

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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You may begin the study of martial arts and you may quit the study of martial arts, but you can never complete the study of martial arts.

Topic

The Never-Ending Path of Martial Arts

Our culture puts a great deal of emphasis on accomplishment. From a very young age, we are conditioned to set goals and see them through. It begins in school, from kindergarten on up. We're taught to attain goals, then we're tested and given another goal. This pattern continues all through our education, and follows us into our careers and professions. Some of the most successful business people around are champions at setting goals and completing them. Picking a direction and seeing it through to a successful end. Being able to reach the finish line thus becomes one of the key qualities of a successful person.

While the ability to follow through and stay the course is admirable, there is a problem with trying to relate this attitude toward our practice of martial arts. In most activities, once you have completed something, the natural question is "What's next?" What's the next accomplishment? But martial arts is not something that you're trying to complete. There is no finish line; you're never really done. It's not something that you do for a little while. It's not something you do until you get it right and then move on. Practice is a path from which there is no turning back! Becoming a martial artist is a way of life. As you begin to understand the benefits of practice, it becomes an integral part of your life. Martial arts is not just another activity, not just a form of exercise

or a sport or a game. Real martial arts is a philosophy, a discipline and a lifestyle. It provides direction and strength. It becomes a code that you choose to live by, and it helps your life to have meaning and purpose. A martial artist is a special kind of person; not better than everyone else, but focused, disciplined and with more responsibilities. As a martial artist, you are expected to use your physical abilities responsibly, but you're also expected to use the art to make choices that will positively impact everyone you meet, choices that enhance your life rather than hinder it. This leads to better relationships at home and at work, better financial discipline, a more well-rounded and successful life. As a martial artist, you learn to live with discipline of mind, body and spirit.

What's In You?

It's common these days to hear people talk about what they're "into." You'll hear, "I'm *into* running, or weight-lifting," or "She's *into* golf," in much the same way as you'll hear "He's *into* martial arts." Please remember, this practice is called martial **arts** for a reason. This is an art. Not a game, not a competition, not a race to some finish line. In much the same way as Picasso didn't view each painting as his last one, the final product, but just another expression of his ongoing art, so is our practice ultimately measured only as an expression of our ongoing journey. You don't get *into* martial arts, martial arts gets into you. Miles Davis wasn't *into* jazz; jazz was inside him, and he expressed it throughout his life. After all, the art doesn't need to change -- we do.

Never confuse modern exercise fads with real martial arts. One gets your body in shape while the other helps you to discover your true self.

It is not enough to practice martial arts but to really learn it you must study the art.

You'll often hear martial arts students remark that they are "just about finished" at their school. Once they get their black belt, they will move on to other activities. It seems they've missed the point. It doesn't matter how physically accomplished you are, or how many forms you know. It doesn't matter how well you fight or how many trophies you've have won or even what rank you've attained. Martial arts is more than just setting goals and completing them. A true martial artist recognizes that mastery — on any level — is not the goal. You never *finish* doing the form; you just learn to perform all the moves with greater power and grace so *that you can continue doing them*. You have never meditated enough, and you never graduate! There is no end to practice and there is no "off-season." The ability to practice *is* the end. If that seems disappointing, then you're probably not yet a martial artist. This never-ending path of self-discovery *is* the art; the ongoing creative expression of our spirit through physical and mental discipline *is* martial arts. It's what makes the whole endeavor exciting. Practice is like food or drink, like sleep, love, exercise or even prayer. Do you think that once you've loved all that is necessary, you're done? That, once you've worked out enough, you're done, you're healthy enough for this lifetime? That, after the perfect meal, you're finished, you're done eating? Do you think, "OK, I know how to pray, I've done it for a few years, I'm into other stuff now!"

Measuring Your Progress

So how do you maintain such a high level of training and stay so passionate about the art? It can't be based on mere accomplishment. Progress must be measured by more than just rank or how well you perform in class. You need to take an honest look at yourself. Are you healthier and stronger, do you have less stress and feel more confident to make the hard decisions in your life?

