

GETTING TO THE EDGE





PRACTICES FOR LIFE

Getting to the Edge

I think everyone should, at least one time in life, establish a practice of exercise that goes a step beyond the usual. This practice must be of sufficient intensity that you find yourself feeling nervous or somewhat afraid before every single workout. In my own life I have only been able to find this a few times—once with martial arts and in recent years with Crossfit-style workouts.

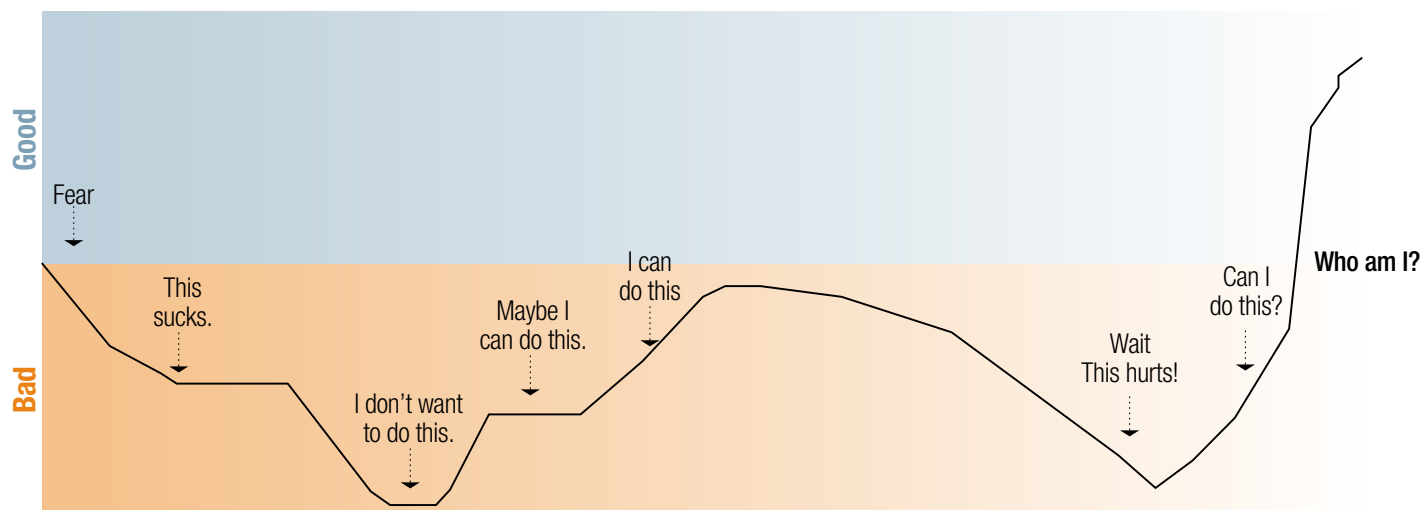
Why? What's the point of the fear? Why can't I just exercise? Look, exercise of the "normal" variety is good. In fact, it is a basic necessity for healthy functioning and living. But it can only take you so far. You need the intensity and the fear. For without them, you cannot get close enough to the edge, where you can really start to find the true benefit of exercise: self-understanding.

As a younger man, I was motivated to exercise for all sorts of reasons—some more mature than others—for example, to look good or to build self-confidence. And motivations like

these can be useful in establishing self-discipline but after a while they lose their force. When the initial excitement of these ego-energies fades away, you are left feeling empty.

But when you workout hard enough to get to your edge, there's just no place in your being for the ego. You get yourself into a more basic and elemental physiological state, almost like survival-mode. And when you are in this state, something really interesting happens. As the ego disappears the nature of your thought changes. It goes from its baseline state of automatic thought, the usual wandering, ego-dominated mind, to something far different. It brings you right to the place where the practitioners of Yoga (not the stretching one, the spiritual version), meditation and Zen are aiming. You become hyper aware of moment-by-moment sensations and perceptions. You are finally not thinking about anything and your consciousness is open to experience fully what is happening in the moment.

Subjective well-being when pushing toward the edge



The psychological arc of a great workout as manifested in the automatic thoughts of the ego looks something like this:

I'm afraid—I don't want to do this—This sucks—Ok, maybe this isn't so bad—I can do this—I am going to feel so good when this is over—Wait, this hurts—I don't like this—I cannot do it anymore—I can do it—Who am I?

What I have found is that, if you can get yourself to the edge of your being, valuable things start to happen. In this state, you don't experience feelings like desire or anxiety. You don't think about the past or forecast the future. You don't really even feel tired, even though just a moment ago, when your ego was still in control of your mind, you were feeling all sorts of pain and suffering. Contact with the edge reminds you that you have capacities of far greater strength, endurance, intensity and magnitude than what is normally available to you in waking life. And when the workout is over and you come off the edge, you experience this strange state where you feel both physically exhausted and emotionally energized at the same time.

I am convinced that something really important is happening in these moments spent at the edge. I always workout in the morning and what I've found is that when I actually get to this place, the quality of the rest of my day, the way I experience and interact with reality is just on a different level. Something carries over from the contact. My chattering mind is much quieter and my ego less obviously present. I feel, not only, mental clarity but also a kind of freedom, to act and to be the way I really want to. Often, I don't even feel a trace of desire or anxiety and the usual psychological discomforts that accompany such things. I believe that the edge is somehow reenergizing my being and, dare I say, bringing me closer to the truth.

Now, some of you are probably going to get really annoyed with me. For if you follow this advice here and workout with the intent to get to the edge but somehow don't make it, you are going to just be really tired and walking around all day with a wounded ego. And we all know how bad that feels. But I say, try anyway! It's definitely worth the effort. □

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