

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.*

Each lesson is divided into three sections.

1. Topic

Designed to inspire and motivate you in your practice. By giving insight into each principle, you will draw a better connection between your practice and your day-to-day life.

2. Activity

An exercise or activity that will deepen your understanding as well as challenge you to explore your core beliefs. The process helps you discover your own beliefs, rather than persuading or demanding that you follow the paths of others.

3. Technique

You will learn techniques of introspection and interiorization. You will practice breathing techniques, awareness skills, and methods of intensifying your concentration. In the experience, you'll discover the importance of controlling and disciplining the mind, breath and chi.

4. Glossary

Explanations of terms used in these lessons.

5. Recommended reading

For inspiration and further education

Welcome to Lessons in Mindfulness

Designed for serious martial arts students, this program will help you understand and study the philosophical and personal growth aspects of your practice. Martial arts is a path encompassing your body, mind and spirit. When you realize the power of this concept, and see how it affects your life each day, you will become a committed and dedicated student for years to come.

Bring Your Practice Into Your Daily Life

Your physical training gets you in shape, and teaches you specific skills for self-defense. But, most people don't often have to physically defend themselves. How can this training be helpful in everyday situations? Think about the confrontations you sometimes face with friends, family, or co-workers. Most of these incidents are small and probably not physical in nature, but you feel attacked—emotionally, mentally and verbally. Unfortunately, the childhood saying, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me," is the farthest thing from the truth. Unless you have discipline over your mind and are able to control your reactions, you can become upset, frustrated, angry, and even enraged by what appears to be other people's words or actions.

By diligently practicing the techniques offered in these *Lessons in Mindfulness*, you will not only notice physical improvement in class, but you begin to be a master over your actions rather than a prisoner of your reactions. Day to day life will be less stressful and more fulfilling.

Be a master over your actions rather than a prisoner of your reactions.

Gain the Maximum Benefit From These Lessons

To get the most out of these lessons, read through them once completely to get the overall theme. Go through a second time more slowly, dwelling on specific points, and practicing the techniques. Complete each assignment, and make the techniques a part of your daily routine. You will discover something new each time.

Return to these lessons after you have progressed in your training. You will be amazed by the evolution of your understanding and the progression of your practice. These are the keys, which open up your practice to daily life. Without them, you are just exercising and learning to fight.

This program, coupled with a serious attitude and good attendance in class, is all you need to live a healthier and happier life, master efficient self-defense techniques, and gain a greater understanding of the philosophy of true martial arts. May your practice always strengthen you in mind, body, and spirit!

**May your practice
always strengthen
you in mind, body,
and spirit.**

Topic

Sharing the Art—the Student/Teacher Relationship

An ancient Chinese proverb says that when the student is ready the teacher will appear. Once the light of inspiration begins to glow in the heart of a pupil, the influence of a great teacher expands infinitely. Historically in Asia, a martial arts instructor's status was similar to that of the clergy or great philosophy masters. They were recognized as very wise individuals and were highly respected in the community.

The Yin and Yang of Practice

The path of martial arts is one of personal growth and self-discovery. What is the student's responsibility in the learning process? You will be learning new techniques and interesting concepts. Each class will be challenging, but fun.

What is the greatest thing a teacher can teach? This is what you must think about. What is the greatest thing a student can learn? This is what you must think about.

—Kensho Furuya

Many students say that studying martial arts is one of the most exciting things they have ever done. Most of our students have wanted to study martial arts for a long time, but, for whatever reason, have put it off.

Having mixed feelings of excitement and frustration in the beginning of your practice is normal. You might even feel uncoordinated and clumsy. Within the first couple of months, through regular practice, you will gain greater command of your body and begin executing techniques much better. This cycle of excitement and frustration will continue throughout your practice. The cycles change as your understanding, techniques, and attitude transform. The key is to remain enthusiastic. See each frustration as an indication of what you need to practice. Having an open communication with your teacher is vital. Their guidance and the nurturing environment of the school, will keep you on track, focused, and moving towards your highest potential.

Who is Responsible for the Learning Process?

People have different ideas of the true meaning of a student/teacher relationship. Basically, in the West, the student's only duty is to show up. That is about it. The teacher bears most of the responsibility in the learning process, with little accountability on the student. The teacher searches for ways to effectively communicate, motivating and teaching the student, even if the student is not trying very hard. Should the student not succeed, the belief is that the teacher failed—he should work harder to teach. So, he repeatedly tries varying methods, until the student, despite his insincere attitude, eventually gets it. This method is not always effective, and rarely does a student internalize the real essence of the teaching. Only by direct personal experience do we really understand anything. We must have our own investment in the learning process.

