

# Richard L. Light

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## Mushin and learning in and beyond budo

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## PSYCHOLOGY OF SPORT



Profile. Professor Richard Light holds a fifth dan black belt in Hayashi Ha Shito Ryu Kai Karate awarded by the late, Soke Hayashi Teruo - a student of Mabuni Kenwa. Richard trained for six years in Osaka where he was also awarded a first dan in Mugai Ryu iaido. Prior to living in Japan he was twice selected in the Australian national karate team and was three times NSW state kung fu champion. He was a member of the Australian kung fu team at the 1980 International Kung Fu Championships (full contact) in Malaysia where placed equal fourth in his weight division. He was also Australian super welterweight kickboxing champion with a World Kickboxing Association (WKA) international ranking of 10 in 1982.

### RICHARD L. LIGHT

Professor and Head: School of Sport and Physical Education  
College of Education, University of Canterbury, Christchurch (New Zealand)  
e-mail: richard.light@canterbury.as.nz

## *Mushin* and learning in and beyond *budo*

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### Abstract:

Recent developments in the theorization of learning reflect a degree of frustration with the limitations of Western dualism and, in particular, with its separation of mind from body. These include the appropriation of the Buddhist concept of mindfulness in Positive Psychology and the concept of flow that has been applied to thinking about athlete performance in sport. This article follows on from this work to draw on the Japanese concept of *mushin* that underpins the practice of traditional martial arts and other cultural practices in Japan to explore the possibilities it offers for an holistic conception of learning. Translated by Suzuki as meaning ‘no mind’ in English, *mushin* describes a state reached through extended periods of training in which purity of action is made possible through the elimination of the interference of the conscious mind as a state of the unity of mind body and spirit. This article concludes by suggesting that the concept of *mushin* offers a new way of conceptualizing learning in and through sport that supports more holistic thinking about it.

### Introduction

Contemporary developments in thinking about learning that see it as a more holistic phenomenon than traditional approaches to sport coaching and teaching would have us believe have stimulated interest in a range of Eastern concepts and ways of thinking [see, Varela, Thompson, Rosch 1991]. There are, however, typically problems with applying Eastern cultural concepts in Western settings due to the vast differences between their *doxa* [Bourdieu 1977; Cohen 2010; Cynarski 2014]. They sit upon

very different sets of philosophic assumptions that are monist in nature while Western views of the world and ideas about knowledge and how we acquire it are dualistic.

In fact, it is the monist nature of Eastern philosophy and the possibilities they offer for challenging mind-body dualism that is so appealing for those working toward more holistic ways of understanding learning. The notion of Zen and the ideas clustered around it have had great appeal in the West as a way of understanding and enhancing performance in sport over the past 50 years and

typically focused on states of consciousness characterized by a unity of body and mind [see, Gallwey 1974]. Applied to sport, Czikszenmihalyi's notion of flow seems to be an attempt to capture the state of awareness in sport in which the athlete is 'lost in the flow' of action when appropriately challenged [see, Jackson, Czikszenmihalyi 1999].

This article continues this interest in what Eastern cultural concepts might have to offer in the development of contemporary learning theory and pedagogy by drawing on the Japanese concept of *mushin* that underpins the practice of traditional martial arts and other cultural practices in Japan [Cynarski 2013; McFarlane 1990]. Translated by Suzuki [1959] as meaning 'no mind' in English, *mushin* describes a state reached through extended periods of training in which purity of action is made possible through the elimination of the interference of the conscious mind as a state of the unity of mind, body and spirit as one [Light, Kentel 2013].

### Physical training and the human spirit

In addition to drawing on the relevant literature this article is informed by my own engagement in Japanese martial arts (budo) because it provides me a practical sense [see, Bourdieu 1977] of budo and *mushin* that complements the literature cited. This is commonly used in autoethnographic studies in which the self can form the only source of data but which can be seen to be at the boundaries of scientific research because they do not sit comfortably with traditional criteria used to judge qualitative inquiries that are influenced by aspirations to objectivity [Holt 2008; Sparkes 2002].

My understandings emerged from ever-deepening involvement in the martial arts in a way that transformed me as a person. In keeping with traditional ways of teaching budo, this occurred over time at an embodied, non-conscious and implicit level. Over long periods of time the ways of moving the body in karate and other forms of budo not only changes the way that you move and the physical features of your body but also the way that you are – your way of being. This is suggested by the use of the suffix *do* in karatedo, judo, aikido and so on. It is also reflected in a belief in the ability of budo to impart particular moral and cultural learning that formed such a strong influence upon the reformation of bujitsu into budo at the end of the nineteenth century, and in belief in the capacity of work on the body to build the human spirit, or *seishin* [Roden 1980; Yuasa 1993].

