

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.*

Meditation...it's not
what you think.

Topic Meditation

What does meditation mean to you?

A lot of confusion and even some fear surround the topic of meditation. In our culture, the word 'meditation' is such a broad term that people have a difficult time understanding the intended meaning. Some believe meditation is a deeply religious practice used exclusively by Asian mystics or specific monastic sects. Chanting, prayer, contemplation, breathing exercises, or even hypnotism are described as meditation. In fact, almost any experience involving introspection falls into the category. Even more confusion arises when people mistakenly relate meditation to metaphysical practices dealing with crystals, astrology, tarot cards, palm reading or crystal balls.

Magazines and entire sections in the local bookstore are devoted to this topic, and you will see a broad sampling of 'experts' selling their perspective with great authority. Wading through the multitude of ideas and techniques can be quite confusing. When you are ready to begin, where do you get accurate information? How do you know which method even works? In this topic, we'll explore the definition of meditation, as well as its benefits and reasons for practice.

Meditation is the process of clearing the mind of all thought. When you tell the average person to sit and clear the mind of all thought, they can't. They might eventually settle down to thoughts about one specific thing, maybe a color, sound or image. But thinking your way to clearing your mind of all thought is impossible. To successfully clear your mind, you must understand where your thoughts originate. Then, you must stop them at their root.

Stimulation of the senses inspires thought

Each thought is a distraction within meditation and all thoughts originate from two primary places. First are the senses. Imagine that you are sitting to meditate. You practice your diaphragm breathing, oxygenating your body. Now, you are ready to clear your mind. Just as you settle down, one of your senses is stimulated. Maybe a car drives by and hearing the noise, you think of a car, or a dog barks and you think of the dog. During a moment of stillness and relaxation, you would never spontaneously think about a dog until his bark stimulated your sense of hearing. As soon as you hear the dog bark, the thought manifests in your mind. No matter how quickly you let the thought pass, it is still present for a moment.

You return to your efforts to meditate, when suddenly, you smell fresh baked bread, and immediately the thought of tasty bread passes through your mind. The breeze blows gently through the window, and you think of its coolness or warmth. A flood of unwelcome thoughts, inspired by the senses, relentlessly bombards you throughout your meditation efforts.

The assault of thoughts caused by memory

The second assault of thoughts originates from memory. The senses stimulate a thought and from that thought, you begin to remember experiences related to the thought. Just as you become peaceful and calm again, you hear a radio in the distance playing an old song. It stimulates your sense of hearing, you think of the song, and then you begin thinking of the last time you heard it. You were on vacation in Aruba, dancing with a beautiful girl in a red dress. She was laughing, and the ocean air was fresh and warm. In the next moment, you realize that no longer are you clearing your mind and sitting peacefully...you are on vacation in Aruba—all because you briefly heard a song!

**The art of meditation
is simple, but not
always easy. It
thrives on practice.**

—Jack Kornfield

**As human beings,
our greatness lies
not so much in being
able to remake the
world...as in being
able to remake
ourselves.**

—Mahatma Gandhi

Detaching from your senses is possible

The senses not only stimulate specific thoughts, but, supported by personal memories, they encourage secondary or additional thoughts. Clearing the mind of all thought and going deep within stillness, requires unplugging of the senses. By disengaging from the stimulation, you stop the thoughts before they are born. Many people think that shutting off the senses is impossible, but you do this every night when you sleep. In deep sleep, you don't hear, see, or taste any sensation. The world goes on around you, but you are not aware of anything.

Meditation is the process of unplugging the senses, thus consciously choosing to cease all thought. The benefits of learning to still the mind are invaluable. It reduces stress and helps to increase concentration. You are energized and relaxed in the same process. So, why don't more people practice this ancient discipline? Learning to still the mind and take control over thoughts takes time. Finding a qualified teacher is difficult, people are impatient, and they don't persevere long enough to see the benefit. The first several attempts are difficult and predictable.

Stop the fidgeting!

A willing student sits down, intending to meditate, and after only a few moments of stillness, begins to shift around to find a more comfortable position. He tries it again. He sits quietly with the spine straight and chin parallel to the ground, hands upturned at the juncture between the thigh and abdomen and elbows slightly pulled back, breaths deeply from the diaphragm, and suddenly, he has an itch. Scratching this itch will encourage another and another.

He resolves to hold the body still, and works past the fidgeting itches, only to be bothered soon by discomfort in the knee, ankle, hip, or almost any other part of his body. If he doesn't shift his position, the discomfort rapidly turns to pain. He vows to remain perfectly still, but battles an overwhelming desire to move. Slowly, the pain subsides and the body becomes calmer. Just when he thinks he's making progress, his mind begins to race. Thoughts like, "I wonder if I am doing this right? Am I just wasting my time? I have so much to do today. When I get up, I want to remember to..." By refusing to give up, his mind settles a bit, but is soon followed by another wave of intrusive sensory stimulation.

Moving on to the next stage

By surrendering to aches, pains and itches, you never move beyond this stage. The practice of meditation is lost to movement, and you will view the experience as just a mild form of torture. From the beginning, resolve to sit as still as you can during meditation, and be diligent in your practice. Start by practicing breathing exercises to oxygenate the body. Then meditate for 10-15 minutes. As the process becomes easier and more enjoyable, slowly increase the time.

The art of learning to still and control your mind

Many people think that meditation is reserved only for specific spiritual practices. They fear that meditation would conflict with their own religious beliefs. We simply use the term, meditation, to describe the art of learning to still and control the mind. Regardless of spiritual preferences, all of us would certainly agree that in our hectic society, the ability to control our mind, and discipline our thoughts is crucial.

**Do you have the
patience to wait
until your mud
settles, and the
water is clear?
Can you remain
unmoving until the
right action arises
by itself?**

—Lao tzu

To recognize the oneness, you must still the body and quiet the mind.

Nicholas began practicing martial arts at the age of eight. In every class, he practiced his basic techniques and strived hard for proper form.

In the early years, he worked diligently on the basic techniques. During his teen years he practiced form daily. He was clearly the hardest working martial artist in his dojo—maybe even in the whole city. In his late teens and into his early twenties, he started sparring. In only a short while, he began winning match after match. The winning streak continued for almost three years.

Nicholas was often asked for the secret to his success. He always responded, “Speed and power. I will always be faster with my kick or punch.” Nicholas believed that the best defense was a quick offense. One day the inevitable happened—a fellow student, Paul, beat him. Paul was very skilled and had practiced for as long as Nicholas. Nicholas shrugged off the defeat, claiming it as a fluke or just bad luck. But in the next few months, he began losing more matches.

Nicholas became incredibly frustrated and decided to talk with the master. He poured his heart out describing his frustration of losing, despite the fact that he was training harder than ever. After listening carefully, the master said, “You must learn two things. The first is that life is seasonal. Everything is constantly changing and you must learn to handle loss and defeat as well as gain and victory. Do not become attached to either outcome. The second thing you need to learn is better defensive skills. When two novices spar, the fastest will win. At your current level of practice, without good defense, you will continue to lose. At this point your practice should be 50% offense and 50% defense.”

Nicholas began practicing his defensive skills: Blocking, parrying, sidestepping, and pivoting. After a year, he was satisfied that his defense was as strong as his offense. Nicholas began winning most of his matches again, and continued to win for many years. He learned to handle the losses much better, taking them in stride and just continuing to practice.

Several years passed when, once again, he started losing. After a string of defeats, he talked with the master. Nicholas reminded the master that, years before, he had been told to develop his defense as well as his offense. He explained that this advice had served him well. But now, he was losing again. Nicholas asked, "Am I just getting old?"

His master laughed and said, "Old? I am more than twice your age."

Nicholas asked, "If I am not old, then what should I be doing?"

The master said, "Get rid of offense and defense and just be. Offense and defense are internal attitudes, motivations and thoughts. These thoughts cause you to view the other person as an opponent. Your anticipation, fueled by desire to win, causes your defeat. Remember that anger, fear, frustration, anticipation or judgment has no place in a clear and calm mind. You are defeating yourself. Learn to view the other person as a partner, stay calm and focused, and let the outcome happen as it may."

Nicholas asked, "Are you telling me that I shouldn't care at all about winning or losing?"

The master said, "You should let go of all thought and be in the moment. When you are able to do this, you will spontaneously and creatively respond to anything that happens. Meditation is the foundation of martial arts practice. If you cannot control your mind when you sit to meditate, you most certainly won't be able to keep control over your mind in a crisis, or during sparring. After all these years of training, your body may have reached its limit on speed, power, and flexibility. Work on controlling and disciplining your mind. Your sparring will get better, and so will your life."

A life of reaction is slavery, intellectually and spiritually. One must fight for a life of action, not reaction.

—Rita Mae Brown

What we have to learn, in both meditation and life, is to be free of attachment to the good experiences, and free of aversion to the negative ones.

—Sogyal Rinpoche

**As human beings, we
all want to be happy
and free from misery...
the key to happiness
is inner peace.
—Dalai Lama**

Activity

Lessons Review

The activity this month is answering questions from the last eleven lessons. Although some of the questions have specific answers, others are looking for general understanding of the lessons. If necessary, go back and review the related topic, activity or technique.

