

Overcoming the submission reflex – Posted by Carolyn

I have mixed feelings about posting this. On the one hand, no woman wants to be victimized, and especially not when she has the power to stop it and for whatever reason doesn't use it. On the other hand, that submission reflex is there to protect us from getting into fights we shouldn't enter.

So... that said, I want to put some information out there for you, as a woman and an aikido instructor and someone who has been in situations where self-defense was necessary.

People, particularly women and children, have what's called a submission reflex. How it manifests generally is when the person is being dominated utterly by another person, usually a large man, there's a sort of mental and even physical paralysis that sets in, based in fear, partially, but also in your instinct for self-preservation.

The first time I came across this in my training, it scared the bejeebuz out of me because I saw it as a hole in my training, a vulnerability. We were grappling, and my partner, the sweetest man in the whole world, got me on my back and had me not quite but almost pinned. Simultaneously, two things happened.

One, I gave up. Not because I wanted to, but because some part of my brain kicked in and said, "STOP! He'll kill you if you fight him." It was like finding a bug in the software that crashed the system. I literally couldn't move and would have let him do anything to me in that instant. Having your brain (and by extension your body) just taken away from you that way is a terrifying experience.

But from my "attacker's" side (we talked about it afterwards), he suddenly felt a surge of aggression while he had me down like that and he said it felt like if I'd fought him any further, he wasn't sure what he would have done, and it scared him, too. What stopped it was that we were both experienced martial artists and disengaged.

I've since talked to many rape victims and many women who were abused by their husbands and so on, and they describe a similar experience.

So how do you keep yourself from being in this position? Ultimately, you can't be guaranteed not to find yourself submitting against your own will. So don't beat yourself up about it if it happens. But you can help train it out of yourself.

How?

Train in a martial art. You'd do well to train in something that gives you kicking skills (because women's strength is in our legs more than our arms) or throwing (like aikido, again, not as upper-body intensive). Ideally, you'd do something that lets you get in lots of partner practice and some sparring. The sparring is important to teach you that you CAN take hits and survive.

Grappling is good to learn because it will help you train out that reflex, so I recommend it. But don't be surprised if you run into this submission reflex headlong, especially if you train with a large male opponent. That shouldn't turn you away from that opponent. It should make you seek him out to help you train it out.

Also, just because you learn grappling does NOT mean you should feel comfortable taking an opponent to ground. NO NO NO. You should avoid going to ground or letting yourself be trapped against a wall or any other object because from what I've seen, that seems to be part of the trigger for the submission reflex -- being trapped or pinned.

Grrrr:

there was this time once when I had seen someone attacking someone and for a moment I just stood there frozen, not being able to grasp that it was happening...I guess that can be termed as a submissive reflex too, can it?

because in a way I could have jumped to the circumstance and helped the person getting attacked but I just couldn't even move, not for a while, and then later I eventually did something (screamed like a typical gal and pulled the guy's hair hehe filmy style) maybe this is the same feeling which grabs people when they see people in an accident, they keep watching waiting for SOMEONE to do SOMETHING!

Sanjay:

mu-shin no shin

Dear Carol, interesting that you should term it a 'reflex', which has the connotation of a spontaneously arising phenomenon, thereby implying lack of ability to manipulate the situation to advantage by strategy. I think your description says a lot in itself about the ability that training in the martial arts confers towards engendering a response that can 'save our butts'.

Here is my two cents.

Whenever a threat engenders a response that is either submission or aggression, I think you have already lost. The aim of threatening behavior is to first unbalance the victim, thus setting up the victim for a take-down. Once unbalanced - either by responding submissively or aggressively - the victim-to-be is in a situation from where it is very difficult to manoeuvre and gain the upper hand. Therefore the ideal response is non-response.

I am obviously not suggesting passivity - rather, what I mean by a non-response is no change in the mental posture, in stance, in composure. One simply moves to a state of readiness to take what comes and let the martial artist inside respond. In the class I instruct, I teach a three-pronged method to achieve composure:

[1] Switch to Strategy - put the mind to work in examining the situation and picking out the favorable and unfavorable elements of which the landscape is composed. It may be possible to pick up a rock and throw it at the opponent, or hold him/her at bay for long enough with the threat of throwing a rock to make the situation safe again. I have heard

of banks being robbed with no weapon other than a razor blade - usually, everything one needs is right where one is!

[2] Training for Composure through Familiarity - in my class, I have the students pair up and role-play attacker-defender. During this role-play, I instruct my students to put realism in the attack as well as defence. The attacker, for example, manifests real aggression so as to shake the defender out of his or her comfort zone. This builds composure through familiarity - "I have seen this before! And I came out of it okay!" It is simple and aligned with human nature.

[3] Spiritual Development - karma is karma and life is life. I suggest to my students to consider this as they go through training, and through life. My instructor, Dr. Nicholas Brummell, would think of himself as dead and walking up the stairway to heaven before a round of sparring. In the ring, he was a tempest. This ferocity arose, at least in part, because he had already "given up" life!

I believe that all battles are won from the "mental higher ground", and therefore my approach is designed around gaining this objective. Needless to say, nothing works without training, training and training, and the training some more!

Ultimately, the goal of a martial artist is to respond with the mind of no-mind - mu-shin no shin. The approach #3 may not be for everyone - we are accustomed to cling to life and negate death. However, #1 and #2 are effective.

Good luck in your martial art.

Carolyn:

Indeed, mu-shin is the goal, and that's why this took me by surprise in my own training.

In this discussion, though, I was trying to take a less martial-artsy approach to this and instead go with a more practical approach for women here who may not be actively training and who would not necessarily understand the concept of mu-shin.

I've had students say, "Wait, I'm supposed to be just empty headed and stupid? How will that help?" No, mu-shin doesn't mean empty headed and stupid, it means uncommitted and not "thinking too much" about what you are going to do. More pragmatically, it's about letting the reflex controllers in your spinal cord do all the work without your brain interfering and mucking you up and slowing you down.

So my use of the word "reflex" was not an accident. You can train very complex behaviors into your reflexes. But you have some behaviors preprogrammed in there that can mess you up

Sanjay:
Training
In brief:

there can be no effective self-defence strategy without training. If one cannot set aside time for training, then the next best strategy is to buy a weapon that one is comfortable carrying and handling. But I doubt that even a gun can be used effectively without active training.

mu-shin

As for mu-shin no shin, whenever somebody asked my senior-most instructor he would reply "I'd rather teach you technique." After many years, I realized that he wasn't saying that to avoid touching upon the spiritual aspect of our martial art, but rather the only way to even approach the spirit is to achieve perfection in the physical plane.

*When the bow is broken
and your last arrow fired,
then shoot with all your might!*

My bad! I should never have brought it up. The only reason I did so is because I believe one should be aware that the purpose of technique is to transcend technique. Like using a thorn to remove a thorn. Lest good technique lead to big egos in my dojang ;o)

there can be no effective self-defence strategy without training. If one cannot set aside time for training, then the next best strategy is to buy a weapon that one is comfortable carrying and handling. But I doubt that even a gun can be used effectively without active training.

Carolyn:

I agree 100%. In fact, I think that if someone (male or female) is worried enough about self defense to buy a gun, that person should be worried enough to set aside time to train, whether with the gun or in a martial art, or both.

(Hehe when I first posted this, it said, ... **if someone (male or female) is worried enough about self defense to buy a GUY** hahaha... Oops, my Freudian slip is showing! *blush*)