The emphasis on dropping the hips, keeping the centre of gravity low and generating power from

the lower body in karate and other martial arts is not only tied into the efficient development and execution of power but also into Japanese bodily sensibilities and (embodied) culture. This is evident outside *budo* in what March [1996] refers to as the Japanese culture of movement. As March and others [see, Bourdieu 1977] note, culture is embodied over time and through participation in social practices.

This is evident in the skill and attention paid to detail with which gifts are wrapped in department stores [March 1996]. It was also evident to me, in the skill of Japanese children in performing origami when compared to Australian primary school students through my experiences of school teaching in both countries. Another example is provided by Aida (cited March, 1996), who notes a significant difference in the way that Japanese and Westerners respond to physical threats that embody aspects of the respective cultures. He suggests that Westerners defiantly face the threat with weight on the front foot while Japanese lower their weight and body position, turn their backs, squat or put their arms on their heads.

I spent over 30 years training in karate of which six years living in Japan. During my time in Japan I also studied *iaido*, which literally translated into English means "the way of presence in the moment" [Warner, Draeger 1982: 79], reflecting holistic conceptions of learning in the martial arts. The holistic nature of Eastern philosophical traditions complement learning theories that accept and make sense of the complexity of learning such as constructivism, enactivism and situated learning [Fosnot 1996; De Jaegher Di Paolo 2007; Lave, Wenger 1991] instead of trying to reduce it to a simple linear process often explained using a simple computer analogy.

### Rethinking the relationship between mind and body

While the philosophical division of mind and body can be traced to the Greeks, such as Aristotle, it is more commonly linked with the epistemology of sixteenth century French philosopher René Decartes. His claim that 'I think therefore I am (*Je pense donc je suis*)', and his subsequent presentation of an argument that mind and body are distinctly different entities in his sixth book of *Mediations* has had a profound influence upon Western thinking about education. Dualistic views of learning separate the mind from, and elevate it above the body to perceive of it as an exclusively intellectual process that movement is seen to intrude upon [Dewey 1916/97]. It is a view that devalues the role that

the body and its senses play in learning. It reduces our understanding of human existence and of how we learn, what we learn and what learning is with Dewey [1916/97] going as far as to describe it as an ‘evil’ influence on education, the negative effects of which can not be underestimated. As Davis, Sumara and Luce-Kapler [2000] point out, traditional notions of learning and thinking divorce it from movement to see the body as something that needs to be controlled and kept still to maximize learning and thinking as is embodied in Rodan’s, *The Thinker*. This, of course, has serious implications for teaching physical education and coaching sport across all levels.

Despite the heavy influence of Western approaches to education on the Asian societies from which the more popular martial arts have been exported, such as Japan, Korea and China, they sit upon very different philosophical foundations. In contrast with Cartesian dualism, Eastern views of the world are monist. Although this may be difficult to see in formal education within schools it is far more apparent in the teaching of martial arts and ways of coaching sport in these countries [see, for example, Light 1999].

In Japan, the increasing globalization of sport has seen traditional approaches to sport coaching developed from the martial arts challenged by more contemporary ways of coaching. The best example of this is the remarkable success of the J. League and the growth of football (soccer) in Japan arising from its extensive restructuring. Much of this success is due to the boosting of regional identity with teams and engagement in the global world of sport that has seen the adoption of more global, modern coaching approaches [Light, Yasaki 2004]. These new approaches contrast with ‘traditional’, *seishin tekki* approaches that emphasize extended periods of physically demanding regimes of training aimed at strengthening the spirit [see, Light 1999; McDonald 2004] that are increasingly seen to be outdated.

At the same time, as traditional methods of coaching are being questioned in Japan, concerns with the limits that Western dualism places on understanding and enhancing learning over the past few decades has led to increasing interest in Eastern conceptions of learning [see e.g., Varela, Thompson, Rosch 1991]. This interest has extended to the appropriation of the Buddhist concept of mindfulness by Western psychologists [see, Seligman, Csikszentmihalyi 2000] and considerable interest in using approaches to sport training informed by Zen practices [see, Gallwey 1974]. These developments suggest some frustration with the limits of Cartesian dualism and a search for concepts and ways of thinking that can better help

explain and understand human learning from a more holistic perspective.

The following section examines the Japanese concept of *mushin* to encourage some thinking about how we might use it to re-conceptualize the process of learning in sport. It is informed, not only by the relevant literature but also by my own experiences of engagement in the martial arts and coaching.

### Learning and *mushin*

*Mushin* (無心) is a key cultural concept in the Japanese martial arts with traditional regimes of training aimed at having the *budoka* (martial artist) achieve mind-body unity in action [McFarlane 1990]. There is no translation of *mushin* into English that adequately captures its meaning. Suzuki [1959: 94] offers the term, ‘no mind’ as a useful translation but this has misleading connotations in English due to our separation of mind and body.

*Mushin* describes a state of unity between mind and body that allows for the enactment of embodied knowledge free from the interference of the conscious mind. For the samurai this state of ‘no-mindedness’ allowed the enactment of knowledge developed over years of rigorous training with the purity of action that was possible before beginning training [Suzuki 1959]. This process suggested by Suzuki is symbolically expressed in changes that occur in the colour of the black belt (*kurobi*) worn by many martial arts practitioners in Japan and explained to me by a very senior sensei in Hayashi Ha Shito Ryu Kai Karate do.

Traditionally there were only a white belt and a black belt with the white belt of the beginner symbolizes an absence of technique or skill but also a purity of action and response. As the *karateka* learns the skills of karate s/he struggles to have his/her body perform the mind’s intent. At black belt (*kurobi*) the *karateka* can perform basic skills and movements competently but there is still a gap between mind and body. As the belt fades over many years of practice it begins to return to white. This symbolizes reaching a stage at which the skills and movements of karate learnt over years of practice are performed with the purity that the practitioner first began with.

Although *Mushin* forms a key concept underpinning the practice of *budo* it also structures, and is reproduced through, a range of traditional Japanese cultural practices. For example, in *shodo* (the way of calligraphy) the writer uses a brush dipped in black ink with which s/he must write the character in one smooth motion that expresses

unity of mind and body developed over many years of practice. Just as the samurai was faced with the difference between life and death hinging upon the speed and efficacy of action, there can be no hesitation evident in the application of black ink on the clean white sheet. The smallest hesitation in performing this one action would prevent the pure expression of embodied mind-body unity and purity of action in a well-drawn character. Just as the *karateka* clears his/her mind before practice drawing a beautiful character, *shodo* (a form of calligraphy) requires achieving a state in which the conscious mind does not interfere with purity of action in the execution of drawing the character. This suggests much about Japanese perceptions of knowing, learning and the relationship between the mind and the body.

### Mind-body unity in sport

In contrast to the monist philosophy underpinning Eastern concepts of learning, reductionist views of learning as being merely a function of a disembodied mind dominate Western thinking about learning [Dewey 1916/97; Heidegger 1968; Kentel 2003; Ross 2001]. Despite dominant discourses in the West about the mind, body, heart and spirit being separate entities they interact as part of the complex dimensions of our existence as singular beings [Merleau-Ponty 1945, 1968].

Recognition of the complexity of our existence is evident in the notion of the 'lived body' that has been widely used in the social sciences and is prominent in studies on the embodiment of gender [see, Connell 1983; Welton 1998]. The lived body is a subjective, social entity that involves forms of action, intention, and intimate interaction through its engagement with our social environment [Welton 1998]. Bourdieu's [1977] key concept of *habitus* as the embodied social history of the individual is also influenced by the philosophy of Husserl [see, 1962] and is Bourdieu's key tool for challenging the cognitive bias in the social sciences [Bourdieu, Wacquant 1992]. The *habitus* is constructed over time through participation in practice within particular social fields at an unnoticed, implicit level and operates at this non-conscious level to structure action and behaviour, which is why it is so powerful.

Support for an holistic approach to understanding sport coaching over the past ten to fifteen years has been strong with a focus on the socially situated nature of coaching [Cassidy, Jones, Potrac 2009; Lund, Ravn, Christensen 2013; Nelson, Cushion, Potrac 2006]. Writing and research on

games-based approaches such as Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU) and Game Sense has also argued for the holistic nature of learning game play [see, Harvey *et al.* 2010; Light, Fawns 2003]. Learning is thus based in the complexity of modified games in an approach that contrasts with reductionist approaches that attempt to break games down into discrete components such as technique that are practised out of context.

