

Thoughts on Balance – A Personal Story

“Life Out of Balance”

There is a Hopi Indian word - ***Koyaanisqatsi*** – literally meaning an ‘unbalanced life’. It is the title given to a 1982 American film and is the first film in a Trilogy called the ***‘Qatsi Trilogy’***. The film consists primarily of slow motion and time-lapse photography of natural landscapes and cities across the United States. The film is a visual tone poem containing neither dialogue nor vocalized narration: its’ narrative tone is set by the juxtaposition of images with music. It is a commentary on our *civilized life*.

In a physical sense, our sense of **Balance** is what helps prevent us from falling. Balance keeps us upright and moving in a controlled and purposeful manner. We normally do not think about our balance, unless we feel out-of-balance or suddenly lose our balance, if we trip or fall. Our ability to maintain physical balance is the result of the brain constantly processing impulses from our **visual system** (eyes), our **vestibular system** (inner ears that function as a gyroscope) and our **proprioception** (sensations from our muscles, joints and skin). Our ability to remain physically *in-balance* and therefore, *in-control*, is the result of ALL three of these systems simultaneously working together to keep us grounded or rooted, so we do not fall over.

But what happens if one of these three systems seriously malfunctions? Our body suddenly becomes ‘out of balance’. We lose our sense of being grounded and we may lose our physical ability to remain upright, especially when in motion. Blindness or a stroke or vertigo are examples that can turn your world suddenly upside down, literally.

Personal Story

For purpose of illustration as to how important *balance* is in our lives, I would like to share a personal experience. It is a testimony to the power of our brain and the incredible role of neurogenesis and potential developing new synaptic pathways in our brain. Over 25 years ago my wife and I were vacationing with friends on their yacht along the coast of France. They were all swimming near the transom and I did a forward flip into the water. I am an experienced swimmer, but in a nanosecond panic hit me. I suddenly realized I did not know where the direction to the water’s surface. After what seemed like an eternity I focused and let my lungs exhale and followed my air bubbles to the surface. My wife was literally a few feet away and she had no immediate awareness that I was in danger of drowning. My vestibular system had failed.

Upon returning home I underwent extensive testing and learned I had NO nerve conduction between my inner ear and brainstem. I had been having brief episodes of vertigo in the months preceding my trip, but now I was physically navigating by only my eyesight and proprioception. My brain was struggling to keep me upright and moving without falling. My life changed dramatically: I had to quit flying my twin engine plane, stop ocean sail racing (especially at night), no more physical sports; even driving a car was difficult, because of all the *unfiltered and undampened* visual impulses my brain was receiving. I could safely say, my life was physically “*out of balance*”. And that physical loss of balance threatened my place in my world, as I previously had known it.

I was introduced to a man named Jeff, who is a master in the study and practice of **Tai Chi**. Jeff agreed to be my teacher or *sensei* and I studied under him for 10 years. The first drill Jeff gave me was on a basketball court. He had me stand on one sideline and walk to the other – a distance of 50 ft. No big deal; however, I was to walk as slow as I could and without stopping. I walked so slow I thought it took forever – 25 sec.! He told me to try it again, but this time do it in 2 minutes! I could not walk that slowly without falling. I was fighting both my personality (“do it now, do it well”) and my physical handicap.

The key to learning slow purposeful movements was learning to maintain a constant focus (mindfulness) and practice, practice, practice. I was committed. I wanted as much of my physical life back as I could achieve. Slowly, my brain learned to reinterpret the visual and proprioception impulses without the aid of my inner ear vestibular function. Over the subsequent years I learned to walk that 50 ft. distance - in 5 minutes! In training to excel at any activity (and especially the martial arts) purposeful action and reaction must become effortless and reflexive. Jeff would say: *do without thinking - spontaneously*. I discovered not only the power of physically *rooting* to the earth, but how to experience the sense of flexibility in my movements and my thoughts – like a tree rooted in the ground being able to bend in powerful winds without breaking. The feeling of being rooted allows you to be *centered* in your world, while possessing the flexibility to interact with the forces around you and without the sense of breaking or as is commonly referred to: *feeling stressed*. (I refer you to my article: “*Meditation - Exactly What Is It?*” and learn about **wu-wei**, pronounced ‘ooo-way’ and **de**, pronounced ‘duh’.)

As I progressed towards my goal of functioning again in the physical world with a workable sense of balance, I also learned something completely unintended. From the mindful practice of Tai Chi I gradually acquired a sense of inner calmness that led to my developing the skill of meditation. Tai Chi is an amazing form of exercise. It is a moving form of meditation that benefits our body strength and coordination, our mind and our spirit and allows us to better function in our daily life with more mindfulness, less stress and reduced risk of injury from accidentally falling, especially as we age.

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