

# Lessons in Mindfulness



*Supporting the practice of serious martial artists*



## Lessons in Mindfulness



### Body, Mind, and Spirit

*The study of martial arts is a path of personal growth, encompassing body, mind and spirit. The **Lessons in Mindfulness** program is designed to support and supplement your physical practice, to motivate you and inspire you on ever deeper levels.*

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**To master the martial arts you must gain discipline over the breath, the mind and the chi.**

## Topic

### Understanding the Force Within

The importance of the breath cannot be overstated. Proper breathing is absolutely crucial to martial arts. It's crucial to all life. We can live 'X' amount of days without food, 'X' amount of days without water, but just a few moments without breath and we die. Breath is life. And yet, we take it for granted here in the West. It's just something that is. We don't place very much emphasis on improving our breathing, learning to control, direct, or utilize it for anything more than keeping the vehicle running. In fact, with the exception of yoga, chi gong and other practices that have come to us directly from the East, the only formal Western practice emphasizing the importance of breath in any detail is prenatal Lamaze, and the only people who regularly monitor and discipline the quality and structure of their breath are professional singers.

Why is breath so important to the practice of martial arts? *Because we control the way our bodies perform only to the extent that we control our minds.* Because the quality of all physical technique is ultimately dependent on the quality of mental discipline. And because the relationship between the mind and the breath is inseparable. The condition of one *directly* reflects the condition of the other. Think about it. When you're angry, frustrated, upset, passionate, stressed-out — breathing speeds up. When you're calm, relaxed, meditating, sleeping — breathing slows down. What would happen in your practice if you *could* take control over your

breath? Not necessarily during your cardiovascular, during your fitness training, during exercise. I mean during your forms, sparring. During interaction with others. What would happen if you could take control over the breath itself? If the relationship between mind and breath is inseparable, then relaxed, flowing breath will be reflected in a relaxed, focused, responsive mind.

### **Learn to Relax Your Breath, Mind and Body**

We all understand that an important component of throwing good martial arts technique is to be able to focus well. Remaining completely relaxed so that the muscles go from 0% tension to 100% tension upon striking. That's how we achieve maximum power. Imagine sparring from an unrelaxed perspective. You put your hands up in a guard, tense your whole body, grit your teeth, and think, "Come on!" You can't generate power or speed with this approach. Why? Because tensed muscles move more slowly, and tensed, tight breathing wears you out more quickly. But most people don't even know what 0% tension in their body is. They don't know what it feels like or how to get there. The moment you start to tense your body, the moment that your muscles become too tense, what happens to your breath? It speeds up. *Any* tension in the body at all, and the breath speeds up, because the muscles need that oxygen. To stay relaxed, you have to slow the breath into a more relaxed state. Once you really slow the breath down, the body becomes completely relaxed -- 0% tension. And how do we slow the breath? By quieting the chatter in our minds. Mind and breath are inseparable.

**It is easier to still  
the wind than a  
restless mind.**

**No matter what level of consciousness you are at, you can experience the world through the senses; but it takes a heightened sensitivity and awareness to realize that there is more.**

## The Force Within

In Eastern cultures, a mysterious inner power within the human body has been explored and manipulated for thousands of years. Known in China as *chi*, in Japan as *ki*, and in India as *prana*, all of these terms refer to the vital life force energy which is believed to permeate all living things.

Western science has, historically, paid very little attention to vital life force energy, mostly because of the difficulties in measuring it. Physical energy, on the other hand, is very commonly recognized and has been studied and analyzed at length. It can be strengthened by exercise, is susceptible to illness and fades with time. Measuring and observing the rise and fall of this physical energy has led us to believe that old people are naturally frail and weak, and that young people should be strong and robust.

Chi, vital life force energy, does not weaken or fade with time. Everyone possesses chi, but very few people have taken the time to understand and develop it to any extent. Ueshiba Sensei, the founder of Aikido, believed that the goal of martial arts is to unite one's personal ki with the universal Ki. This suggests that we have the ability to regulate and control the movement of vital life force energy within our bodies. It also implies that we have the ability to tap into a limitless pool of universal energy.

To help understand this concept of ki, it may be helpful to remember the popular Hollywood movie, *Star Wars*. This movie introduced *the force* to millions. The Jedi were the

ultimate internal warriors. Who could forget Luke Skywalker, Darth Vader and, of course, Master Yoda? Although these were fictional characters, and the story was science fiction fantasy, the underlying concepts and principles of the Jedi and their use of *the force* were based on fundamental truths found in many ancient disciplines.

So, if we all possess vital life force energy, where is it? How do we sense it? How do we develop it? Why are we unaware of it?

It is because we identify with the senses that we often lack sufficient awareness and sensitivity to vital life force energy. We identify very strongly with the pleasures and pain that come from physical sensation. We spend most our time consumed by our interaction with the world around us — what feels good, tastes good, what we want to hear or where we want to go — what hurts and how to alleviate the pain, etc. Even when outside sensation turns off, we spend our time in fantasy and imagination and memory, watching TV, daydreaming. We leave ourselves very little time for true introspection and personal development. To become more aware of this current of chi flowing through our body, and to learn to manipulate and utilize its power in our lives, we need to develop three very specific skills.

### **Concentration, Will and Breath**

The three things which you must learn to control if you wish to manipulate chi are concentration, will and breath. The development of *all three* will lead to awareness and control of the vital life force energy. Of the three, deep

**The goal of martial arts is to unite one's personal ki with the universal ki.**

**People see internal work as breathing techniques, but learning how to control the breath is easy. It is sufficiently developing the will and deepening the concentration that is the challenge.**

concentration is surely the most difficult to develop. Many practices use visualization to help develop concentration, but visualization is not the same as manipulation. Effective visualization requires great concentration, and it's precisely this deep concentration that aids in the manipulation of chi.

In other words, your ability to picture energy flowing doesn't indicate anything about your ability to direct it. Concentration is the critical element. Visualization is merely a tool to help focus the mind. A keenly focused mind is a prerequisite to any internal work.

Concentration, will and breath are all aided and strengthened by our practice of meditation, by our increasing ability to focus on the here and now. Learning to quiet the mind, to keep it from wandering, to remain focused on the breath — all of this builds concentration. At first, we may only be able to concentrate for a couple minutes before thoughts and images swirl in our minds but, with practice, a few minutes becomes 10, then 20, then a half hour. We are developing focus, developing the ability to concentrate deeply. The only ingredient we need to achieve this ability, to keep sitting there, to keep practicing *every single day*, so that 2 minutes becomes 10 becomes 20 — is will power. Just plain old will. And will, like concentration, gets stronger and stronger with use. Each time we sit quietly for a couple minutes more than yesterday, patiently bringing our thoughts back to the breath no matter how many times they wander — each day we just do it, the will gets stronger.



Deep down we realize, hey, I can do this! It isn't impossible. Will begins supporting concentration and, with greater concentration, we begin to gain greater control over our breathing. The breath gets deeper and slower as the mind remains quiet for longer and longer periods and, as we relax, we start to become more aware and sensitive to the vital life force energy moving the breath within us. In zazen (sitting meditation), you feel the breath flow in and out. Eventually, if you sit still enough, you start to feel the energy rise and fall in the spine itself. And that is where the awareness should go.

That's it. Concentration, Will and Breath. That's the basis of internal work. *All internal techniques and practices are designed to aid in strengthening control over one or more of these three components.*

### **Why develop Chi or Ki?**

There are only three reasons to manipulate vital life force energy: Martial application, Health and Deeper Awareness.

While control of chi will certainly help you hit somebody, kick somebody, throw somebody farther, harder, faster — this is a very childish use. In fact, the better you become at it, the more ego gratification you're going to get out of being able to hit someone or throw them farther, or push them harder, or whatever. It defeats the whole philosophy of destruction of the ego.

Another benefit of manipulating chi is for healing, for health. We see that all Chinese medicine, all Chinese

**If you develop the manipulation of vital life force energy just for martial application, it is the equivalence of planting a garden for just one meal.**

**You cannot stumble your way to enlightenment. The path to self-realization is blazed with conscious manipulation of chi.**

philosophy is based around this concept of chi. Herbal medicines, homeopathic remedies, acupuncture, Chinese massage, all of this is based on the flow of chi. The Chinese believe when the chi is flowing correctly through the body, there is health. When there is a blockage, there is illness. So we learn to manipulate the vital life force energy to achieve a healing of our own body, or a healing of others. But once you begin healing others, you have to be very careful, or you find yourself on that same slippery slope of ego gratification. If you can help heal other people's bodies, if you've developed the consciousness and the skill to be able to manipulate the vital life force energy to affect healing, the last thing you should do is publicize it. Do it in private, and leave the ego out of it.

Ultimately, the purest reason to manipulate vital life force energy — this *chi, ki, prana* — is so that, during meditation, we can go into deeper states of consciousness, higher states of awareness, helping us to realize our true selves.

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*There were 3 beautiful fish swimming in the ocean. They swam and swam all day long talking about many things.*

*One topic kept coming up over and over again. They wanted to know about water. "What is water?" they repeated again and again. All of them had heard the word many times but they couldn't agree on what it was. They did agree that if anyone in the ocean could tell them the answer, it would be*

*the big shark, for he was the wisest in all of the ocean. Now they had to find him.*

*They swam everywhere looking for him. They must have swam for hours, and considered giving up, when suddenly they finally caught sight of him. He was big, powerful and confident. The three little fish swam up close to him and all three asked the question, "Sir, what is water?"*

*He turned and stared at each little fish, one at a time.*

*"Water is all of this," he said with a wave of his fin.*

*The fish looked around. "All of what, sir? We don't see anything."*

*The shark said, "Water is what you live in. What you swim through and what flows through you. It is what you breathe in and what you have your being in."*

*"Oh." The little fish all whispered. They happily swam away, contented.*

*The next day while swimming, the subject came up again. A new little fish asked the three, "What is water?"*

*They answered, "We don't know, but we live and breathe and have our being in it!"*

**If your body was sustained by food, water and sunshine, you should be able to give food, water and sunshine to a corpse and have it come back to life. On the contrary, it is chi, ki or prana that gives life.**

**Do not separate your internal practice from your external practice; both are crucial components of the art.**

## **Activity**

### **Fasting**

The activity for this month is a fast. Our physical bodies are working away 24 hours a day, every day. The entire process of digestion puts the body through a great deal of work on an ongoing basis. Fasting is used as a way to give the body a break, and to cleanse it of toxins.

Many spiritual disciplines also use fasting as a technique to help focus the mind by removing the body's major daily process. As a spiritual exercise, a fast helps to build awareness of the Self as something more than just a body.

Fasting is difficult for some people and fairly easy for others. In a very basic fast, drinking watered-down fruit juices is permissible. In a more advanced fast, only purified or spring water is consumed. Either fast can be for 24, 48 or 72 hours. Never fast for more than three consecutive days without professional supervision. Decide on the kind of fast and duration of the fast before you begin. Don't just start and see how long you can last.

As you are fasting, be aware of how often the thought of food enters your mind. At the times that you would normally eat, practice breathing techniques or meditate. Fasting can be very challenging, which can aid in strengthening your will. Refrain from working out during your fast, and drink

plenty of water or fruit juices. At the end of the fast, make sure that you eat only mild and easy-to-digest foods. If you have sugar diabetes, or other health concerns, or if you take any medications, be sure to check with your physician before beginning any fast.

If, for any reason, you break the fast, wait 2 weeks before you start another fast. If fasting is a new experience for you, you may want to consult some literature on fasting or this month's recommended book, "The Miracle of Fasting."

At the end of your fast, write a paragraph to a page on your experience. Make a copy for yourself and one to turn in to your instructor.

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**Some quantum physicists say that the universe is made up of "mind stuff." Others call it chi, ki or prana.**

**Thought is energy, and the more time that you spend on a particular thought, the more energy you are using to pull it in to your life.**

## **Reminders**

### **Visualization aids in Concentration**

There are three components needed to manipulate vital life force energy; concentration, breath and will.

Concentration is directly connected with the power of thought. The deeper your ability to concentrate, the more powerful your thoughts become. Visualization is the ability to see something in your mind's eye. The longer that you can hold the visualization and the more detail that you can "see," increases the likelihood of the desire being fulfilled. Of course, physical action is also necessary.

Visualization or imagery should be used throughout your life. It is a technique that helps you move in the direction that you wish to. It can be used to help develop behaviors and habits, as well as to acquire positions and possessions. The simple truth is what you think about the most has a tendency to manifest in your life. Do not let this fall into the category of something that "worked so well you quit doing it!"

Review the visualization techniques outlined in Module One, Lesson Six.

## Recommended Reading

**The Root of Chinese Qi Gong**

Dr. Yang, Jwing-Ming

**The Miracle of Fasting**

Paul C. Bragg and Patricia Bragg

**Notes:**