

— way of the warrior —

Don't Think, Just Do

by Keith Vargo

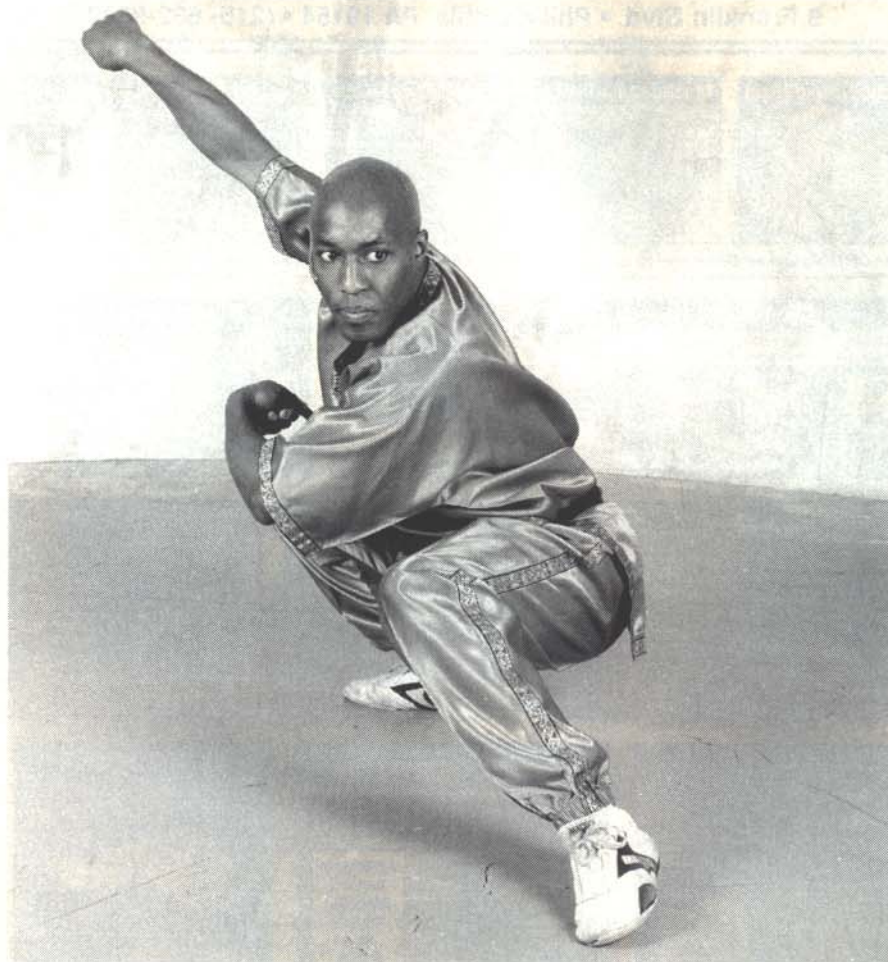
It is common knowledge in the martial arts that thought and action oppose each other. The more you think about a technique you are doing, the less likely you are to do it correctly. Because we encounter this every day in the *dojo* (training hall), it seems like no big deal—just another obstacle to getting better. But this opposition of thought and action hints at something profound.

Before launching into a discussion about that profound something, it would be worthwhile to clear up exactly what human thought is. Usually, thought means “conscious reflection or reasoning.” We summon up images, sounds or other sensations and consider them. Other times, we compare and contrast what we experience in the world with the memories we summon. The important thing to remember is that thinking means having some kind of analog of reality (image, sound, etc.) in your mind and focusing on it.

Why does thinking about doing something interfere with doing it? Because whatever is in our mind is as real to us as what comes in through our senses. So trying to pay attention to what you see and to your mind's images is a bit like looking in two directions at the same time—in this case, inward and outward. If you call up the mental picture of what a *kata* (form) should look like while you are doing one, your *kata* performance will suffer because your attention is divided. If you get in the ring to fight and you imagine what all those people in the audience are thinking of you, it has a paralyzing effect. Both your opponent's punches and your own imagination are demanding your attention.

Here's where we start getting to the heart of the matter. If conscious reflection or thought actually hinders our ability to see clearly and be a good fighter, maybe perception and action are basically unconscious. By unconscious, I don't mean being asleep or comatose. I simply mean that we can be aware of the world around us and do lots of things without really being conscious of it or thinking about it.

That may seem like an odd idea, but it grows on you. Think about the simple act of seeing. How much pause and reflection does recognizing a color or



If a martial artist calls up a mental picture of what his form should look like, his performance will likely suffer because his attention is divided, the author says. (For illustrative purposes, Willie Johnson is shown practicing a form.)

witnessing a movement require? Think of driving a car or playing a piano. Both are complex behaviors that require conscious thought to learn, yet once learned, they become virtually automatic. We can talk, eat and do other things while driving, being oblivious to all the actions that make up driving itself. While playing the piano, we can attend to the notes on the sheet music, all the while being oblivious to the position of our fingers on the keys and the actual movements they make.

Fighting is no different.

Once we've done the conscious work of learning the techniques and strategies of the martial arts, they descend into memory. They go to that “place” inside where all knowledge goes when we are not thinking about it. Then we spend years honing our intuition in practice fights, learning to listen to our deep memories and being guided by them.

Like the pianist who sees the notes and lets his hands respond, the skilled martial artist sees what his opponents do and lets his body respond.

It is here, where consciousness is bypassed, that the martial arts become profound. That is because the shift from conscious to unconscious may be a shift in the physics of the brain, going from space-time to the spectral domain. If that is true, our memories (the guides of our martial intuitions) have a certain timeless and spaceless quality to them. In other words, the things we've learned in the martial arts are transformed as they are stored in our brain. So when we are guided by those unconscious memories of how to fight, we may be guided by more than what we've been taught. ✕

About the author: Keith Vargo is a free-lance writer and martial arts instructor who is currently relocating to Japan.