The Point: Mushin (Part Two)

by Bill Handren

"The two year old child is furious and coming at you with a hammer meaning to get revenge. Without thought, you take away the hammer. To do it with the big, angry twenty year old without thought, is mushin".....Rich Stamper.

I started reading Watch My Back by Geoff Thompson and could not put it down. Not an exaggeration. It was almost like he was writing to me. Mr. Thompson had also been looking for the elusive mushin and had huge self doubts about himself. However, he did what few are willing to do. He took a job as a nightclub doorman in the worst, most violent area in England to find the answers. He eventually became a living legend and one of the most sought out self-defense teachers in the world.
Mr. Thompson, like most of us, mistook the adrenaline rush that comes from confrontation as fear. However, he eventually came to realize it is simply a normal response by the body. Rather than fight it, he learned to control it and use it to his advantage.

Could this be my answer? The hopes that I would someday have the cool of a James Bond as I mindlessly dispatch several opponents certainly wasn't working. I was going in the wrong direction. I was trying to suppress a natural response and I disappointed myself every time. Of course, like any buffoon, I would have to self-experiment a bit with this. That is, to allow confrontations to happen, maybe even encourage them and see how the concept works. With a little practice, it became fairly easy to channel the adrenaline into an aid. I started looking for the rush each time. Using it. Welcoming it. Controlling it. Convincing myself I had a secret weapon which made me faster, stronger and more pain resistant.

The key is control, not elimination. It was about an entirely different mindset where one recognizes the body is preparing you by shooting a powerful drug into your system. A performance enhancer of sorts. It became a sort of Phineas and Ferb "wait for it" moment.

Mushin, or no mind may be a misnomer. Or it may be an exaggeration perpetuated by pseudo-masters of the arts. I suppose a person like Miyamoto Musashi could have reached it. After all, sixty fights to the death should have de-sensitized him a bit. But, we aren't Musashi. We are working folks who have families and responsibilities. Something much more workable is in order.

The Yerkes - Dodson Law is about arousal and how it affects performance. Too little arousal and we may do poorly. Too much arousal and we may do poorly. The law is usually illustrated by an inverted U. For simple or well learned tasks, performance improves with arousal. If, say, I was trying to set a world record in the deadlift which is the act of simply lifting a weight off the floor, I would want flat out arousal. I would want every fiber in my body psyched. There is no such thing as too much arousal for the act of lifting a maximum weight and standing up with it. It is a very rare exception to the curve however. A simple gross motor skill which is almost entirely strength based would do well with extreme arousal. I would not want that level of arousal if I were to perform a violin solo in front of an audience. I need to be somewhat aroused to put my heart and soul into the musical piece, but past a certain point my performance would be ruined.

To approach combat from the standpoint of mushin, or no mind may be the single most mis-interpreted concept in the martial arts. Control mind is more accurate. Adrenaline will most definitely improve martial art skills. There have been several times where I was very angry at people and when I did my workout I was faster and stronger than normal. But, past a certain point, the opposite happens.

Many wax eloquently about reaching mushin during kata. Most of us will eventually be able to pay very little attention to a task after awhile. I've made mental grocery lists while doing kata. But I do not consider this mushin. Wyatt Earp wrote about how his mind moved slowly although his body was moving as fast as it could during gunfights. A controlled, somewhat detached awareness. The time distortion was, of course, caused by adrenaline. But Earp still functioned well enough to prevail and I suspect this was due to maintaining enough control to hit what he aimed at. He knew from experience the physiological changes which would occur when the bullets started flying. And, knowing ahead of time allowed him to cope. Much like Musashi, I would expect Earp functioned better with each subsequent encounter.

So, can the karateka reach Mushin? I seriously doubt it unless he or she works in a world of life or death violence for many years. Perhaps the best we can strive for is the ability to control our arousal levels with a few simple techniques such as tactical breathing and mental rehearsal of violent encounters. Injecting stress into training is something the military has always done. It teaches how to work through chaos by immersing the trainee into high stress situations. Through training we can better handle the stress and the adverse effects are lessened.

The safest place I go is the dojo. We practice in a church and I am among friends. It simply isn't possible to create the

environment where a life or death encounter will occur. The environment is sterile. Yet, there may be a blueprint of sorts to get us close to the ideal warrior state.

First, the longer we practice our art, the more ingrained it will become. And the better ingrained, the more tolerant to stress it becomes. It will become reflexive to a certain point. Next, we increase the stress and eventually learn to function in that environment. The second part is the hard one. It depends on how far you are willing to push it.

Mushin only has relevance when one can produce the state in a life or death situation Take a job as a bouncer in a biker bar? That would do it. All else is make-believe.