

Getting Your Head Right

By Jonathan Roll

Copyright © ESKK® 2007 All Rights Reserved

Getting Your Head Right

By Jonathan Roll

This is Jonathan's Grade Assessment paper for his successful challenge to the rank of Sankyū in June 2008. A very informative piece, which looks at how personal emotions can affect both physical and mental performance.

I'll start this article with a disclaimer, just so you're all forewarned. Writing does not come very easily to me and is something that I always tend to avoid doing unless I absolutely have to. Even when I force myself and sit to put pen to paper I can only really write properly when in the right frame of mind. This is quite fortuitous really as it leads into the subject that I want to try and write about, that is how our mental or emotional state affects our physical/mental performance.

The main reason why I want to write about this over other more technical subjects is that it is something that can completely alter how any given training session can go. How many times have you walked into the dojo raring to train only for everything to go completely wrong leaving you frustrated and thoroughly annoyed with yourself? Conversely how many times have you forced yourself to train and found that everything, for some unknown reason, comes naturally to you leaving you feeling great?

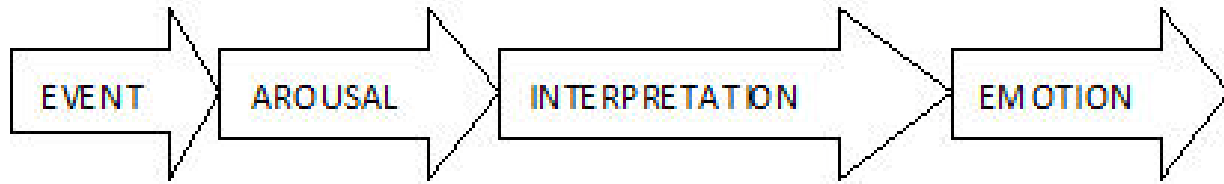
I don't think there's an easy answer to any of this but hopefully through the course of this article we'll be able to explore some of the factors involved, understand the reasoning behind it and develop methods to help it improve our training. With this in mind the first thing to look at is how our mind, emotions, and bodies fit or work together. I was surprised to find during my brief research into this subject that there is no definitive answer to this question and that multiple theories exist. I've attempted to summarise these below.

James-Lange Theory of Emotion

One of the earliest theories developed was the James-Lange theory that was the collective effort of two scholars (William James and Carl Lange) during the 19th century. It was recorded in 1884 and the following passage describes it in Carl Lange's own words,

"Common sense says, we lose our fortune, are sorry and weep; we meet a bear, are frightened and run; we are insulted by a rival, and angry we strike. The hypothesis here to be defended says that this order of sequence is incorrect ... and that the more rational statement is that we feel sorry because we cry, angry because we strike, afraid because we tremble ..."

What they're actually saying here is that our emotions are a direct response to a physical change in our body and that our emotions themselves do not trigger any physiological change. Breaking it down into its simplest form it looks something like this:



So for example we see a darkened alley, get a shiver up the spine and our bodies release a jolt of adrenaline. The result of this combined with our observations of our surroundings leads to our brain interpreting the conditions as something to be afraid of, hence we feel fear. This is essentially emotional conditioning that would cause a feeling based on a set of predetermined physical conditions, thus by recreating them you should surely be able to recreate the feeling. A good example of this is phobias. Many people have what can almost be called irrational fears about things that others aren't bothered about at all. If you're afraid of snakes, spiders, heights etc you see/experience them and each and every time you get the same reaction.

Lange goes on to state,

"Without the bodily states following on the perception, the latter would be purely cognitive in form, pale, colourless, destitute of emotional warmth. We might then see the bear, and judge it best to run, receive the insult and deem it right to strike, but we should not actually feel afraid or angry."

Here Lang is arguing that if we don't have a physiological response but merely react to a situation logically or based on precedent we wouldn't experience the full depth of emotion. I believe he's using this as a proof that his theory (event, physical, emotion) is correct. This would change the alley example to you receiving the shiver down your spine and judging that it is right to feel afraid without actually having had an elevated heartbeat or any of the other symptoms from an adrenaline release. It's the belief of this theory that perception follows bodily changes, or our bodies respond and we feel something because of it.

This theory has a number of problems associated with it in that namely physiological responses are relatively slow when compared to the speed of information transfer through the central nervous system. On top of this some physical responses are the same for events that are interpreted as good and bad (e.g. adrenaline – this is released when you're scared but is also released when you're excited, two very different emotions at opposite ends of the scale!).

Cannon-Bard Theory of Emotion

In the 1920's Walter Cannon and Phillip Bard devised an alternative theory that put the emotional sequence in a different order. They felt that following an event, an emotion would come first and be followed almost instantaneously by physiological changes. So for example, you see someone acting aggressively towards you, you feel scared/threatened and your body releases adrenaline etc preparing you for flight or fight.

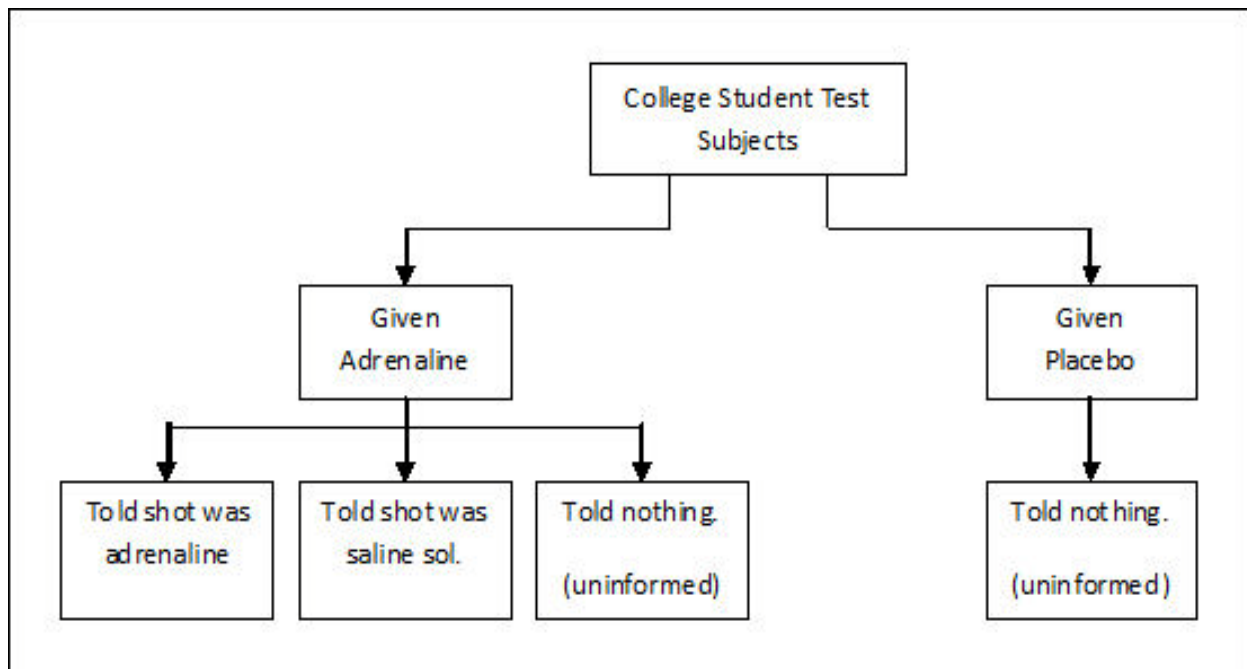
This system seems far more logical to me and would tend to agree with my own observations, e.g. when feeling frustrated during training I tend to tense up more using much more muscular tension in my techniques. I am not frustrated because I am tense; I am tense because I am frustrated. This has the effect of hampering them even more leading to more frustration, more tension etc. It becomes a vicious circle that can be very

difficult to break. The only real way to manage it is to completely detach from a situation and get your emotional balance back. I'll look at some of these techniques later on.

Psychologists, being the picky bunch that they are were still not happy as this theory does not give any solid reason for emotions being triggered in the first place. This led to the development of the third and final theory that I'm going to consider here.

Two-Factor Theory of Emotion

In the 1960's two psychologists (Stanley Schachter & Jerome Singer) conducted a series of experiments on college students and came up with the two-factor theory of emotion. The theory itself is best explained through a description of their experiment. They wanted to determine the influence of physiological change and rationality on emotion. All participants in the study received an injection of what they thought were vitamins. In actuality some of the subjects were injected with adrenaline whilst others were injected with saline solution. Those receiving the adrenaline shot entered a heightened state of awareness (increased heart rate, breathing etc) whilst the saline subjects had no physiological change. To further divide the groups they told some of the adrenaline subjects what changes to expect, misled others and some gave no additional information at all (see diagram below for group splits):



All subjects were then placed in a room with another person (who was part of the experiment) who acted either aggressively or playfully and they found that the misled or uninformed adrenaline subjects mimicked the actor's behaviour whilst the informed adrenaline subjects did not.

