

Structure and Skill

To be free, to live on into the next generation



Many people feel that if we are overly concerned about form or structure, our movements and emotions will be restricted. What we really want is to feel relaxed and free... But what if structure is part of the admission ticket to freedom? If our underlying attitudes are wrong, the search for freedom can feel like trying to put a round peg in a square hole.

The structure of tea ceremony Rules for relaxation

If you only know a little about Japanese tea ceremony, it might seem strict because of its fixed rules and traditions. Isao Kumakura, a professor at Osaka's National Museum of Ethnology, specializes in the history of Japanese culture and tea ceremony. "Tea ceremony is artfully designed so that after a four hour session, strangers will become friends," he explained.

It is often noted that samurai could not wear armor to pass through the small entranceway of a tearoom, which made it suitable for peaceful negotiations between shoguns. Beyond this tradition, however, tea ceremony has many other functions that are still relevant to modern life.

For example, if you follow the carefully proscribed rules of tea ceremony, you will not disturb others in terms of move-

ment or eye contact, even within a very small room. During tea ceremony, everyone finishes their small tea ceremony cakes at the same time, which feels very natural, not awkward and stiff. To take the pressure off of eye contact with the tea master, a tearoom contains many beautiful pottery pieces, wall hangings and flower arrangements. We relax, a friendly atmosphere fills the room, and everyone starts to feel like they are friends. A good tearoom contains many elements that contribute to this atmosphere.

After the Meiji Restoration in 1868, class barriers in Japanese society were eased and people were free to discuss new models of social etiquette. At that point, Ogasawara-style protocols used by samurai were considered too complex and not pragmatic enough for the new era. Tea ceremony contains many elements of social etiquette found in real life and it was even suggested as a natural way to teach social graces to women.

Do strict form and structure really make us stiff and limit our freedom? Mr. Kumakura explained: "People criticize learning structures without involving the heart, yet we sometimes access the heart using a structure. There is truth to both of these contradictory ideas. People who are extremely talented can fully express what is in their hearts by altering or destroying structures. But for many people, structure makes it easier to express the heart, which makes learning structures and fixed patterns preferable."

Pattern theories on improvement School gymnastics and society

In elementary school, we all learned how to do "forward upward circling" in gym class. At first, no matter how you'd kick the ground, you couldn't lift your legs over your head. Then one day, your whole body flips over. It suddenly becomes so easy, it's hard to believe it ever used to be so hard. What joy! Unfortunately, that happy moment of satisfaction and sense of achievement is transient. Takashi Saito, associate professor at Meiji University School of Arts and Letters, takes another view.

"Early experiences of learning to do "forward upward circling", memorize multiplication tables or play a simple melody on the organ are not clearly connected to any idea of learning or improvement. That's why we are not really convinced we need to learn how to do "forward upward circling" in school. In my opinion, though, there is a benefit in learning such things. When you face a difficult situation in the real world, I believe these early elementary school achievements help you to make better decisions and act with more confidence."

It's normal for schoolchildren to complain there's no real-world benefit in learning to do "forward upward circling", and the teacher who says "no, you're wrong" is an increasingly rare

treasure. Let's take a closer look at the idea of learning and improvement, which is closely related to the concepts of patterns and structure.

"I once took karate lessons, where I experienced the enforcement of patterns and structure willy-nilly. My teachers told me that even if my position was off by one inch, it was no good. At the time, I felt very restricted, as if I had no freedom at all. But after if I repeated that movement several hundred, several thousand, more than 10,000 times, it started to feel totally natural. At that point, I would feel very uncomfortable if I was off by even one inch. If a pattern or structure is pragmatic or sensible, after you acquire it you realize how effective it is."

Mr. Saito also gave the example of sitting in a chair. If you sit correctly, without restrictions or tension, you can sit for hours. If you sit down totally freely, after a while you might feel pain or discomfort, which doesn't feel too free.

"A structure or pattern is often modified and passed down through the ages

based on wisdom from many people. It contains much more than just the external form we observe with our eyes. At certain stages in the course of learning you might be

weaker or slower. But if you take the long view, over at least a ten-year period, patterns are a shortcut. Patterns contain such condensed wisdom, there is no doubt that you will reap their benefits in the future."

In a certain sense, learning patterns is like defrosting frozen food. You may not know quite what it is until it is fully thawed, but at that point all the time and effort put into preparing that food (i.e., wisdom that refines a pattern) becomes obvious.

It's not a new idea that education methods in Japan are too old and strict. After the Meiji Restoration there was a new atmosphere of freedom, and people forgot the real meaning behind patterns. In the Taisho Era 50 years later, things had progressed to the point it was trendy to reject many of the old traditions. According to Mr. Saito, "Things went in a bad, inefficient direction for passing on culture."

"We are learning through patterns less and less not only in the martial arts, but in most areas of our lives. Because of this, most people are extremely impatient during periods that offer few tangible results. Famed karate master Tsugumasa Nango has offered a dialectic approach to this theory of improvement: he suggests that quantity begets quality. In other words, if your quantity exceeds a certain point, there will be a change in quality. In the martial arts, if you perform the same movement ten or twenty thousand times, at a certain point

you will be able to do something that was previously impossible for you. If you believe in this process, you can be patient without good results each day and know that such periods are not devoid of meaning."

Let's come back to the idea of doing "forward upward circling". Even if you practice many times and in many ways, if you still cannot do "forward upward circling" your tangible result is zero. The day will come when your body will be able to do it, though, and at that point you will never forget this skill. It's the same with learning to ride a bicycle. If you consciously understand this process, you will be able to confront difficulties in this world with greater confidence.

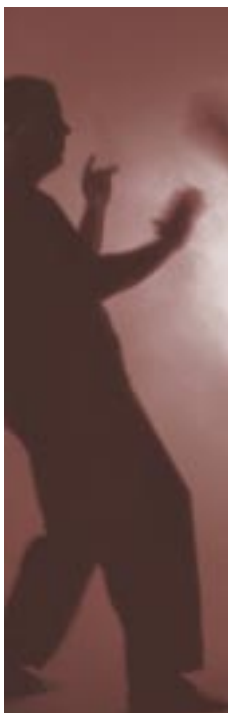
"No matter what job a child ends up in, I firmly believe that learning this process in school will give him or her their greatest power in the future."

In search of the creative zone How can structure breathe?

Even if we do understand the use of patterns in learning new skills, we need to keep sight of the overall process. Does learning in this way mean we have to concentrate single-mindedly on a movement or pattern without knowing its real purpose? This can sometimes cause us to lose our way, or fall into the nebulous hole of mysticism.



Takashi Saito was born in Shizuoka in 1960 and serves as an associate professor at Meiji University specializing in theories of the body.

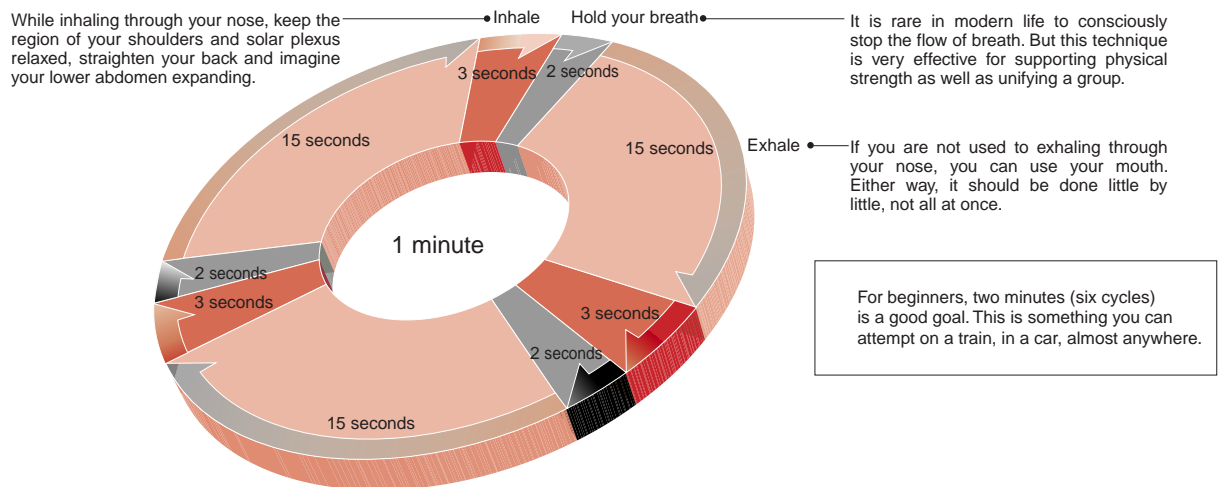


Within the family confines of traditional Japanese arts, talent is not the only thing passed down through generations. By learning patterns that have been successful for hundreds of years, you will almost certainly achieve a certain level of success.

■ Breathing to increase concentration

Mr. Takashi Saito, an expert in yoga breathing techniques, has invented an easier method for use by ordinary people. In experiments performed in elementary and junior high schools, this breathing technique had a significant effect on the results of Kraepelin psychodiagnostic tests.

Kraepelin psychodiagnostic test: measures mental perseverance by asking subjects to perform simple calculations within a given time period.



“Actually, it’s completely the other way around. Pattern and structure are meaningful because they help clarify your focus. Definite standards help us see when we are off course and need to bring ourselves back. From the point of view of education, I think it might be more important to develop ways that help us to recognize when we deviate from a given standard. No matter what kind of work you end up doing, it is always useful to consider the basic requirements of the job and compare them to what you are doing.”

So discussions about which karate school has the best pattern are meaningless.

“Surface differences are not important. It is far more important to constantly find something new in yourself than to compare structures. In other words, our experience changes after repeating the same pattern the 100th, 1000th or 10,000th time. We feel differently at different stages of repetition. This is one of the secrets of mastery.”

Behind structure, there always exists a certain consciousness we can sense. There is also another factor that can help to lubricate the unnatural movements of learning a new pattern-breathing.

“As I am talking to you right now, I am breathing only about two times a minute, something I am able to do because I am constantly exhaling. I can do this because I am concentrating my consciousness on a single point just below my navel. When I sense that point, I am aware of the center of myself and experience a powerful sense of relief.”

Ideas, words and bodily experiences

Mr. Saito is currently devoting himself to cataloging verbs and meanings that have fallen from favor and will soon be forgotten. There is a Japanese word for ‘blend,’ for example, that is associating with blending food, or blending ideas. But today’s young people seldom use this word to refer to the blending of ideas or sentences. This might be because they don’t have the bodily experience of trying to blend something. If they blend, for example, heavy cream which suddenly becomes very solid, the way they think and the way they use this word would be different.

We think with language, and bodily experience adds dimension to language. Maybe today we need a crash course in bodily experiences to help us understand things better. The fact that we even use bodily experiences to enrich our understanding is a pattern.

In the late 1930s, the German philosopher Durkheim lived in Japan where he wrote a book explaining Japan’s belief in the power of hara (lower stomach) called, “Hara: the center of the human body.” He cites how a father would say “hara, hara” to help encourage his children, both when they are depressed and when they are so excited they lose perspective or balance.

In today’s Japan, this once-common breathing method is virtually non-existent. Now even when children are breathing deeply they don’t move their lower stomachs.

“In martial arts, an opponent will attack you just after you exhale and before you begin your inhale. They do this because at this instant there is a momentarily gap in your consciousness. To minimize these gaps, it is very important to practice inhaling quickly, and exhaling slowly and steadily. Shakuson, or Buddha, promoted this same kind of breathing. Doing some deep breathing while concentrating on your lower stomach is an effective means of promoting concentration for long periods of time and retaining a sense of balance in con-

versation with others. The same goes for physical movement. If you breathe properly and synchronize your breathing with your movements, you can perform any given task stably for a much longer period of time.”

We can clearly see the connection between patterns and breathing in activities such as traditional Japanese archery, where you pull back the arrow as you inhale. By coordinating your breath and your movements, you can achieve a state in which you are active yet extremely calm. Pro golfer Tiger Woods called this state “the creative zone.”

“When we think of patterns and structures, we tend to focus on movements we can see. But behind them is often an entire philosophy on breathing. For the machinery of a pattern to operate smoothly, we need the energy of breathing. Of course, if we try to coordinate an inhale or exhale with movements or patterns, the whole thing can seem stiff, like a formal ritual. Still, it is through this process that people with only average talent become more creative, and sometimes even approach the realm of genius.”

■ The symbiosis of bodily structure and fixed forms breath new life into a culture



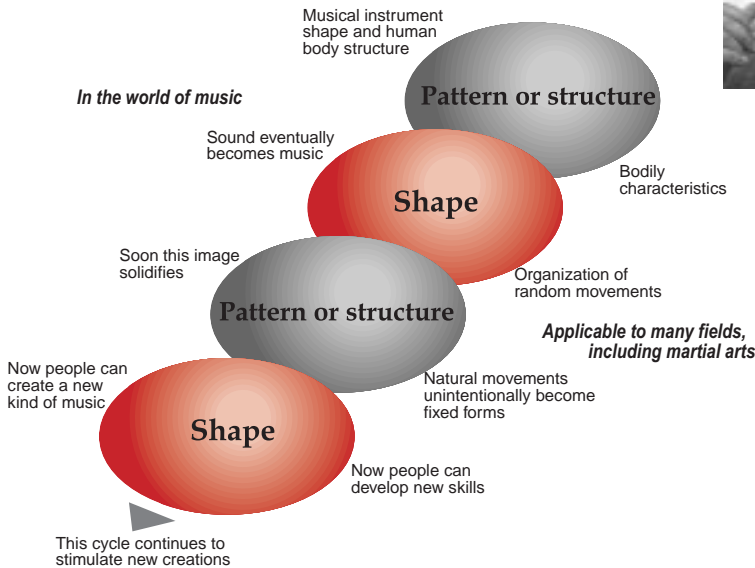
The Philippine kubin, a kind of jew's harp played by exhaling as you pluck the strings. You can produce different sounds by varying your breath. This instrument takes full advantage of the properties of bamboo, which can be cut very thinly for high flexibility.



Osamu Yamaguti was born in 1939 and is a professor at Osaka University specializing in ethnic musicology. Applied musicology (Published by The Society for the Promotion of the University of the Air).



The Philippine togari, a nose reed played to communicate with ancestors. It is played using air from the nose, which is considered holy because it supplies air for sustaining life, as opposed to air from the mouth that is also used for speaking and eating.



In terms of evolution, a piano would be superior to these instruments because it has greater acoustical complexity. "Yes, but it is impossible for a piano to make the sounds of these ethnic musical instruments, so there is no difference in their value," said Mr. Yamaguti.

Technique can have multiple layers
The original landscape of ethnic music

Patterns or structures involve more than just visual elements, with music as a prime example. Osamu Yamaguti, professor of ethnic musicology at Osaka University, explains:

"An image takes on concrete form inside the heart. This will either change or, through repeated experiences, become fixed. What's important is that a form or structure can be combined with another form, which may not always be a visual one. Often they are expressed in music or words." ("From Pattern or Structure to Shape: Cultural Expressions through Sound," Literature magazine, vol. 56, Oct. 1988)

It sounds nice when people say that music is a common language for all human beings. Actually, we automatically link geographical regions or cultural images with certain instruments, a kind of pattern of association. Sounds make shapes we call music, which over time become engrained in our consciousness as a fixed image, or pattern. And from

such patterns, new shapes can again be born...

For more than five years, Mr. Yamaguti has been promoting a new theory of skills applicable not only to music, science and literature, but to many other fields. What kind of theory? To find out, we set up an interview, receiving a confirmation email that said, "I will probably wear a hat like the one worn by Helmut Schmidt (former chancellor of West Germany)."

"By combining theories from two scholars with a few ideas of my own, I developed my theory. The first scholar was ecological psychologist James Gibson, whose 'theory of affordance' states that any given environment has certain demands it makes on human beings. (The word "affordance" is the coined word come from "afford".) For example, a floor is naturally flat because it expects us to stand on it. According to this theory, we should first try to understand what an environment is asking of us and then try to take the appropriate action."

This theory could easily be used to help develop more effective machines and

operational procedures.

Rocks, trees and everything in nature provide us with the possibility of making sounds. Some already have sounded, like the sound of the wind through a forest of trees. If we want to create sounds with our environment, we must first take into account our bodily structure, which is a restriction. We exhale from only our nose and mouth, for example, and only pluck with our fingers. When we consider our physical characteristics and the sound we wish to create, we can get ideas for the shape of a new instrument. If we look closely at the origins of musical cultures and the processes used to create them, a legitimate "skill," this connection becomes clear.

"The second scholar who influenced my thinking was Michael Polanyi, a philosopher of science. He recognized the existence of tacit knowledge, like when we recognize friends on the street, ride a bicycle or use chopsticks. Without this kind of knowledge, we would not be able to function in life."

If you hear a skillful musician play, you might think about their technique, which can seem very complicated. In fact, it is merely a combination of simple things everyone can do, like blowing a reed.