

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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Sometimes we look so intently toward the pinnacle, that we stumble over the steps leading to it. Development begins just where you are.

Topic **Peaks, Valleys and Plateaus**

This Too Shall Pass

By now you know that practice is a process to be experienced, not a result to be achieved. It's a journey, not a destination. Sometimes though, it feels a lot like a roller coaster. You always seem to be hitting peaks and falling into valleys. Some days, you feel great about your practice. You feel strong, powerful, flexible, focused. Your cardio is good and your techniques are crisp and clean. You can't get enough of these days. Other times, you feel overwhelmed, sloppy, distracted. You keep looking up at the clock. You wonder if you're ever going to get any better at this. Sometimes these peaks and valleys last for awhile -- weeks, maybe months.

Obviously no one loses interest in practice during a peak. You're excited, you feel like you're improving, your life outside the dojo is somehow becoming less stressful, as if your martial arts practice is actually improving your life in general. You can't believe your good fortune in finding something this authentic, this much fun and this useful. But that's the nature of riding the peak. Sad to say, it doesn't last. All the discipline and focus in the world can't stop your practice from periodically dropping into a valley. The point is to be careful that these low points don't steal your practice from you. Don't lose sight of the fact that a valley is simply a lull between two peaks. These valleys don't reflect a sudden

breakdown in physical ability, but a shift in how you feel about practice. It's not your physical execution of technique that's slipping, you still know how to do all the things you were doing last week -- but your mood, your attitude has changed.

In practice as in life, many people's true potential goes unrealized for one reason: they do not follow through when things gets difficult. They forget that, given enough time, change is certain. Most people have a tendency to give up when the tables turn, instead of sticking it out until the tables turn again. They rationalize, "Oh, I've got no will power," but this is a self-perpetuating rationalization.

Will power, like a muscle, needs to be exercised. You need to take control. Undisciplined will is a lazy, spoiled child; every time a situation becomes difficult, it seeks the path of least resistance — to give up. Each time you give in to the spoiled child, each time you shrug and give up, you increase the chance that that same spoiled brat will show up when things get tough in the future. Each difficult period you ride out builds a stronger will, as you take charge of your life, and begin to become someone who follows through on commitments.

You're Not Really Stuck!

More dangerous to your practice than these alternating peaks and valleys is the plateau. A plateau is a significant period of time when you feel that you are not getting any better. It differs from a peak or valley in that these ups and downs continue even when you are on a plateau. You have

Success is not permanent. The same is true of failure.

In life, you will experience peaks and valleys. Take care not to turn the valleys into nests; transforming them into plateaus and perhaps even destinations.

good days and you have bad days but, over the longer run, you don't really seem to be getting any better or any worse. Your practice seems to have just flattened out. A plateau can last several months or even a year. You may test for a new rank, learn a new form, even be introduced to different parts of the curriculum. Regardless of these external benchmarks, you still feel like you're on a plateau and that you're not making any real progress.

Let's analyze this phenomenon. In the first nine months of your practice, you learned more over one short stretch than you ever will again. This is only logical. When you came into this practice, you knew nothing of this art. You were a complete novice and everything was new and exciting. There was, literally, *everything* to learn. In each class, you tried as hard as you could to perform the physical technique and to understand the philosophy behind it. You might go home a little confused, sore and tired, but you knew you were learning, you were getting it, and maybe, just maybe, someday you would be as good as some of the senior students. Even when this initial period seemed to slow down, you were still progressing remarkably quickly — learning terminology, technique, philosophy and principles. Your practice became something very special to you, and soon you couldn't imagine yourself not going to the dojo. You wondered many times how you ever made it through life without this special place, and quietly committed to yourself to practice forever.

Overcoming Frustration Through Understanding

Now, let's fast forward to the present day. You have practiced for at least one year, and if you haven't already hit a plateau, you are very close. You're expected to keep improving your basics, but the techniques you already know aren't really getting any better and the new techniques are even more difficult. It's not just your physical practice either. The *newness* of it all has worn off. You're discovering that Christmas morning is more exciting than Christmas afternoon, and why, three weeks later, you're not entirely sure what you wanted these presents for in the first place.

This is a *very* different phase of practice than your first year. If you expect to continue to learn as quickly as you did in the beginning, you *will* become frustrated.