The theory that they developed from this is that emotions are determined not only by physiological change but also by the reasons we give for that change or what we believe to be true. A good example of this is the marked difference between those defined as cowards and heroes. Both will receive the same physical response but it's those that identify

positively with them who use it to help their situation that is seen as heroes whilst others relate the responses to fear and freeze up. These are two very different reactions to the same initiating event.

Now this is something that I really think makes sense and is something that can be used to help change ourselves to get out of negative behaviours. Training is a really good example of this theory in action as we're always going to trigger the same physiological changes in the body (e.g. elevated heartbeat, adrenal/endorphin release etc) because of the nature of exercise. If this were the only factor effecting our emotions we'd always have the same emotional reaction to a session. The reason we don't is because different frames of mind can be in place that will alter emotions and therefore the outcome of our training or how we personally see it. If we've had a bad day at work or an argument with a partner or any other bad experience heightening our senses will amplify that feeling. If we train with this negativity we will undoubtedly be much more critical of our own mistakes as our body will be subconsciously reasoning our heightened awareness is because of something bad. In reality our techniques may still be fine; it's just our perception of them that isn't.

The only way to get out of this situation is to get a positive spin and consciously force you to change that reasoning to something good or learn how to learn how to disengage emotions from training completely. It is not something that is easily done as it will have to rely on some sort of mental/emotional conditioning to get right. In the same vane if your mind is cluttered and unfocused it will be easily distracted which provides an opening for negative reasoning.

The subject of distractions is where I want to look next. We now know that during exercise, small distractions can be amplified and lead to negative thought patterns quite easily. The best way to counter this is to remove as many distractions as possible, which is easily said but not easily done. A lot of people use meditation to facilitate this in their day-to-day lives as it allows you to disengage from the world around you and regain your emotional balance. In this respect, meditation is a tried and tested technique. The problem is that we are genetically designed to absorb information from the world around us so for example if you hear something you immediately tend to turn towards it to see what it is. It is in the minds nature to do this and each time your senses detect more information you will subconsciously start to focus on it. This is not in itself a bad thing, it's a survival instinct that has served us well for centuries however it can serve to distract us when we least expect/want it.

This is something I have particular trouble with when performing kata in a crowded dojo. Usually when performing any kata after stepping into yoi position you have a couple of seconds to compose yourself and empty your mind. You're aware of your surroundings but not focused on anything in particular. The problems start when you get to a point where you cross paths with a fellow student. Your focus immediately switches to them and off the kata that you're performing stopping your mind and in the worst case you end up forgetting the kata completely.

The best way I've ever heard this phenomenon described is through the theory of stopping or still minds which is described in "The Unfettered Mind" by Takuan Soho. The mind is discussed in this work as something that should be malleable in that it constantly moves and never stops or settles on one thing. One of the examples used within the text is that of a swordsman engage in a duel, if he focuses on his opponent's blade that is where his mind goes to and it stops trapping him there and so he loses. Similarly if he focus on his opponent, his mind will also stop leaving him vulnerable and at a disadvantage. This concept is exactly the same as the one I came across when getting caught out during kata performance. I believe that moods or emotions will act in a similar way with the stopping mind theory. By attaching to an emotion you focus on it, and by doing so prevent yourself

from committing 100% on the technique at hand. Soho's answer to this problem is to develop a state of no mind which is best described as detached awareness. In this state you know what is going on around you and you act on it but don't allow any emotional attachment to the events. In the two part theory this would require you to condition yourself to repress the reasoning part of the process. Rather than figuring out whether you're happy or sad you just react.

To develop your mind to achieve a state of no mind will take years of practice and can only really be achieved through constant application. On paper it looks incredibly desirable, by turning off our emotions we get all the bonuses of physiological responses to situations without the risk of getting mentally bogged down. This is an area that I haven't really delved into during my own training yet and the brief exposure I have had suggests that it is a far deeper subject than I can ever hope to go into here. Having greater emotional control is obviously beneficial not just in karate terms but also in terms of our lives outside of the dojo.

My worry is that by suppressing our reasoning and by association our emotions we risk taking out a fundamental part of what makes us what we are. One of the best things about us as humans is our ability to feel both such a vast range of emotion and to feel it with such passion that calls to the very centre of what we are. Whilst I can see the obvious advantages of controlling the extremes of our feelings I can't help but worry that we'll lose something of ourselves by suppressing them. These fears are most likely groundless and born of my lack of experience and understanding. It is definitely something I would like to investigate further at a more appropriate time but for now let's continue with the subject at hand.

We've considered many different theories of how the mind can work in conjunction with our bodies and emotions. Now I'd like to move on and look at ways we can mentally train to try and improve our overall performance. One of the best ways of training the mind is through meditation, which is one of the many reasons we do it at the beginning of every class. Meditation seeks to clear the mind and does this by assuming any number of stationary postures and detaching from your surroundings or focusing on one particular point to the exclusion of all else (typically breathing).

This is a very good way to develop the skills needed to detach from negative emotions and gives you a good start on the path to the no mind mentality mentioned above as it helps to train your mind to remove distractions. You're probably all familiar with the phrase that goes along the lines of, "focus on nothing, see everything", that is what I believe the concept of no mind is trying to teach us and what meditation helps us step towards.

The main problem with mediation is that it is not something that is easily translated into line work or any other activities, at least initially anyway. It can take many years of practice to condition the mind to allow you to slip into a medative state in active situations so what can we do in the mean time to help our techniques? If you start to get frustrated whilst training it has a tendency to whirlpool out of control, as you will get more and more annoyed as time goes on (i.e. the vicious cycle we talked about earlier).

If you have the option your best bet is to take a time out and try to re-find your centre and calm down (using tools like stationary meditation or simply taking a 10 minute break to do something else). When this is not possible remember the philosophy behind the one hit one kill principle, i.e. with every technique you perform give 100% effort but as soon as its thrown you forget it and put everything into the next one. That way you will leave be attempting to leave behind any emotional attachments so you're always starting with a clean mental slate.

Another option is to attempt increase our affinity with meditation by applying it to as many situations as possible. It stands to reason that the more we use it the better we'll get. I've found personally that I tend to use this during periods of physical duress, namely the attribute training sessions. When performing stamina punches or any other physically draining technique, mentally zoning out makes it much easier to keep a steady rhythm going.

In addition during our pre-arranged techniques (Yakusoku Gumite Shodan) in the technical sessions we constantly apply mental pressure focusing on our opponent and our surroundings, which is also a type of meditative state. We develop these skills almost subconsciously so by bringing them into the limelight and focusing on them for what they are we can make a conscious effort to develop them further.

If you find your techniques are consistently feeling wrong this is not a bad thing and is definitely not something to feel frustrated about. Half the battle with any technique is learning what is not right rather than what is and by applying this positive spin it can help keep you in the right frame of mind to allow progress. If you simply switch straight to anger or frustration you'll cease to get anything positive from the session and it would probably be more beneficial to stop and either calm down or move onto something else.

Another successful technique that has been used by many different sports is visualisation. If you picture yourself doing something in a particular way more often than not you'll end up doing it that way. This is half the reason why frustration leads to further frustration, if you believe you're doing a technique wrong, you see yourself doing it wrong and subconsciously predict that it will happen again putting you in that downward spiral that is so hard to get out of. If you look at the gross movements of any technique does it resemble anything you've seen before?

A really good example of this is a hook punch where rather than just throwing the punch; imagine you are throwing a really heavy stone. I can almost guarantee that you'll instantly get an improvement in the next technique. The reason for this is that it's a movement you can already relate to and in addition by imagining heavy weights your body will set itself up structurally to cope with that weight when the technique is thrown giving you a much stronger punch.

Another application of visualisation is viewing yourself from a 3rd person perspective. For anyone who's ever had the opportunity to teach part of a class this is may be a bit easier to relate to. When you watch someone else for faults you look at the whole body, not just the limb performing the technique and usually view it from a number of different angles. If you can apply this analysis to yourself you'll be able to iron out many more flaws. Initially it may be easier to start using a mirror to help physically see your position but if you can do the same mentally you can influence the technique before it's even thrown!

This concludes my article on the effects of mental/emotional attributes on physical training. It is by no means a conclusive piece and if anything the journey I've travelled whilst writing it has opened my eyes to far more areas than I originally knew existed. Thank you for taking the time to read my words and I hope you can find something useful to take from it.