

Where Is Your Mind & And The Door Latch

After bowing, I get up from the zabuton and look out the north windows: first sunlight shines a brilliant pink across the summit snows on the mountain above. Gazing down, the dark valley is still, with just wisps of wood smoke slowly rising, as dawn turns. Breathing deeply and stretching upwards – a pleasure after ki-breathing for an hour – my bare feet press into the cool mats, and I walk across the dojo.

The north wall is all glass, with a pair of sliding doors opened a few inches for the winter air. As I approach the doors, I feel the chill on my feet and hear a crow's chortle in the trees outside. I enjoy these moments right after sitting; though I'm no longer meditating, I am not yet engaged in thought cascades about the day. Awareness is calm and broad, refreshed from the ki-breathing, as I reach the doors.

First, I draw the two glass sliding doors together. Thunk. Then I reach to engage the latch. As my finger draws the lever down, my awareness drops into the door's mechanism, to just the spot where the latch hangs up before engaging. Every morning when I push the latch, it balks at this point and I release it back upward and try again. Click, hitch. Click, hitch. This morning, I notice my awareness is focused on the obstruction in the mechanism so completely that even when it works smoothly I don't follow the lever into the down-locked position. Each time I press the latch, I expect it will fail and consequently I immediately raise my finger to try again.



I observe all this in the first moment of trying the latch. A smile starts up the corners of my mouth.

"Where is your mind?" I hear sensei asking.

"Why, it's on the obstruction, the conflict point within the latch," I answer. *"In fact, what's mostly present is the anticipation of obstruction, the expectation of conflict."*

And in that moment, my awareness draws into my center; while inhaling, I smile wider. My finger touches the top of the latch, expectation released, awareness dropping, and I feel myself extend into the mechanism, all the way to the bottom of the channel. I drop the latch... and in the stillness... I feel it hit the obstruction and hang.

Laughing, I raise it again, and simply let it drop... hitch. Then smoothly it glides through and lands into the locked position.

As I leave the dojo for the morning, I remember how my mind focused on my grabbed wrist during aikido. Seeing my awareness fix at the point of conflict. My first inclination was to move at that grabbed spot, to counter, to force, to overcome, or to resist. None of which embodied the spirit of aikido. By focusing on the conflict, the grab, I was joining in and increasing the conflict. Same thing with the latch.

While the door's latch had not grabbed me, the mechanism's subtle obstruction had certainly captured my attention. I was generating conflict with this mechanical snag and creating a rhythmic, kinesthetic expectation of conflict, all by myself. What was really funny, was that the latch did not care. If I clashed or if I was masterfully centered, the latch either locked or jammed. I simply got to see where I was at, each time I pressed.

In aikido, there are usually two (or more) people involved, the grabber and the person grabbed. A subtle relaxation and non-conflict movement from center by the grabbed, usually effects the one grabbing in interesting and unusual ways. As they fall to the mat, they often wonder, *"What happened? Why did my grip, my attack dissolve so easily?"* By not focusing the mind into the conflict, not agreeing to clash, the conflict disappears: it takes two to keep a conflict going. This is not magic, but it is quite remarkable when one feels the awareness shift from conflict to non-dissension, along with the corresponding shift from reactive movement to creative movement. And it is not some "namby-pamby" pacifist belief. One authentically learns this discipline by throwing and being thrown to the mat many, many times, while paying powerfully close attention. You can't learn this by simply disengaging. You have to enter into it fully and go through the innate conflict response until it is transcended for something much more nuanced and evolved. It takes a lot of practice to gain confidence in this mind-body shift, while at the same time learning to move smoothly and effectively.



But let's get back to the latch.

While the latch could not drop me to the mat, it had metaphorically thrown me many times by trapping my awareness in the mechanism's hitch for months, an indifferent circumstance I had used to pattern conflict. Seeing how easily my mind led itself into conflict was humbling. But then, doesn't a good teacher, with straight honesty, point out where our relative self is attached, where we are blind in our rich subjectivity?

Maybe I should just oil the lock.

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