Look at it this way. You began your practice at zero (not even knowing how to do the techniques) and hoped to someday achieve ten (mastery of the art). You may go from zero to four or five relatively quickly but, from five on up, all growth is incremental and is increasingly more difficult. In other words, learning how to perform the gross motor skills involved in the technique and forms of your art may only take a year or two (zero to five on the scale), but complete physical mastery and deep understanding of these same techniques (six to ten on the scale) can take twenty or thirty more years. You cannot hope to make progress at the same rate year after year. Eventually, when you have practiced martial arts for many years, well over 90% of your time will be spent on plateaus.

Wisdom is not
what you can
remember,
but what you
cannot forget.

Your future is dictated by your deepest desire. Take care that your deepest desire is always to realize the self.

One of the reasons that people become a jack of all trades and never master anything is because they get excited about the initial pace at which they learn a new subject. Whether it is mountain biking, rock climbing, golf or any new activity, there is a rapid learning curve in the beginning which invariably tapers off. Once they hit their first plateau, most people start looking for a new way to spend their time. They've got the basic moves, and they're not learning as quickly, so they rationalize that they've learned most of what there is to learn. The activity is no longer instantly, quantifiably exciting, and so it's on to a new activity, a new thrill, maybe a new style of martial arts. This may or may not be a conscious decision, but people, especially in the West, have short attention spans. As progress wanes, so does motivation.

Sometimes you feel stuck at a plateau for so long that it appears that you are as good as you are ever going to get. Take care not to build a nest, turning the plateau into a comfort zone. A plateau can feel frustrating and confining and, sometimes, all you want is to reach that next level. That's fine; you can find motivation in that attitude. It's when you become too comfortable, when you become resigned to where you are, that a plateau becomes a comfort zone. Double your efforts and keep practicing. Talk to your teacher. Everyone has been through this. This is the meaning of the saying, "Learn to love the practice and not just the progress."

Dedicate Your Life to Something!

It's ironic that we show such respect and honor to people that have dedicated their lives to their art, sport, discipline or craft. Deep down, we all admire perseverance. We recognize that no one gets as good as they can possibly be at anything without struggling, without pushing through their limitations and overcoming plateaus. When you're on a plateau for an extended period of time, you may actually feel that you are going backwards; you start to see your technique as declining. This is actually a very good sign, and here's why. Progress alternates continually in two ways:

1. An understanding of what you should be doing, and
2. The physical execution of technique.

When you see yourself as declining, what is really happening is that your awareness has been elevated, you understand what you should be doing in a much deeper way. The next step is to learn how to physically execute what you now understand.

**A student went to his teacher and said,
"My meditation is horrible! I feel so distracted,
or my legs ache, or I'm constantly falling asleep.
It's just horrible!"**

"It will pass," the teacher said matter-of-factly.

A week later, the student came back to his teacher.

"My meditation is wonderful! I feel so aware, so peaceful, so alive! It's just wonderful!"

"It will pass," the teacher replied matter-of-factly.

Tell me, I'll forget.

Show me, I may remember.

But involve me and I'll understand.

**This is why
Martial Arts
should always
be taught
face-to-face.**

According to aerodynamic laws, the bumblebee cannot fly. It's body weight is not the right proportion to its wingspan. Ignoring these laws, the bee flies anyway.

M. Sainte-Lague

An Advanced Technique is a Basic Technique that's been Mastered

This internal and external circular process of confusion, analysis, understanding, execution and progress will continue throughout your practice. The curriculum becomes confusing, then you suddenly realize the deeper subtlety of what you're really trying to learn, and now you must get your body to perform these "new" subtle details. For example, a white belt that has been practicing for just a couple of months has difficulty seeing the difference between the way they throw techniques and the way that senior students execute the same techniques. To make progress, they must first understand the differences. When they do, when they're hit with, "Oh, so *that's* what I should be doing," they can feel overwhelmed. However, with awareness, comes the beginning of new growth. Once you understand the difference between correct and incorrect details, you can adjust and progress. Now practice becomes exciting again because you realize there's so much new to learn. You feel like you're improving, and your life outside the dojo becomes less stressful, as if your martial arts practice is improving your life in general. You can't believe your good fortune in finding something this authentic, this much fun and this useful. You quietly commit to yourself to practice forever.

Until months later, when you feel like you're never going to get any better. You're frustrated. And then you suddenly realize that there's yet another level to that same technique. "Oh," you say, "Now I get it!"

And here we go again...

Sam began his martial arts practice at the age of eight. By the time he was fifteen he was fighting in full contact tournaments. Now at 19, he held a 2nd degree black belt.

One day Sam's dad peeked into the garage and saw Sam pounding furiously on the heavy bag. While trying to get Sam's attention, he noticed blood all over the floor. Sam had been punching the bag for over an hour without gloves. The canvas bag had ripped his knuckles to shreds. After stopping Sam from hitting the bag, he calmed him down and asked what he was so upset about. Sam told his dad that he had been beaten in a sparring match earlier that night. It wasn't the first time that Sam had lost a match, but the student who had beaten him was someone that had not practiced nearly as long and, in fact, was someone who Sam had introduced to martial arts. He had helped this student learn his basics. After listening to Sam, his dad said, "Well, maybe you are as good as you are going to get. I mean, you have come a long way and this is the first guy that you taught basics to that beat you, but you know it won't be the last." Then his dad added, "There is a story that I want to share with you. There was a little boy that wanted was to play professional baseball. That's all he ever wanted to do. He played every single day, for years. He played on school teams, in rec leagues, on travel teams — this boy was real good, and he loved playing ball, but you know what? He never made it to the pro leagues. Then, there was this other kid that never even picked up a baseball until he was seventeen. I mean, he

**Technical skill
is mastery of
complexity.**

**Creativity is
mastery of
simplicity.**

**Enlightenment is
mastery of self.**

**Before the world
finds a place for
you, find a place
for yourself
in the world.**

liked playing ball, but it was just something fun to do. Three years after he started, he was playing professional baseball. Sam, you just never know. You've come a long way in martial arts, but maybe you're as good as you're going to get."

Sam was at a plateau and he had a decision to make. Would he continue to practice or was he done? He gave it some thought and decided that whether or not he ever got any better, he was going to keep practicing.

Several years later, Sam was sitting down with his instructor for a cup of coffee, and shared the story. After listening closely, his instructor said, "Your dad was right. We all hit plateaus, and the body does have limitations. If martial arts were merely a physical activity, then these limitations would determine our ability to advance. Fortunately, martial arts is also a mental discipline. It's not a coincidence that so many great masters were at their peak well into their 60's, 70's, even 80's. You need to spend more time developing your concentration, your breathing sensitivity and awareness. Practice with deep attention to details, be mindful always, and you will continue to improve beyond any mere physical limitation."

Reminders

Peaks, Valley, and Plateaus

Plateaus are normal and natural and experienced by everyone. Plateaus are really a great means of insight into the way that you are thinking about practice. Are you thinking that you should be better by now? Are you thinking that it's hopeless, that you will never get any better? Maybe you think that everyone else is getting it but you.

When you are aware of this negative self-talk and internal dialog, you can begin to put a stop to it. The most important thing is not to become too attached to these thoughts, believing them to be true. They are just thoughts.

To help rise above negative thoughts, go back and practice the techniques of watching your thoughts. It is in Lesson Five of Module One. It will help you to remember that you are not your thoughts.

A man who strikes first is usually angry or scared.

As Martial Artists, we should strive to avoid both.

An archer cannot hit the bulls eye if he doesn't know where the target is.

Activity

Back to Basics

The activity this month is to be a beginner again. For the next month, if appropriate, attend only the beginner classes. Watch and work out with the beginners. This will help you to see how far you have come, as well as help you to sharpen your basics. You will also appreciate the details that are being taught in these classes. Go into this activity open-minded and resist feeling that you already know the curriculum. Watch the beginners carefully, not judging technique, but their excitement at learning. If it is not possible to only attend beginner class, at least attend one a week for a month. Take notes on everything that you observe and highlight what you feel are the most important. At the end of the month write a paper on your observations, feelings, and overall experience. People always say that hindsight is twenty twenty. This month you have an opportunity to look back and see what you might have missed.

**If we don't change our direction,
we're likely to end up where we're headed.**

Recommended Reading

**The Father of Judo:
A biography of Jigoro Kano**
Brian N. Watson

**Beyond the Known:
The Ultimate Goal of the Martial Arts**
Tri Thong Dang

Ultimate Martial Arts Encyclopedia
John R. Little and Curtis F. Wong

All things good
to know are
difficult to learn.
Martial arts is
no different.

Proverb

Notes: