

Exploring Inner Strategies for Learning Karate



Pascal J. Gambardella, Ph.D.

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Introduction

Mastering karate is an ongoing, never ending process, which is a combination of mastering technique and mastering self. Both are essential, each helps the other. This paper, however, focuses primarily on mastering self to master technique, rather than mastering technique to master self. We explore inner strategies to use in learning, teaching, and practicing Karate.

I lead multiple lives, each with different roles and perspectives. In one life, I perform as a Martial Artist by learning, practicing, and teaching Karate. In another life, I perform as Modeler, by eliciting and transferring corporate memory and expertise. Here I want to bring both perspectives together by:

- Helping others learn by understanding their internal processes, especially how they learn
- Improving my own strategies for learning and doing Karate.

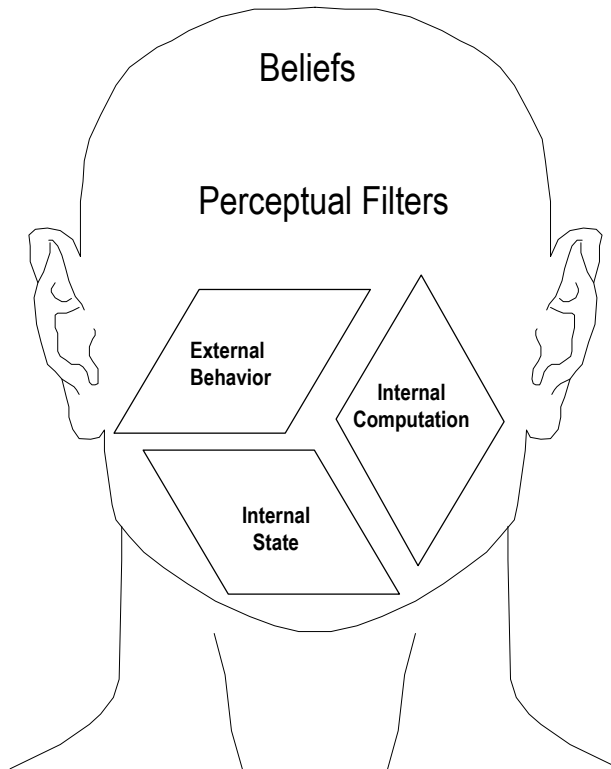
The Modeler has sometimes invaded the world of the Martial Artist with some success using techniques from Neuro-linguistic Programming (NLP), which is the study of subjective experience. NLP looks at the structure as well as the content of experience. Later we will show how knowing the structure of experience can help learn, practice and teach Karate.

In what follows, we first discuss the structure of experience to give us a language for discussing learning strategies. Next, we discuss the stages of competence to understand the progress of learning. Finally, we discuss techniques useful in learning, teaching and practicing Karate.

Structure of Experience

We provide and illustrate a model of the structure of experience from NLP that is useful in examining how we behave and learn. In this model, the elements of experience include:

- **External behavior.** How we act.
- **Internal states.** How we feel, e.g., fear, happiness, curiosity, curious about fear.
- **Internal computation.** How we think in terms of sensory modes: visual, kinesthetic, and auditory.



Elements of the Structure of Experience

- **Beliefs.** What meanings do people associate with words? What cause-effect beliefs do they hold? Beliefs govern a person or an organization's life. Here are some examples:
 - **Belief from Karate:** Learn Karate so you don't have to fight
 - **Belief from NLP:** We have all the resources we need.

- **Perceptual Filters¹**. These filters help a person choose what to pay attention to among the vast array of incoming experience. There are about 50 perceptual filters. Here are some examples.
 - **Chunk Size Filter**. Does a person need the details or big picture? If both, which first?
 - **Direction Filter**. Does a person go toward goals, or away from problems, or both?
 - **Locus of Judgement Filter**. How does a person know that they are doing a good job? Does the judgement come entirely from within (internal) or do others (or information) help them decide (external), or both?

Let's illustrate the structure of experience by breaking a board with a roundhouse kick. Two or three people usually hold the board in place. The martial artist executes a perfect roundhouse kick and the board breaks. That's how it looks, but what could really be happening? Here is a description in terms of the elements of experience for a particular person:

- **External behavior**. The physical execution of a correct roundhouse kick aiming for a point well beyond the board.
- **Internal states**. The feeling of confidence that the board will break. You may also create a state that you access² in preparation to break the board. If you are fearful of getting hurt, it might be useful to feel curious about your fear³ or appreciate your fear.
- **Internal computation**. You will probably break the board without thinking. However, before kicking the board, whether consciously or unconsciously, you might execute a strategy using your visual, auditory and kinesthetic sensory modes. For example, first, you look beyond the board for a place to kick. Next, you say to yourself "I will not be denied." And finally, you will focus on your body prior to the kick.
- **Beliefs**. What is a board, anyway? This is an important question for anyone who wants to break it. Is the board a solid surface, like a brick wall, or is it a brittle, fragile object, which is very weak along the grain. Reframing our belief about the board helps set a context more amenable to breaking it. Of course carpenters already know that wood is malleable.
- **Perceptual Filters**. It is useful to breaking the board as the goal (Direction Filter: Toward) and deciding (Locus of Judgement Filter: Internal) from what you know yourself that you can break it.

¹ Perceptual Filters are also called Meta-programs in NLP.

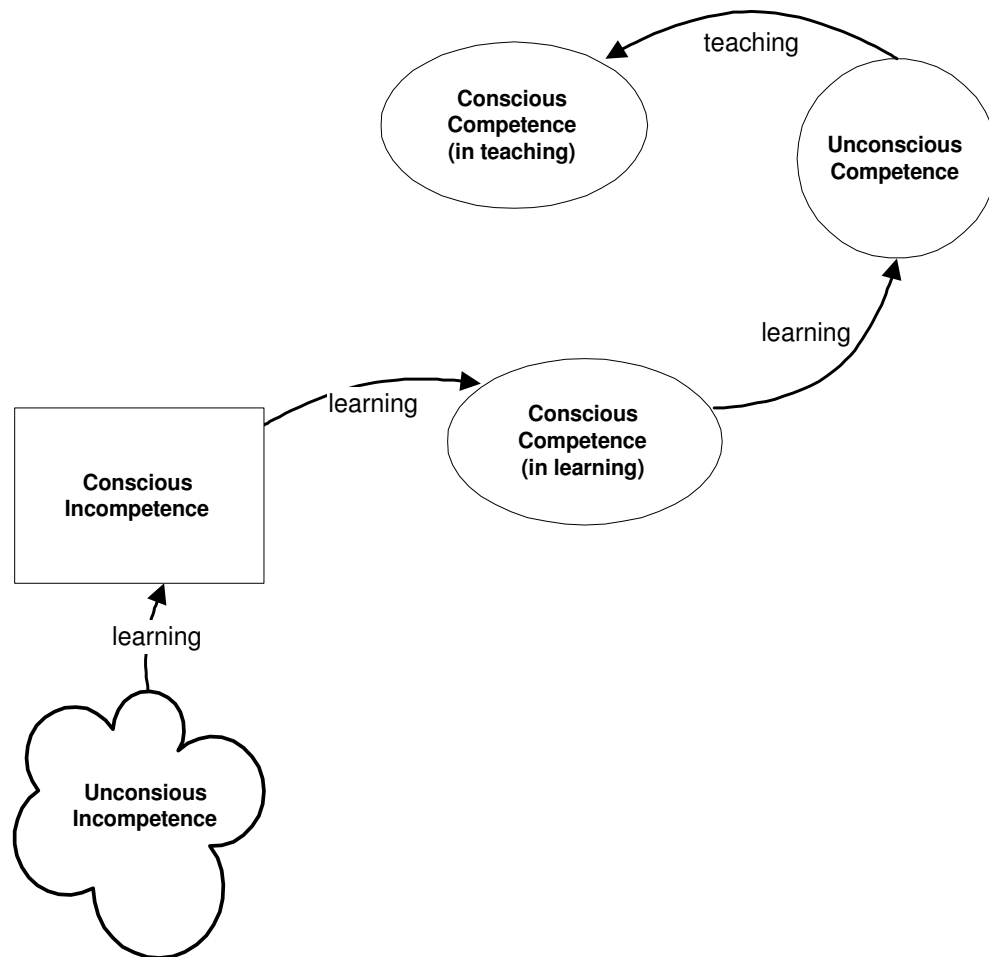
² More about this state later when we discuss anchoring.

³ The state "curious about fear" state above fear and is called a meta-state. More about meta-states later.

Stages of Competence

In Budo and Zen: *“Shojin is the first stage, a period during which the will and consciousness are involved in practice: in the beginning they are necessary...The second stage is the period of concentration without consciousness...In the third stage the spirit achieves true freedom.”* Taisen Desimaru

The following figure illustrates the stages to competence (or expertise) in any area of Karate:



Stages of Experiencing Competence and Expertise

Unconscious incompetence

Not knowing about a Karate technique. You don't know what you don't know. Here you might be at the window of the Karate school looking in at a class.

Conscious incompetence

Knowing about a Karate technique and knowing you can't do it well, yet, or at all.

Conscious competence (when learning)

Knowing about a Karate technique and being conscious of all the moves whenever you do it.

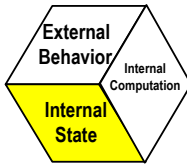
Unconscious competence.

Knowing about a Karate technique and not be conscious of all the moves whenever you do it. This is the state of no-mind. I used to worry about not remembering a form when I first started Karate. Now it seem my body knows each move once it accomplished the previous move. It is just like shifting a car without thinking. Daisetsu Suzuki said: *“Technical knowledge is not enough. One must transcend techniques so that the art becomes an artless art, growing out of the unconscious.”*

Conscious competence (when teaching).

Knowing how to teach the Karate techniques that you know, even though you do them unconsciously. You are able to break down what you know and cast in into a form that can be conveyed to someone else. Or, being able to tell someone what to notice when they are doing the move correctly. For example to hear the snap of a Gee when punching correctly. One tennis instructor has his students listen (auditory trigger) for when the tennis ball hits the sweet part of the racket. Another instructor tells her students to hit the ball only when it appears to stop (visual trigger). This is where the ball is at the height of its trajectory and going down.

Creating and Accessing Resource States



Remembered States

Each of our remembered states of consciousness can have visual (V), auditory (A) or kinesthetic (K) sensory components⁴. For example, I can remember a time that I gave a great presentation while teaching a class. I can see the interested faces of the students understanding and being surprised about what I am saying. I can hear our conversation. I can also feel excited, calm and confident about conveying a complex topic in a unique way. This remembered presentation is a resource that I use before starting a form in Karate. To see how this is done, we first need to discuss anchors.

Anchors

An anchor is a sensory trigger used to access a remembered state of consciousness. Any sensory mode can trigger a state. The smell of lilacs can trigger the memory of a past picnic. The feel of a cool damp spring morning can trigger the memory of coming out of tent after a rainstorm during a camping trip.

Suppose you need to marshal additional resources to help you handle a present situation. Earlier, I mentioned that we have all resources we need. These resources may be in different areas in our life. If I feel confident when giving presentations maybe I can carry that confidence to Karate. Here is how you can do it. Step into your past experience. See, hear, and feel what you saw then as if you are in the experience now. Experiment with adjusting your image of the experience to make it more vivid and compelling. For example, if it is dim make it brighter, if it is loud make it softer, if you feel excited increase your excitement. At the peak of your experience, associate a trigger with your image. For example, you could press two fingers together or think of an image. The next time you press these fingers together or think of that particular image you should be able to access that remembered state quickly. The state is anchored to your trigger. You can intensify your experience further by associating more than one similar experience to the same trigger (or anchor).

The following table illustrates some of example anchors

State to Anchor		
Situation	Anchor (trigger)	Resource State
Kata (form)	Image of giving a great presentation	Calm and confident. A remembered presentation.
Breaking	Image of boards breaking	Power. A remembered instance of breaking a board.

