

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 environments where you choose to spend your time are reflections of what is important to you.

Topic

Mastering Your Internal Environment

How external environments influence us

When people use the term “environment,” they are usually referring to an external setting or place. Although many environments are natural and untouched, modern man spends most of his time in specifically designed environments. External environments can significantly impact our behavior and our thoughts. Consider the distinct differences between the following two examples:

First setting: Imagine being in a dimly lit, smoke-filled bar, at eleven o’clock on a Saturday night. The trendy over-dressed, or barely-dressed, crowd consumes alcoholic refreshments throughout the night. The deafening music from the live band competes with loud conversations, many tainted with profanity and sexual overtones. By simply entering the door of this environment, a person is bombarded with hundreds of subtle stimuli, which influence his actions, emotions, and thoughts.

Second setting: Picture yourself on a Sunday morning at church, synagogue, or temple, where candles flicker, and incense fills the air. A choir sings uplifting hymns, or chants play softly in the background. People practice introspection and monitor conversations for tone and content. The dress is modest and tasteful. In this environment, thoughts and feelings are mostly peaceful, loving and uplifting.

Environment is stronger than will

These two situations are not given as examples of right or wrong behavior. Instead, they are meant to illustrate the power of external environments over human behavior and action. We participate in many kinds of environments throughout our day, which might include work, home, entertainment, and the dojo. These environments affect us strongly, so we must choose them with care.

Self-control vs. mastery of the self

Most of us don't realize that we also have an internal environment. For thousands of years in Eastern culture, people have practiced mastering their internal environment, but this concept is not widely understood in the West. Most people recognize the need for a little self-control. But few of us comprehend the difference between self-control and mastery of the self, which includes control over thoughts and feelings, discipline of the breath, and command over moods and attitudes.

Our internal environment is made up of thoughts, vibration and consciousness. It is the lens with which we view the world. Our internal environment ultimately determines the degree of happiness that we experience over our lifetime. Three steps are necessary to master your internal environment:

A person's unbalance, mentally or physically, is the same as a weight.

Your internal environment is the lens with which you view the world.

Both the body and mind should be able to change direction at any time.

1. Understand and accept that you have an internal environment.

You can't master something, if you don't even recognize it.

2. Learn to monitor thoughts, feelings and emotions.

To maintain and eventually master the internal environment, learn to monitor thoughts, feelings and emotions. Blaming other people or circumstances for your own attitude, mood, and or even thoughts is much easier than accepting personal responsibility.

Haven't we all been guilty of thoughts like, "He makes me so mad, or she upsets me? He frustrates and depresses me, or they raise my blood pressure? He makes me happy or she makes me feel good." Realize that these types of statements, whether expressed in words or just thoughts, relinquish control over your internal environment.

Many times, simple awareness of thoughts and feelings can affect actions. For example, when we are tired, sick, angry, or upset, we should probably delay making important decisions or put off difficult conversations. At the very least, we should choose words and behavior carefully. People judge us by our actions, and friends and loved ones will excuse a bad day, but they will not soon forget it. If we have too many of these bad days strung together, others begin to avoid us, or be careful around us, not wanting to provoke us.

The competitor looks at his opponent, the artist looks at his partner and the wise man looks within.

3. Take control of your internal environment.

By now, you realize that all feelings, moods, and attitudes are born from your thoughts. So getting control over your internal environment requires that you take control of your thoughts. Monitoring your thoughts, feelings and moods for a significant period of time and noticing your reactions to situations is important. But, you must take action. Use affirmations and visualization techniques to help construct your desired mindset.

Becoming aware of your thoughts doesn't require that you endlessly contemplate them. You might fear that this will take a lot of time, but nothing could be further from the truth. Thoughts happen in the moment. You cannot monitor or change thoughts from the past or the future. You can only change them in the present. Changing from undesirable to desirable thoughts is a simple, but not easy, process. Begin by recognizing negative thoughts, banish them, and then immediately replace them with positive thoughts. The most difficult task is to recognize each and every emerging negative thought, *before* becoming attached to it. Attachment manifests as a bad feeling, mood, or attitude.

External circumstances continuously bombard us, but we can choose to maintain a steady course internally. We can use introspection to monitor our internal environment and reason to guide us. We can use our strong will to defeat bad habits, push beyond our boundaries, and keep away distractions. We have the power to master the most difficult part of our practice, the self.

We can use the practice to truly understand and eventually master ourselves.

Learn to listen to that which is not said, but only thought.

**A person's heart is
the same as heaven
and earth.**

It was Monday night and the last class had just bowed out. Students were cleaning and saying goodbye, when the master noticed Charles, patiently waiting to talk. The master approached him and asked if he wanted to join him in the office. Taking a seat in his chair, the master asked, "What are we talking about today, Charles?"

Charles sat down, dropped his shoulders and sighed. His eyes filled with tears, and he looked very uncomfortable. Finally he blurted out, "Sir, I want to say goodbye. I am joining the military."

Obviously surprised, the master said, "This is very sudden. When and how did you come to this decision? You have practiced here for many years and never indicated any desire to enlist in the military."

Charles slowly began to speak, "Sir, my life is a mess. I am disorganized, undisciplined and unhappy. The military will provide the structure and discipline that I desperately need."

