

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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Relaxation
frees the heart
Courage
opens the heart
Compassion
fills the heart

Topic Conscious Relaxation

Relax, Focus, Relax

Relaxation is a crucial component of practice. No matter what techniques we're practicing, no matter what drills we're performing, relaxation is the beginning of all technique. Relax the breath, relax the body, relax the mind. It is, in fact, the underlying mental state with which we must approach our practice at all times. Look at it this way. Practicing forms, basics, one-steps; sparring a bag, sparring with a partner — no matter the activity, we need to be *fully present* to be able to execute the art correctly. Technique can only improve, understanding can only grow, when we are utterly mindful of what we are doing in each moment. Otherwise, repetition is not a learning experience, it's just repetitive. And to be fully present in the moment, we need to *relax*.

Yes, we all understand the importance of being able to perform technique with power, with incredible explosiveness. But you have to appreciate the interrelationship between explosive speed, power and relaxation. To perform any strike, kick or lock with power, you must go from 0% tension to 100% tension just before the moment of focus, the moment of contact. You have to maintain that 100% focused tension as you drive 2-6 inches through your target, and then go back to 0% tension as you withdraw the strike. We also understand that greater speed helps to create greater force. But to really generate speed, the body has to be relaxed. You cannot throw a punch or a kick quickly if your body is tense. An instructor can tell you to pivot, rotate, or fix your stance, put your hand here, re-cock your leg. But how do you teach

people to relax? It's a feeling. It's a state of body and a state of mind. Most students come in and they swear that they *are* relaxed. But, they have at least 30% tension in their arms and their legs and their torsos. They just don't understand the concept; they don't know what 100% relaxation feels like.

If you have 30% tension in your body, then even if you throw your technique *perfectly*, the best you can do is to go from 30% tension to 100% tension. The maximum power you can achieve comes from about 70% focus. You need to be completely relaxed until the moment of focus, then drive through with total focus, and relax again for the next strike. This is part of the rationale behind Bruce Lee's famous "1 inch punch." Relax, focus, relax.

To relax the body, you must relax the mind

Most of our tension comes from mental stress and anxiety that we hold in our bodies. You're not going to relax your body as long as your mind is active, worrying, anticipating, and judging. We see this all the time — when a student is studying, when they're really trying to figure out a new concept, when their mind is very focused on what they are trying to learn, they tense their muscles, their posture becomes terrible, and you can see the stress in their body. There's a clear mind-body connection. So, to be completely relaxed, you not only must discipline the body, you must have discipline of the mind.

How do we gain discipline over the mind? At this point, I'm sure you all know the answer to that question. You simply must meditate. When you still your mind and slow your breath, the body starts to relax. You have to practice your diaphragmatic breathing, because breathing deeply and slowly from the *secca tunda* will lead to relaxed breathing.

To win all of your battles is not the goal, to remain peaceful during your battles is the goal.

Man's desires are like the small metal coins that he carries around in his pocket. The more he has, the more they weigh him down.

This is an absolute: for the body to be relaxed, the mind must be relaxed. When the mind is tense, the body is tense.

So what causes the mind to be tense? Anxious thoughts. Sensory stimulation combines with memory to create thoughts that, in turn, create anticipation, imagination and anxiety about what happened or didn't happen or might happen or won't happen. You need to remain here, in the present, and to do that you need the ability to take control of your thoughts. If you have discipline over your mind, you can think about whatever you want for as long as you want. You can focus for as long a period as you desire. If you have control over your mind, you have the ability to experience the senses or to unplug them. When *you* have control, you can engage in pleasant memory, or fantasy, or imagination when *you* want to, and still be focused here *in the moment*. This is why I insist that meditation is the foundation of martial arts — because there is such an inseparable link between the mind and the body.

How far you go in life depends on your being tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the striving and tolerant of the weak and strong. Because someday in life you will have been all of these.

George Washington Carver

Find Stillness Within Motion

Say you're practicing with another student — you're sparring with them and you miss a block. You get hit. Your natural reaction is to tense up. The body has been injured, or at least assaulted. Maybe a little fear kicks in, and your mind starts jumping around — "Darn it, I missed that one. Geez, that was fast. What's he going to throw next? Quick, hit him." As you start to think and you start to anticipate, your body and mind become less and less relaxed. If you recognize that you've lost focus, you then start to get angry at yourself. More distracting thoughts. Each thought infuses the body with a little more tension, a little more stress. More tension equals less speed and you become a little slower and you make another error and soon, there's no way you can function at your skill level. You're just throwing junk, trying not to get hit.

Stilling the mind, relaxing the body, calming the spirit — this is not just for silent moments sitting quietly in a darkened room or beside a peaceful river. Yes, this is where we learn to meditate, where conditions are optimal for stillness. But, unless you plan to live in solitude, you need to bring these principles into your life in general. You need to be able to relax and remain centered during the most energetic moments in your practice, the most frenzied moments of your day-to-day life. When the punches and the kicks are coming at you in full-out sparring, the degree of relaxation and stillness you can achieve in your mind and in your body will determine how quickly, how powerfully and how efficiently you will be able to perform. When the phone is ringing off the hook, and the client is annoyed, and the boss wants you at a meeting in 30 minutes and they're calling from school because your kid scraped her leg in the playground — your effectiveness, success and ultimately the very quality of your entire life is determined by the degree of relaxation and stillness you can achieve in your mind and in your body.

**A good day
is not a day
without chaos,
but rather a
day in which
we remain
calm within the
chaos.**

The only true
voyage of
discovery is not
to go to new
places, but to
have other eyes.

Marcel Proust

Take control of your mind, take control of your life

Most of us are careful about what we put into our bodies. We understand that tobacco and alcohol can impair our health. While we may not always eat correctly, we're generally aware of what constitutes a healthy or unhealthy diet. We know we're supposed to get enough sleep, stretch and work out, etc. We're far less concerned or aware of the importance of what we put into our minds. But this is so important. If we want our minds to function at their best and stay relaxed, then we have to be very careful of how we treat our minds, and what we put in there.

Most of us watch way too much television. And the nature of television in recent years is to create loud, shocking statements and images. What happens is that 3-4 hours a day of bright, loud, dazzling words and images fills our minds with anxiety and anticipation and fantasy, and our bodies with stress and tension. To consciously relax, we must practice clearing our minds of all this noise. It would be helpful to this process if there weren't quite so much noise to contend with. Take control of what goes into your mind.

Most of us have jobs that are stressful, full of deadlines and last minute emergencies, surprises from the boss or the client. If martial arts is more than just punching and kicking, more than just winning contests — then it must be applicable off the mats, outside the dojo as well. What does it mean that we call this the *practice* of martial arts? It means that when you practice techniques in the dojo, you are learning so much more than how to throw a punch correctly. You're learning how to focus, how to relax, how to coordinate mind and body. You're learning how to remain calm under stress. You're learning how to work hard with

all your concentration, yet not so hard as to hurt yourself. You're learning to work with a partner and you're becoming sensitive to motion and energy, both within yourself and in the world around you.

These are all valuable skills outside the dojo as well, in our everyday life. Don't imagine that your practice begins and ends at edge of the mat. When you remain calm in a crisis at work and patiently solve the problem, you are practicing martial arts. When you have a difference of opinion with your teenager (or with your parents) and you insist on maintaining the energy of conversation and not that of confrontation, you are practicing martial arts. When you can't sleep at 3:00 a.m. because of all the hectic activity in your life, and you patiently watch the breath and calm your mind, you are discovering what it means to be a martial artist, in ways far more meaningful than merely winning a punching and kicking contest.

