

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.*

Instructors can impart a fraction of the teaching. It is through your own devoted practice that the mysteries of the art are brought to life.

—Morihei Ueshiba

Topic

Do What You Can Do—Perfectly

Most people would agree that one of the best ways to improve in martial arts is to practice hard. But what does practicing hard mean? By performing techniques with as much speed and power as possible, most people would believe they are practicing hard. The workout is vigorous, and they leave sweating, sore and smiling. Although I subscribe to the ‘sweating-sore-and-smiling theory’, practicing hard involves more than just throwing technique with power.

Perform every action with conscious intention

Practicing hard means to do everything that you are already able to do—perfectly. Maybe the word ‘perfectly,’ brings to mind the idea that no one is perfect. This might be true, but everyone can do some things perfectly...every time. Some skills and concepts are quite easy to learn, and having a specific fitness and flexibility level to perform them is not necessary. For example, everyone can stand in a perfect attention stance with heels together, back straight, eyes looking forward, and hands sharply by their side. Each time, when standing in attention stance, everyone can bow deeply and respectfully. Everyone can remember to wear a uniform to class, to line up straight without gaps in the line, to re-cock or chamber the leg after kicking, to make your fist tight when making a fist, to keep your knees bent when they are supposed to be bent, to keep your hands up when they are supposed to be up, and to keep breathing through class. The list of other moments of possible perfection can go on and on. Believing that these are little things and that they don’t really matter is not the correct attitude. Remember the saying, “If you take care of the little things, the big things will take care of themselves.”

Success lies in the details

As a beginner, this is one of the most important lessons to learn. The essence of practice, and often, the success of any technique lie in the subtle details. If you watch a beginner, an intermediate and an advanced student, and compare their basic techniques, undoubtedly, the differences between them will be in the subtleties, not in the gross movements. To discipline the mind, increase awareness, and develop a strong body and strong technique, you must realize that mindfulness of each detail is crucial.

So, if we are capable of performing specific learned skills perfectly, why don't we? Because our wandering mind is distracted by other thoughts and is too busy to notice mistakes. We must be aware of mistakes before we can improve them. So, how can a person become more aware? He must develop self-control and discipline of the mind, so that the mind stays focused. At the deepest level, the art absolutely demands total awareness and concentration, helping you to stay in the moment.

Try not to localize the mind anywhere, but let it fill up the whole body, let it flow throughout the totality of your being. When this happens, you use the hands where they are needed, you use the legs or the eyes where they are needed, and no time or energy will go to waste.

–Takuan (advice to a Samurai warrior)

**Nothing is a
little thing.
Everything
matters.**

Practice is actually an opportunity to be mindful, and a time to exercise accountability for one's action.

Seeking perfection without judgement

Begin anew with each class. As you enter, determine to put forth your most sincere effort in every action. Resist the desire to dwell on your mistakes or your accomplishments. The practice will move quickly. Your goal is to stay in the moment. Recognize your strengths, but correct your errors, no matter how small they might be. Move from moment to moment with the same watchfulness. But, here is the key: don't judge. Simply correct mistakes without feeling disappointment or frustration. Practice with this attitude, and your awareness and sensitivity will increase.

Be patient. Doing everything that you can do, perfectly, might be difficult in the beginning. It's a good idea to pick five or six techniques, and perform them with this conscious intention. Although the techniques might need physical improvement, which will come through countless repetitions, your effort can always be sincere. In the process, you will be developing muscle memory, making repeated actions a habit, and soon without thinking, you will just automatically perform the technique correctly. When these become habits, pick others to work on.

Transformation...not rationalization

By applying this principle everyday, without a doubt, we can raise every aspect of our lives to a higher level. What if each of us decided to discard old habits of making excuses and rationalizing less than perfect behavior? Instead, we consciously determine that in each and every moment, we will do everything that we are capable of doing as perfectly as possible. Just think—our work and relationships would

In the life of a sincere martial artist, a moment comes when he realizes that practice is actually an opportunity to be mindful, and a time to exercise accountability for his action. When this happens, martial arts practice surpasses the mere physical level of punching and kicking, throwing and grappling. It becomes a discipline of mind and body. It becomes an act in mindfulness...a lesson!

**Put your heart,
mind, intellect and
soul even to your
smallest acts.
This is the secret of
success.**

—Swami Sivanananda

There once were two friends, John and Robert, who wanted to study martial arts. They investigated schools in the area and after finding a good teacher, they began to study. They understood that they needed to be patient. They practiced regularly and very hard.

Early on, it was clear that John was more of a natural athlete, and took to the practice easier than Robert. For the first several years, John's power and speed would dominate. John would easily win when the two men sparred. At every testing event, John would stand out. Both had fallen in love with practice, and would continue for many years.

Resolved to taking a back seat to John's talent, Robert started to practice without comparison, and committed himself to the true study of his art and technique. He shed all desire of competition and simply studied the art for himself. At some point, John started to realize that Robert's technique and skills were improving greatly. Eventually Robert beat John in sparring.

One day after a very hard practice, the two men were changing, and John confessed that he was really trying hard, but no matter how hard he tried, he just couldn't beat Robert. He finally asked, "What are you doing differently? Your practice has changed dramatically."

**Anyone who trains
to see even the
smallest detail
of the technique or
art will progress
quickly.**

—Kensho Furuya

Robert said, “ I could never keep up with you. Growing up, you were always stronger, faster, and more athletic in everything we tried. So, I finally decided to stop competing with you, and started practicing for myself. Master even noticed my change in attitude. One day, he came to me and said, ‘Now that you are practicing for yourself, you should always do whatever you can do, perfectly, every time, and then build on that.’ I took his advice to heart.

If you think that this change in attitude has helped me develop in the dojo, you should see how it has helped me in the rest of my life! I just made partner at work, and my relationships have never been better. Who would ever guess that, out of all the things that we have learned in this dojo, something so simple as ‘always do what you can already do, but do it perfectly’ would become one of my most important lessons?”

**If a man wants to be of the greatest possible value
to his fellow-creatures, let him begin the long,
solitary task of perfecting himself.**

—Robertson Davies

Activity

Now that you have read the topic, “Do what you can do, perfectly,” write down 3 examples of how your life might be affected, if you implemented this principle. Look at your work or career, your martial arts practice, family and home, hobbies or activities. Take your time, and think about it; be specific in your answers. Write at least a paragraph for each example.

When you have completed the activity, keep a copy for future reference, and make a copy to turn in to your instructor.

I claim to be no more than an average man with less than average abilities. I have not the shadow of a doubt that any man or woman can achieve what I have, if he or she would make the same effort and cultivate the same hope and faith.

—Mahatma Gandhi

Technique: Watching Your Thoughts

**The watcher
cannot be the
watched.**

In the first lessons, you've practiced controlling the breath. Now, you will work on focusing the mind. The average person has thousands of thoughts passing through their mind everyday. We concentrate on some of these thoughts for extended periods of time, but most of them pass by practically unnoticed. The technique for this month is called "Watching your thoughts."

- Find a quiet place and sit comfortably. Keep your eyes closed, back straight, and chin parallel to the ground. Sit in seiza, full lotus, half lotus, crossed legs or whatever posture that is comfortable.
- Begin by taking six to twelve deep diaphragm breaths.
- On the final exhalation, with your body completely relaxed, quiet your mind. Wait for whatever thought enters. Do not dwell upon or become attached to the thought, just simply recognize it without judgments. Do not judge whether or not it is a good thought or bad thought. Witness the thought completely.
- When the thought passes, recognize the next thought and continue the process.
- If a thought lingers for more than a moment or two, you are probably too attached to it. By concentrating on the thought, you cause it to grow stronger. Let it go and continue the exercise.
- Remember that you are watching the thoughts—not trying to think about one thing in particular.

The Perfect Way is only difficult for those who pick and choose; do not like, do not dislike; all will then be clear. Make a hairbreadth difference, and Heaven and Earth are set apart.
—Seng Ts’an

Key Points:

Practice the technique daily for ten to fifteen minutes.

If you begin thinking about things you need to do, keep nearby a pad of paper and pen to jot down the thoughts. Then let them go. By writing them down, your “to do list” usually quiets down after the first few minutes.

When the mind is relaxed, memories pop up. But, this is not a remembering exercise. Practice long enough to get past just remembering, and on to the next step of watching the thoughts pass by.

Benefits:

This technique allows greater awareness leading to greater control over your mind. Gradually, you will begin to realize that you are more than your thoughts.

Glossary

Ego

That part of a person which causes him to view himself as separate and alone, resisting the oneness. Common thoughts and words linked to the ego are ‘I’, ‘you’, ‘we’, and ‘they’. This pseudo self and our identification with the ego keeps us from realizing our true nature. The ego causes us to view another person as an opponent and not a partner. The ego convinces us that we are not good enough, or that we don’t measure up, or that we are superior to or better than another.

Mushin

A Japanese term. The direct translation is “no-mind.” You experience mushin when you are reacting without thought, powered by spontaneous creativity that comes through you, but not from you.

Bruce Lee referred to the experience as when “it” happens. Ueshiba Sensei referred to the experience as when, “spirit flows through you.” All thought is absent, the ego is forgotten, and the individual has freedom from dualistic notions of good or bad, success or failure.

In a sparring situation, any thoughts can usually be traced back to concerns of victory and defeat. If you are trying to fake out or trick your partner or you are trying to judge or anticipate his movements, you are thinking...your mind is engaged. Because one could throw hundreds of techniques in a sparring situation, guessing or anticipating someone’s next move is difficult. The great masters have learned that the mind cannot keep up. By relaxing the mind as much as possible, the opportunity to respond to the next attack is greatly expanded. At the highest level, this calm mental state is called mushin or no-mind.

Archery, fencing, spear fighting, all the martial arts, tea ceremony, flower arranging...in all of these, correct breathing, correct balance, and correct stillness help to remake the individual. The basic aim is always the same: by tirelessly practicing a given skill, the student finally sheds the ego with its fears, worldly ambitions, and reliance on objective scrutiny—sheds it so completely that he becomes the instrument of a deeper power, from which mastery falls instinctively, without further effort on his part, like a ripe fruit.

—Karlfried Graf Dürckheim

Michael Jordan does not love basketball. Muhammed Ali does not love boxing. Barishnikov does not love the ballet, and Tiger Woods does not love golf. What they truly love, is their state of consciousness while performing these activities.

Reading is an opportunity
to discover and learn from
the greatest who were
and are among us.

Recommended Reading

- * *The Art of Peace* – Morihei Ueshiba
- Sand and Foam* – Kahil Gibran
- Essential Writings of Mahatma Gandhi* –
Mahatma Gandhi, Raghaven Iyer

* *Highly recommended*

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