The Value of Concentration and Discipline

Traditionally in Asia, not everyone was allowed to study martial arts. Great masters would accept only students who could prove they were motivated and willing

to meet high expectations. The students held most of the responsibility for the learning process. Teachers were usually serious and rather gruff, demonstrating techniques silently, or with very few words. The students had to concentrate hard to follow and learn each technique, and as a result, awareness and sensitivity increased. Students worked very hard to keep their mind under control, because teachers did not repeat for wandering minds. In this environment, new students were almost sure to miss something, simply because their understanding had not evolved enough to grasp the complicated concepts. Classes were never adjusted for beginning students. As you can imagine, many people became frustrated and quit their practice. For those who continued, their beginner's wisdom expanded slowly through trial and error and they moved down the path of growth and realization.

This model of teaching seems rather brutal, but some aspects are effective. Self-discovery is a very powerful way to learn. By exerting great effort to grasp the knowledge for yourself, you absorb the lesson completely, making it a part of your very being. You are not just mimicking or memorizing something that you will forget in a few months. You've discovered it on your own and it is important to you. When the teacher just spouts forth the information, repeating again and again, students really don't have to listen carefully, and probably won't comprehend how the lesson affects their life.

A Powerful Way to Learn

The student/teacher relationship that we employ is somewhere in between these two examples. The learning process should be a partnership. The instructor's job is to help students grow and learn. The students' job is to work as hard as possible to absorb the lesson. The instructor motivates and explains concepts and techniques, but the student must exert maximum effort by paying close attention, concentrating in every moment. In class, if your mind begins to wander, banish those random thoughts, and bring attention back to the class. You will learn quicker and will increase your concentration in the process.

The difference between a master and a novice is that the master makes use of each opportunity in life as well as in practice.

**Love the
practice...
not just the
progress.**

Everyone should learn the excitement of self-discovery. A great teacher points the way down a path, but does not necessarily walk hand in hand with his student on the entire journey. Sometimes, an instructor might even set up obstacles in the path, instigating change and re-evaluation on the students' part. He forces students to go around, over or through. After all, by facing challenges and dealing with change, we all develop a stronger will, and greater character.

Communicate With Your Instructor

Every student hits plateaus in practice. Even if you've made great progress so far, hitting a plateau can be quite frustrating. Sometimes students say, "Not only am I not getting any better, I think I'm going backwards." When you feel this way, stay with your practice and discuss your concerns with your instructor. A student/teacher relationship is based on honesty, open communication, and loyalty. Your instructor has your best interest in mind. He's been through his own struggles, and understands where you are. With his help and your continuous effort, you will soon feel yourself making progress again. But remember, the goal is to love the practice and not just the progress.

Honor Your Practice and Yourself

Originally in the East, the student/teacher relationship was one of great reverence. Respect and loyalty for the teacher was vital and the students sometimes even feared the wrath of the instructor. In the West, people mistakenly equate a martial arts instructor to a coach, a personal trainer, or a cheerleader. While teachers should never be feared, great respect should always be present. This balance is not easy to achieve. Your teacher may seem quite approachable and friendly. Do not confuse his friendliness and approachability. He should not be your buddy. You can find friends everywhere, but finding a great instructor is difficult. If you step over the line and try to make him a friend, you will compromise your ability to be a great student, as well as his ability to teach you. By holding your teacher in high regard, you honor your practice and yourself.

The Teacher Looks For Effort...Not Skill

Students sometimes ask, “How can I become one of my instructor’s favorites?” There are no favorites. The instructor helps and guides everyone based on his or her level of understanding. If he did have favorites, the regularly attending hard working students would be his choice. The teacher is not looking for skill...he is looking for effort. Sometimes, effort manifests as initiative, desire, focus and intensity. At other times, effort might be patience, persistence and an open willingness to learn. Be like a sponge, absorbing as much as you possibly can.

The best advice to a new beginner: cultivate and develop a great relationship with your instructor, and only take private classes.

A student who had not been practicing very long was warming up before class. A high-ranking black belt student approached the beginner and introduced himself, asking how his practice was going. This senior student possessed great skill and was known by all to be one of the best martial artists in the school. The beginner was excited to be speaking with him and took the opportunity to ask for advice.

“How did you get so good?” he asked.

The black belt student answered very seriously, “I’ve practiced a long time, and I only take private classes-never group.”

The beginner thought, “Only private classes! That would be very expensive, but the price must be worth it. He is probably the best martial artist in the entire school.”

Before the beginner expressed his thought, the advanced student added, “No matter how many people are in the class, pretend that you and the instructor are alone in the room. Everything that he says, ‘Keep your hands up! Curl your toes back! Bend your knees!’ is intended for you. He is talking directly and specifically to you in each and every moment. Check and recheck yourself. From now on, only take private classes.” He bowed and walked away.

The best advice to a new beginner, “Cultivate and develop a great relationship with your instructor, and only take private classes.”

Activity

In this first activity we would like for you to answer some specific and personal questions to help your instructor get to know you. There is no right or wrong answer, and you will not be judged or categorized due to your answers. Be as honest and open as possible. You also may gain greater insight into yourself, spotting trends that might be strengths or areas that you wish to change.

1. How long have you wanted to practice martial arts?
2. Have you practiced before? If yes, what style, and for how long?
3. If you have practiced before, what did you like the most about the practice? What did you like the least about the practice?
4. If you have not practiced before, what stopped you from starting sooner?

Technique: Diaphragm Breathing

Being a great martial artist without having control over the breath is impossible.

The Power of the Breath

Breathing is a very important component of your practice. Breath gives your techniques explosive power. In stressful situations, you can use it to relax nerves, helping you to be more calm and peaceful. Being a great martial artist without having control over the breath is impossible.

The first and most basic breathing exercise is called *seca tunda* or *hara* breathing. In the West, speech and voice coaches call this diaphragm breathing. The goal is to fill the entire lungs from the bottom up, and then to completely empty them from the top down. Most Americans breathe in their chest using shallow inhalations. The oxygen only fills the top of the lungs leaving the lower area unused or holding stale air. By breathing deeply, you more effectively oxygenate the blood stream. This benefits the heart and other internal organs as well as the muscles of the entire body.

- To practice *seca tunda* or diaphragm breathing, lie on your back and place one hand on your stomach and one hand on your chest. Start by exhaling completely.
- As you begin to inhale, the hand on your stomach should rise, but do not let the hand on your chest move at all.
- Pause for a count of three, and then begin your exhalation. The hand on your stomach should fall as you exhale. Again, do not let the hand on your chest move at all.
- When your exhalation is complete, pause again for a count of three, and then repeat the process.

Learning to breathe correctly instills the power to handle stressful situations.

Having difficulty in the beginning is normal. You might feel that you aren't getting a full satisfying breath. You aren't. This is an exercise that will help you breathe deeper. You do not breathe this way all the time. By practicing this exercise, you will recondition yourself to breathe from the bottom all the way up, and then to exhale from the top all the way down. You will become accustomed to filling the lungs from the bottom. Then, you can breathe deeply using all of your lungs. When you use all of your lungs at all times, you are more energetic and able to better handle stressful situations.

Key points:

- Do not practice *seca tunda* breathing on a full stomach. Wait at least one hour after eating.
- In the beginning, practice for a total of only five to ten minutes.
- Inhalations and exhalations should be equal in time and duration. As you perform the exercise, the breath will naturally slow.
- Practice your *seca tunda* breathing daily, with great discipline. Do not get discouraged—you have been breathing in the upper chest for many years. Retraining the body will take time.
- When you have learned the technique, periodically monitor your breathing throughout the day. If you notice that your breath is not deep and relaxed, filling the entire lungs, practice this technique again.

The breath is such an important component in martial arts and life that in later lessons, we will continue the topic. Remember—the battle is within.

Glossary

In this section terms are defined in relation to your martial arts practice. Some of the words will appear in the lesson and some will be in the recommended reading. The intent is to further clarify the philosophy included in your lessons.

Seca-tunda (Chinese), dan-tien (Chinese), or hara (Japanese)

All of these terms describe the area of the body located an inch and half to two inches below the navel. Often referred to as the center of the body where movement and power originate, this is also the area where deep diaphragm breathing begins.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is to be in the moment, experiencing life fully from that perspective. The mind is still, not wandering or distracted, and completely in the now. You are doing what you are doing when you are doing it. You control and focus the mind with the power of deep one pointed concentration and you are aware of all the activities around you. Mindfulness is to be completely awake and alert right now. Mindfulness is to eat when you eat, work when you work, play when you play, and to sleep when you sleep. Simply, mindfulness is to control your mind rather than letting it control you.

Interiorization

Interiorization is the outcome of taking mindfulness within. Your senses will shut down and you will be fully conscious, not letting the mind slip into the subconscious or sleep. At this point, you experience a deep sense of awareness that lies beyond the senses and day-to-day life.

**The years teach
much that the days
never knew.**

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

**The man who does not
read good books has no
advantage over the man
who can't read them.**

—Mark Twain

Booklist

Each month, a list of recommended reading will be included for those with time and desire to study further. These books are not meant to promote one style of martial arts over another, but to educate and inspire commitment to your art and practice.

**Highly recommended*

** Karate-do, My Way of Life— Gichin Funakoshi
Budo Secrets—John Stevens
Moving Zen—C.W. Nicol*