### Achieving *mushin* in sport

The obvious complexity of team sports makes them ideal for the use of holistic coaching approaches that can account for the relationship between conscious, rational learning and non-conscious, embodied learning. In team games taught using Game Sense and other game-based approaches the players learn by adapting to the conditions of the modified, small-sided games and by bringing experience to consciousness through the use of language to reflect on experience and make sense of learning through dialogue [see, Light, Fawns 2003]. In team games athletes can typically articulate what they should do well before they are actually able to enact this knowledge as knowledge-in-action [Schön 1983].

As Light and Fawns [2003] argue, the enactment of knowledge-in-action shows that the player knows the game but this knowledge is often enacted without rational consideration. Indeed, expert performance typically produces action and responses that Light and Fawns refer to as 'the body thinking' because it is action unhindered by the conscious mind. Instead, it can be seen as achieving the unity of mind and body evident in a state of *mushin*. Just as the expert *karateka* or *kendoka* must attain a state of *mushin* for the clarity of action, expert football, cricket, basketball or rugby players who perform remarkable feats in games do so in a 'mindless' manner.

The concept of *mushin* can also be gainfully employed for thinking about learning and how to enhance it in individual sports. Some previous writing has shown how game based pedagogy can be adapted to the different demands of individual sports with Light suggesting that the four features of the Game Sense framework can be applied to swimming [Light, in press]. From a holistic perspective the learning of swimming techniques unfolds from the personal interpretation of technique and adaptation by the swimmer with techniques not completely standardized and uniform due to individual reinterpretation by swimmers [Light, Wallian 2008]. Rather than the swimmer embedding patterns of movement s/he engages in a process of reducing the gap between

conscious regulation of the body and its movements in the water the swimmer can be seen to learn as s/he approaches a state of *mushin* when technique is performed in action under race conditions.

*Mushin* can be used as an objective in teaching individual sports such as swimming and running. Drawing on the four features of Game Sense pedagogy and applying them to swimming or running can lead to the same learning process outlined above for team sports [Light 2013]. This involves setting up the physical experiences (as the physical context) aimed at promoting specific learning and which typically involves some sort of constraint placed on the swimmer or runner to which he/she has to adapt. It also involves encouraging reflection and thinking by asking questions instead of telling the athlete what to do. This involves setting up learning as a process of problem solving that can be done at an individual level or at a collective level through the formation of small groups down to having pairs so that the athletes can engage in dialogue and the debate of ideas [Gréhaigne, Richard, Griffin 2005].

The coach/teacher then needs to provide opportunities for the athletes to formulate ideas for solving the problem and to test the idea(s), evaluate them and modify them until the problem is solved. This all needs to be done in an environment in which there is trust and support and acceptance that making mistakes is part of learning. This approach is built upon the idea of the learner understanding through experience the most fundamental concepts of the sport from which s/he can interpret instruction on technique. In swimming these two 'big ideas' [Fosnot 1996] are *propulsion* and *reducing resistance*. In all aspects of swimming the swimmer strives to increase propulsion or thrust and reduce resistance. In attending to these fundamental principles learning and teaching are focused on increasing thrust and reducing resistance.

A specific example of this approach is outlined elsewhere [Light, Kentel 2013]. In this example the coach aims to improve the second kick in butterfly by having the swimmers perform one-armed butterfly and asking the swimmers to compensate for this constraint. When asked, the swimmers suggest compensating with the kick and are sent off to work in pairs on their kick and report back to the group after five minutes. One of the pair then presents their solution with discussion among the group on which kick needs more power and how to produce it. Finally the group swim normal butterfly while focusing on integrating the improvement into their normal stroke. This session works on linking action, reflection and dialogue but would need to be followed up with a significant amount

of swimming to embed the change in technique so that it is performed without any interference from the conscious mind. This approach is different from standard skill drills in that it involves a conversation between mind and body – a cyclical process of swimming, reflecting and engaging in dialogue - to arrive at the non-conscious execution of improved technique as knowledge-in-action.

## Discussion

This article follows on from recent work in sport coaching and physical education that challenges the dualistic division of mind and body in learning [cf. Harvey *et al.* 2010; Light, Evans, Harvey, Hassanin 2015; Lund *et al.* 2013] to emphasize their inseparability for learning in and through sport, physical education, and other regulated physical activity. Conducted employing a methodology that extends Columbus and Rice's [1991] call for 'non positivist approach' to studying the practice and meaning of oriental martial arts in the West to understanding the meaning of important Eastern cultural concepts underpinning the practice and development of martial arts in the East.

Although this article highlights the role of the body in learning it is not intended to reinforce the division of mind and body by emphasizing the body. Instead, it is intended to promote a view of learning as involving a 'conversation' between mind and body leading to complete learning as being their unity in action that Yuasa [1993] suggests is the goal of learning in Eastern cultures. While what is suggested here seems radically different to the direct instruction and emphasis on repetition it is aimed at achieving complete learning as the ability to enact knowledge through the unity of mind and body. It should also be noted that not all karate *renshu* is conducted in the traditional manner. From my own experience of learning *kata* from one of the highest ranked and most respected sensei in Hyashi Ha Shito Ryu Kai, his approach was very different. Instead of having his class practise *en masse* he had small group and individual practice with him moving about the *dojo*, monitoring and providing individual instruction. Typically he focused on getting a feel for movement that involved asking questions instead of shouting commands.

Within an enactivist conception of learning Varela and colleagues [1991] propose the concept of *cognition as action* that they juxtapose with the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and Buddhist doctrine to suggest the usefulness of the Eastern concept of *mindfulness* for thinking about learning. Mindfulness meditation is an ancient Buddhist

practice used to cultivate, “a gentle, spacious attending to one’s being and a wakeful awareness to one’s doing” [Cohen 2010: 110] appropriated by psychologists over the past few decades [see, Seligman, Csikszentmihalyi 2000]. However, Cohen [2010: 111] argues that these interpretations of mindfulness transform it from a cultivation practice into a “coping mechanism for dealing with the stresses of modern life” which suggests the need to consider its philosophical foundations.

## Conclusion

Physical education has long lacked status in schools due in part to its focus on the physical in institutions that prioritize intellectual learning and within which the mind is separated from, and elevated above, the body. Rather than accept the view that movement and corporeal experience interferes with learning this article suggests how movement is central to learning and how the relationship between body and mind is central to complete learning as the enactment of knowledge-in-action through the unity of mind and body.

When applied to learning in sport and physical education the concept of *mushin* outlined in this article could make a contribution toward reclaiming the body’s role in learning. It can highlight the importance of corporeal experience and the central role the body plays in learning but not by switching the prioritization of the mind to the body. Instead, it highlights the inseparability of the two and the essential relationship between them that is possible when viewed from an holistic perspective. With the approach suggested in this article this relationship can be seen as what Light and Fawns [2003] refer to as a conversation from which learning as knowledge enacted through the unity of mind and body. This then offers a pedagogy for shaping and guiding learning in physical education and youth sport coaching that, beyond improving skill performance, can make valuable contributions toward building confidence, self-esteem and resilience among children and young people. In this way we can learn from traditions of practice in *budo* and apply this knowledge outside it to a range of sports and other regulated physical activity.

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### **Mushin oraz uczenie się w i poza budo**

**Słowa kluczowe:** *mushin*, zachodni dualizm, karate, pedagogika, teoria nauki

#### **Streszczenie**

Autor artykułu Prof. Light, pochodzący z Australii mistrz karate, kung-fu i kick-boxingu, przez wiele lat mieszkający w Japonii, łączy w swojej pracy doświadczenia oraz idee pochodzące z Zachodu i Wschodu.

Według autora najnowsze osiągnięcia w teorii nauki odzwierciedlają stopień frustracji spowodowany ograniczeniami zachodniego dualizmu w szczególności, z oddzielenia umysłu od ciała. Należą do nich - zaadoptowanie buddyjskiej koncepcji uważności w Psychologii Pozytywnej i koncepcji przepływu, które zostały zastosowane przy analizie osiągnięć sportowców. Celem artykułu jest kontynuacja badań japońskiej idei *mushin*, która stanowi podbudowę praktyki tradycyjnych sztuk walki i innych praktyk kulturowych w Japonii w celu zbadania możliwości, jakie stwarza ona dla holistycznej koncepcji nauki. Pojęcie *mushin*, przetłumaczone przez Suzukiego jako „bez myśli” (po ang. „no mind”), opisuje stan osiągnięty po dłuższym okresie szkolenia, w którym czystość działania jest możliwa dzięki eliminacji interferencji świadomego umysłu, jako stan jedności ciała, umysłu i ducha. Konkluzją artykułu jest stwierdzenie, że pojęcie *mushin* oferuje nowy sposób konceptualizacji uczenia się w sporcie i poprzez sport, który wspiera bardziej holistyczny sposób myślenia o sporcie lub drodze sztuk walki.