

# 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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**There are great martial artists of all styles; it is not the style that made them great, but rather their own effort combined with decades of practice.**

## **Topic** **Style vs. Style**

Martial arts has always had a very broad meaning. Martial arts may refer to karate, aikido, judo, ju jitsu, kung fu, tai chi, tae kwon do, hapkido, kendo — in fact, there are hundreds, perhaps thousands of styles of martial arts. Some are well-developed, well known styles taught in schools internationally, while many styles are indigeneous to a specific rural village, taught and practiced only there for centuries and unknown to the rest of the world. Some arts specialize in kicking, while other focus on hand strikes and trapping. Some are throwing arts and others grapple — concentrating primarily on ground fighting. Although these styles and systems vary in origin — coming from China, Okinawa, Japan, Korea, as well as from other countries throughout Asia and elsewhere — they all teach martial technique, either empty handed or with a weapon.

Only a small number of these styles have successfully migrated to America, and only a fraction of those have come to the general public's awareness. A particular style gains popularity almost exclusively through the media — specifically movies and TV — quickly gains a small following and grows in popularity only when it is successfully marketed or championed by a Hollywood star or professional athlete.

## Modern History

The popularity of martial arts in the West over the past 50 years has its roots in the experiences of military servicemen returning to the U.S. at the end of the Korean War in the early 1950's. Exposed for the first time to traditional Asian forms of empty-handed fighting and self defense, these combat-trained soldiers were as fascinated by its efficiency and effectiveness as they were by its grace. Returning servicemen were among the first westerners in the U.S. to open martial arts schools.

The relative popularity of various martial arts styles has risen and fallen with the times. Throughout the 1950s and 60s, the Judo craze mesmerized audiences with throws and locks. By the late 1960s and 70s, we saw the rise of Karate, a powerful striking art, and Kung Fu, popularized by Bruce Lee and, later, by the American TV series of the same name. Hundreds of thousands of students throughout the U.S. flocked to dojos to learn these mysterious new fighting arts. Words like *ninja* and *sensei* entered the general English vocabulary.

In the 1980s, a Korean art – Tae Kwon Do — burst upon the scene. One master was asked, "How did Tae Kwon Do become so popular?" His reply? "If I break a brick with my hand, it looks good, but if I throw a brick in the air and break it with a kick – that looks more impressive. Americans want to be able to defend themselves, but they also want to look good doing it." Martial arts-inspired fight scenes became more and more prevalent in mainstream Hollywood movies. A whole generation of kids grew up watching the animated TV show, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*.

**Martial arts is a way of human development understandable by people all over the world.**

If you can beat up everyone in the world but cannot control yourself, you will have missed the point of practice entirely.

## No-Holds-Bared Competition

In the 1990s, the popularity of Brazilian Ju Jitsu coincided with the introduction of *Ultimate Fighting*, a contest that claimed to settle the age-old question, “Which martial art is the best?” *Ultimate Fighting* promised to end speculation, conjecture and arguments; it would all be settled in a cage. And, after winning match after match, Brazilian Ju Jitsu, as practiced by the Gracie family, consistently came out on top, appearing to be the style to beat. Ten years later, *Ultimate Fighting* has become an international sport, watched by millions around the world. Top competitors train hard, and Brazilian Ju Jitsu is just one successful style among many. Today, there are as many knock-outs as tap-outs. Grapplers are punching and strikers are grappling. It can be said that the lasting legacy of the Gracie family was to make the martial arts world address the issue of what to do when you are taken to the ground. *Ultimate Fighting* has become much less a contest of style vs. style, and much more a test of one particular fighter’s ability vs. another’s.

Given this history, it is easy to understand that people who have never studied martial arts see the entire practice as fighting. It’s only natural. Martial arts were introduced to the West in general and to the U.S. in particular by former soldiers who viewed the art as an effective mean of self-defense. And, if you view these as fighting arts, then it’s no surprise that the question arises, “If one style fought another, which would win?”

