

# 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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**Pain is the greatest teacher, but no one wants to go to his class.**

## Topic

### What Can Injuries Teach Us?

When an adult begins the study of martial arts, they have two primary questions. The first one is, “Can I do this without getting hurt?” The second one is, “Can I do this without looking stupid?”

Everyone knows that most kids are fearless and, with a few exceptions, aren’t afraid to try anything that looks fun and exciting. Adults, on the other hand, are usually self-conscious, and tend to gravitate toward things that they feel that they are good at, or at least *could* be good at. While kids instinctively see in martial arts the potential for having fun, adults weigh the potential benefits against the potential danger of injury.

Getting hurt while practicing martial arts is usually a taboo topic. Certainly no school owner wants to discuss the potential for injury at length with a student or prospective student. Everyone insists that *they* run a very safe program and, on the whole, the martial arts industry *is* much safer than it was in the 1960’s and the 1970’s. That era was known for bare knuckle fights and long, bloody workouts. Training methods back then would make any modern exercise physiologist cringe. There was no consideration of heart rate, no warm up, no cool down, potentially dangerous ballistic stretching, classes that when on for hours without hydrating the body and routine hyper-extending of joints. These days, personal safety really is a concern and, while no training environment is completely risk-free, today’s schools and dojos take the fundamentals of safe training very seriously.

That said, it's still ridiculous to believe that you can practice martial arts for years without experiencing an injury. Anyone, in any style, that has practiced at a high level of intensity for ten, fifteen, twenty years or more has experienced their share of injuries. And it's not just a matter of *what goes with the territory*. I believe that experiencing injuries along the way is a very important part of your practice, part of your development as a martial artist. We have all heard that a life without struggle is barely worth remembering, and that what does not kill you makes you stronger. Indeed, it is living through the bumps and bruises of practice that help us live through the bumps and bruises of life. It is feeling the locks — really applied — and the kicks and punches that land squarely on their mark, that helps us gain respect for our art. We realize that these techniques actually work, and we begin to understand their effectiveness. We've all seen countless films and TV shows where the hero and the villain are engaged in a battle to the death and each are able to withstand 5-10 minutes of the most powerful punches, kicks and throws that the other can dish out! We start to become desensitized to the power that a good technique possesses. Getting hit with one good technique — even moderately executed, helps to remind us that people don't just bounce back up, ready for more! In the real world, most fights, most physical confrontations are over in seconds, not minutes.

### **Fighting through pain builds endurance; Fear of pain builds focus**

There are wide discrepancies in the way each individual feels pain. Some people have very high pain thresholds, and are able to withstand incredible amounts of physical discomfort, while others complain and crumble under the slightest twinge. It is precisely the intense physical nature of our

**If you didn't feel the power of the technique for yourself, you may not be convinced how effective it truly is.**

**Pain to a large degree is a learned emotion.**

**In martial arts pain is used as a catalyst to help the student stay in the moment. Sometimes just the thought of pain is enough to keep the mind from being distracted.**

practice that helps to strengthen the martial artist's tolerance for pain. Time and time again we see men and women begin their practice with a fairly fragile constitution. But within a couple of years, these same people become physically, mentally and emotionally stronger. They can endure more. The limit that they push themselves to gets higher and higher. When they started, a mere bump might give them pause but, a couple years later, there they are taking reverse punches and throws in practice and just shaking it off.

In a very real sense, it's the intensity and the perceived level of danger that aid the martial artist's sense of being *in the moment*. It is your healthy respect for the techniques, and what they could do to you, that help you to *be here now!* Think of it this way; sometimes you have an absolutely dreadful day, a dreadful week, when everything in your world goes wrong. You're under pressure at work, your personal relationship is on the rocks, your finances are shot. It's not only raining, it's pouring bad news. Yet you discover, time and again, that one of the most helpful things that you can do to clear your mind and shake off your troubles is to go to practice. Why is this? Because practice pulls you out of yourself, it removes you from the turmoil of what happened before and what might happen next and what someone did and what you'll have to say to someone else later. You leave all of that behind when you bow in. The world, and your life, is still going on, and you'll still have to settle all your problems, but that's later -- tomorrow -- next. For now, you step onto the mats, get off the the daily rollercoaster and find yourself squarely *in the moment*.

When you're sparring at a very fast pace, there's an immanent danger of being hit, kicked or choked. In this situation, your mind has to let go of all its thoughts, all its stress; it has to relax and focus one pointedly in the moment.

Otherwise, you *will* get hit!

But it's not the act of sparring that focuses your mind. It is the understanding that you could be hurt if you don't concentrate. It's the injuries that really strengthen your respect for practice. You remember back to when you didn't concentrate on making a tight fist and you had to live with a sprained finger for a week. You remember your mind wandering and walking into a kick that bruised a rib. You gain new respect for concentration, and you gain tremendous confidence in the techniques themselves. You will forever have greater respect for the sidekick that you were hit with, and consequently greater respect for your own sidekick, and for the art itself!

### **Deal with injury; Don't run from it**

Most physical injuries heal rather quickly, but emotional and psychological scars can last a long time. An injury may not be the direct fault of the partner you were working with at the time, but you will probably find yourself avoiding practicing with them for a while once the injury heals. Some injuries can steal your practice completely if you allow it. For example; a student practices for many years without any serious injury. One day, he falls poorly and injures a shoulder. As he waits out the healing process, he starts to believe that practice is too dangerous; he's too old to do be doing this. He's forgotten how many years up until now he's practiced without an injury! Human beings have very short memories. When we're confronted with sickness or injury, we are very easily persuaded that we will be sick or hurt for the rest of our lives.

To be a martial artist is to deal with injuries. The best advice is not to miss class when you are hurt, but to learn how to modify your practice. After all, this is more than punching,

**If the truth be told, most people are able to withstand so much more than they believe.**

**Don't seek injuries out through poor training methods, but when they find you, do not resent them, learn from them.**

**Never let practice gear get in the way of your practice.**

kicking and throwing. We're also developing sensitivity, awareness and creativity. If your arm or hands are hurt, work on kicks, or just footwork. If your leg is injured, work on hand techniques. If you can't stand at all, work on your grappling. Even if your injury is so severe that you cannot practice at all, at least go and take notes. You will be amazed at what you can learn from the edge of the mat.

### **Don't allow safety gear to hinder your technique or control**

Pads, gloves, helmets and other safety gear are all beneficial inventions and should be used most of the time, but they have their drawbacks. Many people never learn good control because they rely too heavily on their safety equipment. Gloves can hinder the development of good technique, making it difficult to make a good fist or strike with the correct part of the hand. Students who have only practiced with pads think nothing of hitting an elbow, knee, or punching the back of the head. In real life, this is terrible technique and should be avoided. Practice gear can also limit your ability to grab.

On the other hand, in striving for complete realism, some people claim, "if practice isn't full contact, it is not real." Let's be honest — if you can practice full contact and still have a partner to practice with tomorrow, then your techniques are not effective enough. Practicing hard does not mean trying to injure your partner before he or she injures you.

Fear of injury helps us to stay mentally focused. This is a good thing. An actual injury teaches us respect for the practice and for good control of its techniques. This is also a good thing. Control helps us practice the most efficient techniques safely. Control allows us to develop the sensitivity to know just how much is enough and how much is too much. Injuries are best



kept to a minimum but, regardless, years from now, you will not remember the injury. What you will remember is how you got hurt, and the memories of the experience and the stories that grow out of them will be something that both you and others can learn from.

Practice hard, practice safe. But don't run from injury. Learn from it.

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*Mark began his martial arts practice in his mid twenties. Always very athletic he was in as good of shape as anyone you would meet. He was strong and fast and the years of playing a variety of sports helped to develop cat-like reflexes. He was unusually flexible – perfectly suited to the practice of martial arts. Mark would grasp techniques quickly and then rep them thousands of times. He worked harder than anyone in the dojo and, as you might imagine, in just a couple of years he became one of the strongest students in both forms and sparring.*

*His success appeared to come from his constant hard work, but really it was his passion for practice that was his strength. After a long hard day, Mark couldn't wait to get to the dojo and start sweating. Physical practice was his sanctuary, his way of recharging his battery. The sweat washed away the stress of the day.*

*Mark continued his practice week in and week out, and by his fifth anniversary of practice he couldn't imagine life without martial arts. Mark had taken many tests in the last five years but his biggest test was yet to come.*

**Physical injuries heal quickly, but emotional scars tend to linger. If you get injured, get back in class as soon as possible and battle your demon while it is relatively small.**

**Discipline and control over the body is the first step to discipline and control over the mind.**

*It was Saturday afternoon and Mark and Craig were free sparring at a very intense pace; a drill that both men had done many times before. About 25 minutes into the practice Mark attacked with a front punch/reverse punch combination. Craig side stepped the first punch and answered with a powerful sweep to Mark's front leg, just as Mark was shifting his weight for his reverse punch. The sweep was executed with speed and power and Mark hit the ground immediately. It only took a moment for everyone in the school to realize that Mark was seriously hurt. The technique that swept him off his feet damaged his ACL (the supporting tendon). Mark would need rest, followed by aggressive physical therapy. The whole process could take 2-4 months. The pain in his knee was bad enough, but the thought of going 4 months without practice was unbearable.*

*Mark's initial reaction was to deny the severity of the injury. He insisted that it was not that bad and that he would be healed in a couple of weeks. Then, once he admitted to himself how badly injured he was, he thought that he would never practice again, that his martial arts career was over. He rationalized that practice was just too dangerous and it was risky to continue with a compromised knee.*

*He decided to go in and talk to the master and say his goodbyes. After listening to Mark, the master asked "How long have you practiced?"*

*Mark responded, "Over five years sir."*

*"And have you had any major injuries besides this?"*

*"No, just a couple of bumps and bangs but nothing serious."*

*"So," said the Master, "for five years you have practiced without incident and one accident makes practice too risky?"*

Mark saw his point and happily replied, "I really don't want to quit. I'll be back as soon as I am better."

The Master responded, "Why wait until your body heals? You can come and watch classes and take notes." Mark smiled and agreed.

The next week he attended three classes and then stopped coming. After two more weeks the Master called Mark to inquire why he was not in class. Mark responded, "Sir, it is just too painful to see everyone practicing and not to be able to be out there. I am just the kind of person that likes to do it 100% or not at all.

Master responded, "I see. For the last five years have you been practicing your breathing exercises and meditation every day?"

Mark said, "Excuse me?"

The master said again, in a gruff voice, "Have you been practicing your breathing exercises and meditation since you began practicing?"

Mark responded, "No sir I haven't."

"Well then, you never were practicing 100%, but I still allowed you to physically practice. Maybe this injury is the lesson you need to take your practice to the next level. Up to this point, you have seen practice as a physical discipline, naively overlooking the internal aspects. This injury affords you time to practice at another level. I want you to begin breathing and meditating every day and come to class consistently 3 times a week. Bring pen and paper, take notes on the lessons and record what you observe."

**Some things can only be learned from the outside looking in. Every now and then, spend some time at the edge of the mat.**

*Two and a half months later, Mark's knee was completely healed, stronger than ever. After his first class, the Master asked, "So Mark, what did you learn from this test?"*

*Mark replied, "I learned how important practice is to me and I learned that practice is much more than I initially thought it was. There are subtleties in movements I was not seeing and there were whole areas of my practice that I was completely neglecting. Now I am able to see my practice extend into every area of my life. It seems that without this injury I would have continued to practice for years with a limited perception.*

*And the master smiling said, "Your injury was just one example of good news bad news – who knows?"*

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**"Long ago, there was a farmer who lived in China. One day, several wild horses crashed through the gates of his farm, causing a great deal of damage. "Oh no!" cried the neighbors, "This is terrible news!"**

**The old farmer shrugged, "Good news, bad news—who knows?"**

**The next day, the horses came back and the farmer's twenty-year-old-son managed to capture one. All the neighbors ran over to admire it,**

**"Oh, how wonderful!" they cried, "What good news!"**

**"Good news, bad news—who knows?" shrugged the farmer.**

**Several days later, the farmer's son, attempting to break the steed, was thrown and his leg badly broken. The neighbors rushed over, peering at the young man in bed, "Oh, this is awful news!" they cried.**

**The farmer shrugged, "Good news, bad news, who knows?"**

**A few weeks later, the Chinese army came by, taking all the area's young men for war raging in the south. They couldn't take the young man with the broken leg... "**

## Activity

### Write your own Eulogy

The topic this month is to take personal injury to the extreme. Write your own eulogy. This is a common assignment in many self-improvement courses and, because of the focus it demands, is a very powerful exercise. Remember, you must do the work to get the benefits.

Everyone is going to die someday and, at death, the tendency is to remember one's life. Sit down and pretend that that far-off day has arrived and that everyone is gathered to reflect upon your time here.

Be both specific and all-encompassing. Address each area of your life and its accomplishments. Stretch yourself and write as if you reached your fullest potential. What did you do? What did you leave that will carry on because of you?

**Everyone is compelled to examine their life as they approach death. The truly wise examine their life while they are living.**

To truly be a martial artist, the mind and body must work in harmony.

## Reminders

### Distinguishing between Meditation and Internal Techniques

Martial arts are based on the development of mind, body and spirit. If the body is injured, we need to modify our practice, not further aggravate the situation. Many people feel that if they are injured, they are unable to practice. One problem with this line of reasoning is that they're separating meditation from physical practice. It is as impossible to separate meditation from practice as it is to separate your mind from your body. Both are a part of the total You, and in that relationship they transcend their uniqueness. Similarly, meditation and physical technique are both a part of the total art and, within that relationship transcend their separateness.

As a martial artist you should be meditating daily. Remember that meditation is not a breathing exercise, not an affirmation or visualization, not at all the same as watching your thoughts or sharpening your senses. All these are internal practices and should be used regularly, but all are designed for specific results. Just as you wouldn't confuse a knife hand with a sidekick, understand that there are many different internal techniques. Each has its purpose. You have learned many of these techniques but always remember that meditation is more than a mere technique. Meditation is the foundation of all true martial arts.

***To be a martial artist you must be meditating regularly.***  
Review Module One Lesson 12 for clarification.

## Recommended Reading

**Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking,**  
Malcolm Gladwell

**The Greatest Minds and Ideas of all Time,**  
Will Durant

**Notes:**