

Mushin is often translated as 'No Mind' and refers to the state that a combatant enters into when he has transcended the need to focus on the particulars of his opponent's or his own movements and is able to respond without conscious thought. Fear, fatigue, and other emotions disappear from the combatant's mind and time slows down leaving him to focus only on defeating his adversary.

Miyamoto Musashi, the legendary seventeenth century Japanese warrior, describes the state of Mushin as follows:

- Not letting the mind be influenced by the state of the body.
- Keeping the mind calm, even when you are moving rapidly.
- Holding back the mind while launching the body into movement.
- Keeping hold of the depth or core of the mind while letting the mind go.
- Taking the initiative of a movement of attack in order to bring about a collapse in the will of your opponent.
- Keeping the mind calm in the midst of violent movements.
- A mind that is strong, unmoving, and calm, whose vigilance is a wakefulness devoid of useless tension, becomes clear when it is necessary. This is the fundamental state.

Although the term is usually thought of as applying to samurai or martial artists, it is common in other forms of combat and a broad range of human activities.

Chuck Yeager, a fighter pilot who flew against the Luftwaffe in the World War Two, describes the state of Mushin when he relates how it felt to engage German fighter planes with his P51 Mustang: "... I knew that dogfighting was what I was born to do. It's almost impossible to explain the feeling: it's as if you were one with that Mustang, an extension of that damned throttle. You flew that thing on a fine feathered edge, knowing that the pilot who won had the better feel for his airplane and the skill to get the most out of it. You were so wired into that airplane that you flew it to the limit of its specs, where firing your guns could cause a stall. You felt that engine in your bones, felt it nibbling toward a stall, throttle wide open, getting maximum maneuvering performance. And you knew how tight to turn before the Mustang snapped out on you, a punishment if you blundered. Maximum power, lift, and maneuverability were achieved by instinctive flying: you knew your horse. Concentration was total; you remained focused, ignoring fatigue or fear, not allowing static into your mind. Up there dogfighting, you connected with yourself. That small, cramped cockpit was exactly where you belonged."

And a final example from Bill Russell who played basketball for the Celtics: "At that special level all sorts of odd things happened.... It was almost as if we were playing in slow motion. During those spells I could almost sense how the next play would develop and where the next shot would be taken. My premonitions would be consistently correct..."

So how does one enter into the state of Mushin? There is a fair amount of research on this subject. The authority is considered to be Hungarian expatriate Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (also famous for the fact that no one can pronounce his name). He uses the word 'Flow' instead of Mushin and describes eight requirements to achieve this state:

1. The goals you are trying to achieve must be clear.
2. You must have immediate feedback as you pursue the activity.
3. Your level of skill must match the level of the challenge you face.
4. You must be totally focused on the activity and be able to exclude any distractions.
5. Your mind must exist only in the present.
6. You must have personal control over the situation.
7. Time must become un-important.
8. Your ego must disappear.

Items one and two are inherent in the situation you are involved in and are more or less out of your control.

Items three and six require that you have a certain level of proficiency in the activity you are confronted with. How do you achieve this proficiency? Obviously through practicing enough so that you can respond with the appropriate action without thinking when confronted with a challenge. Performing any physical movement repeatedly causes the brain to generate new connections between neurons or, in the vernacular to 'rewire itself' a concept known as 'neuroplasticity'. It is interesting to note, especially as it relates to karate or other skills involving combat, that the brain makes more connections between neurons if the learning experience involves a certain level of stress. A recent experiment compared mice running on a treadmill voluntarily with mice forced to run on a treadmill where the speed and duration were controlled by researchers. The mice who endured the forced training performed better in tests involving the avoidance of shocks. When their brains were dissected it was found that the mice who had trained under the more stressful conditions had generated more complex neural connections. This indicates that a 'boot camp' experience is a more efficient way to train recruits for combat than the same syllabus taught under less stressful conditions.

Although you may be well trained and be able to perform your activity without conscious thought, this doesn't necessarily put you into a state of Mushin. You must also learn to bring into play the remaining four items on the above list.

Because the state of Mushin has similarities to the state of 'no mindness' that the practitioners of Zen Buddhism seek through meditation, some believe that this is a path that leads to being able to reach a state of Mushin during physical activities, although others dispute this. Miyamoto Musashi devoted a lot of time to meditation but it is doubtful that Chuck Yeager spent much time in the ready room meditating. I suspect most people who are able to reach this state 'stumble into it' without consciously seeking it. The more they are able to experience it, the easier it becomes to experience it again.

W. Timothy Gallwey wrote a seminal book in the early seventies called 'The Inner Game of Tennis'. In his book he doesn't talk about Mushin or flow. Instead, he uses the term 'in the zone'. Gallwey postulates that the conscious mind interferes with the unconscious mind and prevents one from getting 'in the zone'. He gives a number of examples of this and also discusses some techniques for suppressing the conscious thoughts which get in the way of letting the unconscious take charge.

Conclusion

If you can reach a state of Mushin in karate or any other activity you are going to have a huge advantage over your opponent. Not having been there myself, I can't give you a road map. However, constant practice and repetition of the skills you are trying to master is clearly the first step. The second step is more elusive. Meditation may be a path for some and practicing some of the techniques from the 'Inner Game of Tennis' may be useful.