

In Pursuit of the Tao of Gliding

(Valentin Maeder 2003)

Much has been written about the of gliding related knowledge in terms of equipment, meteo, mathematical optimization models, check lists, safety and yet comparatively little reflection is available on the subject of the “pilot factor” or what goes on inside a pilots head.

What makes it interesting is that although soft factors such as the “mental model” or “intuition” of the pilot are not as easy grasp as the importance of the gliding ratio, they often seem to determine the outcome of competitions and long distance flights more than the performance of the plane used.

Pursuing perfection in gliding is a passion that can accompany a pilot throughout the entire adult life and will signify different things at different phases of the personal development. And if you look at it like that, how far you can go in a glider is in many ways is related to your inner journey. (And of course western Switzerland is a very good point to start from ;).

With wisdom comes tranquility
With tranquility comes softening
With softening the inside self becomes one with the outside world
This is the way to the Tao

Mental Model

Pushing the personal limits in gliding requires you to attune your internal representation or mental model of reality both before and in the flight. A key aspect is that you manage your expectations properly as to remain in a receptive state of mind throughout the flight.

Mantras or pre-formulated intentions and mental images can help you restore a state of receptiveness when an outside disturbing factor triggers distraction, frustration, negative inner dialogue and limiting behavior patterns and habits take over.

To make the most out of the information available both before and in the flight you need to connect both to the shared knowledge of the gliding community around you and to tap the subconscious processing power (or intuition) within you.

Expectation Management

The Dalai Lama, a keen observer of human nature once had the pleasure to speak to a selected audience of leading buddhist thinkers and dignitaries in a famous Japanese Zen Monastery. He felt he found the right words to give form to his views, that he was perfectly in tune with the enlightened audience and he felt a deep satisfaction in himself when a blissful accord settled in the room once he concluded his discourse.

A moment later, two beautiful girls in traditional kimonos got up in the back and walked up the aisle towards the Dalai Lama with elaborate Ikebana flower arrangements. He got up to receive the flowers and the girls went around him to put the flowers down in front of the shrine behind him.

“At this moment” The Dalai Lama admitted, “I found myself a bit frustrated, and I became blind for the harmony and the sublime beauty around me. Why? Because I expected that the flowers were meant for me...”

Well... such is the nature of wrong expectations and ensuing frustrations – they arise out of thin air and they cloud your vision. Not good for glider pilots that need to be receptive for what nature is offering them in terms of opportunities to advance along their path.

A simple example: when you are swearing at the top of your lungs in frustration and fogging up your cockpit with your breath because the “standard” thermal did not come where and when you expected and needed it, you are blind for the swarm of jackdaws that just shot skywards from the slightly lower peak 1km to your left. Had you said to yourself, hmm, that’s interesting, have I overlooked something and started to curiously look around without expecting a cloud or another glider, you may have spotted the birds and gotten a better thermal than you expected.

That is why, if you want to go further in gliding, you are well advised to learn to manage your expectations properly and to adjust your mental model to circumnavigate frustration.

As a starting point for the glider pilot who seeks to transcend his own mental barriers, one could reinterpret the old pilot adage *“always expect the unexpected”* and summarize: *“stop focusing on getting what you want and gracefully embrace what you get.”*

The Voice of Intuition

Holding on to a wrong expectation and insisting on a flawed internal representation of reality for too long has nearly killed me in a Foehn storm 10 years ago. That is probably why I have meditated more about this topic than most pilots and it let me not only gain insight about the perils of wrong expectations, it also has helped me to start accessing the processing power of my unconscious self – or in other words learn to listen to my “intuition”:

Interestingly, the shock of the accident has opened a dialogue between my conscious self and my unconscious self. In flights after the accident my unconscious self did not entirely trust anymore my conscious self that “knowingly” steered the “two of us” into the accident (similar to a race driver that cannot win a race after an accident anymore because he is thrown out of touch with the reflexes of his unconscious self). At the slightest challenge or doubt in a flight, “it” reacted with unduly high pulse and all sorts of bodily alarm signals while my mind remained calm and on top of the situation.

Well, at that time “I” had to literally calm down my unconscious self, explain to “it” that everything was fine and that I understood where “it” was coming from. “We” had to “forgive each other” and learn to enjoy sharing each others views to go on. Sounds a bit weird of course but the result was that I understood that there is the unconscious self following every move “I” make in the glider, processing and learning from the experience in a different and complementary quality and communicating with my conscious self along the way. Some people call it gut feeling or flying with your bum – but “we” feel it is possible to cultivate your intuition and access the incredible processing power of the unconscious self way beyond just feeling out the qualities of the thermal you are trying to center with your bum.

But again, you need to keep yourself in a relaxed and receptive state to keep the communication channels open within – much like in any relationship.

(here I would like to thank my girlfriend for the insight: Any woman can tell you that men are comparatively blind in realizing the “état d’âme” and the finer signals of everybody around you and that as a man you are well advised to consult your partner first before making decisions that involve feelings of other people. It seems that women throw some form of “radar beam” at their environment while constantly changing and modulating their own moods and views to examine the human relationship landscape under a “broad wave spectrum”. Thus they pick up “vibrations” of a different quality than men, which in turn helps them to better fulfill their role as connecting tissue and caring agents in society. My mental model I derived from this is that if you manage to accept input from your unconscious self and consult your intuition while making your decisions you can add depth, quality and speed to the ongoing decision process. It can also help to absorb more complexity by countering it with more variety in perception. Sometimes you will just “know” what to do. Just remain in a receptive state.)

Calibrating the Receptive State of Mind

Several times the concept of a mental “state of receptiveness” has been brought up. So an important factor is to be able to calibrate and restore this state of openness when outside factors induce distraction, frustration, negative inner dialogue and limiting behavior patterns.

Daniel Nipkow, a friend and former world champion in shooting called it pre-formulated intentions and mental images, other top performers call it procedure, mantra or anchor or whatever trigger that you can willingly invoke whenever you need it to effectively bring back an awareness and a state of mind that you have previously associated with such trigger.

As an example: on long tasks that approach the limits of your ability and meteorological potential you invariably have to deal with doubts whether you will be able to complete the task and return to your base or not. You start to waiver and succumb to discouraging input such as news of a colleague who has outlanded somewhere due to a thunderstorm or you become distracted by your girlfriend who calls you unexpectedly on the mobile phone and tells you about how other “normal” couples enjoy romantic summer evenings along the lakeside while she is alone again. When such doubts arise and you are distracted you can reinstall your optimal state of mind with the help of such trigger phrases or mantras:

A simple mantra that helps me to deal with such challenges towards the end of a long flight is: *“As long as it is safe it is not over until it’s over.”*

This brings up all my recollection of safety considerations and thermal activity in the evening and puts me in a relaxed and receptive state that I have attached to this mantra before. The concurring “breaking” feelings of doubts and the “blinding” desire of completing the task make room the “evening thermal researcher” in me is who is curious to observe and experience the many fascinating meteorological phenomena along the way late in a thermally active day and just has to play it safe but has no other pressures or preoccupations. And more often than not, I have fun on the way and make it home without much trembling long after most other pilots have ended their flights.

Or another mantra that I use to quickly get over mistakes that cost me time and resume my pace and receptive state in a flight is : “*A record pilot can deal with such mistakes and will enjoy to learn from them later*” it brings up in me at the same time that a) I am just playfully extending my energy to a challenge that I enjoy - after all these are the type of days I look forward to during the whole year b) it quickly restores my confidence and reminds me that I have often flown further than others even though I made mistakes c) it also makes me stop trying to explain away the mistake for now (and wasting energy by being caught in a inner dialogue of trying to reduce cognitive dissonance).

Try to make up your own mantras tailored to your personal needs and challenges - it's the idea of mental preparation for a flight and recalling a suitable mental state when you need it that counts.

The Pleasures of Sharing

Thanks to the online publication of GPS flight logs and over the internet, the gliding community has become something like a bee hive, a super-organism that is feeling out, exploring, memorizing and communicating the characteristics of its environment through the experience of its individual members. And the beauty is that very clearly this communal learning leads to superior insight and extending the boundaries of the possible.

The impossible is composed of the possible and flights that were previously thought impossible suddenly come within reach with this new possibilities.

In my eyes this sharing of experience and information and the exchange concerning internal representation of reality (mental model) is something that seems to be more advanced in other gliding communities (e.g. in Austria) for quite a while already – and it looks like such “sharing” communities consistently outperform gliding communities that have a more “traditional” approach that are less open to this “soft” factors.

Flights such as the ones I was fortunate to experience this year from Montricher are e.g seen as nothing extraordinary in gliding communities in neighbouring countries for many years already.

And sharing experiences is something deeply fulfilling and rewarding in itself anyway and it has gained a whole new quality trough the connection over the internet.

The Outer Limits of Glider Flights from Vaud

In many ways, it is should be possible to expand the performances from what we see currently. Meteorologically speaking the year 2003 has been interesting and in some ways different but not necessarily superior in terms of gliding possibilities compared to other good years. The top scores achieved in the National Championship e.g. do not significantly differ from the years before for example.

My personal view is that Montricher's position at near the arch of the Alps opens exciting possibilities to fly big triangles beyond 1000 km that match those of any place in the Alps. I also feel that the extreme terrain of the Valais and Haute Savoy is a treasure trove for all sorts of evening thermals that make it possible to fly until nearly sunset on active days. We will have to research together where the earliest thermals start, where the best thermals are in between and then enjoy to overcome together perceived impossibilities by composing a lot of exiting new possibilities and sharing the experience along the way.