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## **Thinking in the Martial Arts**

In martial arts (MA), intellect is too often discredited in favor of intuition. Smart people, it's said, often over-analyze and don't do well. Practitioners are cautioned that thoughts can be distracting or restrictive, and are encouraged instead to "turn within," simply "let the fight happen," and emphasize their unconscious.

This contains pieces of truth, but it also disparages the role of deliberation and analysis in MA. By reducing thought to a rigid preplanning and perfectionism, this view would suggest that MA is a world where you more or less feel your way forward. In fact and particularly in JKD/FMA, you must use your intellect diligently if you want to train and fight well, though you'll use it differently in learning and in combat.

Here "use your intellect" doesn't mean thinking deep thoughts or pondering your next 5-step takedown. Thinking is a very broad activity: it includes grasping principles, honing your training, cuing your subconscious and managing a fight.

There are various mental aspects to MA - psychological, perceptive, proprioceptive, and intellectual. The intellectual aspect helps you assimilate training to gain expertise. Intuition is certainly involved, but intuition comes from processed experience, i.e., careful observation and intelligent practice. You need to grow your ability to automatically recognize and react to certain situations and patterns, and you do this by discovering essentials and tracing their connections across a chain of muscle feedback, footwork, and fighting systems: in a word, thinking. Thinking reveals principles so

you won't be rule-bound or drill-bound. Thinking points out how you, as an individual, need to train and prepare. Connecting the dots deeply internalizes your knowledge and enables you to adapt.

Of course, your thinking needs to be grounded — you shouldn't expect to fully understand every technique immediately, for example. **The point here is that to acquire skill anywhere beyond entry level, you need to do a lot of thinking.**

The goal is to automatize, to ingrain highly effective skills and fight 'intuitively', without worrying about details. To do this you need to deliberate up front, to link ideas and concretes across a range of physical and abstract levels.

Blind practice gets you nowhere — a drill monkey doesn't have skill apart from doing the drill. Modeling is vital but insufficient. You need to think things through enough and integrate your experiences so that you understand what you're doing and how to apply it — from dumog biomechanics to concentration in combat.

Examples of analysis: (1) After class, *sum up principles* (e.g., specific timing, body mechanics) -- what's important about this lesson? Where and how can you apply these principles in personal practice? (2) *Understand the details* in the techniques — set aside time to test them, or adaptations of them, and discover how to make them work for yourself. If you can't master them, ask your teacher and find out why. (3) Extra credit: relate these principles to the fighting system, and compare them to different systems. Is one a better choice over another? When is that optional?

OK, but what about thinking while in actual combat? Learning and training occur in phases, with each phase demanding different thought and focus. In fighting or performing, the thinking you do is different still.

One training phase is free-style practice, which helps you drop fixed patterns and preconceptions. There's an analogy here with correct grammar and speech: your ability to speak smoothly is the result of your past thinking and practice. Just as you don't consciously worry about grammar detail in conversations, free-style lets you focus on one or two elements — footwork or entries, for example — while your subconscious handles the necessary body mechanics and boxing combinations that you've already mastered. Slowly your "grammar" flows and becomes and more diverse, freeing your intellect to monitor your high-order goals.

When you train, you necessarily fixate and consciously attempt to duplicate some pattern. You train by following strict methodologies; but you fight by ***responding, adapting and managing***. In a fight, a correct reflexive response (built from earlier critical thought and intelligent practice) should be unthinking; fight management (e.g., tactics) requires active, conscious judgment; adaptation (involving automatic recognition as well as conscious judgment) is a mixture.

**In combat, you don't want to think about details of how you *should* be moving.** Your attention and connection during training should have ingrained that. Thinking, in the sense of perfecting techniques or projecting preconceived moves, interferes with execution. In combat you want to see and hear and feel everything about the confrontation, and respond within the confines of a clear goal and strategy. You discard details and pay attention to the goal.

To be effective we follow different conscious activities based on objectives and availability of time. In training and learning, our thinking objectives should be:

Observation

Analysis

Optimization

...according to the principles of the art. This is all homework. But in combat or sparring or demo-ing, we don't have the luxury of time for detail, and the way we use our minds is very different:

Concentration

Fight Management (e.g. pacing)

...so that we are hyper-aware of our immediate situation and control the outcome at a high level. Concentration is not thinking, in the sense of step-by-step reasoning; rather, within MA, it's another form of mental management: intently directing your mind to be alert to immediate threats and opportunities. You want to smoothly tap into all your automatized, assimilated experience. This is a professional's skill, the dismissal of details — a skill impossible without clear thinking and intelligent practice.

To sum up: thinking doesn't mean being rule-bound, or taking preconceptions into a fight. Analytical thinking is no substitute for acquired, automatic combat skills. But (1) Sherlock-style observation and critical thinking during training are essential to build expertise and intuitive responses in JKD/FMA, and (2) during actual execution, thinking in the sense of mental management is absolutely necessary.