If you think about it, you’ll see that the question itself is beside the point. All authentic styles and systems teach self defense skills necessary to take a confrontational situation under control or allow you to defend yourself if attacked. But people are rarely attacked in everyday life by

professional fighters, or by trained martial artists. Most attacks are perpetrated by a punk or thug with a quick temper, often under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol. So, which style is the most effective? From a self-defense perspective, virtually all authentic styles will work.

### **Sport, Science or Art**

Of course, the longer you study martial arts — *any* style of martial arts — the longer you practice, the more apparent it becomes that it is so much more than fighting. In fact, the ability to fight effectively is a mere consequence. Let's analyze it. If the objective of martial arts was just to successfully compete in contests of skill, then wouldn't it be called martial *sport*? If the objective was to hone an efficient means of fighting technique, then shouldn't it be called martial *science*? Wouldn't we be *martial technicians*? But no, this has always been designated and referred to as an *art*. What does it mean to be an artist? While mastery of technique is necessary; and desire, will and execution are expected, ultimately, artists act to express themselves, to produce or arrange sound, color, form, movement, or other elements in a creative manner. It may not make for an exciting action movie, but martial arts is about creating something of unique aesthetic value, not about destroying your enemy.

Look at the names of several traditional styles. Judo is translated as *the gentle way*. Kung Fu means *achievement through effort* or *wisdom through skill*. Karate translates as *empty hand*, although some masters say that the original characters meant *using the hand or body to empty the self*. Aikido means *the way of harmony*. All of the great masters, from Tamo Bodidharma (founder of Kung Fu) in the 6th century on, have stressed that martial arts is a path of personal transformation that ultimately leads to self-realization.

**At the deepest level all disciplines strive to help the practitioners transform themselves.**

**The ego is what causes you to feel superior. To study martial arts is to do battle with the ego.**

### **Ego Enhancement is the Antithesis of Martial Arts**

From this perspective, the question, *which style is the most effective?* is meaningless. What reason would two martial artists — serious martial artists who practice their art diligently and passionately — have for fighting with one another? Through practice, they develop the discipline and self-control to be able to deal with most situations without resorting to blows. The thrill of competition? If the essence of martial arts is personal transformation that ultimately leads to self-realization, then practice is designed to minimize and ultimately destroy the ego. Entertaining concepts of victory and defeat is counter-productive.

Unfortunately, today there are far too many people claiming to be martial artists who are perpetually training for the enhancement of their egos, for the pride of victory, boasting that they are the toughest or that their style is the best, ready to fight anyone that challenges them. Although these people may be great fighters, they have not yet realized that, in martial arts as in life itself, the real battle is within.

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**Never compare yourself with others.**

**If you must compare yourself with someone, compare yourself with yourself yesterday.**

*Craig was in his 30s and had practiced martial arts for many years. He had practiced 2 or 3 different styles and was quickly becoming bored with his present practice. Believing that he had gotten all the he could from his present style, he started to search again for the ultimate system. His search led him to a small school on the outskirts of town. Craig thought that he had visited almost every school in the city at least once, but somehow he had missed this one.*

*Craig walked into the school with the intention of interviewing the master. He had prepared a lengthy list of questions. This was the same list he used to confront all of his previous instructors, as well as many others that did not pass his test.*

*A friendly and professional staff member, who asked, "How can I help you?," immediately greeted him. Craig in an assured, slightly arrogant tone asked to meet the master. The staff member smiled and said, "Normally, you would need an appointment but we just had a cancellation. Please, take a seat and I'll see if the master will meet with you."*

*Sitting down, Craig couldn't help but notice how quiet and peaceful this place was. It wasn't at all what he expected. Everything was so neat and clean; it seemed as if everything had its place.*

*It was simple and beautiful, yet Craig could tell that this wasn't about just being beautiful. Students practiced very hard here. Glancing up, he noticed a wall lined with framed photos. Some he recognized and some he didn't, but they*

**Everything that you encounter is an aspect of martial arts; find the marvelous truth there.**

**A true artist  
transcends  
style and moves  
with spirit.**

were obviously martial arts masters. The odd thing was that, as far as he could tell, they came from all different styles. Looking up at the pictures, Craig didn't notice that the master was now standing in front of him. He was a small and unassuming man, yet he exuded a presence of confidence and wisdom.

*The master spoke first. "You asked to see me?"*

*Craig immediately stood and said, "Yes sir. I've practiced for many years and I know a lot of styles and now I am thinking about joining your school."*

*Now the master, seeming a little confused, asked, "You know a lot of styles?"*

*"Well," said Craig, "I've practiced a lot of styles and I have some questions for you. My first question is why should I practice your style?"*

*To this the master responded, "I don't know that you should."*

*Craig said, "Well, what I mean is, what is so great about your style?"*

*The master smiled and said quietly, "Nothing."*

*Craig was becoming a little frustrated now. "No, I mean what makes your style better than other styles?"*

*In response, the master pointed to the wall with the photographs and said, "These are great masters from many different disciplines. It doesn't matter what style you practice. Much more important are the reasons you practice. What these great ones have in common is that they all saw their art as more than fighting, understood that martial arts is a path to help people strengthen their mind, body and spirit, so they can defeat their internal demons."*

*Craig realized that, for years, he had been looking for the greatest style, feeling that, if he found it, it would turn him into a great martial artist. But he needed to examine his motivation for practice as well as what he got out of his practice. Now it seemed that the first step in being a great martial artist was to see the practice as more than just fighting, to understand that it is a discipline that can lead to self-knowledge.*

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**In the beginning of practice, people desire confidence and self defense skills**

**Once acquired, they start to see how the art effects their life.**

**The only way to develop your mind, body and spirit is to always practice with your mind, body and spirit.**

**Even the most capable one was once a beginner.**

## **Activity**

### **Great Martial Artist**

This month's activity is to write about a great martial artist. They can come from any style or discipline, an ancient master or a contemporary master. Research his life and art or arts that he has practiced. Include any facts that you feel are interesting or important. Include all you can discover about their personal philosophy — the ways in which they viewed their art and practice beyond physical technique.

In picking someone to write about, try to avoid movie stars or celebrities. Make your decision based on someone that you are interested in learning about or are drawn to. Initially, you may want to have 3 or 4 people in mind and then narrow the field as you discover more about them. This activity can be very exciting, and should motivate you in your own practice.

If it starts to seem like too much like a chore, you may have picked the wrong person, so choose wisely and have fun with it.

**Enlightenment must come little by little; otherwise it would overwhelm.**

**– Idries Shah**

## Reminders

### Style vs. Style

You have practiced now for a year or more. In this time you've been exposed to many new concepts, principles and techniques. If you are practicing regularly and hard, you should be in much better shape than when you began. You have learned many things. You are acquiring technical skills that once you only dreamed about. A basic technique that seemed so difficult at the beginning, you now perform with ease. Of course you still have a long way to go, so it is important to remember that, at the heart of your practice, lies the student/teacher relationship.

This is a very unique and special relationship and should be unlike any other. Of the seven ways of becoming a great martial artist, the first is to find a great teacher. 200 years ago, if you wanted to study martial arts, you would have to live in Asia and be willing to enter a temple, hermitage or secret society, vowing to dedicate your life to the study.

In modern society, the problem is almost reversed. There are many strip-mall masters flooding the phone books, all claiming to be the greatest, the best, the highest-ranking martial artist in town. Don't fall into the trap of believing that the grass is always greener. Focus on developing a deep, meaningful relationship with your instructor. If you have

**Students of any art including karate-do must never forget the cultivation of the mind and the body.**

**May the  
extraordinary  
days of your  
past be the  
common days of  
your future.**

the tendency to be reserved and quiet, use this relationship as an opportunity to break through your limitation and really let somebody know you. If you have a more outgoing personality, remember, your instructor should never become your buddy, pal or friend. If they do, it will only hurt your ability to learn from them. You can find friends anywhere but a great martial arts teacher is very special and rare.

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**“Karate ni sente nashi”  
(There is no first attack in karate)**

## Recommended Reading

**Strike Like Lightning** - C.V. Rhoades

**Martial Arts after 40** - Sang H. Kim

**Herding the Ox: Martial Arts  
as a Moral Metaphor** - John Donohue, Ph.D

**Notes:**