The master nodded in agreement, "Yes, Charles, the military is a powerful path for those who are drawn to it. It is a noble and respectable career. But, would I be correct in stating that you are choosing the military out of desperation?"

Charles straightened in his chair. "Yes sir, but I sincerely feel desperate. If I want to accomplish the things that I want to in my life, I need control."

"I would agree that you need discipline and control. But why the military?" the master asked.

Charles, growing uncomfortable and a little defensive said, "Sir, you have often warned that environment is stronger than will. I feel that being in an environment where I am given very little choice will be best for me."

The master walked over to the window and looked out at the outdoor practice area. He spoke in almost a whisper, "Charles, many people live under the supervision of others, from spiritual institutions to penal institutions, and everything in between. Even some corporations demand conformity among employees in both behavior and dress. Many will blindly follow orders or perform rituals, often for many years, without making any real progress. If you do not freely embrace the environment and the principles behind the organization, you will only resent the confined existence of a chained man. You must be "called" to a restrictive environment.

Over the years, I've noticed that you have some difficulty with authority, even here in the dojo. Yes, I have often said that environment is stronger than will."

He turned to look directly into Charles' eyes, and continued, "Charles, there are two kinds of environments: One is external and one is internal. Wearing a military uniform and obeying rules and regulations will give you external discipline, but you need to take control over your internal environment. I am referring to your thoughts, attitude and moods. To truly be happy, you must maintain control of the internal world, regardless of your surroundings." The master returned to his chair.

Charles sat quietly for a moment, gathering his thoughts and began to speak, "I think that I understand, sir. To deepen my practice, I must include my thoughts, attitude and behavior. I have been a poor workman, finding fault with my tools."

How successful are you at controlling your internal environment?

**To contemplate
and ponder is
important, but to
become enlightened,
you must learn
to just be.**

Activity

Monitoring your internal environment

Using a tape recorder or small notepad, record your thoughts, feelings, attitudes, moods, and emotions several times throughout the day for 2 weeks. Be specific, giving as much detail as possible at each entry. Strive for a minimum of 5 observations a day. Obviously the more times a day you track your internal environment, the better. Try not to miss or skip days, but if you do, resume the activity immediately. Each entry should take no more than a few moments.

At the end of each day, read or listen to all of your entries for that day. Identify your most frequent and powerful thoughts, feelings and emotions. After monitoring your internal environment for 2 weeks, write a paper on your discoveries. Include the most frequently recurring thoughts, feelings, attitudes and emotions, for example, anger, frustration, or happiness. Reflect on what you've learned from observations.

When you have completed this activity keep a copy of your work for future reference and make a copy to turn in to your instructor.

At all times, it is your thoughts, feelings and emotions, which determine your happiness.

Technique: **Controlling your internal environment**

The secret to control

After monitoring your internal environment, you should clearly see how your thoughts are influenced. Rather than blaming outside forces for your moods and behaviors, you can gain control over your internal environment. The secret lies in the breath. Most of us have heard that taking several deep breathes when angry helps to calm you down. This common childhood advice is more powerful than most people realize.

The breath and the mind are inseparable

The suggestion seems so simple, that we dismiss it, in search of more advanced or complicated control techniques. But the breath and the mind are inseparable. The condition of one directly reflects the condition of the other. When you are angry, frustrated, upset, breathing speeds up. When you are calm, relaxed, meditating or sleeping, breathing slows down. So by taking control over the breath, we effectively take control over our internal environment. Centering ourselves, we are able to return to a calmer, more peaceful state.

To control your internal environment, use diaphragm breathing taught in Lesson One. Throughout the day, when you see or feel yourself becoming upset, frustrated or angry, immediately take 6-12 deep diaphragm breaths before proceeding. Before beginning a stressful period in the day, attending a meeting, facing a verbal confrontation, or even driving in rush hour traffic, perform diaphragm breathing to help relax your body and calm your mind.

**The blood
circulating is
similar to the
moon and sun.**

A martial artist should position himself in the center of the storm. While remaining calmly active, he is actively calm.

Catch it early

Imagine that you are on a very steep mountain with a large boulder resting at the top. The boulder is about to roll down the mountain, and will probably destroy everything in the path.



Your job is to stop the boulder! Where do you want to be standing? Obviously, the sooner you can stop it, the better. Once it gains momentum, you lose control. The same is true in your life. Without control, you will begin rationalizing and justifying irrational behavior, thought and moods.

The great ones say that you should master the self...referring specifically to your internal environment.

Key Points

- To control your internal environment, you must identify the negative thought or feeling early. Once you become attached to the thought or feeling, staying in control will be difficult. You are likely to get swept up in the thought and feelings and feel justified in your behavior. Remember, this is not about being right or wrong. It is about staying in control.
- Take deep-relaxed breaths, not quick, short breaths.
- The more that you practice this technique, the more you condition yourself to take deep breaths before responding to anything.

Benefits

- Overall better relationships
- Happier, less stressful days
- The ability to react calmly and rationally

You cannot be aware of your thoughts in the past or the future—only in the moment.

The manner of drinking and spitting is either hard or soft.

In ancient times, martial artists were known to practice calligraphy, write and read great books. These activities, along with practice, led to greater wisdom and insight.

Recommended Reading

**The Prophet*—Kahlil Gibran

Zen Keys—Thich Nhat Hanh

Book Of Five Rings—Miyamoto Mushashi

**Highly recommended*

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