Just sleeping and taking vacations is not enough

Most people believe that they are relaxed when they sleep. This may be as relaxed as they get, but I would argue that, for many people, sleep is not as restful as they imagine. Dreaming is supposed to be restorative, but we all know that what we see and hear and think during the day affects our dreams at night. Dreaming involves a subconscious recognition of the thoughts that are already at play in your mind. Regardless of the state of consciousness, it's still your mind. Do you meditate before sleep? Do you still your mind for 15-20 minutes before you let the dreams begin unfolding?

So sleep isn't necessarily complete rest. Now, you might say, "Well, when I go on vacation, I can really relax — I'm getting away from the stress of my life." Well, there are

**Tension is trying
to become
who you think
you should be.
Relaxation is
who you are.**

**Chinese
Proverb**

What primarily separates you from your true self is restlessness. To be still is to tune in to the infinite.

two problems with this. First, at best it's a temporary fix, since you can't live on vacation. Secondly, have you ever gone somewhere that you really planned and mapped out — you were going to be with the people you loved and it was going to be wonderful, and then you got there and it just was a mess? You know, the weather was bad, the food was bad, you argued with your loved ones, it just didn't work out. We put a lot of energy into our getaways, we have a lot of emotional investment in everything being perfect and, sometimes, stuff just happens. It's no one's fault, but things don't work out. And then the vacation becomes more stressful than day-to-day life. How many times have you heard people say "Man, I need a vacation to recuperate from my vacation." So physically getting away isn't necessarily a means of relaxation either.

We need to be able to achieve a calm peaceful state on a day-to-day basis, here in the present, in order to function at complete capacity. On the mats or off. We need to truly be able to relax our body and relax our mind at a moments notice. It's your body; it's your mind. You should have the skills to do that. Take control of your breath; the state of the breath reflects the state of the mind. Take control of your mind; the state of the mind reflects the state of the body.

Martial arts is based on sensitivity and awareness. It is truly a path that encompasses your entire life.

When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves.

Viktor E. Frankl

Once, there was a great martial artist that was challenged by another school. Everyone recognized him as one of the greatest masters alive, but his reputation was that of a wise teacher, not that of a fighter. He was initially inclined to refuse the challenge, but the stakes were such that whoever won would be able to affect the perception of martial arts dramatically. The outcome of this challenge could literally change the way a whole generation of young people viewed the art. And so this master decided that he would accept the challenge and participate in the contest.

The day came when the fight was to take place and the whole town shut down and all the people gathered around a raised platform in the main square. The young man from the other school stepped up. He was in his mid 20's, six feet tall, rippling muscles. He was strong and fast, very powerful; he had been training his whole life. He was a great fighter, a great technician. And the old master, in his mid-seventies, walked up slowly and deliberately, leaning on his cane. His students had to help him up onto the platform, and the contrast was ridiculous. He looked like a little old man facing a professional fighter. If it were anyone else, the match would have been called off — it just didn't make any sense. But such was the respect that the master commanded, that no one dared suggest that he might have been mistaken in accepting this challenge.

The master set down his cane, took a couple breaths, the two men bowed to one another and the fight began. The

**Great
tranquility of
heart is his
who cares for
neither praise
or blame.
Thomas a
Kempis**

**Think and act
from inner
trust and
spontaneity
rather than
from fears
based on past
experiences.**

young man moved around a little bit, thinking, “why is he just standing there?” The master stood relaxed, hands at his side, head bent, seemingly resigned. Everyone in the crowd thought, “He’s gonna get killed. He’s not even taking a stance. He’s so relaxed.”

The young man kept dancing around the ring, and the old man never moved.

“Oh well,” the young man thought, “I have to get this over with. I have to just hit him.”

So he moved in quickly and threw a very powerful punch, and the old man suddenly moved so fast that the crowd could barely register the movement. Before the young man’s punch landed, before he could even begin the next part of his combination, the old master leaped up, hit the young man once to the head, once to the body and once to the groin, then stepped away and bent to retrieve his cane as the young fighter crumpled to the ground. The master walked to the edge of the stage and was helped down before walking away slowly and deliberately.

