FROM FIGHT OR FLIGHT TO THINK OR SINK

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To elevate personal performance, output levels and personal capabilities – in trading, in day-to-day life, in everything you do – it is necessary to understand the equipment you are working with.

The human mind, and the human body, are an integrated machine.

And that means understanding that the human mind, and the human body, are an integrated machine.

In Trading and the Hunter-Gatherer Connection, we explained how and why humans are shaped by their "formative biological environment."

By that meaning, the human mind and body, as a survival machine, are not configured for performance in the modern world.

They were configured over a timespan of millennia, or even eons, for an environment that no longer exists.

(To get an idea of how old some of our basic functions are, consider that the amygdala, the part of the brain primarily responsible for fear response, is of such ancient origin that we share it with birds and reptiles.)

Every organism alive today has a parental lineage that stretches back deep into the mists of time. There is an unbroken line of parents or predecessors that goes all the way back to the beginning.

We all come from a remarkable string of survivors – by definition, those who came before us lived long enough to reproduce. Every single one of them.

In harsh environments, where food was scarce and danger was imminent, this unbroken reproduction chain was only possible through a focus on survival.

And so the mind and body evolved together as a kind of integrated survival system… a "survival machine" (and a reproduction machine).

The more we learn about how the mind and body work, the harder it becomes to separate the two.

The more we learn about how the mind works – and about how the human body works – the harder it becomes to separate the two in terms of basic function.

The mind and the body are separate systems, but their functions are interwoven so intimately it is almost impossible to conceive of them as independent.

The mind can tell the body how to feel, and the body will change its chemical composition and posture and heart rate to facilitate that mood change.

But the body can also tell the mind how to feel, sending signals when tired or going into automatic response mode in periods of danger or stress.

Moods, emotions, and perceptions of reality itself are shaped not just by what the mind believes, but how the body feels. It is almost impossible to feel good, or to feel confident, under certain conditions of deprivation, malnutrition, or other stress.

On the positive flip side, treating the body well – getting solid levels of sleep, nutrition, sunshine, and basic exercise – can actually make it hard to feel "bad" or "negative," even in challenging situations.

Just as a general mood or life outlook can be slowly degraded or destroyed by neglect of the body's basic physical needs, the opposite is the case: A positive, productive mood can be reinforced, to the point of feeling bullet proof, by taking care of the body in such a way that core physical requirements are well satisfied.

A Machine Built to Move

Causality runs in both directions. The mind impacts the body and vice versa.

So does the mind rule the body or the body rule the mind? There is no simple answer. Causality runs in both directions.

The mind can impact the body greatly. Yet the body can impact the mind greatly. It is a two-way street. And when you understand the core directive of the body and mind as an integrated system, a "survival machine," this two-way causality makes perfect sense.

John Coates, author of *The Hour Between Dog and Wolf*, argues a belief increasingly held by neuroscientists:

> *The basic operation of the brain is the organization of movement.*

Human beings are, quite literally, "built to move."

Human beings are, quite literally, "built to move."

Again, this is wholly logical when you consider our formative biological environment.

In the environment we came from – the environment that shaped our mind-body system as it exists today – all forms of survival were based on movement, sometimes rapid movement.

> Obtaining food on a regular basis, be it foraging for nuts and berries or hunting for protein, required movement.
>
> Evading predators, or fighting them off, required instant and sometimes highly aggressive movement.
>
> Hunting prey over long distances – man is a world champion distance runner, which allowed him to chase down fast prey by wearing them out – required observation and movement.
>
> Social conflicts, and rituals of impressing potential mates or showing leadership and dominance, required movement. (These rituals still exist today in the form of sports. This is why athletes are revered.)

The mind may have evolved primarily to regulate the movement of the body.

As such one can make the case that the human mind, as incredibly creative and sophisticated as it is, evolved primarily to regulate the movement of the body – to work hand-in-glove (or brain-in-head) to facilitate the right kind of movement at the right times, while responding to feedback signals in a survival-optimal type way.

As Coates writes in *The Hour Between Dog and Wolf:*

> If… you view your brain and body and behavior with a robust appreciation of the fact that you are built to move, and if you let that simple fact sink in, then I am willing to bet that you will never see yourself in quite the same way again. You will come to understand why you feel so many of the things you do, why your reactions are often so fast as to leave conscious thought behind, why you rely on gut feelings, why it is that during the most powerful moments of your life – satisfying moments of flow, of insight, of love, of risk taking, and traumatic moments of fear, anger and stress – you lose awareness of a split between mind and body, and they merge as one. Seeing yourself as an inseparable unity of body and brain may involve a shift in your self-understanding, but it is, I believe, a truly liberating one.

We agree with Coates. The mind and the body are so intertwined they cannot be truly understood as separate entities, but only as an integrated system.

It is like the shading of the wrist between the forearm and the hand. One cannot truly say where the forearm stops and the hand begins – and one cannot understand the physiology and functions of either, on a standalone basis, except in context of how they work together.

The mind and the body are a system. And the purpose of that system – what it was literally designed for, by constant pressures of natural selection over incredibly long periods of time – was to survive, and to socialize, and to move.

The Fight or Flight Response

Consider the response of "Fight or Flight," which is quite rational for a majority of vertebrates.

Fight or Flight arose because danger, in the natural world, is primarily a physical phenomenon.

Fight or Flight as a basic response arose because, in the natural world, danger is primarily a physical phenomenon.

To deal with danger, you move away from it. Or to avoid the danger of starving, you move in the direction of your food.

For the human being, Fight or Flight arose from a basic roster of choices: You either stand your ground in the face of danger and prepare to do battle – possibly to the death – or else you run like hell, either to prevent becoming dinner or in order to track and catch your dinner.

Two key brain regions involved in Fight or Flight are the hypothalamus and the amygdala. As Coates writes:

> The hypothalamus, a brain region found by projecting lines in from the bridge of your nose and sideways from the front of your ears, regulates our hormones, and through them our eating, sleeping, sodium levels, water retention, reproduction, aggression and so on.

It acts as the main integration site for emotional behavior; in other words it coordinates the hormones and the brain stem and the emotional behaviors into a coherent bodily response. When, for example, an angry cat hisses and arches its back and fluffs its fur and secretes adrenaline, it is the hypothalamus that has assembled these separate displays of anger and orchestrated them into a single coherent emotional act.

Without the amygdala, the world would be a collection of boring objects.

The amygdala assigns emotional significance to events. Without the amygdala, we would view the world as a collection of uninteresting objects. A charging grizzly bear would impress us as nothing more threatening than a large, moving object. Bring the amygdala online, and miraculously the grizzly morphs into a terrifying and deadly predator and we scramble up the nearest tree. The amygdala is the key brain region registering danger in the outside world and initiating the suite of physical changes known as the "stress response." It also registers signs of danger inside the body, such as rapid breathing and heart rate, increased blood pressure, etc., and these too can trigger an emotional reaction. The amygdala senses danger and rouses the body to high alert, and is in turn alarmed by our body's arousal, this reciprocal influence of body on amygdala, amygdala on body, occasionally feeding on itself to produce runaway anxiety and panic attacks.

Some believe the regulation of movement, in service to Fight or Flight, is why consciousness exists.

To briefly get philosophical, some believe that the regulation of movement – and the need to implement ever more sophisticated versions of Fight or Flight – is the reason why consciousness exists.

What does it mean to say an animal has consciousness, or self-awareness? There has to be a kind of continuum.

At one end of the spectrum, a flatworm has nothing that one could call consciousness.

At the other end of the spectrum you have human beings, the only known species with a cultural legacy of science and art and engineering.

But in between flatworms and humans you have dogs and capuchin monkeys, who demonstrate a basic sense of fairness; crows that can apply innovation to basic problem-solving and tool usage; octopuses who live in a "city" scientists have dubbed Octlantis; and elephant herds that hold funeral rituals for their dead.

The more sophisticated a creature's survival strategy, the more self-awareness it tends to have.

These are varying degrees of consciousness and self-awareness, with one clear link: The more sophisticated the creature's survival strategy the greater range of possible responses it has – and along with that, the more self-awareness it tends to possess.

To put it another way, the most basic of survival responses could be characterized as a cockroach moving in the opposite direction of gusts of wind on its antennae, or a paramecium moving in the direction of chemical traces that signify a food source.

The most advanced survival responses are expressions of science and art and engineering across societies, for purposes of production, fulfillment or war.

We don't mean to argue that it is "all" survival… that it is "all" Fight or Flight… but then again, on a certain irreducible level this is arguably true.

The concept of meaning is associated with having a neocortex, which is why, on earth at least, only humans have access to it, and only a handful of other species (the octopus and elephant perhaps) are close. Meaning is important, but it is also subjective and self-created, and thus exists on top of, and is enabled by, the basic survival mechanisms that drive all forms of continued existence in the first place.

But getting back to Fight or Flight, and mankind's uniquely modern problems…

Old System, New Problems

Nearly all human reaction to negative emotion makes sense in the context of Fight or Flight.

Nearly all of the reactions a human feels in the presence of negative emotion like fear or anger — or micro-level manifestations like anxiety and low-level stress, the same thing on a smaller scale — make sense in the context of Fight or Flight.

When you experience the Fight or Flight response, your body is preparing you to do what worked for millennia, what worked 50,000 years ago and so on. It is preparing you to engage in physical movement, either toward or away from something.

In the literal sense this means immediate pragmatic changes to the body.

> Your heart rate spikes in anticipation of intense physical movement.
>
> Your breath gets shallow in preparation to engage in a blast of anaerobic activity, like running at full sprint or hitting something with a club.
>
> Most critically, the Fight or Flight stress response takes blood flow AWAY from the brain in order to reallocate to the muscles, while flooding the system with stress hormones that indicate TIME TO MOVE!!!

All of these reactions are logical when juxtaposed against the assumption that a physical reaction is appropriate in response to a threat.

But they are the **exact opposite** of what is necessary if a cerebral, mental response is more appropriate as a threat neutralizer.

In the modern world, the pre-modern Fight or Flight response would ideally be turned on its head.

Imagine, if you will, a human being whose integrated mind-body response system is fully evolved for the 21st century, rather than the needs of 50,000 years ago. (Or actually hold on, we'll circle back to that idea shortly.)

In the modern world, the pre-modern Fight or Flight response would ideally be turned on its head. Danger in the modern world is almost never physical, in the sense of needing to physically fight or physically run. But instead the danger, and the needed response, is mental and cerebral.

Whereas in the past, being presented with danger might mean getting ready to run from an animal or engage in combat with that danger, now the presence of sudden danger is akin to having to play a surprise game of speed chess — where you have to stop and think your way through a situation.

Even the physical dangers that still menace modern humanity, like being in the path of a hurricane or dealing with a mugger, more so require the ability to act coolly and rationally, versus responding with a surge of adrenaline or physical force.

And there is another, yet even more serious, problem with the embedded Fight or Flight response all humans are born with:

> The original Fight or Flight response was attuned to **fleeting and temporary** dangers, not a constant presence of worry and stress.
>
> Biochemical reactions were meant to deal with the issue **quickly and decisively**, or in the space of a few hours, and then to relax again later.
>
> You run from the predator or catch the meal – and then at home you relax again, the threat now gone. In the modern world **low-level threats persist,** which creates hormone-related problems over time.

A constant experience of low-level stress, undealt with, creates hormone-generated problems over time.

When stress is a constant presence and not handled properly, as often occurs in the modern world, the result can be permanent impairment of the mind-body system.

As John Coates observes:

> Cortisol is the main hormone of the stress response, a body-wide response to injury or threat. Cortisol works in tandem with adrenaline, but while adrenaline is a fast-acting hormone, taking effect in seconds and having a half-life in the blood of only two to three minutes, cortisol kicks in to support us during a long siege.
>
> If you are hiking through the woods and hear a rustle in the bushes, you may suspect the presence of a grizzly bear, so the shot of adrenaline you receive is designed to carry you clear of danger.
>
> If the noise turns out to be nothing but wind in the leaves you settle down, and the adrenaline quickly dissipates. But if you are in fact being stalked by a predator and the chase lasts several hours, then cortisol takes over the management of your body. It orders all long-term and metabolically expensive functions of the body, such as digestion, reproduction, growth, storage of energy and after a while even immune function, to stop.
>
> …At this crucial moment in your life, cortisol has in effect ordered a complete retooling of your body's factories, away from leisure and consumption goods to war matériel.
>
> In the brain, cortisol, like testosterone, initially has the beneficial effects of increasing arousal and sharpening attention, even promoting a slight thrill from the challenge, but as levels of the hormone rise and stay elevated, it comes to have the opposite effects… promoting feelings of anxiety, a selective recall of disturbing memories and a tendency to find danger where none exists.

Cortisol takes over the management of the body, and orders metabolically expensive functions to stop.

And thus the long-run impacts of cortisol, if constantly present through poor stress management, present a whole new problem for modern Fight or Flight instincts.

In the modern world it is possible to feel "stalked by a predator" all the time, for months or years on end.

In the modern world, though physical predators generally don't exist, it is possible to feel low-level stress and worry inputs akin to **being stalked by a predator all the time, for months or years on end.**

This can cause damage and impairment on multiple levels, not just to productive capacity but to general health and well-being.

The 21st Century Reconfiguration

So think about a modern world – a wholly different world than our formative biological environment, the one in which the mind-body system was created – in which the current layers of technology and societal rules and strategic response requirements have been built up enough that the mind is more primary than the body as a key response tool… and engagement of the neocortex, the thinking and planning locus of the brain, is the ideal first responder versus lungs or muscles.

What's desirable is a response completely opposite to the old one.

What you actually want in the switched-up modern world, it turns out, is almost the **complete opposite reaction** versus the old response.

