people. The main problem is that it is simply hard for people to let go of old habits, which prevents them from realizing their true potential. The five steps for creative visualization are

simple: relax, visualize, focus, believe, and achieve. The first two steps are done to create and establish the image in your mind. The last three steps are done during the execution of your goal.

Relax

The body must be relaxed for creative visualization to work. Do the following to achieve a meditative state:

- Sit comfortably.
- Consciously relax each part of your body, starting with the extremities (fingers, toes), and then working up to your head.
- Clear your mind of everything and let go of stress build-up.
- Take slow, deep breaths.

Visualize

Imagine yourself achieving your goal. The image must be clear and the goal measurable. Once you have established the picture, retain it and keep coming back to the image throughout the day.

Focus

During the execution of your goal, use one-pointed attention to focus on the end result. Nothing in the world matters except for the ultimate achievement of that goal.

Believe

Believe with all your heart that you can achieve your goal. This is a very important step. Without this step, the created image is just a lie.

Achieve

Until you achieve your goal, repeatedly practice the preceding stages of creative visualization.

Application of Creative Visualization to the Martial Arts

The discussion of how creative visualization can be applied to martial arts has been discussed throughout this paper. Creative visualization does not replace the discipline of regular physical training. The martial artist must still undergo the rigors of intensive physical training in order to grow her skills. What creative visualization offers is a means to overcome psychological barriers that may prevent the martial artist from achieving her full potential. As some physical limitations are linked to mental or psychological blocks, creative visualization may also be effective for overcoming seemingly physical limitations as well.

Creative visualization should be a regular part of any martial arts training. After training, students should meditate on the lesson and visualize how they would execute the techniques covered in the lesson perfectly. Enhance a lesson with visual aids such as videos or photos. For the martial arts student trying to perfect a technique, print out photos or watch videos of a technique, then meditate on the visual images and replace the character in your imagination with yourself.

The instructor has to encourage the student with positive reinforcement, not negative criticism. Like *The*

Little Engine that Could, each student must realize that they have the potential to achieve the improbable in spite of their limitations. When the instructor believes in the student and offers positive reinforcement, the student will believe in herself and respond with success.

Conclusion

Creative visualization is not new to martial arts. The technique to use the power of the unconscious right brain dates as far back as the samurai era. The importance of the “no-thought, no-mind” state of *zazen* is included within every bushido and “Art of War” book ever written. Yet, the “western world” has discovered these techniques for unlocking the power of the unconscious to maximize potential only recently. While creative visualization does not replace the rigors of disciplined martial arts training, it is an additional tool that a martial artist should learn to use in order to overcome psychological and mental obstacles and allow to achieve her full potential.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Scaglione and Cummins, p. 15.
- ² Yu, Zhou and Cui.
- ³ Shone, p. 64.
- ⁴ Shone, pp. 34-35. Each of the subsequent subject headings corresponds exactly to one of Shone's principles, presented in the same cardinal order.
- ⁵ Autogenic Training.
- ⁶ Sport Modified Autogenic Training.
- ⁷ Wechsler.
- ⁸ Attributed to Henry Ford, as given in *Laura Moncur's Motivational Quotations*; posted online at <http://www.quotationspage.com/quote/2330.html>