1. In your own words, explain the student teacher relationship in detail.
2. In your own words, explain how to practice diaphragm breathing and the benefits.
3. List the seven ways of becoming a great martial artist.
4. What is the goal of triangular breathing?
5. In your own words, explain how to practice triangular breathing.
6. Explain the concept of practicing as partners and not as opponents.
7. In tension and relaxation exercises, does the tension lead the breath or does the breath lead the tension?
8. In both good and bad times, what can we always control?
9. Name one thing on your original wish list that you have already done?
10. Which statement is correct?
 - A. The more tension in my body and mind, the more focused I am, and I breath slower.
 - B. The more tension in my body and mind, the less focused I am, and I breath faster.
11. In your own words, explain the phrase, “Do what you can do perfectly.”
12. Explain how to practice the technique of “Watching your thoughts,” and the benefits.

13. Complete the sentence, “Right now, you are the sum total of _____.”
14. Describe the benefits of affirmations and explain two different ways to practice affirmations.
15. Complete balance cannot be achieved and maintained in life. List strategies you can use to maintain relative balance.
16. In your own words, complete the sentence, “To be a martial artist, you must_____.”
17. What are the two environments addressed in these lessons. Which one is more important and why?
18. Explain the connection between the breath and the mind.
19. Explain the difference between watching the breath and controlling the breath.

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.

In meditation, work on consistency, depth, and then duration to achieve calmness, peacefulness and ultimately self-realization.

Do not seek to follow in the footsteps of the wise; seek what they sought.

—Basho

**The most important
journey is the
one within.**

Technique: Watching the breath

The goal in meditation is to detach from the senses and clear the mind of all thought. There is a distinction between meditation and a breathing exercise. Breathing techniques are exercises to manipulate the breath for a specific result. Every breathing technique has a specific purpose.

Watching the breath is the first meditation technique. It is a very basic and powerful technique that can be practiced by anyone, regardless of religious beliefs. Every human being breathes, and simply watching your breath cannot offend any spiritual path or religious belief.

So, begin by sitting comfortably in a full lotus, half lotus, cross-legged, seiza or in a straight back chair. Keep your chin parallel to the ground, hands relaxed and up turned at the juncture between the thigh and the abdomen. Eyes should be gently closed, and your attention should be focused at the point between the eyebrows. Practice 6-12 diaphragm breathes to oxygenate the body. Exhale and begin to watch the breath. Do not try to control it forcibly. Just let it flow naturally. The breath has four positions, inhaling, holding the breath in, exhaling, or holding the breath out. Do not attempt to control the breath, just be aware of the position, without judgment.

Not only a truer knowledge, but a greater power, comes to one in the quietude and silence of a mind that, instead of bubbling on the surface, can go to its own depths and listen.

—Sri Aurobindo

Resist analyzing each breath. Don't think about whether it is a good deep breath, a short breath, whether or not it is satisfying, or whether inhalation was faster than the exhalation. Just feel the breath and watch it without attachment. Watch as if you were observing another person breathing. After a period of time, the breath will naturally slow.

The breath and the mind are inseparable. The condition of one directly reflects the condition of the other. As the breathing slows, the mind will slow. As thoughts slow, the breathing will slow. At this time you want to be totally aware of the breath, consumed in it to the exclusion of everything else. As you learn to go within, the senses will unplug, allowing the mind to become still. Practice this technique for at least ten to fifteen minutes a day. Gradually increase to twenty minutes or more.

**To meet the true self,
one must unplug the
senses and go within.**

Key Points

- Keep the spine straight and the chin parallel to the ground
- Keep the attention focused at the point between the eyebrows
- Hold the body perfectly still while practicing this technique
- Wait at least one hour after eating to practice
- Understand the difference between manipulating and controlling the breath, and watching the breath

Benefits

- Reduces stress and increases awareness
- Helps to promote calmness and a realization that you are more than your thoughts
- Connects you on a deeper level to what is real in that moment

**What is behind
the darkness of
closed eyes?**

**—Paramahansa
Yogananda**

Recommended Reading

Tao Te Ching: 25th Anniversary Edition—Lao Tsu

The I-Ching or Book of Changes: A Guide to Life's

Turning Points—Brian Browne Walker

After the Ecstasy, the Laundry: How the Heart Grows

Wise on the Spiritual Path—Jack Kornfield

Man's Eternal Quest—Paramahansa Yogananda

**Meditation is not a way of making your mind quiet.
It's a way of entering into the quiet that's already
there—buried under the fifty thousand thoughts
the average person thinks every day.**

—Dr. Deepak Chopra

Notes

Notes