Here are some of the things one might want in a 21st century reconfiguration of the embedded Fight or Flight response:

> You want **a sense of calm to wash over you**, rather than a sense of heightened adrenaline. If danger is building, then rather than having our mind-body system say *RUN!* or *FIGHT!*, you actually want a sense of focus and a deeply enveloping calm, a sort of competition-level relaxed sharpness, to observe and analyze and respond to the moment.
>
> You want **your breathing and heart rate to actually slow down,** rather than speed up. You want deeper oxygen intake and rhythmic calming activity as you emphasize clear thinking, engaging the mind rather than muscles, as opposed to the sharp, shallow bursts that signal cutting off blood flow to the brain and preparing for anaerobic movement.
>
> In terms of blood flow and stress hormones, you do not want your muscles pumped up with blood and hormones as your brain is deprived and your systems are sped up. Instead you want **the body to slow down and require less blood flow,** not more, so that more blood flow and energy can be allocated to the neocortex for executive function.

A severe stress response is, in a some ways, a temporary "self-lobotomy" as energy (via blood flow) is restricted from the brain and reallocated to the muscles.

A severe stress response is like a "self-lobotomy," as brain blood flow is restricted and reallocated to muscles.

You want the opposite of that, almost a stillness of muscles in a relaxed state, so that the mind can fully power up to contemplate and measure and respond.

Your brain demands more resources in these times, not less. This is, literally, the *opposite* of the way it was in our formative biological environment.

The reason why the 21st century ideal for responding to stress and danger is the complete opposite of what happened eons ago, is because of the way body and mind are juxtaposed and triaged in the context of limited energy resources.

The mind-body system is actually two systems, mind and body, intimately linked and integrated in a single survival machine.

The mind and body are two systems, with one shared pool of energy reserves, subjected to zero-sum resource allocation under stress.

The survival machine has ONE energy reserve and ONE pool of resources to allocate, which becomes “zero sum” in times of danger and stress.

In the old environment, the optimal survival response was allocating the survival machine’s resources TOWARD “body” and AWAY from “mind.”

The modern world is literally opposite. As stress and danger arise, the optimal response is allocating resources AWAY from “body” and TOWARD “mind.”

Countless millennia ago, the response to danger was to put body into action, and so resources for mind were restricted and redirected into body. But today the appropriate response to danger is to put mind into action, which means the opposite needs to happen.

It is of course not possible to literally, physically create a human who is optimally evolved for the modern environment.

This would mean modifying the interaction between the mind and the body as a system — changing the functional apparatus of the hypothalamus and amygdala, tinkering with the body’s biochemical reaction functions, and so on.

That is neither immediately possible nor obviously desirable. We don't have the time or capacity to rapid-evolve in a physical way, and we likely wouldn’t want to tinker with our ancient physical blueprint that much anyway.

The mind-body setup as currently experienced is a miraculously resilient and powerful complex system, even with its drawbacks, that has been crafted and sculpted over eons. It also generates the essence of “self,” what it feels like to be not just a conscious being, but a human. We don’t really want to mess with that.

We can “rewire” the mind in ways that produce radical positive change.

But the good news is **we can yet "rewire" the mind in ways that produce radical positive upgrades,** in the manner of swapping out the operating system for a computer.

You cannot change the computer hardware — which in this analogy is like the physical body — but you can **change much of the operating system software,** represented by the neural patterns and mental models and subconscious learned responses encoded via neuroplasticity into the mind.

Thanks to neuroplasticity – the astounding ability of the brain to change itself, via the forming and reorganizing of synaptic connections – we can actually **rewire the software and reprogram the system** away from Fight or Flight.

The Labyrinth Paradigm

Imagine you are trapped in a labyrinth with a series of doors. Embedded in each door there is a puzzle. You have to solve a door's puzzle in order to open it.

You've also been injected with a slow-acting poison. The antidote to the poison exists behind the very last door.

You have ten hours to make it out of the labyrinth and drink the antidote. If you run out of time, you die. This means solving a series of door puzzles, and tracking your steps, and doing it all under the clock, on pain of death.

Now picture an alternative scenario: Instead of death being on the line, everything you ever wanted is behind the final door.

If you make it through the labyrinth, the greatest achievement of your entire life will be unlocked. But if you fail – if you run out of time – you get nothing.

In the labryinth paradigm, Fight or Flight would cause your mind-body system to do all the wrong things.

Imagine how unhelpful "Fight or Flight" would be under the above circumstances.

With Fight or Flight in the labyrinth, the presence of stress and pressure would cause your mind-body system to do all the wrong things.

It would cloud your focus and impede your ability to think (by restricting blood flow to your brain). It would gradually cause panic and anxiety levels to rise as the minutes ticked away. And it would literally block your ability to solve the puzzles quickly and efficiently, due to lost concentration and biochemical distractions.

The modern world is a lot more like the labyrinth paradigm than it is like the old world. Our problems tend to be abstract puzzles, not predators that want to eat us.

That is why we have to change. That is why the operating system has to be upgraded. That is why the mind's software must be swapped out and reprogrammed.

The proper orientation is no longer Fight or Flight, but Think or Sink.

The proper orientation for the labyrinth is not "Fight or Flight," but rather what we have dubbed "Think or Sink."

The essence of Think or Sink is captured in this apocryphal quote from Einstein. It's not clear he really said it, but the concept holds regardless:

> *"If I had only one hour to save the world, I would spend fifty-five minutes defining the problem, and only five minutes finding the solution."*

That attitude captures the essence of "Think or Sink" as opposed to "Fight or Flight." To sit and think for 55 minutes, as the world came close to ending, would be to deliberately engage the neocortex, and rationally work through questions and answers, rather than engage in frantic emotion or movement for movement's sake.

You have to be cooler than a cucumber in a bowl of hot sauce to pull that off.

The way of the neocortex and the use of “executive function” – rationally analyzing problems, thinking calmly, directing blood flow to the brain while keeping the body relatively still – is the way of “Think or Sink.”

It is the way to solve the labyrinth, and the way to win in the modern world.

Software and Electric Cars

Think about one of the great advantages of the electric car versus the old ICE vehicles (ICE stands for internal combustion engine).

It used to be that, when a car with an internal combustion engine and zero computer components was built, the car was simply "done" in terms of being easily modified.

Before the gradual introduction of computer components, you built a car and that was it. You had the car, the engine and the parts, and nothing could be modified except via physical operation (the removal and replacement of parts).

Now consider the difference between the 20th century ICE vehicle and the 21st century electric car.

The modern electric car, still rapidly evolving, is in many ways far more simple than its ICE predecessor. Whereas an internal combustion engine literally has thousands of parts, and thousands more parts connected to those parts, an electric car is more like a battery strapped on a skateboard, with power flowing directly to the wheels.

An electric car is inherently far simpler than an ICE vehicle, with the ability to run software upgrades.

And yet the radical difference with an electric car – besides the power source – is the fact that the car runs on software, and is in some sense a computer on wheels.

The software can furthermore be updated via airwaves, which means the electric car has its own version of neuroplasticity.

So if engineers discover, say, an algorithm that can better manage the interplay between braking and acceleration, and a small tweak to this algorithm can improve energy efficiency by half a percent, they can simply send out the update and improve the car as it sits in its owner's garage. Updates to the operating system can be made at nearly any time.

The brain is more like the modern electric car than the old ICE vehicle.

Thanks to neuroplasticity, you can update your mental programming. You cannot change the physicality of your body, in the same way that the chassis of the car cannot be easily modified. But you can modify the software for performance improvements.

One day we may have the capability to change our actual physical system — the internals of the body — as easily as taking a pill. The way this might work would be for a pill to contain a specially engineered virus, a helpful virus with a specifically designed job, which propagates throughout the body and makes updates to DNA and RNA, or causes certain genes to be switched on or off.

That is probably a few decades away at least (though CRISPR is a start down this road). In the here and now, upgrading one's mental operating system software via neuroplasticity is abundantly doable.

Achieving the Transition

So we want to make the switch from Fight or Flight (formative biological environment response) to Think or Sink response (21st century response), as such that the mind-body system's reaction to threats or stress is wholly reconfigured.

And this is the stuff of legend, is it not? The stuff of action films and comic books.

Culture subconsciously celebrates the Think or Sink ideal, similar to the way we celebrate athletic prowess.

When you see a highly trained spy from a secret agency… or the comic book hero acting calmly as everyone panics around them… or the Finnish sniper Simo Häyhäin, who had 259 confirmed sniper kills in the Winter War of 1939-40… or the athlete who makes the "clutch" game-winning shot to win the championship… that is a manifestation of Think or Sink in a high stakes, high performance setting.

What we see with these examples – which humans tend to elevate and celebrate like the physicality of athletes – is at root level an elevation of the Think or Sink concept, this marshaling of mind over body in times of stress, when the opposite reaction is more the norm.

It is an elevation of strategy and tactics born of thinking and focus, as opposed to Fight or Flight.

And this elevation does not dismiss the "body" aspect of the equation but elevates it alongside, simply making sure that the "mind" component of the mind-body system comes first and foremost. The body is controlled in service to a conscious goal.

Philosophers and poets and story tellers have respected such capabilities at least since the days of the ancient Greeks, and likely far further back.

Now how do you achieve this switch from Fight or Flight to Think or Sink?

How do you make this happen?

In our write-ups on Metaprocess, we've introduced Linguistic Performance Management and Radical Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and developing a suite of cloud-based tools to enable advancement.

It is not a fast or instant upgrade, but a slow and steady install over time.

But the short and immediate answer is that you make the software change gradually and incrementally, by changing the wiring of your neural networks. It is not a fast or instant upgrade, but a slow and steady install over time.

A key difference between the human brain as an operating system, versus say an electric car's operating system, is that the human brain's operating system is much more powerful and complex, which makes the installation challenging and gradual.

There is a manual component to installing new software in the mind – one cannot simply "accept the upload" like a headphone jack in the back of one's neck.

You can mentally receive over-the-air programming instructions and updates, in the sense of material that you read or listen to.

You can tap into sources of information that give you ideas and direction on how to hack into your own neuroplasticity, and how to change your mental models and perceptions of reality and learned responses, in ways that are beneficial.

But you have to prepare your mind, almost with a sense of artisanal craftsmanship, to receive the new programming. And then you have to work on an incremental and gradual installation process – which takes time.

The human brain is harder to program because it is more powerful, not less.

The human brain is harder to program than a normal computer because it is so much MORE powerful, not because it is less.

The mind-body system as it exists is delicately calibrated, and thus rejects any crude attempts to modify it. This is truly for the best.

Humans can't go around crashing their own systems like Windows 95. You can't type a bad line of code into your head and summon the blue screen of death. The system is too sophisticated for that. It won't accept new programming easily or lightly. You have to write and then rewrite, and gradually strengthen the new neural patterns.

Getting in the REPS

In a very real sense, changing your brain is like changing your muscles. To grow bigger muscles, you have to do strength conditioning.

Strength training and brain modification have much in common.

That means doing "reps" with physical weights, or other acts of repeated physical exertion, in order to stimulate muscle growth through pressure and resistance.

For brain change we can think of REPS as an acronym:

Repetition
Engagement
Process
Strategy

You actually need all of those for a physical strength program too.

If you want to build muscles you have to "engage" in a certain level of physical activity with weights… with a significant amount of "repetition" (engaging over and over again)… and you follow a certain "process" in terms of how you do things… and you deploy an overall strategy in pursuit of a goal, which can take months or years.

There is X number of reps, and Y combination of exercises, and rest and recovery, and nutrition. You embrace repetition. You engage with the resistance. You have a process that you follow. And you deploy a strategy that shapes all other inputs.

In this sense, you train your mind like you train your body.

In this sense, you train your mind like you train your body.

To go from Fight or Flight to Think or Sink, you blast out the REPS.

There is no way to inertly receive the programming and gain real benefit from it. Hoping for this is about as realistic as expecting to grow muscles by reading body-building books, or hoping to learn Kung Fu by watching Bruce Lee movies.

You must actively become your own programmer, coach and trainer. And this is where we get into the realms of actual strategy, which is critical.

Bad Strategy Is Worse Than No Strategy

This is a significant departure from common self-help approaches which implicitly assume that success is based on will power, or attitude, and not based on the quality and viability of a strategy (or lack thereof).

There is a component of magical thinking, quite prevalent today, that assumes will power alone is sufficient to accomplish a hard task. This attitude says things like:

> *What the mind can conceive, the will can achieve.*
>
> *If you just believe in yourself, you can do it!*
>
> *Truly commit to your goals and all the rest will follow.*

These statements have value. There is real value in motivation, and value in gearing up for a challenge via “PMA” (positive mental attitude).

In the absence of a viable strategy, motivational statements can be toxic.

But it’s also the case that, if coupled with a bad or non-viable strategy – or no strategy at all – **motivational statements can become toxic.**

It may be motivating, at first, to think that "If I just push hard enough, I can do it."

But what happens when no amount of pushing produces the desired result? This sets up the mind for intense internal conflict.

> On the one hand, there is intense desire to believe the motivational statement: “If you just believe, you can do it.”
>
> On the other hand, there is an increasing flow of negative evidence over time: “This isn’t working / the desired result is not happening.”
>
> If not resolved, this conflict leads to growing doubt, which in turn leads either to intense rationalization (dangerous) or a sudden collapse of motivation and destruction of one’s positive belief system (also very dangerous).

We can use strength training as a clear example of why bad strategy is worse than no strategy. It is possible to approach strength training with great enthusiasm and commitment, only to achieve bad results that actually result in a LOSS of strength.

Consider what happens when the muscles are over trained – when there is too much shredding of the muscle fibers, without sufficient rest and recovery.

The hyper-enthusiasm trap can lead to a loss of muscle strength, and a follow-on collapse of motivation.

This is not the trap of the lazy individual who doesn't get to the gym enough. It is the trap of the hyper-motivated individual who assumes that if pushing hard in the gym three days a week is good, then pushing hard six days a week is better.

A trap that befalls many beginning weight lifters, pumped up by hyper-enthusiasm, is the tendency to go too hard, and not allow enough time for recovery and growth.

The logic of this enthusiasm is that harder work, and a higher frequency of workouts, will mean faster muscle gains. But without sufficient rest and recovery the opposite can occur.

The act of tearing down muscle fibers, and then not giving time for the muscles to heal before engaging in the next round of exercise, can actually leave the body weaker rather than stronger.

The practical result of this is that one can see a dedicated but inexperienced weight lifter train as hard as they can for a solid year… yet feel deeply frustrated at the end of that year.

They put in huge amounts of hard work and got nowhere, or quickly hit a wall, or may have even LOST strength… when the simple reality is that the physical biology of the body meant their strategy was wrong.

The practical reality of this is forehead slapping:

> Not only are willpower and motivation not enough (when lacking strategy)…
>
> But willpower and motivation can actually be *counterproductive and destructive* if applied the wrong way (lacking strategy again).
>
> As such, without the proper strategy, greater levels of exertion, and ginned up levels of enthusiasm, only hasten the moment of doubt and collapse.

This why each component of REPS is imperative – strategy included. The acronym one more time:

Repetition
Engagement
Process
Strategy

Strategy is imperative. As are REPS in general. And as with strength training, or martial arts training, time and devotion are required to see incremental results.

Ideally the journey becomes the destination.

Ideally you fall in love with the process itself, the way martial arts practitioners cherish their dojo time and muscleheads love hitting the gym. The journey becomes the destination, so to speak. (For more on this, read *Mastery* by George Leonard.)

Many people, when they think about stress management techniques or crisis response training, have a mental picture of some emergency action they can take, like "in case of emergency break glass."

The time to prepare is well before a call to action occurs.

But that is not how it works. The time to gain physical strength is long before that strength is called upon. The time to prepare for a stressful event is long before the stressful event occurs. And the time to prepare a crisis response is long before the crisis occurs.

If you wind up in a situation where it would really be helpful to know Kung Fu, you don't consult a Kung Fu manual on the spot. You either learned Kung Fu already or you didn't, and you go with what you have.

You do the REPS and you build towards your goal. And then your desired responses, your hard-wired reconditioning, is part and parcel of your reconfigured system.

It is simply always there, at an instinctive level, as a form of automaticity:

> **Automaticity** /ˌɔːtəməˈtɪsɪti/ is the ability to do things without occupying the mind with the low-level details required, allowing it to become an automatic response pattern or habit. It is usually the result of learning, repetition, and practice.

So, in our effort to decommission Fight or Flight, we have Think or Sink as the attainable goal.

A goal is achieving and deploying correct form without a consciously registered need to use it.

And you want this automatically, which comes from preconditioning. You want to massage your conceptions and incrementally change your models and patterns, until you automatically deploy a Think Or Sink response without having to consciously register the need to do so.

Not a Superpower (Though It Can Feel Like One)

When you have achieved this:

> Your physiology in the presence of day-to-day stresses and fear points will actually change – much for the better.
>
> Your heart rate will fall, not rise, in response to stress impacts.
>
> Your breathing patterns will become deeper and richer, not shallower, in response to challenges.
>
> Your levels of calm and intuitive stillness will rise in the presence of a threat, rather than levels of agitation and discomfort.
>
> Blood flow will increase to your brain, as the body relaxes, when performance is demanded from the neocortex rather than muscles.
>
> Instead of stress hormones flooding your system, a sense of determined relaxation – a quietly fierce calm – will take hold instead.

This is not a superpower, but just a form of training born of REPS.

This sounds like a superpower, or something wielded by a Shaolin Buddhist monk. But it's not a superpower. It is just a form of training that is born of REPS, and the rewiring of neural networks toward new and superior response configurations geared to the modern world, via the inherent neuroplasticity of the mind.

It is a "superpower," one might say, in the sense that the individual who has profoundly transitioned from Fight or Flight to Think or Sink as an automatic response mechanism has capabilities under pressure, and the ability to perform in stressful situations, at performance levels that 99% of the population can't access.

But training is a better way to think about it, because this ability is not based in willpower or extraordinary genetics or freak of nature capabilities.

Nor is it something that one calls upon only in the moment, on a spot basis.

The new orientation is immersive, and becomes a part of who you are.

You don't call on it out of the blue because when configured properly, all the desirable responses already exist. The training is already there. It is reframing to such an immersive degree that the new orientation is a part of who you are.

Not Vulcan Either (Emotions Are Good)

The famous sci-fi series *Star Trek* presented a compelling vision of the Vulcans.

In the *Star Trek* universe the Vulcans, as you likely know, were hyper-logical beings who had a past culture of being extremely emotional and extremely violent.

As such the Vulcans had learned to restrict and suppress their intense emotions, burying them so deeply that only cold logic remained. Mr. Spock was a product of this culture, in which a capacity for destabilizing emotion was entirely removed.

But while that made for a neat concept (and a uniquely memorable character in popular culture), becoming a Vulcan in real life would actually be a very bad idea.

Restricting or repressing emotion has significant drawbacks, not just in quality of life terms but performance.

Restricting or repressing emotion has significant drawbacks, not just in quality of life terms but reducing capacity for performance.

There are many reasons why emotions are valuable, on both an aesthetic level and a talent and performance level.

Emotions are an integral part of the mind-body system, and play important roles in decision making and experience weighting.

Emotion is a form of feedback that signals danger or opportunity… adds weight to important memories… reinforces learning with psychosomatic markers… allows for the perception of subtle cues… flags alerts from the depths of the subconscious mind… and so on. Suppressing emotion blocks all of that, which is not a good move.

Trying to be rid of your emotions – trying to be like Mr. Spock, in other words – cuts off a rich and nuanced stream of signals, while making the act of day-to-day living a less enriching and enlightening experience.

But you don't have to cut off emotion to do what we are discussing here.

You can decommission the Fight or Flight response, and install the Think or Sink upgrade instead, without diminishing emotional richness.

You can have even more access to emotional richness than before.

In fact, with this transition you can have even MORE access to emotional richness than before, because emotional variance in the context of the new mental operating system will no longer be dangerous or destabilizing.

This is possible because of neuroplasticity and the infinitely customizable nature of mental patterns and learned responses.

The mind has an incredible ability to juxtapose and compartmentalize and custom-fit, and does so naturally.

The same individual can be scientific and hyper-rational at three o' clock in the afternoon, yet be passionately moved while listening to their favorite Beethoven symphony performed at a concert that night.

The way that the mind stores patterns of mental models and learned response, it is possible for different patterns to have wholly separate function and implication.

The mind's ability to compartmentalize and custom-configure is a feature, not a bug.

You may have noticed that people have the ability to hold incredibly contradicting beliefs on certain topics – while maddening at times this is a feature, not a bug, in that it shows how the mind can be custom-configured and compartmentalized.

You do not have to degrade any of the wonderful, desirable emotions that are upheld as the best part of the human experience, in order to become hyper-rational in the presence of danger or stress. They are *separate situational elements*, and the neuroplasticity of the mind is fine with that.

Part of the beauty is the ability to change small pieces incrementally, other parts not at all.

Part of the beauty of an over-the-air software update is that very small pieces of the system can be changed incrementally, other parts of the system not at all.

This creates the opportunity to take deliberate control of the process, and reconfigure the program for both optimal response and optimal perception of life experience (which includes unimpeded emotional flow when desired).

As such, if Spock were actually as smart as advertised, he would have figured out how to gain *beneficial access* to his emotions – in a deliberate and controlled type of way – while still being able to rein them in as needed.

The classic dilemma for many who are attracted to disciplines of stoicism and detachment – who wish to rise above their perceived emotional weaknesses – is:

> *"What if I become a robot... What if I lose my humanity... What if I become a machine."*

As we explain this dilemma is actually false on multiple fronts.

First, you are already a machine (and not in a bad way); second, you already have highly useful emotions which you can keep — indeed, emotional control allows one to experience emotion, when desired, even more intensely than before; and third, there is no conflict between re-orienting towards *calm detachment* at will and maintaining the capacity to be *emotionally engaged* at will.

If anything there is an enhancement on both fronts: The individual who has deeply explored and learned their own system, the system of interplay and interaction between body and mind, will have greater ability to access and tap into the power of emotion *when they choose to*.

The individual who has learned their own system will have greater ability to access, channel and tap the power of emotion as they see fit.

It is like mastering the flow of water in and around a property. Water can be a great nuisance if you can't control where it flows or when. But if you gain control over the flow completely, you can shape it and channel it and direct it in highly useful ways.

The 4-Minute Mile Effect

Why do so few people actually do this? We suspect it is a combination of things. First, many are not aware that the transition from Fight or Flight to Think or Sink is even possible. It doesn't occur to them. Others don't want to commit to the training.

The 4-minute mile story is instructive because of the psychological impact.

Before Roger Bannister broke the 4-minute mile barrier in 1954, it was widely believed that breaking such a barrier was physically impossible for the human body. The scientific literature of the day had declared that no human could run a mile in less than four minutes, ever.

Once Bannister broke the barrier, however – with a time of 3 minutes and 59.4 seconds – his record only held for 46 days. After it was shown the barrier could be broken, large numbers of other runners followed through.

A belief that something can be done – or awarness that someone else has done it – can be a game changer.

A belief that something can be done — or simple awareness that someone else has done it — can be a game-changer in that it inspires the calm persistence necessary to keep pushing forward. Achievement by others shows that a viable strategy exists.

It is hard to push for a goal that you don't know is possible. If someone else has done it, however, and you thus know it is doable, it is easier to forge ahead.

The other aspect is the training. How many people are willing to get a black belt? And how many have access to the training techniques for doing so? A lot of these concepts, with REPS and so on, can be compared to martial arts for the mind. This comparison is apt not just in terms of potential, but training and repetition and form, and incremental gains that accrue over time.

Our intent here is to work back from an empirical proof of concept – the actual doing of the thing – and use iterative refinement to explain and evolve the best practices and methodologies to get it done. Think or Sink system reconfiguration is real and attainable, as we can attest from firsthand knowledge.