

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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The greatest martial artists in the world know that no matter how long they practice, no matter how old they are, no matter how many hours they spend on the mats, their techniques can still develop and improve. As a beginner or intermediate student do not allow yourself to believe that you've mastered your techniques.

Topic

Why Practice Must Intensify with Time

At the beginning of your practice, you will learn basic techniques that make up your art. Blocks, kicks, locks, throws, chokes or grappling — regardless of the art or discipline, beginners start at the beginning. The point is that you build a solid foundation over time and then continue on. Often times students ask what is the best way to develop a certain technique; for example, “How should I develop my reverse punch?” In the old days, the answer might well have been, “Throw it a million times.” There are three problems with this answer.

The first problem is that, although we are striving to be patient, few people will ever have the patience to actually throw a *million* reverse punches.

The second problem is that developing good technique requires throwing the reverse punch in many different applications. Throwing a reverse punch in the air helps to build good technique by familiarizing the body to the specific movement; the muscles learn what the technique feels like. At the same time, you need to use a bag, shield or focus mitt to develop distancing, focus and power, and to make sure that you are striking with the correct part of the body. You also need to practice with a partner to develop timing and control, as well as learning to assess the correct targets for each individual strike and to develop the speed to take advantage of the momentary openings. So it's not just a million reverse punches thrown *the same way*.

The third problem with endless repetition is that you *must throw technique with mindfulness*. You could throw a reverse punch a million times; you could use different drills to help you develop different aspects. But if you do not concentrate deeply each and every time on how to improve, questioning again and again what needs to be fixed, “how can I make this better” — then the technique will stagnate and you will be building muscle memory of an inferior way of throwing a reverse punch.

This is precisely the problem that faces many intermediate and senior students. Consciously or subconsciously, they feel that they have learned the technique, they recognize that it is not perfect and they assume that all they need to do is keep repping it and it will improve. Years of practice can go by and, seeing no improvement, they rationalize that they are too old to practice. On the contrary, it is their indifference rather than their age that has led them to mediocre technique. Fight hard not to fall into this trap. Stay focused on the details throughout your practice, *especially the details of the techniques that you think you know*. In other words, pay special attention to the techniques that you’ve been doing the longest.

The Nature of the Practice is Physical

As kids, much of our play is rough and physical. Even most girls, up to a certain age, engage in pushing and shoving and general rough-housing. There’s nothing malicious about it. We scramble up slides and monkey bars, push friends into piles of leaves, hit each other with snowballs and dodge balls, slap-box, wrestle and generally horse around physically. We get a few cuts and bumps and bruises along the way but, usually, nothing so terrible that it stops us from continuing the fun.

You have to throw your techniques thousands of times for them to become muscle memory and an automatic response.

You can be a fighter without being a martial artist, but can you be a martial artist without knowing how to fight?

In our society, as we mature, we become less physical in our interactions. For adults, most day-to-day contact is restricted to handshakes or pats on the back. Then you enter a martial arts school, and you realize that the very nature of the practice is physical, that it demands that you punch, kick, choke and throw each other. This is often a difficult transition for adults to make. You have to be able to accept that people will be punching and kicking you, that people will be sweeping your feet out from under you, knocking you flat on your back, pinning you, and choking you. You learn that no one is really trying to *hurt* you, but there is some shock involved in being bumped around like that. Often it's even more difficult to learn to punch and kick others. Fear of getting hurt is very common but usually, at the beginning, most people are just as terrified of accidentally hurting someone they're working with. They struggle with causing pain to others. They don't yet trust their control or recognize the importance of their role in helping a partner learn the art. The only way to overcome this is time on the mats.

The Dojo compared to a flight simulator

Take flying as an example. A new pilot may log hundreds of hours in training. This training starts out very smoothly with perfect conditions. As he learns how to operate the plane and his skills and understanding increase, the flight simulator is programmed to make the flight more difficult. It will create conditions of a storm, or mechanical difficulties in the air. In the flight simulator, the pilot addresses a whole range of obstacles and, eventually, after much practice, he is ready to really fly.

Treat the dojo as a flight simulator, where we gain experience and the skills needed to defend ourselves.

Think back to the seven ways of becoming a great martial artist. The fifth way is to *practice what you want to perform*. This directly addresses the need to intensify our practice at the same rate as our skill level. It is a mistake to think that being a good partner is to always be soft enough for your partner to handle it. Going slow, taking it easy, is fine at first, when you're just learning what to do, but you've got to step it up if you're ever going to advance. If a grab, push or punch is practiced in a lighthearted, soft or casual manner, you can be sure that it does not accurately represent a real life attack situation.

Perform your technique like it really matters. I'm not suggesting that you injure your partner, but focus with intensity. Punch, kick and throw with the same absolute intent that you would if you were defending your life. If you're helping someone else with a technique, grab them for real. Bear hug them the way they can expect to experience it out in the world. A great partner safely guides the practice to as intense a level as his partner is able to handle. If you are thinking that good control is important, you are absolutely right. Control is one of the most important things you will ever develop. The more skilled you become as a martial artist, the more skilled you must become at controlling the intensity, focus and potential damage of each technique. The key to being a good partner is always sensitivity and awareness, coupled with impeccable control over your body and mind. Senior students have logged more hours on the mat. They are desirable partners precisely because they *can* make practice challenging and intense, while remaining safe.

As you develop your physical ability, learn to cultivate and express emotional content. This means to put your mind, heart and soul into every movement.

Every punch, kick, lock and choke is no less than an expression of who you are.

As you are practicing, strive to make attacks as aggressive as possible. This is the only way your partner will be prepared for the real world.

Are they practicing or fighting?

In an advanced class, the intensity level should be so focused that, if you took away all of the rituals, etiquette, uniforms and dojo décor, a stranger witnessing the class should feel that there were actual fights breaking out all over the room. They should be nervous and ready to call for help. Self defense is very serious matter and the intensity with which you practice can mean the difference between surviving a confrontation or not. In short, we're talking about life and death.

Time alone does not equal competence

Your ability to translate your practice into actual self-defense technique that could save your life depends almost entirely on the attitude with which you practice. After two or more years of practice, people tend to fall into one of three categories.

There is the student who has solidly developed their basic techniques and is starting to understand how to put them together in ways that are natural and logical. They practice with intensity. They try to make every technique in class count. Whether they're focusing on hand or foot position, angle of the throw, where the strike is directed, on keeping their blocking hand up, even on their breathing -- they try to throw every technique with purpose. These people are well on their way to being able to protect themselves and loved ones, should the need arise. They simply need more time and practice.

Then there is the student who has practiced just as long and has absolutely no confidence in their techniques or skills from a self-defense standpoint. They have been working out in the same classes as the first student, but these people have just

been repping the technique over and over without thinking about it, getting a workout, watching themselves and their fellow students in the mirror. They may have developed good cardio, they may be stronger and more flexible but, in truth, it's not surprising that they have no confidence in their self-defense skills. They are really no closer to being able to defend themselves than when they first walked in. Their attitude is that class is fun and martial arts is just a cool way to get a workout.

The third type of student is nothing less than delusional. They too have been mindlessly repping their technique with a ho-hum attitude, but they actually see themselves as effective martial artists. They don't realize that an actual attacker doesn't throw casual, slow, telegraphed punches that they can smoothly and flawlessly counter like they have in practice. They have cultivated a false sense of security that is dangerous at best and could prove fatal in the wrong situation. Believing in their ability to defend themselves, they simply don't understand the intensity of a real confrontational situation.

All three types of student have practiced the same curriculum, taught by the same people for approximately the same amount of time. The only variable is their attitude toward training and the intensity they bring to it. The first student understands that patience and perseverance alone is not enough. In order to apply what you learn on the mats to your life, you must also practice hard and you must practice exactly what you want to perform.

The longer you practice, the more dynamically you must practice. Study the art and learn to push yourself and your partner, making every class, every technique, as real as possible.

If you get paired up with a person that talks too much or jokes around during class, one of the greatest lessons that you can help them learn is to practice with intensity. Do not stoop to their level, but strive to raise them to yours.

Your technique may appear the same week to week, but you should see a difference in it month after month, and it should be apparent to all how much it has changed year after year.

Paul was a 32 year old executive who had two lovely children and a wife, Jill.

It was Jill that pushed Paul into an exercise program. He had been gaining weight over the years and she was worried about his health. He tried many different exercise programs and decided that none of them were for him. He couldn't stand the idea of running, weight lifting was too boring, and aerobic classes seemed too feminine.

One day, his friend Mark was over for a barbeque and Paul remembered that he practiced martial arts. When Paul asked him about martial arts, Mark said, "I never thought that you would be interested."

Paul responded, "No, actually I have always been a little curious and I have to start doing something."

Later that week, Paul found himself in his first class. He loved it and found it challenging yet fun. He understood that he would get in shape, but he was excited to think that he'd also learn self-defense. Paul attended class three times a week for well over a year. He learned how to block, punch, kick, and defend against grabs. He also felt comfortable if he were taken to the ground. He wasn't the best, but overall he was pretty happy with his skill level. He certainly had gotten more than he expected out of his practice. Now he was meditating, breaking through limitations and just living a better life. It seemed that he had more passion and confidence than ever before.

Another year passed and now Paul was attending advanced classes. At the end of a Monday night class, Paul was on his way home when Jill called to ask him to pick up some milk. Paul stopped at a convenience store and as he was entering the store he accidentally bumped into the man that was coming out of the store. Apologizing, Paul couldn't believe how upset the man was. He pushed Paul and yelled some profanities. Paul responded, "I don't want any trouble, I'm sorry." The man reached out and grabbed Paul by his jacket. He was going to hit Paul when the store owner ran out with a bat and announced that he had called the police. The thug, still holding onto Paul's jacket yelled more profanities and then pushed him onto a car and ran away.

The next day, Paul was still very upset when he met with the master.

"Sir," he said, "I have been grabbed like that thousands of times over the last two years. I know at least 15 different techniques to do in that situation. I didn't do any of them. I know that they work. People have done them to me. Although I am getting a lot out of practice, one of the things I hoped to learn was good self defense."

The master waited until Paul finished. "Paul, this is a great lesson. What you are practicing does not need to change, just how you are practicing." Paul said that he didn't understand. The master said, "When this guy grabbed you, how was it different?"

Paul thought for a moment and responded, "Harder, he grabbed me much harder."

Your attitude and effort, rather than the drill, should dictate the intensity of the class.

You cannot hope to perform your techniques any better in real life than you do during practice.

“Exactly,” said the master. “You’ve heard me say ‘Grab harder! Use more intensity! Make it Real!’ This is exactly why. When you have been grabbed, or grabbed someone in practice, it has been very gentle. Taking care not to hurt anyone, you have actually trained one another to defend against soft grabs. If the thug would have grabbed you softly you would have been able to defend it.” The master continued, “It is important to start off slow with beginners, but as you advance, you must intensify your practice. That doesn’t mean to just learn more advanced moves. It means to practice your basics more realistic.”

Paul understood that his practice had to be more real to life.

Talking is the greatest thief. It will steal the good hard practice from you. Looking back, the classes that you worked the hardest and learned the most were the classes that you barely spoke in.

Activity

Practice with Intensity

This month's activity is to practice with intensity. This will require your partner to attack more intense and realistic. In every class that you practice in this month, explain to your partner that you are working on developing your technique against very realistic attacks. Ask your partner to grab stronger, make pushes faster, and all punches and kicks committed. Ask that the attacks have a heightened level of aggression attached to them.

Remember that the success of the drill is going to depend on how hard the attack is, *not only* on how fast and powerful the counter is. Do not confuse having a quick response with dynamic intensity.

At the end of the month write a paragraph to a page on your experience. Include feelings, emotions, and technical strengths and weaknesses.

This month's activity will help you assess how much you have learned from a self-defense standpoint. If your regular classes will not give you the opportunity, find a few minutes before or after class. Make sure that this month you focus on intense practice. Of course, work with a partner that has good control and is ready for this type of practice. Don't scare off a beginner and take care to counter with techniques that you are very familiar with. Do not try to intensify with a technique that you are just learning.

In most classes, you should walk away dripping with sweat because you pushed yourself and your partner to your mental and physical limits.

A great martial artist has the ability to be both intense and calm.

Reminders

Make sure your internal improvement keeps pace with your external improvement

This month the topic is why your practice should intensify with time. As you make the efforts to intensify, you will notice your techniques will become cleaner, sharper, faster and much more powerful. As your skills increase, it is normal to become more confident, and as you become more confident, take care not to become cocky and arrogant in speech, actions, or behaviors. Becoming arrogant in behavior may result in your making a dumb decision that would place yourself or others in a risky situation — e.g., parking in dark alleys, frequently rowdy bars, ignoring the potential danger of a variety of places and situations under the rationale that you could take care of it if you have to.

Another important point is, as your physical abilities improve, so must your mental and emotional control. You would not give a loaded gun to a child; it is grossly negligent to train the body without disciplining the mind. External techniques must be balanced with the internal techniques of breathing and meditation. Remember, in any confrontation you must keep control over yourself if you expect to have any hope of controlling the situation.

Recommended Reading

Awaken the Giant Within

Anthony Robbins

Esoteric Warriors

Alex Kozma

Do not bring who you are in life into the dojo, but rather allow the practice to develop you and then take that person into your life.

Notes: