The Point: Mushin (Part One)

by Bill Handren

”Most of one's life is one prolonged effort to prevent oneself thinking.".....Aldous Huxley

It's six A.M. My last night shift is over. I love the twelve hour shifts because I have more days off, but they are exhausting. My twenty minute drive home will be much longer this morning; there is a snowstorm. I work out this morning and I am not excited about it. It isn't just a karate day, it's also a weight training day. I want to go to sleep when I get home, but I will be in no shape for anything after a nap. To make matters worse, I have company in the back seat. Body, Mind and Spirit are arguing like a bunch of school children about whether we should skip this morning's workout.
"It's been a long night, he could end up with an injury. Let's do it later," Mind argues. "Yes", says Spirit, "but trying to get started after a nap will make it worse." Mind searches for a logical rebuttal; "How about we take a nap, move around for a few hours afterwards, then hit it?" These two are the worst; Mind and Spirit are always looking for excuses to not train. If I weren't so tired, I'd reach around and slap them. Body never says much. He isn't the decision maker among the three. Mind and Spirit finally decide to give the workout a token try - not really skipping, but not really trying either. Pleased with their cowardly compromise, they quiet down. The decision has been made.

We're home. I will have several hours of snow shoveling later. My ambition bottoms out. Off with the work clothes, on with the workout clothes and downstairs to the gym. Mind and Sprit are exceptionally quiet now. Figures. They are good at talking, then bail on Body when he needs them most. Body is on his own; there will be no encouragement from Spirit, no rationalizing from Mind. The conductors are napping while the train moves on its own.

Squats are first. The king of all exercises. They are the hardest. Self-inflicted brutality. Get them out of the way and the rest of the workout will seem easier. I drop under the racked barbell and stand. Whoa! Did I forget to put some 45's on the bar? No, I can see them in the mirrors across the room. The weight seems almost light. I drop down slowly and to my surprise, no pain. There is always pain, but not now. Perfect form all the way down and back up. Smooth.

Mind and Spirit are sound asleep. Body is grinning. "If those two arguing fools would leave me alone, it would always be like this", he whispers. "They think too much, so I punish them." I understand. He's telling me it is thought which magnifies discomfort. I am now a passenger being taken for a ride. It is almost as if I am watching the workout being done by someone else. I am only dimly aware it is me doing the work. I keep my mouth shut and just watch. I get to enjoy for a change.

What started out as an almost aborted session becomes a non-stop, heart pounding workout. No thought, just do. No aches. No discomfort. There aren't any feelings when Mind and Spirit are absent. Emotional numbness sets in and the body performs like a trained monkey.

Another quick change from wet weight training clothes into my gi and I am back at it. Mind and Spirit are still sawing logs, Body is chomping at the bit like Seabiscuit. Body takes me through an hour and a half of non-stop fury. Mind and Spirit must be waking up because I am starting to wonder whether my heart will take much more of this. Then it ends. It has been two hours of thought free sweating.

Is this a glimpse into Mushin? Maybe. I don't know. Can I repeat this the next time? Not likely. The only time I can shut down the interference from my thinking is when I am near exhaustion. When I am simply too tired to care. It happens every few months. My head sort of collapses and my body becomes free from thought. Sort of like a drunk hitting bottom and turning his problems over to a higher power. I realized decades ago that the single greatest limiting factor to training hard is thought. Ouch, that hurts - maybe I can do this tomorrow-is this really necessary?-it's just one missed workout. All sorts of thoughts which undermine.

Many years ago, a monk quietly sat in lotus. His fellow monks doused him in gasoline as he meditated. The seated monk then set himself on fire and sat motionless as he died. The photographs horrified the world. I was mesmerized. How does one reach such a state of almost superhuman detachment? Could I? So far, the answer is: not even close. I can barely dial a phone number if the TV is too loud. So much for detachment and the ability to focus. Homer Simpson has a longer attention span.

But, how do I get there? Meditation? Hard training? Doing Sanchin under ice cold waterfalls as Gogen Yamaguchi did? I would most likely just develop pneumonia.

So, my time has just about run out. I know where I need to be, I just cannot do it at will. But, maybe that is really the answer. One isn't supposed to overcome mind and spirit. Perhaps it is these two who keep the body from destroying itself. That pain and rationalization are safeguards. When all three don't work together there is an imbalance. And, in the later years, you are left with the daily reminders of an exercise in futility.

Maybe mushin is a state reserved for truly desperate moments. For those moments when you are willing to die for someone or something. We may be allowed a glimpse into that state, but to achieve it at will is wishful thinking.

Unless you are a monk, perhaps a different approach is the answer.....