

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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If you face an opponent, you cannot be in mushin. There are no opponents where there are no thoughts.

Topic Mushin

Why do people practice martial arts? What do they want to achieve? What's their goal? When they walk into a dojo, many of them are looking for a system of self-defense. Or maybe they want to get into better shape. Or they want to be able to master an art. Or they want to be able to do something with their bodies that is so powerful and so beautiful that it seems almost magical.

The student enters the dojo environment with all these expectations and more. They hope to master many things, and they expect to be able to monitor their own progress as time goes on. How? The martial arts ranking system. A student moves up in rank as their skill improves; everyone knows that. You get a series of colored belts that are meant to signify improvement. Every white belt wants to be a yellow belt, every yellow belt wants to be a green belt, every green belt wants to be a brown belt and, of course, everybody wants to be a black belt.

Over the past 30 years, the industry has helped promote the idea that every student's goal is black belt. And with that expectation, it becomes the master's job is to take raw students and produce black belt students. To some extent, a martial arts program is defined by how many people they train to the level of black belt. This plays very well to the Western mind-set. We love setting goals and keeping track of what we're doing and where we're going, how well we're doing it and what we're going to achieve next. We do it in our careers. We do it in our hobbies. We do it in our relationships. And so we do it in martial arts.

The problem is, martial arts is not Western. Martial arts is ultimately about learning to change your state of consciousness, to develop new and more effective ways of seeing and thinking and acting. There is nothing linear about this type of education. You may be able to track your physical practice through a ranking system, but you cannot measure how practice changes you mentally or emotionally. There is no tool to measure consciousness. Focusing on a progression of colored belts, advancing from point A to point B is less important, once we realize that martial arts is more than physical.

Going from Thought to No-Mind

The direct translation of mushin is “no-mind.” This is a difficult concept. It’s especially difficult to think about or discuss. How do you discuss entering a state in which the mind isn’t active, when it’s the mind that is trying to process the information?

But that’s how we start. At the beginning, there’s thought, and lots of discussion. When you walk into a dojo, like walking down a path, you can’t skip ahead. You can’t start at the beginning and magically appear at the middle or the end. You have to take each step one at a time to proceed. So we start with thought and move toward a state of no-mind.

The very first thing you must do in your practice is to learn to perform the techniques correctly. The kicks, the blocks, the punches, the forms — you must try to get your body to move accurately, correctly, skillfully. And the effort of trying demands that you think about it, intensely. So, in the beginning of your practice, a great deal of thought takes place. You consider each movement, analyze what’s correct and incorrect. You take notes, you ask questions, you practice your way through clumsiness and frustration until you begin

Most thoughts have an ‘I’ connected to them, supporting the ego and individuality. Mushin being the state where thoughts cease, help connect us with the oneness.

Thinking is good except when you are supposed to be experiencing and feeling.

to move fluidly, cleanly. And, at some point, if you're patient, and you persevere and work hard and meditate, you begin to think fluidly and cleanly as well, and you start to be able to let the body just happen. I'm not saying it happens quickly, but I am suggesting that getting beyond the merely physical aspects of practice is the whole point of practice.

To the great masters, the goal of martial arts was not a black belt. The masters did not practice for trophies or rank. They practiced in order to achieve a state of consciousness. It doesn't matter the style — karate, kung fu, tae kwon do, aikido. You don't change *what* you're practicing, you change *how* you're practicing. More punches and more kicks are not going to lead you to a shift in consciousness. You cannot just train harder to get there. That will help your physical technique, but we're talking about mushin now, a state of mind.

Let "IT" Happen!

Some of the greatest martial artists in the world — Ueshiba, Funakoshi, Chojun Miyagi — they were in their absolute prime in their 70's and 80's. That's unheard of for an athlete. A gymnast is in their prime in their teens. Most athletes think about retiring in their mid-30's, by 45 they're coaching, by 60 they're consulting, and in their 70's they're remembering and watching it on TV. How in the world can martial artists be in their prime at 70 and 80 years old? They can't do more push ups. They're not stronger than they were at 25. They aren't more flexible. They aren't faster. The only way these people can remain in the prime of their practice with a body well past its peak is because, at the highest levels, martial arts is a mental discipline.

A young, strong, fast martial artist fires a front punch at you and you, as a young, strong, fast martial artist yourself, are

able to sidestep or get out of the way of the punch. And an old 80 year old master has the same punch thrown at him and is also able to get out of the way of the punch. To the naked eye, it appears to be the exact same occurrence, but it's really not. At some point before impact, the young practitioner recognizes the punch being thrown and, with quick reflexes, is able to move out of the way, or block or counter with a technique of their own. But the old master isn't that nimble, isn't that quick. Yes, he is able to recognize the punch so much more quickly than the young man that it compensates somewhat for slower movement or less flexibility. But there's more going on. As the punch is coming in, the old master's mind is truly in that moment, and so the punch is not moving at 80 mph, 90 mph. In his mind, the punch is moving in slow motion. Not because he's concentrating intently — quite the opposite. His mind is clear, like a still pond. When the water is like glass, when everything is completely still, then the tiniest movement produces a ripple that we sense instantly and clearly. But if the water is choppy and splashing and moving about, then that same tiny movement is lost — you don't feel it at all.

Your mind is that pond. When you clear your mind completely, then you will recognize every tiny ripple very clearly and much earlier, and be able to spontaneously and creatively respond. Bruce Lee said "It's when IT happens." Ueshiba Sensei said "It's when Spirit flows through you." That's the state of mushin — no-mind — that we are striving for.

I'll give you an example. You're driving down the road 50, 60 mph and you hit a piece of ice and the car starts to spin and you know you're going to hit the telephone pole. What happens? Everything slows down, doesn't it. Why? It's because your fear has put you right in the moment.

**It is often
desires that
keep us from
living in the
moment, for
they can only be
fulfilled in the
future.**

Creativity is when you get out of the way and the Divine shines through.

You aren't thinking about the argument with your wife. You're not thinking about getting your child off to school. You're not thinking about the meeting at 11:00. **You're not thinking at all.** This is mushin. You are right there, completely in that moment, to the exclusion of *everything* else. Your consciousness changes and your perception of time-flow changes with it. Now imagine being able to control when you go into that state.

24 / 7 - 365

Understand that this state is not exclusive to martial artists. I've said for years that Michael Jordan does not love basketball. Baryshnikov does not love ballet. Mohammed Ali does not love boxing. They loved the *state of consciousness* they were able to achieve when performing these activities. Michael Jordan was asked in an interview, "What is the number one thing that you miss about playing since you've retired?" And he said, "I miss the quiet, the peacefulness. When I was on the court, playing, it was the quietest place in the world." The reporter seemed confused and said, "But Mr. Jordan, thousands of people were watching you, sometimes screaming and jumping up and down. You had announcers and music and loudspeakers and hundreds of thousands watching on T.V. How was that the quietest place?"

"I can't explain it," said Jordan. "It just was."

In his mind, he was so completely focused right there, in that moment, that everything else was gone. In mushin, there is no past and there is no future. There is only now. We have created this concept of linear time, of 365 days a year, 24 hours a day, 7 days in a week. We all agree on the rules and we use it, we need it, to interact with one another and create societies. But it's an artificial structure that bears no resemblance to the way our minds really work. Linear time has no bearing on consciousness.

In mushin, there's only *this moment*. And in *this moment*, duality ceases. There is no up or down, no left or right, no good or bad, no right or wrong. There just is. And then, from that state of centered calm, you react spontaneously and creatively. *It* happens and, when you're able to let *it* happen, you cannot take credit for *it*. A great master said, "You don't throw the punch. You don't do the block. It happens to you. You are a conduit at best."

Of course, if you're performing technique incorrectly, then it could be that you need more physical practice. But at a certain point, your body can do it. What goes awry is that you're thinking too much about it. You're considering too many cases of *either-or*. You're trying too hard.

Prepare, then Let Go

Sometimes, we really prepare for a situation that's coming. A speech, a test, an event, a spotlight moment. We prepare intently. We make sure we have all our ducks in a row. We really understand our topic and we know what we're going to do. And we still choke. Why? It's because our minds become cluttered with all the thoughts, all the possibilities of things that could go right or wrong. We're trying too hard. The water is too choppy. We have to just let go and let it happen. I'm not saying that you should not prepare. Preparation is very, very important. But once you've prepared and you're ready and the moment comes to perform, then you have to let go. The struggle culminates in surrender. In mushin, we're surrendering to the consciousness of no-mind. The chatter ceases and only the moment matters. We are no longer there, except as a part of the universe. And so the universe is moving through us, with us.

Most teachers' advice is think, think, and think. The zen masters advice is stop thinking.

It is your thoughts that decide where you go as well as hinder you from knowing who you really are.

In martial arts, whenever you attack, you're thinking. You cannot enter the state of mushin if you're striving to attack. You must be defensive, but not calculating, not anticipating the other person's movement or motion. You have to truly just be. You have to wait and be. The essence of mushin lies in the breath. The breath and the mind are inseparable. The condition of one directly reflects the condition of the other. As your breathing slows, your mind slows. As your mind slows, the waters grow calm, turn to glass, and you're able to touch that state of no-mind, the state that is going to help you not only in your practice, but every day throughout your life.

One day a student was walking with his teacher in the marketplace when, suddenly, a large, looming figure blocked the path. With no concern, not even interrupting in his stride, the teacher guided the student around the angry man. This enraged the man who now shouted, "Your money or your life!" The student clearly startled by the request, jumped back several feet and entered a fighting stance. The old master simply responded, "We don't have money and we don't wish trouble."

The assailant reached out to grab the old man, who shifted his weight ever so slightly and avoided the grab. After regaining his balance, the big man attempted a vicious blow at the old man, furious as he hit nothing but air. Taking a deep breath, the attacker now dove at the old man, hoping

to knock him to the ground. The master calmly sidestepped and the attacker ended up in a heap in the road. Livid with anger, he leaped up and pulled a knife from under his shirt. Looking directly at the old man he said, "Now you will die."

As he began to wildly stab and slash, the master remained relaxed and calm, moving, ducking, and pivoting as he avoided each blow. After several minutes the attacker, completely exhausted and bewildered, threw down his weapon and ran away. The master then rejoined his student and continued on their way without a word.

The student was stunned. Later that evening he asked his master, "Sir, I am very confused. How did you do that today? Why didn't you defend yourself?"

The master said, "You don't believe that I defended myself?"

The flustered student replied, "Well yes, but I mean, why didn't you strike back?"

The master said, "I did not need to strike. Let me give you an analogy. You are a young, strong man in your mid 20's and have practiced for many years. If a four-year-old child attacked you, even violently, would you feel the need to hurt them? Remember that there are many levels of self-defense. At the lowest, most basic level, if someone attacks, you must get away without any concern for his or her well-being or safety. You do whatever you have to do. At the highest level of self-defense, you take the attacker and the situation under control without hurting them or getting hurt. At your skill level, you could easily take control of a four-year-old without hurting them. To me, this attacker today was no different.

The student continued to protest, "But sir, there is a difference. This man was two or three times your size, much younger and he had a weapon."

**In battle one
should not be
fearful
or confident.**

It is the ego that hinders and inhibits the state of mushin.

The master said quietly, "You believe that martial arts is based on size, age and weapons? You may or may not understand this, but fighting is not as much a physical activity as it is a mental state."

The student appeared confused. The master went on, "You think that time is a constant, that there are 24 hours in a day, 7 days in a week, 365 days in a year. One minute is 60 seconds and all calendars and watches will agree with you. But, if you are able to live in the moment and keep your mind relaxed — free from fear, anger and turmoil — you may enter a state called mushin, or no-mind. In this state of consciousness, things can appear as if they are moving in slow motion. When an attack comes, it is much easier to avoid or respond to them. At my age, do you really believe that I can do more push ups than you? Do you think that my old body is more flexible than yours? Do you think my reflexes are like fine wine and grow better and faster with age? It is only because of mushin that I am still in my prime in my 70's. Always remember that martial arts is a mental as well as a physical discipline."

The student asked, "Sir, does this level of mastery come with time?"

The master said, "To reach this state does indeed take time, but just repping physical technique is not enough. To reach this state, you must meditate and always practice mindfully."

Two students were watching a flag blow in the wind as they were arguing. One student said that the flag was moving, and the other said that the wind was moving. Overhearing this, the master responded, "Your mind is moving."

Activity

Bite by Bite

It is impossible to summon mushin as you might summon a waiter in a restaurant. There is no specific ritual or action to perform. When the experience happens, the only part that we play in it, is to get out of the way. Getting out of the way means to be in the moment and to experience the moment fully, without other interrupting thoughts. This includes all past memory, all future plans, imagination, desire, expectation, etc. It's not that we must deny or repress the senses, but we must be able to completely control them. Unplugging the senses in meditation, as well as being able to tap into them, actually heightens them when they are in use.

This month's activity is to sit alone, quietly, and enjoy a big bowl of popcorn, one kernel at a time. Most people eat popcorn by the handful. Your task is to become completely consumed in each kernel before moving on to the next. Smell the aroma, feel your fingers select each kernel, note the color. Keep your attention completely on the popcorn. Do not let your mind wander, fully experience how the popcorn feels, let your mouth salivate in anticipation of the buttery or salty taste. Notice the rough but smooth texture of each kernel. Be aware of the crunching and how it slowly dissolves. Experience swallowing and the feeling of emptiness as your tongue searches for any remaining particles. Completely and consciously eat all of the popcorn. If your mind wanders to anything other than this, keep a piece of paper and a pencil nearby, and mark every time your mind wandered. Write a paragraph to a page on your experience and turn in to your instructor. Feel free to substitute a bowl of raisins if popcorn is a problem.

To sleep when tired, to eat when hungry, to work when you work is the best way to be in the moment.

The road to truth is lined with many tempting parking spaces.

Reminders

Mushin

It is important to understand that you cannot force the state of mushin or no-mind. The harder you strive to clear the mind of thought, the more thoughts originate. However, it seems that a principle component of the state of no-mind is concentration. I understand that this seem contradictory and confusing. How can concentration lead to no thoughts?

We must realize that thinking is much more than concentration. Thinking involves judgments, anticipation and deliberation, as well as randomly attached memories of the subject, sometimes incorporating additional thoughts and memories that are completely irrelevant to the original point of focus. Concentration, on the other hand, is the ability to absorb oneself mentally, physically, and emotionally in a specific moment. In that moment there may be an experience, feeling or thought that takes place.

To be open and ready to accept the experience of mushin, you must be able to concentrate deeply enough to be and remain completely in the moment. Please do not confuse mushin or the state of no-mind with daydreaming or spacing out. On the contrary, this effortless state seems to demand a prepared and disciplined mind.

If you are skeptical as to whether this “Shangri-La” state of consciousness exists or not; you must taste the proverbial orange to understand how juicy and sweet it is. We can point to examples where various people were able to get out of the way long enough to experience it. Examples include the monastic, aesthetic or sage that has practiced meditation for

years, or the artist who is able to concentrate so deeply that they get lost in their chosen medium. A professional athlete that focuses so intensely that they actually forget about winning or losing, and live only in the moment. A musician that gets swept away in the music, not making any claim that it is their own. In the West, athletes have coined terms like, “being in the zone, or flowing,” to describe this state.

The common thread that connects these very different people living very different lives is that all experience mushin as deep, one-pointed concentration. It may have been preceded by many years of training or induced suddenly through fear. In either case, once in this state, the person’s perception of time changes and they seem to experience life in a kind of slow motion. Some people are so surprised by this slow motion experience that they freeze up and don’t respond to the situation. Others are able to continue and even alter their responses, allowing them to respond even more quickly.

To continue to increase your level of concentration, revisit the ancient technique of wall gazing. It was taught in Lesson Nine, Module One, as a focus point. Through regular practice of this technique, your concentration will sharpen and help prepare your mind for mushin.

It is ironic that concentration and mindfulness is the path to no-mind.

**To be happy, you
first must be.**

Knowing is not enough; we must apply.

Willing is not enough; we must do.

Doing is not enough; we must do willingly.

Recommended Reading

Toward the Unknown,
Tri Thong Dang

The Warrior is Silent,
Scott Shaw, PhD.