Real martial arts changes you, changes the way you deal with all aspects of your life. The hours spent in grueling classes do more than teach you how to fight — they strengthen your will. Living through the bumps and bruises of practice helps teach you that you will live through the bumps and bruises of life. You learn that you don't have to quit something just because it is hard. You learn that, with patience, perseverance and hard work, anything is possible. The hours in meditation teach you to stay calm and centered in the drama of your day-to-day life. Finally, there is an overwhelming conviction that stems from accomplishing something that you never thought you could, that allows you to say "I can." "I can do anything that I set my mind to do." No, you're not a superhero, you can't leap tall buildings in a single bound, nor are you an emotionless drone that is steeled against the world and unaffected by problems. Martial artists are still just people; Moms and dads, employees and employers, sons and daughters and neighbors and students. The difference is that martial artists know how to focus their energy, and they possess a calm strength that comes from knowing that anything is possible with sufficient strength of will.

Since we all have different backgrounds and different levels of fitness; since some of us are athletic and others uncoordinated and some are flexible while most are stiff; since some concentrate intensely while others minds drift; since some practice hard and come regular, while others struggle with attendance; since there are so many differences between us — it is ridiculous to compare your self to anyone else, and to do so will only enhance your ego or jeopardize your practice.

It is impossible to be a martial artist only on the mats. So, if you are thinking of your practice only as techniques you perform, you are just training to be a fighter, and not yet a martial artist.

If you still view Martial Arts as just one option among the many things that you do, then you are not yet a martial artist

It is this process of practice that, for generations, has transformed ordinary people into extraordinary people. This is not a new phenomena. It can be traced back over a thousand years, through many cultures, to Hunan province in China. A monastery of lackadaisical and ordinary monks embraced this discipline of mind and body and were transformed into the legendary Shaolin monks. They practiced this discipline privately, secretly for many years and, as word of their abilities spread, so too did the art. It slowly made its way throughout China, to Okinawa, Korea and Japan. Along the way, many great masters influenced the art and contributed much to it's continuing development.

Martial arts practice has taken on many faces as it has circled the globe. Many cultures have embraced the art, expanding, adapting or specializing in specific aspects of practice. At the same time, the art has been widely misunderstood and perceived in a variety of ways. Today, kid's programs aimed at 3-5 year olds; exercise fads and cardio-aerobics to get in shape; ultimate fighting competitions; Hollywood entertainment — all of these activities have mistakenly come to be accepted as legitimate forms of martial art. In truth, real martial arts has always been the same, and its universal truths remain intact. This art has a history; it has meaning and depth. It's more than flashy MTV choreography and it's more than special forces commando training and it's certainly more than ninja night sleepover parties for the kids. The

art was not designed as an amusing and entertaining little activity, it was designed as a spiritual path, as a way of life.

Life is not made up of winners and losers. There are only trained people and untrained people. Regardless of your style or discipline, if you practice consistently and hard, if you train yourself with the proper motivation, and focus on the original intent of the art, you too can transform yourself and your life through martial arts.

**You should
carry practice
with you
everywhere.**

Mr. Garner was leaving class one night after an incredibly hard workout. It was a class that he never could have even imagined himself doing when he joined the school two years ago. Today he was in great shape and really enjoyed practice.

The master approached him and asked, "Mr. Garner, are you reading the books that I suggested to you? Mr. Garner responded, "Yes sir, but they do bring up some questions." The master looked at the clock and said, "This is the last class of the night, do you have time to talk?" Mr. Garner responded immediately, "Yes sir, Thank you."

The two men entered the small office and sat down. The master spoke first, "What are your questions?"

Mr. Garner paused and took a breath and appeared to be weighing his words very carefully. He was a sincere man who never wanted to be misunderstood. The master recognized

A martial artist does not place emphasis on belts, ranks and titles, but rather on completely understanding and internalizing his or her art.

the hesitation and said, "Mr. Garner, you are a good student, please speak freely."

Mr. Garner began, "Well sir, the books that you have recommended to me over the years have given me a lot of insight to my practice. I have always been a active person, of course never in as good of shape as I am now, but I have been involved with clubs and gyms for years. I must admit that when I started practicing martial arts, I saw it as just another gym; a place to get in shape, meet people and learn some skills. I honestly never could have imagined the profound impact that it has given my life. To be very honest sir; it is kind of scary."

The master listened intently and encouraged Mr. Garner to continue. "At first I felt a little put off by the discipline and rituals and formal environment. As I began to understand, I found myself embracing it. Knowing that people all over the world have dedicated their entire life to the practice and study of martial arts means quite a bit. This is obviously not an exercise program or fad that is here today and gone tomorrow. This is a philosophy that helps discipline the mind and body. If practiced sincerely, it will encompass your whole life."

Mr. Garner was becoming emotional as he spoke and he stood up as he continued to speak. "I came in here to get in shape, lose some weight and have fun. I had no idea." He lowered his head and whispered, "I feel ashamed that I did not see how sacred practice is and I question if I am worthy of such a practice."

Smiling the master said, "Mr. Garner, you are starting to understand martial arts. You are not to be blamed for anything. As a beginner you only knew what you saw on TV or at the movies. Now, after studying martial arts, and attending class, you can see why it has been around for thousands of years and how powerful it is. Real martial arts was designed to touch you on all levels — mentally, physically, emotionally, spiritually. I'm pleased to see that your practice is doing just that."

If you think that you are a martial artist, you probably don't have a deep enough understanding of what martial arts is. For to really understand it will give you a lump in your throat and butterflies in your stomach. A real martial artist is in such awe of his art that he feels humbled by it.

The strengthening of the will is not a pretty sight and often misunderstood.

Activity

How Has Martial Arts Changed You?

The activity this month is to list the five most important ideas, principles or concepts that you have been taught or exposed to, because of your practice in martial arts. Take into considerations those aspects of martial arts that have had the greatest effect on your life outside the dojo.

Take your time and think carefully. List the lessons that you have learned and why you chose them. It doesn't matter if you fully grasp the concept or not. Detail if you learned it in a class, reading a book, from *Lessons in Mindfulness*, from practicing with a partner, after a meditation, etc. Explain the ways you are incorporating it into your life.

Some examples:

- Spending time vs wasting time
- Affirmations
- Partners not opponents
- Our deeds determine us
- Seven ways to become a martial artist
- Best block is don't be there
- Designing your life
- Four things you can do with energy
- Primary aim

Reminders

Mastering Technique – By the Numbers!

Reflecting on Lesson #5 – Do What You Can Do Perfectly, and this Lesson on the never-ending path of martial arts, it becomes clear that practice is a process of constant, never ending improvement.

Frequently, beginner and intermediate students are frustrated with their progress, even though patience has been emphasized as one of the most important qualities that a martial artist needs to develop.

There is an exercise that helps put into perspective what is meant by the statement that it “takes time to be good at this.” Any technique from any style will work for this. It could be a punch, block, throw, lock, kick, or any basic technique, but for this example let’s use a roundhouse kick, back leg.

Let’s assume that you have practiced for five years and practice three times a week. In each class you have thrown fifty roundhouse kicks with the back leg. (Obviously not all schools throw fifty back leg kicks in each class, but many throw much more!) Let’s assume that it takes one second for each kick. (Most will throw it faster, but to make the math easy, one second.)

One second per kick times 50 kicks a class, times 3 classes a week, times 52 weeks in a year, times five years of practice makes a whopping 39,000 seconds!

This equals 650 minutes, or 10.8 hours.

**The years know
things that the
days and weeks
will never know**

An advanced technique is a basic technique that has been mastered

Think of it this way; after five years of practice, with better than average attendance you have only practiced your roundhouse kick, back leg for less than eleven hours!

In China it is believed that to master a technique you must throw it a million times. Using this formula, remember that after five years, you have 961,000 more to go!! At this rate, you will master the roundhouse kick back leg in another 123 years!

Now it is easier to understand the saying,
"Martial arts take a lifetime, maybe a little more."

P.S. It is a good idea to practice at home, and also to remember that, while it might take a million reps to master a technique, it doesn't take that long to reap the benefits!!

Try this using your own numbers and see how long you have practiced.

Recommended Reading

**Striking Thoughts - Bruce Lee's Wisdom
for Daily Living.**

Bruce Lee

**The Warrior Path- Wisdom from
Contemporary Martial Arts Masters.**

James Sidney

Notes: