

The Inner Game of Paddling

By Mike Vandamm

You can tell when a Japanese swordsman has achieved "oneness" with his weapon by observing the tip of the blade as he brings it to a stop in a horizontal position after a swift vertical cut beginning with the sword held overhead. If the tip wavers or rebounds before settling into its resting position--like a car dipping on its front suspension and rebounding after being braked to a halt--it's a sure sign that body and sword are not unified. When an adept swordsman makes the same cut, the tip comes to a smooth stop without any excess motion.

In traditional Japanese martial arts training, the teacher typically demonstrates the proper technique a few times while the students observe. Then the students practice the demonstrated technique, imitating the master's movements as closely as possible, but without receiving any guidance about the "inner game." With that manner of teaching, most students can hope to attain the feeling of oneness with the sword only after years of diligent practice. I would guess that most expert kayakers--the ones who, in their boats on rough water, appear to be at home, like sea creatures--also acquire their ease and grace of movement only after long practice.

Is there a shortcut to achieving "oneness"? I was fortunate to study the martial art of Aikido, which includes practice with the sword, with a teacher who not only understood, but could communicate the "inner game." Holding the sword first in a horizontal position, before progressively moving on to half- and then full-speed cuts, he instructed me to extend my mind into the sword all the way out to the tip of the blade, as if my inner energy were an invisible fluid which I could extend out of my body at will. With a few weeks of practice, my cuts began to bear the unmistakable sign of "oneness," which he called unification of mind and body."

The technique works equally well for me in a kayak when I remember to apply it. I simply imagine that invisible inner energy flowing out of me into and through the entire hull of the kayak, unifying my boat and myself into a single energy field. An alternative method, which may be easier for those with a more visual learning style, is to picture in your mind's eye the entire kayak from stem to stern. It's almost as if you ARE the kayak.

Another method is to imagine that an invisible thread is attached to the top of your head, gently pulling it upward and slightly forward, allowing the weight of your upper body to sink into the keel of the boat where it condenses like a heavy, iron bar running the length of the hull.

Any of these methods will allow your mind to sink into the boat, lowering your effective center of gravity. In that relaxed state, you will naturally be able to respond to whatever sea conditions you encounter. You will be on the path toward riding the waves in the "mindless" state which a samurai seeks to achieve on the field of battle, in which all his movements are in unpremeditated response to what the Universe prompts him to do next.

As with any new technique, mindlessness takes practice. It's advisable to begin on flat water, before moving on to progressively more demanding conditions. It is natural for your mind to wander while practicing any meditative technique. When you find that it has done so, gently bring it back into proper concentration. With practice, anchoring your mind in your boat will be accompanied by a familiar, relaxed feeling in your body. Then it will be necessary to concentrate on mental technique only when you notice the absence of that relaxed feeling.

One last, practical point: the techniques which I have described will be frustrated if your boat is not properly fitted to the form of your individual body, with feet braced so that knees can be pressed against the underside of the deck, back comfortably supported, and hips snugly braced against sliding from side to side. This fitting out of the boat is normally accomplished mainly by gluing carefully-shaped pieces of closed-cell rubber foam in the appropriate locations.

2000-01-15