

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.*

**Only those who
will risk going too
far can possibly
find out how far
one can go.**

—T.S. Eliot

Topic

Breaking Through Your Limitations

A wise phrase reads, “No one who has led a life of ease has a name worth remembering.” The lives of some of the most remarkable martial artists are woven with stories of great personal struggle. One of the qualities they all shared was relentless enthusiasm and optimism. We can all admire and learn from their unwavering positive attitudes. I don’t mean that we should adopt a “Pollyanna” attitude, and claim that the glass is half full when it is really empty. Instead, like these great martial artists, we could all benefit during our difficult moments, if we remember that, “this too shall pass.”

Control your reactions

Life always contains cycles of good times and bad. During either period, we only have control over one thing—our own behavior—specifically, our reaction. Realizing this truth, great martial artists choose to develop habits, which lead them in the directions they wish to go. Once they determine their path, they stay diligent in their disciplines and choices. Everyone has heard the phrase, “attitude is everything,” but nothing sums up this concept as succinctly as the Japanese phrase, “Kaizen.” More than just a word, Kaizen represents a philosophy of commitment. The person makes a resolution to never stop improving.

Use your practice as a tool for disciplining and developing your body, as well as a means to building a strong and powerful attitude.

Seize every opportunity

A person with a weak will might hear about constant never-ending improvement and immediately think, “Nothing will ever be good enough. No matter how hard I try, I will always have to improve.” This same idea would have the opposite effect on an optimistic and enthusiastic martial artist. He understands the philosophy as an opportunity to continuously grow and strive for his fullest potential. He doesn’t judge or get frustrated by errors. Optimists correct and improve their behavior, and perceive this as an opportunity. Pessimists see this same act, as proof that they are failing.

A plateau can be the next step in the journey

Relate this idea of Kaizen to the practice of martial arts. With a pessimistic attitude, the student reaches only a very basic level of development in his physical technique. When he hits a plateau, he becomes frustrated and rationalizes why he cannot get any better. In his mind, he has decided that this is as good as he will ever be, or the effort that is required to get better is just too much. The lazy minded pessimist will give up. On the other hand, a strong willed, optimist makes a new commitment to practice each time he reaches a plateau. He understands that with diligence, his technique will improve. A plateau should not be the end of the journey, but just a place to assess your practice and make necessary changes before moving on.

Empower your life

It is important to note that most people are mentally defeated long before they are physically defeated. By developing the will, the body and the mind, martial artists are able to withstand and conquer most challenges in their lives. If you sometimes fall into the category of a pessimist, make a commitment right now to replace this debilitating habit. Use your practice as a tool for disciplining and developing your body, as well as a means to building a strong and powerful attitude. With Kaizen, you can empower all aspects of your life.

**Do the thing we
fear, and death of
fear is certain.**

–Ralph Waldo Emerson

The difference between what we do and what we are capable of doing would suffice to solve most of the world's problem.

—Mahatma Gandhi

Determination breeds success

Pessimists might set a goal, but upon reaching the first obstacle, they simply give up. This process actually weakens the mind and causes more doubt. On the other hand, a strong willed positive person will accept the challenge, and push himself, determined to finish the project. Not only will he succeed, the process actually reinforces his strength of purpose and will. He enters an upward spiral, where his determination is breeding success, as well as more determination—more strength of will. A true martial artist possesses a strong body, but an even stronger mind.

Break through your limitations

What prevents most people from reaching their fullest potential? Why do most people snuggle up in their comfort zone and never push themselves to greater heights? The biggest reason is fear. When you determine to break through your limitations, remember the saying, “Everything that you want is on the other side of fear.” Do not get too comfortable in any part of your life. Compare your life to your workout. If everything is easy, and you are not really pushing yourself, then, you probably aren’t making much progress.

Don't be afraid of making mistakes; be afraid of not learning what valuable lesson they have to offer you.

—Kensho Furuya

A young man was driven to succeed in life. He was having lunch with an older man, who had been quite successful himself. He asked the old man, "Sir, what is life?"

Without hesitation, the old man responded, "Exciting and fun! You could probably ask fifty people and get fifty different answers, and they could all be right. But, if their answers didn't encompass fun and excitement, then what's the use of living?" Before the young man could respond, the old man added, "Rewarding, life is also rewarding."

The young man asked, "Sir, how did you become so successful?"

The old man paused a moment, and then said, "The first thing you have to ask yourself is, 'What defines success for you?' Do not believe that success for everyone looks the same." The old man added, "What do you want out of life? In the next few days, get a pencil and paper and write down what you want to accomplish in your life."

The young man thought about the power of the old man's words. "May I ask another question?" The old man nodded approval. "If you knew everything that you now know to be true, and could live your life over, what would you change?"

The old man smiled and quickly answered, "I would take more risks!"

Immediately the young man shot back, "I have heard the stories of your accomplishments sir, and I am certain you took a lot of risks in your life."

The old man looked him square in the eye and said, "Life is meant to be lived, and if your heart isn't in your throat at least once a week, then you are too comfortable. The only difference between a comfort zone and a grave is about six feet."

The two men finished their lunch and walked out of the restaurant. The old man put his arm around the young man and said, "In life, bite off more than you can chew, and then chew it."

Practice enables you to rise above praise or blame, and it frees you from attachment to this and that.

—Morihei Ueshiba

What would be the use of immortality to a person who cannot use well a half hour?

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Pilsung is a Korean term, which means, “indomitable spirit; to obtain certain victory and to never give up.” No difficulty in life can conquer a rock solid attitude based on Kaizen and Pilsung. Most of your limitations are self-created. So, only you have the power to break through them.

Activity

Taking the old man’s advice from the story, write a wish list of 15 to 25 experiences or accomplishments that you will have by the end of your life. Wisdom does not come with age, but with experiences and opportunities to learn. You might include examples such as traveling abroad, learning a foreign language, skydiving, changing careers or perhaps opening your own business. The list should contain any and all things that you really want to obtain or experience during your lifetime.

Do not be afraid to dream, but stay out of the realm of the absurd. Example of absurd: a 350-pound man wants to be a jockey in the Kentucky Derby. Have fun with your list!

After completing your list, keep a copy for future reference and make a copy for your instructor.

Not to have control over the senses is like sailing in a rudderless ship, bound to break to pieces on coming in contact with the very first rock.

—Mahatma Gandhi

Technique: Slowing Your Breath

- To practice this technique, get a clock or a watch and sit comfortably with your spine straight and your chin parallel to the ground. Sit on a cushion in a cross-legged position or in a straight back chair. Seiza (kneeling) or full lotus positions are also acceptable.
- Starting with your breath completely out, inhale through your nose slowly and deliberately, filling the bottom part of the lungs, causing the *seca-tunda*, (also know as the *dan tien* or *hara*) to expand. Continuing the breath, fill the upper part of the lungs, causing the chest to expand.
- After a full deep breath, hold to the count of three and slowly exhale from the top of the lungs down, releasing the breath through the nose and mouth.

Each complete inhalation and exhalation is counted as one breath. Count how many breaths you take in a five minute period. As the number of breaths decrease, you will find that your body and mind are more relaxed.

Practice this technique daily and track your progress for the month. Stress and tension in the body and mind demand greater oxygenation of the system. The more relaxed you are mentally and physically, the fewer breaths

Benefits:

Slowing your breath helps promote peacefulness, relieves stress and promotes longevity.

Key Points:

- Do not practice this technique right after eating.
- Keep the spine straight to facilitate deep breathing.
- Inhale and exhale as slowly as possible, without straining.
- Each breath should be constant with no breaks in the inhalation and exhalation. Do not hold or strain the breath. Through regular practice your breath will slow naturally.

**Master your breath
Master your life.**

There is more in us
than we know. If we
can be made to see it,
perhaps, for the rest
of our lives, we will
be unwilling to
settle for less.

—Kurt Hahn
Founder,
Outward Bound

Glossary

Kaizen

Japanese term for continuous improvement, regarding all levels of life, mental, physical, emotional and spiritual.

Karma

Eastern concept referring to the law of cause and effect—what you sow, you shall reap. What you do, think or say, good or bad, will be done or said to you. It is not returned in judgment or as a reward or punishment, but to help us learn and grow.

Recommended Reading

**Highly recommended*

- * *The Spirit of Aikido*—Kisshomaru Ueshiba
- Transforming the Mind*—Dalai Lama
- Zen Way to Martial Arts*—Taisen Deshimaru