

From *Even Monkeys Fall From Trees*

A Note From the Author, Doug Lipp

I first encountered the concept of maintaining balance in life as a graduate student at International Christian University (ICU) in Tokyo, Japan. I enrolled in the program because I wanted to master the Japanese language. In high school I had started studying Japanese. I loved it so much, I made it my minor in college. And now, I intended to become an expert, through immersion in both Japanese language and culture.

When I flew to Tokyo, I dove into the program immediately. My plans included a blistering pace of study so I could absorb as much as possible as quickly as I could. I shunned other foreign students at ICU. I didn't want to hear a word in English. And of course I wasn't going to speak it. I informed my Japanese roommates at the boarding house I wanted nothing to do with English. No built-in English tutor. I considered our living area an "English-free zone." I was there to learn Japanese!

I aced the classes my first semester. A real success. Time to turn up the heat. I decided to tackle the most advanced Japanese-language class taught at the university. Within weeks, I was dragging myself out of bed early to finish homework. Every day all day I was working—working on my assignments, working to excel. Hours spent memorizing new vocabulary words. Hours learning how to read and write the complicated Japanese alphabet called Kanji. I was totally immersed. And I was in over my head.

Every free moment I studied. I rushed out of classes, no time to socialize with other Japanese students on campus. No time to explore the country I had come to live in. But I wasn't happy. I had flown 5,000 miles, left family and friends, to study and savor a culture I loved. But I wasn't enjoying it. I had time for none of the richness of the Japanese culture I had dreamed of absorbing. It wasn't much different from living in the United States, scuttling from classroom to library to dormitory room.

I got more and more discontent but I couldn't admit it. That would mean that I was wrong or had failed. That was unacceptable. I'd always excelled at Japanese studies back home. Always studied hard, been at the top of my class in both high school and college. But this was different. I felt like a failure.

One day during a lecture in one of my more difficult classes, I started to feel anxious. The material was much more complex than what I was ready for. And the homework assignment

promised hours and hours of hard work..... if I could complete it successfully! Suddenly my stomach began to cramp. I clutched my abdomen as waves of nausea swept over me.

The pain wouldn't leave. I dashed out of class, hopped on my bicycle, and pedaled back to my boarding house. I rushed in the door and down the hall to the bathroom. I vomited. And then I noticed—there was blood in the vomit.

I had a problem. I was clearly way out of balance and I had to do something. I couldn't go on like this. I had to change something so I could benefit from my months in Japan instead of hating them. The next day I marched over to the university administrative offices and dropped the class. I took a deep breath and then I joined the Aikido Club, which was open to all students. Aikido is one of many martial arts. Aikido attracted me because of its emphasis on balance, and on inner peace, as a means of handling attackers.

Three hours each time the club met we would focus on Aikido. But the three-hour workout turned out to be only one! The first hour we meditated. And after only one hour of physical workout, we meditated for another hour.

I was the only non-Japanese member of the club, probably the only member fretting about this terrible waste of time. I was there to learn Aikido. But two thirds of the time I sat on the floor in silence, involved in my own inner world. This was exactly what I needed. But it was hard for me as a Westerner to embrace.

Fortunately, the Aikido instructor noticed my discomfort and took extra time with me. Faithfully he would explain the Aikido philosophy after each practice session. I learned eventually. I understood. The goal of Aikido was not to forcefully control an attacker with counterpunches or kicks, but to use the energy of the attacker against him to neutralize his force.

“Why fight force with force?” my instructor would caution me. “If you push too hard, you will lose your balance and fall over.”

Slowly I melted into this wisdom. I knew that feeling all too well. I was now ready to learn.

As we meditated, our instructor would lead us through a number of mental exercises visualizing any number of attackers and how, by being relaxed, we could be more effective in neutralizing them. The attackers we visualized were not limited to people, menacing men on dark streets. As we sat mute and blind, our instructor pulled our minds to other attackers: school projects and the personal challenges laying in wait for us.

First we practiced relaxing our muscles. We went through deep-breathing techniques. Each session started this way. Early in our training, our instructor had demonstrated the power of relaxation. “Line up,” he ordered. One by one he told us to prepare for his attack. One by one we braced ourselves and tried to keep him from pushing us over. And one by one we failed, pushed aside like paper dolls in the wind. We were no match for him.

“You tense up,” he admonished us, “instead of relaxing.” In our tense state we were totally out of balance and easy to push over.

He led us through another round of relaxation exercises and then lined us up again. This time the results were different. Each of us was able to deflect his blows and energy. In our relaxed states, we were much harder to push over. He had made his point clear. Now what he had told us made sense. “A balanced, relaxed mind and body are much more flexible and resilient than a tense mind and body that is out of balance and thus better able to handle attacks.”

I pedaled slowly back to the boarding house that day, knowing I had learned something on a very deep level. Something that would be very important to me. I understood what this was all about. *Balance = Strength*. This imprinted itself in my brain like a mathematical formula. *Balance = Strength*. I knew it was right.

Years have passed, but I regularly flash on the significance of that lesson. I don't usually face physical attackers. Not many of us do. Most of my attackers actually appear in the form of self-doubt or uncertainty. When I remember the words of my wise instructor, I relax. And when I relax I am fully prepared for anything. When I am relaxed I fare much better because I can deal with challenges creatively and flexibly.

I think about the time when I had a long and stressful commute from my office to my home, some 15 years after graduating from college. I would trudge into the house and my children would immediately rush to me. "Daddy, can you help me with my homework?" Or another would ask me to play with him and his Legos. "Not now," I'd usually bark at them. "I need some space." I was in no mood to be bothered and would march off to change my clothes. I realized that my behavior was completely out of line and that I had forgotten the fundamentals of being in balance that I had learned so many years ago. But what to do? I vowed to regain my balance daily before entering my house. Before pulling into my driveway, I would actually stop my car in front of my neighbor's house, several houses away, and practice some of the stress-reducing exercises I had learned so long ago. I would visualize myself in a relaxed state, free of the worries from work and crazy drivers. I also made sure I told my neighbor what I was doing! The point is that my five-minute relaxation break worked. I was much more relaxed as I pushed open the door to my home. My family deserved as much, if not more attention than I had given my colleagues and customers during the day!

What does this have to do with customer service? Everything! Remember, balance = strength and as a service provider, you have many opportunities to address issues of balance regarding your product line, your management style or how you interact with co-workers. I can't transport you back to my Aikido class of years ago. But I hope the ideas and

activities introduced in this book help you and your work group achieve a sense of balance and strength.