

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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At the most basic level of self-defense you do not care about the attacker, you do whatever you have to do to get away.

At the highest level of self-defense, you take the situation completely under control without hurting the attacker or getting hurt yourself.

Topic **The Deeper Purpose of Sparring**

Martial arts and self defense are intimately linked. While we may strive to achieve deeper levels in our practice, and while practice may get us into shape, reduce stress and increase self-discipline, the fundamental purpose of martial arts remains -- in many people's minds -- self-defense.

In the dojo, we practice many things. We learn basic techniques, then combinations to develop fluidity of movement. We practice breathing, tension and relaxation. We practice kata and traditional forms. All of these serve to advance our practice and hone our ability.

And then there is sparring. This is the element of practice that's suppose to put it all together, a means to simulate a real fight, and some people can't get enough of it. To many martial arts students, sparring is what it's all about, it's the real deal, the opportunity to "try out" everything they're learning along the way.

But just how similar is sparring to self-defense? And, if we're not sparring for self-defense, why make it part of the practice at all?

The Difference Between Sparring & Self Defense

To begin with, let's not confuse sparring with real self-defense situations. There are several differences. Sparring is often simply a game of tag, seeing who can touch whom first with a technique. For safety reasons, there is little or no contact, altered distancing, slight focus and no 2-6 inch follow-through. Consequently, there's often lots of hypothetical questions — Did the strike actually land or not? Would it have caused any damage? Did it hit a good target?

For these reasons, some people prefer full contact, or no-holds-barred, fighting. This is certainly closer to simulating a real self-defense situation, but it's still faulty. Sparring in a tournament, you have the luxury of knowing who you are going to fight, and (generally) an opportunity to review their previous fights before you face them. This allows you and your trainers and handlers the opportunity to come up with a strategy for victory. You also have a specific fight date and time, so you can physically and mentally prepare yourself. There are no weapons, a doctor is on the scene, there are specific rest periods, and a referee is there to make sure that the situation doesn't get out of hand. Everyone wears protective gear so that no one ends up hospitalized. In the dojo, sparring is even more closely regulated. The point is that these are all highly controlled, contained and monitored environments. In a real self-defense situation, on the street, almost exactly the opposite is true. You have no idea when or where you may be attacked, or by whom. They may have a weapon, and it may be one or multiple attackers. They may be under the influence of mind-altering drugs. There is no way to know their fighting ability or their intentions — just how far will they carry this assault?

While there are huge differences, there are still many skills acquired in sparring that translate well into self-defense training. Nothing teaches timing like moving with a partner. If you practice full contact, you begin to understand distancing. Sparring teaches you how to move, how to work the whole body, how to focus a strike and how to hit a moving target. These are all very valuable techniques for self-defense. There are many reasons to practice sparring for self-defense; the point is, be sure that you understand the difference between the two.

To successfully defend yourself you must be able to keep your composure during an attack.

Maintain
intention
and attention.

Can Sparring Hinder the Martial Artist?

The problem with sparring, and the danger of devoting too much of your practice to it, lies not in the skills developed, but in the way it enhances the strength of your ego. All great masters have taught that, at the core of martial arts, lies harmony, selflessness, realization and oneness, not merely the ability to win a fight. In the 20th century, sparring has evolved into a competition, rather than an opportunity for the participants to improve their skills and advance their understanding. And, as in many things, it's not the *what* or *how* that need to be adjusted, just the *why*. For example, the next time you're sparring, notice how often your competitive nature surfaces. Don't embrace it, don't rationalize that through competition you are pushing yourself to be your best, but don't repress the tendency either. Just calmly recognize the feelings and thoughts. Notice when the ego surges to the front, especially when you get hit. Take a breath and ask yourself, "Does it really matter?"

Again, be mindful of the difference between self-defense and sparring. On the street, you may actually be called upon to defend your safety. Winning and losing become very important. In the dojo, you and your partner are pushing each other to the best of your ability. Exactly what is there to win? Practice intensely, and understand the value of good self-defense.

Be mindful of planning fakes, strategies and setups. You know — when you throw a technique in order to get a specific response, allowing you to then land something else. In truth, these aren't strategies at all — they're tricks. When you employ tricks, your mind is busy. You're not feeling motion. You're thinking about how, when and what they're going to do, and how and what you're going to follow up

with, and your mind becomes so incredibly active that you cannot possibly respond spontaneously and creatively in the moment. In fact, you are at your most vulnerable when you are thinking of attacking, when you're planning and plotting. To attack takes only a moment, but most people spend several seconds planning the attack and, that whole time, they're wide open.

The Experience is the Goal

So, if winning is not the goal in sparring, what is the goal? Why do we bother sparring at all? We spar to practice and develop our skills while moving with a partner. We spar to learn to avoid anxiety and frustration when we perform poorly, and to avoid elation and ego gratification when we perform well. Punching and kicking, throwing and grappling, being punched, kicked and thrown — these are all just tools. The aim is to perform within this experience to the best of your ability while remaining calm and peaceful. This may sound foreign to practitioners of modern-day, tournament-style martial arts, but it is actually at the heart of authentic practice.

Over a thousand years ago a man named Tamo Bodhidharma became the abbot of a Buddhist temple in Hunan Province, China. Legend records that, in taking over the temple, he also shouldered the responsibility for the spiritual growth of its monks. Noting that they were overweight, lethargic and prone to falling asleep during their meditations, he decided to institute an exercise program to integrate their spiritual practice with a physical discipline. Thus was born martial arts.

To truly understand martial arts, we must understand the origins of the practice. The ancient monks of Shaolin, like monks everywhere, were seeking enlightenment, nirvana,

**In sparring
you will rarely
get hit with
what you are
expecting.**

**If you feel
superior and
proud of winning,
did you?**

As long as there is duality there will be conflict in life. The martial artist strives to realize the oneness in order to overcome duality thus extinguishing conflict.

samadhi, satori, self-realization. Their belief was that this state of consciousness could only be achieved by overcoming the ego and unifying with the Divine. For centuries before Tamo, rishis, yogis and monastics of all sects had employed meditation to help clear the mind and raise consciousness. The desired state was that of Oneness, and the ego was what kept man in the delusion of duality. Good and evil, up and down, male and female, winning and losing, the self and all others. All of these perceptual divisions got in the way of mental and spiritual clarity. To rise above this perception of duality was the purpose of meditation.

But Bodhidharma's monks were falling asleep! They could meditate deeply, but would nonetheless find themselves right back in body consciousness once they stopped meditating. Tamo saw the need for a practice that would be a bridge between meditation and day-to-day life, a "moving meditation" that would unite the physical with the mental and spiritual. He understood that the ego was at its strongest in a man during a physical attack. The natural responses of fight or flight are both ego-driven. To run away from an attack out of fear that you will be hurt is to ignore Oneness. To defend yourself with anger is to promote your separateness. Either way, it fails to advance the monastic path. So, Tamo decided that his monks would practice fighting with each other. They would spar and develop techniques of movement, and become so proficient that fear and pride would both be beside-the-point. Winning and losing would become meaningless.

This physical regimen served many purposes.

Capitalizing on weakness is a good strategy, but strategy taken to the extreme becomes trickery.

1. it helped get the monks in shape;
2. the practice enabled them to protect the temple if they were attacked; and
3. most importantly, they learned to practice physically with the same calm peacefulness that they were able to achieve in meditation.

In fact, the state of mind should be exactly the same whether you are sitting in meditation, practicing martial techniques (the moving meditation) or performing everyday activities. You should remain one-pointedly focused and in the moment. All reaction should come from a calm and peaceful center. Compare this practice to what we currently think of as “sparring” in the martial arts. There is no resemblance. The point is that sparring was never designed as a competitive game or a sport between opponents, but as a sacred practice, as a partner drill to help clear the mind and raise the consciousness.

Use Practice for the Sake of Practice

This isn't meant to be mystical. Tamo's teaching was, and is, utterly pragmatic. In practice, we feel the flow of energy more clearly only when the ego is completely gone, when practice exists for the sake of practice. In that moment, when you're sparring *with a partner* and not *against an opponent*, there is only one energy. The energy you provide and the energy I provide are gone. There is only the energy that we are together. We're playing the same song and harmonizing perfectly. We are completely in the Now. At that moment, there is no competition. No one's winning and no one's losing. Once you stop worrying about offense and defense, achievement or failure, the game is over, the sport is gone, and all that's left is art. That's higher than any victory that

A student once asked his teacher, “Sir, when should I most control my mind?”

The teacher responded, “Now, now, now, now . . .”

the ego can experience. Achieving victory is merely arriving at a boundary you set for yourself. You reached the plateau, but so what? There's always another plateau, another limit. Artistry is what transcends limitations, and allows the moment to exist for its own sake.

We call this martial *arts* for a reason. This is an art that transcends ego. This is a creative art that leads to the end of separation. Tamo Bodhidharma's gift – martial arts – is a means of closing the gap between physical and mental, between motion and non-motion, between good and bad, victory and defeat, happiness and sadness, between vengeance and love. Learn to spar well, for the right reasons and with the proper motivation, and you learn to live in harmony.

What is the difference between an artist and a technician? And can you become an artist just by throwing more technique?

William had practiced martial arts from the time he was eight years old. Now, at twenty-seven, he was approaching his twentieth year in martial arts. He was a skinny young kid when he began, Now, as a young man, he was completely filled out, strong and fast. He remembered his excitement when he first entered the school and how, later, his mother and his instructor had to encourage him to stick it out when he had wanted to quit. He remembered achieving his first, second and third degree black belts. Now, as tournament season was coming to an end, he was preparing for his fourth degree belt. William was in the best shape of his life. He had collected 30 trophies

this year, more than in any year past. All of them were in sparring. William loved to spar and, while perhaps not consistently the best in the school, was certainly in the top five.

One day, he came to the school a little earlier than usual, just to stretch out and practice before classes. After he had stretched, the master asked, “William, would you like to spar? We haven’t in a while.”

William responded, “Yes, sir,” and quickly went to get his practice gear. No one knew how long the master had practiced, but it was known to be over forty years. As the two men had bowed in, William began to size up the master. He watched carefully at the way the master moved and looked for the openings. William threw some fakes just to see how his opponent would move. After a few moments, he decided to launch an attack. William entered with a flurry of punches and kicks. The master responded and the two men began.

After 30 or 40 minutes, the master said, “Time.”

The two men bowed and walked off the mat. William felt a bit unsettled about what had just happened. They hadn’t kept score, so he couldn’t be sure, but he guessed that he had beaten the master. He said, “Sir, I am confused. I have never done this well against you in sparring before.”

“Yes,” said the master, “your physical technique has come a long way.”

William nodded and said, “If we were in a tournament I would have won.”

The master responded, “Yes, today you would have, but tomorrow maybe not. William, this is your problem. You still spar for trophies — not for yourself. I’m not concerned at all

**When you spar
you should see
yourself as well
as your partner.**

In a self-defense situation the attitude must be, "I will win. I will continue to fight until it is over."

In sparring, the attitude should be, "I will learn as much as possible."

with winning and losing, but only in allowing the experience to sweep over me. I know that, because of the experience, I will be changed for the better. It might appear that we are doing the same thing, sparring. You, however, are enhancing your ego, while I am striving to let go of mine. Look at what just happened. You feel superior and self-congratulatory because you scored more points than I did. If you had scored fewer points you would have been upset and disappointed. Both reactions merely increase the delusion of separateness. Neither reaction enhances the experience. Stop being so concerned with victory or defeat and you will enjoy the practice and the experience regardless of the outcome.

"You need to use sparring as it was intended, and not as a sport or a game. Spar as if you and I were dancing. In a dance, there are three energies at work: your own energy, your partner's energy, and the energy that you create together.

In a dance, the object is not to get to a certain place on the floor or to out-dance your partner. It is really to engross yourself in the experience, so that when the dance is finished you will remember such an enjoyable time that you want to dance again."

"So sparring is more than just fighting, with rules," said William.

The master smiled. "Just because you can win a fight does not mean that you are a martial artist. You are a martial artist when you use fighting to change your life."

Activity

Practicing Mentally and Physically

Learn to monitor yourself in all battles of life.

The activity for this month is to choose one of your worst techniques and consistently work on it in sparring. It can be a combination, an advanced technique that you haven't done well, or a basic technique that you just don't use much. Use good control as you strive to develop speed and power. Watch for good target areas and opportunities to throw the combination or technique. This doesn't mean that you only use this technique, but give it a lot more attention than anything else.

The result will, naturally, develop this technique, but the real goal is to monitor your feelings, emotions and attitude during the process. The benefits of this exercise are enormous. It is common, at first, to become frustrated and upset, and you will strongly want to return to using a technique that you know will work for you. But as you continue to develop the new skills, the feeling of frustration will become one of excitement and anticipation. It may even turn to confidence and a little cockiness. Be aware of all of these changes in attitude and emotion.

Use the month to develop both your physical skills and to monitor your internal environment. If you are not yet at the level of sparring, substitute any partner drill and practice the same exercise. Obviously, this is a good technique to use at any time in your practice. Don't use it this month and forget it. At the end of the month, write a paragraph to one page on which technique you chose and why. Describe your internal experiences during the activity. Make a copy for yourself and one to turn in to your instructor.

What do you want to achieve in your lifetime?

Keep your commitments to yourself.

Reminders

Designing your Life - Revisited

This month the reminder is simply that it is your life and you are in control. By not deciding the direction of your life, you allow yourself to be tossed about on the waves of other people's desires. The only way to cut through the waves is to have both a sail and a rudder. The sail is energy, will and indomitable spirit. The rudder is the direction and the tool that helps to set the course.

It has been almost a year since you completed the activity of designing your life. This was one of the most difficult assignments in the course. So let's go back and revisit it. Are you actually following through with what you wrote one year ago? Of course, if you did not do the activity in Module One-Lesson Six, or didn't finish it, do it now. If you completed it then and put it on a shelf, dig it out!

You should have an established system for tracking your progress in all of the areas you are committed to improving. Chances are that you have made some improvements in some areas, but remember, it takes effort in all of them to really have a well-designed life. Critically analyze your progress in your career, financial situation, spirituality, personal relationships, health, community involvement, educational opportunities, and your overall attitude. Are you happier, healthier and more productive than you were a year ago? If not, what areas of development have you neglected? Have you sufficiently broken it down to a monthly process in each category? Make an inventory list for the goals that you have met on time, and the goals that you have not. Which goals need to be revised or dropped completely? Have you inserted any new goals that you have set for yourself?

Time is life, and your life is being designed right now. The question is, are you or others designing it?

Recommended Reading

**Goals: Setting and Achieving
Them on Schedule,**
Zig Ziglar

Living on Purpose
Dan Millman

Notes: