

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.*

The difference between sport and art, is primarily in motivation, attitude and understanding.

Topic

When Are You a Martial Artist?

More than a belt

Once you begin to study martial arts, when are you a martial artist? Do you qualify after your first introductory class? Or are you a martial artist after you enroll in a school and become an active student? Maybe you are not a martial artist until you learn a few techniques well. Do you have to take your first test? Are you a martial artist when you reach green belt? And, of course, all black belts are martial artists, aren't they?

This is a difficult question. An easier question is, "When do you think that you are a martial artist?" To answer the question, we must examine the true meaning of being a real martial artist. Frankly, most people believe the moment is when they put on the uniform. Becoming a martial artist, however, requires much more than wearing a uniform. Participating in exercise fitness classes, throwing punches and kicks to the latest pop music doesn't make you a martial artist either. Neither will you become a martial artist by training with bouncers and bodyguards, cage match bullies, and bad-tempered tough guys capable of pounding someone into dust.

Are you collecting techniques or perfecting the details?

The aim in this topic is not to give a definitive answer to the question of when you become a real martial artist. Instead, the intent is to offer ideas that encourage you to think about your practice. After years of serious study, you will begin to profoundly understand what it means to be a martial artist.

In the beginning of your practice, no matter the style or discipline, you learn basic techniques. Basic techniques are the building blocks or foundation of the system. Through continuous repetition of the basics, you will become a technician. Adding intermediate or even advanced techniques to your repertoire does not make you an artist. You simply become a technician with more tools. Many people develop habits of consciously or unconsciously collecting new techniques. Indeed, learning new techniques is exciting...new punches, new kicks, and new forms. But, you must learn to enjoy the basics. In order to develop the essence of the art, you must learn to concentrate on the details. As you practice, ask yourself, "Is my hand right? Am I striking with the right surface? Am I relaxed until the moment of focus? Did I drive through my target? Did I recover quickly? Is my stance right?"

Perfecting all the details is an important aspect of the art. After all, a student who has practiced more than five years should know, not only more techniques, but his basic skills should be better than one who has practiced for only a year. A student of ten years should have even better basics than one who has practiced for five years...after twenty years, better still.

A fighter is not an artist, and an artist doesn't have to be a fighter. But, to be a martial artist, you have to be both a fighter and an artist.

Calmness and execution are both important parts of the process we call martial arts.

Other artists begin with a blank canvas, or a piece of paper, but the martial artist begins with himself.

Martial arts...not martial arts

Two words describe our practice: 'Martial' and 'arts'. The definition of the first word, 'martial', is certain. The meaning is, "of, pertaining to, or suggesting war," and unfortunately describes the prevalent view of martial arts. Today, most people relate martial arts to violence of some sort. We usually ignore or forget the second word, 'art,' in the context of martial arts. Art suggests spontaneous creativity, a changing of consciousness, beauty and elegance. Art inspires us and adds to our life.

Martial arts or fighting?

So what distinguishes martial arts from any other violence and fighting techniques performed since the beginning of time? Martial arts began in the sixth century with Tamo Bodidharma, a Shaolin monk. In a simple monastery in Hunan Province, China, Tamo realized that martial techniques, if practiced with the correct mindset, could be used for much more than just self-defense.

Tamo pushed the monks to challenge themselves to greater heights, forcing them to break through limitations and develop their bodies in remarkable ways. By concentrating to master difficult physical moves, students learned to better focus their minds. More importantly, they cultivated powerful discipline and will, which changed their self-image. The earlier picture of simple monks, overweight and lethargic, transformed to one of acutely focused individuals, living up to their personal convictions and beliefs. Under the guidance of Tamo Bodidharma, these first practitioners integrated deep introspection, meditation and physical techniques to create a complete practice that is now known as martial arts.

Bringing ancient principles into modern life

By practicing martial arts, as those monks did so long ago, you also begin to realize your own power in life. Diligently practicing the art, you change your self-image, becoming more confident in all situations. You see yourself as strong willed and focused. You know that you are mentally tough, and able to overcome obstacles and achieve goals. A real martial artist is a martial artist in and outside of the dojo. You do not become a superman or superwoman, never hesitating or fearing anything, but rather a person of discipline, fully conscious and aware of all thoughts, feelings, emotions, moods and actions. In all moments, you maintain control, or at the very least, you are able to regain control of yourself quickly.

Don't think so much

Artists use the term “blocked,” to describe periods when they are unable to move forward. Writers can't write, painters can't paint, and musicians cannot compose. This block usually comes from an overwhelming or nagging pressure originating in the mind. Uncontrolled thoughts manifest as self-talk such as, “I used to be creative, but I fear that I'll never have another good idea. I don't feel inspired-what if people don't like what I do? What if I fail?”

As a martial artist executing a form, you might tell yourself, “Everyone is watching, don't screw up. Here comes the hard part. Wow, I did that really well!” During sparring, your inner dialogue might consist of anticipating your partner's moves and planning how you will respond. “A back fist is coming next...he always throws a back fist after this technique. Here comes a roundhouse kick...as soon as he moves, I'll hit him,” and so on and so on. The inner chatter constantly flows, so we must deliberately train our minds to slow down and stay in the moment.

When the concern for victory and defeat completely falls away, all that is left is you. What you then express is art.

**Art flows when
your breath is
slow, your mind is
clear, and you are
out of the way.**

Surrender to your practice

Our desire to perform or produce excellence is precisely what inhibits our art. If you are concerned with 'it' coming from you, then you are not able to get out of the way and let 'it' happen. For 'it' to come, you must become a spectator of your performance, rather than merely focusing on the outcome. How does one reach the state of being and not doing? Ueshiba Sensei said, "Let spirit flow through you." You must learn to meditate deeply, clearing the mind of all thought, and remain still. Only then are you able to bring a calm peaceful state into your practice. By keeping the mind calmly active and actively calm, the artist responds, rather than anticipates. The artist harmonizes and does not force. Art comes without effort. Surrender to the practice, without judgment, and just be.

Changing consciousness

A Zendo (a place where the philosophy of Zen is shared) inspires change of consciousness, but does not teach martial application. Self-defense teaches martial application, but does not change consciousness. Real martial arts taught in a dojo (a place of enlightenment) uses martially effective techniques to teach self-defense and to change consciousness. The Japanese tea ceremony, performed correctly, produces a fine cup of tea in the end, but the primary aim is to inspire one to be more mindful...to experience life fully, moment by moment.

**In that moment when you are a martial artist,
spirit is flowing through you, raising your
consciousness. Strive to stay in that state,
consciously and consistently, throughout life.**

The art comes *through* you...not *from* you

A martial artist understands and consistently uses the principles, both physical and mental, of his art to raise consciousness and increase mindfulness in every act. With great compassion and humility, a martial artist recognizes that the art comes through him but not from him. Being a hindrance, he has but one job: To remove himself. Bruce Lee said, “Let *it* happen.”

So, can one simply proclaim that he is a martial artist and thus become one? Or are we only martial artists, when we learn to get out of the way and allow the practice to transform us?

A student asked a great master, “Sir, do you know martial arts? The master responded, “No, I study martial arts, and when I am still, it flows through me.”

Remember that you cannot skip steps. All great artists of any discipline were first great technicians. After years of dedication, unceasingly perfecting their skill, and learning to still their mind, art found them.

The aim of art is to represent not the outward appearance of things, but the inward significance.

—Aristotle

Greg had practiced martial arts for many years. He was in his early thirties and was a corporate executive for a large company. His position required him to relocate every few years. In some cases, his appointments were only temporary. In other instances, he remained in the new area for years. His family was accustomed to his life style and took the moves in stride. Yet again, the day came when a superior informed him that he would be moving to another area of the country...this time, thousands of miles away.

**The true work of art
is but a shadow of
the divine perfection.**

—Michelangelo

As always, within the first week of the move, Greg looked for a new dojo. He really enjoyed the workout and discipline in martial arts. Because of his relocations, he had experienced different styles of martial arts. He had practiced Chinese styles, Japanese, Korean, Indonesian and Okinawan styles. After researching schools in the new area, he found one close to his office and joined.

Each time, Greg began again as a white belt. Rank wasn't important. In fact, he just enjoyed practicing for himself. He was a white belt with great etiquette and discipline. Adapting to and embracing his new environment, Greg fit in very quickly.

Six months later, several co-workers who had transferred with him asked, "Greg, what are you doing differently? You are so calm and never appear stressed. You are more pleasant to work with and more productive than ever." Another commented, "We have known you for years. You are just not the same person. What are you doing?"

Greg answered, "I have been practicing martial arts."

One of his friends said, "You've been practicing martial arts for years. That can't be it."

Greg responded, "My new instructor teaches the philosophical and mental aspects of the art."

One of the men said, "So, you're learning history of martial arts? How does that help you?"

Greg sat down and started to quietly explain, "No, actually it is much more than history. My instructor teaches how to take practice into everyday life. I am learning breathing techniques, and meditation techniques. These techniques help me control my thoughts and emotions, and have taught me not to separate my life from my practice. For many years, I thought I was practicing martial arts. But, I was really just learning self-defense and getting in shape.

I realize that studying true martial arts causes physical and mental changes. I could be transferred to another job location at any time. But I can always take this knowledge with me, no matter what style I practice. Punching, kicking, throwing and grappling are just tools to help me discipline my body and mind, so I can live a healthier and happier life. Before I learned this, I was healthy, but not as happy. Learning to discipline my mind and control my thoughts has made all the difference in the world. Only now, do I really feel like a martial artist.

Some people say that art is an escape from reality, but actually, it is reality inspired.

Learn to meditate deeply. Be able to clear the mind of all thought and remain still. Carry this calm peaceful state into your practice. The artist responds and does not anticipate. The artist harmonizes and does not force. He allows the art to flow without effort.

The artist is too busy looking within to notice the score or hear the praise.

Once the fight begins anything else that can be done is not worth the consideration.

Activity

Reflect on your practice

Write a two-page paper on why you practice martial arts. What does it mean to you and what exactly are you getting from it?

Write down your thoughts from your heart and not your head. There are no right or wrong reasons. Take your time and write with passion and honesty. Very rarely will your first draft be the final version. Enjoy this opportunity to reflect and examine your practice.

Make a copy to turn in to your instructor and keep one for yourself.

The artist's world is limitless. It can be found anywhere, far from where he lives or a few feet away. It is always with him.

Technique: Analyze Your Activities

In this lesson, the technique is to analyze your activities every day for at least one month. Spend ten minutes at the end of each day to analyze your day—primarily your thoughts and behavior. Ask yourself, “How did I fare today?”

Create a good list

On one side of a piece of paper list all of your good thoughts, behaviors and intentions.

Create a bad list

On the other side list your negative shortcomings for the day. These could be things that you said, thought or did that cause you to feel sad, embarrassed, or ashamed. Also list anything you wish you could do over or do differently.

Using the lists

After completing your lists, look for areas that you want to improve. Analyze your positive column, as well as your negative. Vow to repeat your strengths, while you work on shortcomings.

Remember:

- Don't be too self-congratulatory or too hard on yourself.
 - Use the technique to truly assess your thoughts and behaviors.
 - Reserve time each day to complete the exercise.
 - For one month be very disciplined, not missing a day.
- In the end, the exercise develops your will and your follow-through 'muscles'. Most people don't stick with things long enough to see them through. Everyone has good intentions, but success or failure is often determined by the level of perseverance.

No great artist ever sees things as the masses. If he did, he would cease to be an artist.

**The artist belongs
to his work, not the
work to the artist.**

—Novalis

Key Points

- Only spend about ten minutes a day on this technique. Longer periods of time make it a chore and increase the likelihood of skipping.
- As you are making your list, write down whatever comes to mind. Do not be concerned with its significance. Don't struggle to remember things. If it matters, it will come to you easily.
- When you are finished, take a few minutes to recognize your strengths and weaknesses. Do not just toss out a list and be done with it.
- Perform the technique alone in a quiet relaxed place, free from distractions. Turn off the television, radio, or telephone. Contemplate deeply about your day.
- You can perform this technique before or after meditating. Some like to use this technique to empty the mind before meditation. Others meditate first to relax and calm the mind. Then, in the relaxed state, they do the technique.
- Be careful not to think about your list while you are meditating.

Benefits

Shining a spotlight on your thoughts and behaviors encourages change. You'll notice areas, which need improvement, and you will reinforce positive thoughts and tendencies. It also helps you to become a master over your actions rather prisoner of your reactions.

Recommended Reading

**One Day One Lifetime*—Kaicho T. Nakamura

The Way of a Warrior—Robert W. Smith

Aikido and Chinese Martial Arts—It's Fundamental Relations—Tetsutaka Sugawara

**Highly recommended*

No matter how great the artist, he is still just a tool in the hands of the cosmic artist.

True art cannot be measured, only witnessed and experienced.

All art is simply an expression of oneness uniquely revealed.

Notes