Later, when asked by his senior students how he was able to defeat the young fighter, he responded, “That young man was very busy. He was busy considering the fight with an old man in the ring, and was busy with his movement and his technique. His mind was very restless and his body was tense. I just stayed relaxed, I was just waiting. A moment would come. The point is, you must be completely relaxed — body and mind. Only then can you achieve maximum power and speed in an instant. Only then can you fully take advantage of the moment when it arises.”

Activity

Conscious Relaxation

This month, as you practice, work on being completely relaxed before and after each technique, between each rep or combination. Whether you are practicing basics, forms, partner work, bag work, no matter the activity or drill, work on being relaxed all month. We have seen that relaxation is more than just a physical concept, it is mental as well. As you relax, you will notice both your speed and power increasing.

Begin the activity this month by rating your level of relaxation in day to day life. On a scale of 1-10 — one being frustrated, anxious, upset, tense and 10 being relaxed, calm, peaceful — where would you rate yourself on average? Naturally, we all oscillate up and down the scale, having good days and bad but, generally speaking, where would you rate yourself? Be as honest as possible, and try to stay away from the “quick 7.” A “quick 7” describes the person who doesn’t consider the question and gives a quick answer. Not wanting to be too optimistic or too pessimistic, they say, “7”.

After you have rated yourself, ask someone that knows you well, a friend or a loved one, how they would rate you using the same criteria and scale. Take both numbers into consideration as you begin the month. Commit to become more relaxed, calm, and peaceful. Map out a strategy that you will use this month to experience greater states of

**The man who
does things
makes many
mistakes, but
he never makes
the biggest
mistake of all
— doing nothing.**

**Benjamin
Franklin**

**Happiness is
the harvest of
a quiet mind.**

calmness and happiness. Your plan may include meditation, breathing techniques, affirmations such as “I am calm, peaceful, relaxed, and centered,” harder workouts, better time management. You can choose as many techniques as you would like, but this month your goal is to experience and maintain physical and mental relaxation.

At the beginning of the last week of the month reassess yourself, using the same criteria and scale and then write a paragraph to a page on your discoveries. Include the techniques you used, as well as your beginning and ending score, and any other significant details.

The sword has to be more than a simple weapon; it has to be an answer to life’s questions. And to draw the sword correctly, you must be relaxed.

Reminders

Conscious Relaxation

In the West, we view ourselves in duality; the mind and the body. This division is not easily understood in the East, where the attitude toward mental and physical health is much more holistic. With this outlook, mind and body are integrated parts of the same whole. Consequently, if body and mind are intimately connected, the state of one always affects the state of the other, i.e., it is impossible to be physically relaxed while mentally tense. Mental tension manifests as stress, anxiety, anger, etc., all of which then show up in the body.

Many people claim that they are more productive, creative, and work better under pressure. Deadlines may often keep us on track and remain focused, but don't confuse productivity and creativity with cramming the night before. Procrastination will never lead to your best work.

It is when you relax enough to let the energy come *through* you but not *from* you that the magic happens, and to get out of the way you simply must be relaxed and open. But don't confuse relaxation with laziness. And don't associate a high state of mental activity with anxiety. You need to develop greater sensitivity between body and mind.

This month, work hard at being relaxed as you go about your life and practice. By now you should be good at practicing the tension and relaxation exercises from lesson 3 in module 1. If this exercise is not one you use regularly, review it and use it this month. As you concentrate deeply and tense each individual part of the body, your mind should be so fully engaged in the technique that no other thoughts can interrupt. At the completion of the technique, you should be able to experience a deep state of mental and physical relaxation. Carrying this into your day to day life, stay calmly active and actively calm.

You should be
like a flower,
even when
crushed giving
fragrance.

Recommended Reading

Mans Search for Meaning

Viktor E. Frankl

**Benjamin Franklin's the Art of Virtue:
His formula for Successful Living**

Benjamin Franklin