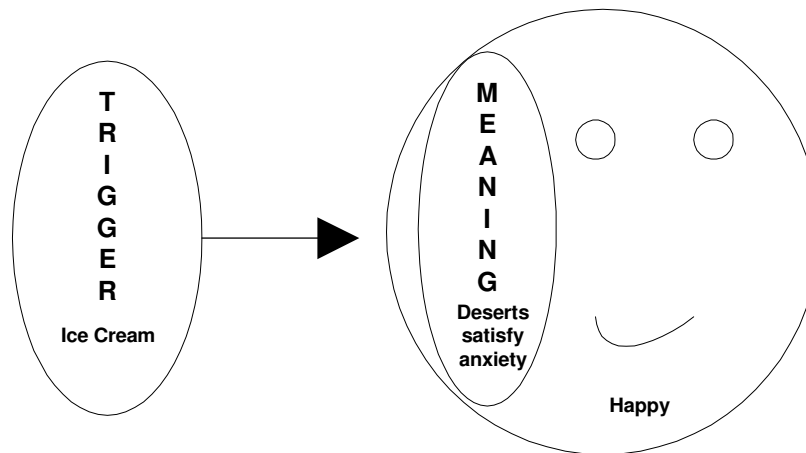
⁴ Actually we may also use our gustatory (taste) and olfactory (smell) modes.

Changing your posture is another way of accessing states. For example, if someone is depressed their body is slumped and eyes are downcast. Standing straight, with shoulders back and looking up can change the state. Physical postures can be natural anchors for particular states.

Metastates

“The Karate philosophy of calmness and confidence is the antithesis of aggression and inhumanity.” Peter Urban

The following figure illustrates a primary state. Primary states, such as anger, fear, and happiness are about directly responding to something in the world. Feelings or sensations drive these primary states.

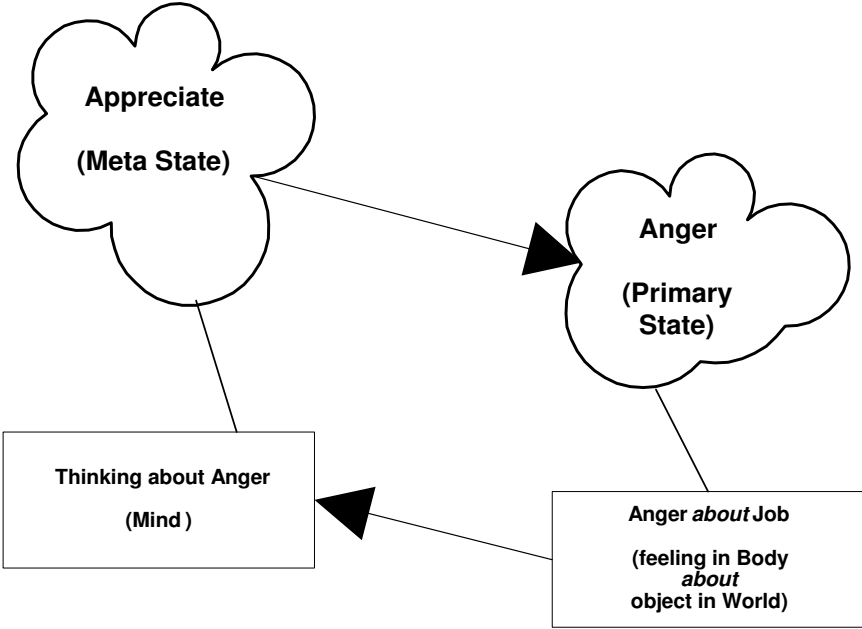


An example of the primary state of happiness

Metastates are about responding to a primary state or another metastate, as illustrated in the following figure. For example, appreciating anger or being curious about fear. The driver for meta states is self reflexive consciousness.

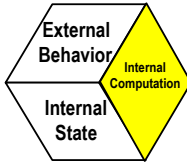
Why are metastates useful? Behaviors such as learning, remembering, communicating and perceiving that all depend on our state of conscious⁵. Some states of consciousness, like anxiety and fear, limit our choices and access to our inner resources. Meta states drive and control primary states. If we are fearful, accessing the state of curiosity about our fear changes our state and allows us to access more of our internal resources. Any state with the word “self-“ in it is a metastate, for example self-control, which is written on the walls of the Studio of Korean Karate.

⁵ When we are depressed we see life through “depression” filters. If we do homework while watching TV, then we need the TV when taking a test at school!



Example of a metastate

Strategies for Learning



When we begin to learn a form we go from a stage of conscious incompetence to conscious competence. We all need a strategy for learning. It took me some time to realize that my strategy for learning Karate is not the same as my strategy for learning physics. Being conscious of learning strategy helps us pinpoint where it is not working in ourselves and whom we teach. A strategy that works for one person may not work for another.

Each person learns through a combination of doing (K), listening (A), and watching (V). However, many people favor one or more sensory modes when learning (see the box below). There are some things done more efficiently with one sense than another, which may be why some people find it more difficult to learn Karate. The visual and auditory skills needed to learn physics might not be enough to learn Karate.

I used to find it difficult to learn each new form. When I first began learning Karate, I relied mostly on my visual and auditory modes and not enough on my kinesthetic mode. Now to learn a form quickly, I first look at a book of forms to get the overall moves usually with someone else who is also learning the form. I walk through the moves and feel myself experience each one. Next, I adjust the moves according to the variation practiced in the Karate school using feedback from someone who knows the form. Then, I practice and practice. Within the Chunk Size Filter, I need the big picture first, then the details.

Where do you place students when learning a new form?

Assuming that beginning Karate students use a primary sensory mode for learning a new form, where do you place them when learning this form? Here is something to try. Among the students of the same rank learning a new form:

- Place the auditory learners in front since they learn by listening
- Place the visual learners in back because they learn by watching
- Place the kinesthetic learners in the middle.

As students progress through Karate they will increase their flexibility in learning by learning through all their sensory modes.

In a usual class, the higher ranks are in front since they do the form the best. This enables the visual learners in back to get the right picture in their heads.

Whenever I perform a form, I try to remember any previous instructor feedback at the point in the form where I needed feedback I hear a voice indicating what is correct. As I correct this over time the voice vanishes. This strategy is similar to the way the

ancient Greeks memorized poems and speeches. They associated each phrase to a specific location.

I use two critical words when doing Karate: Relax and Stop. I used to become tense after each move. Tension restricts flexibility and flows into the next move. Also, as Bruce Lee said “*The less effort, the faster and more powerful you will be.*” I started saying the word “relax” between each move. Eventually, I started to relax between moves and no longer say the word. Other people might need to see the word “relax” rather than say it. I still use the word “stop” between moves during a form, when I realize that I am going to fast and not coming to a complete stop. Although most times I can feel myself stopping.

Imagining

Using our imagination as a technique can take many forms. We can use imagination to mentally rehearse a form or a Karate technique. When I first tried visualizing a form, I had difficulty because I just tried to see myself do the form. Now, to rehearse a form, I first need to see myself doing a move from outside my body, and then step into my body once the move is executed. I alternate between the visual and kinesthetic senses to rehearse the form. Of course not everyone is the same.

It is also useful to imagine an opponent when performing a technique, especially a back turn sidekick. Our techniques improve when we have a target.

Finally, imagine stepping into another person experience when observing he or she perform Karate:

- If it is someone you are teaching, you can experience when he or she makes an error.
- If it is someone you are learning from, you can model and learn from his or her behavior.
- If it is an opponent, according to Tsutomu Oshima: “*In order to achieve victory you must place yourself in your opponent’s skin. If you don’t understand yourself you will lose one hundred percent of the time. If you understand yourself, you will win fifty percent of the time. If you understand yourself and your opponent, you will win one hundred percent of the time.*”

Concluding Remarks

A Buddhist walked up to a hot dog vendor with a ten-dollar bill and said: “I want you to make me one with everything.” The hot vendor handed him a hot dog. The Buddhist then asked him: “Where is my change?” The vendor said, “Change has to come from within.” As related by Dick Boyden, original source unknown

I first had a taste of Karate in Vietnam in 1970. My motivation there was similar to that of the skinny kid on the beach described in the box below. Now I am motivated to perfect my technique and to strengthen and maintain my self-control, integrity, perseverance, confidence, and friendships.

A skinny kid on a beach

I was a nerd as a kid, and most of my adult life. When I was a kid I remember this ad on the back of comic book covers: A skinny nerd-like teenager walked on the beach shy and unhappy that he could not attract or meet any girls. Then he discovered Charles Atlas's body building program. We next see him as a muscle-bound kid walking away with a girl on each arm.

In this paper I described techniques of mastering self to master technique. Work on these techniques began during my last twenty years practicing Karate, and hopefully will continue during the next twenty.

Further Readings

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