

How Meditation and Yoga Can Help with Karate Practice

**“Knowing others is intelligence; knowing yourself is true wisdom.
Mastering others is strength; mastering yourself is true power.”**

— Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching

Meditation and yoga are fundamental and necessary tools for karate. Karate requires a great deal of patience and finesse because the line between the aggression and intensity needed to win and destructive anger is often razor thin. There are specific, technical, and proficient skill sets to be an effective karate practitioner. There is a range of physical and mental components that contribute to a successful performance. Behaviours that are conducive to training in karate are competitive by nature and have a strong achievement drive. Karate students can benefit tremendously from a meditation and yoga practice. Aggression, although useful, does not support the focus necessary to win in competitive situations.

Yoga means union or connection. Anyone who has stepped into a yoga studio understands that the practice of yoga is a lot more than just exercises. But with so much information about yoga as a spiritual discipline and way of life, the whole thing can get pretty confusing. Yoga is a series of movements put together to encourage balance, coordination, flexibility and strength within your body. Yoga is a total body workout. It strengthens the body, improves circulation, and helps with flexibility. Initially, the discipline of yoga, the physical aspects of yoga was developed to help one meditate. Yoga prepares the body, and particularly the nervous system, for stillness, creating the necessary physical strength and stamina that allows the mind to remain calm and the body to be able to sit for long periods of time while meditating, while meditation helps the practitioner get through the yoga practice. Those who meditate report a greater sense of inner peace and wellbeing. They also report higher levels of self-esteem, a clearer mind, the ability to focus on one thing at a time, and to make better decisions. By adding both yoga and meditation to your training, the benefits are endless.

Both yoga and meditation reduces stress, releases endorphins, makes you feel better, balances your body and your mind and decreases reactive behaviours. Anyone can learn to meditate and do yoga, even if you don't have any experience, it is available to everyone. If you can think a thought, meditation is available to you. The idea of yoga is that it is a practice and you don't have to be a yogi or flexible, by practicing yoga it will make you more flexible and balance your whole body. The same goes for meditation, yes, there are a lot of thoughts going through your mind, the trick isn't to get rid of them it is to quiet your mind down and create gaps where you can have clearer thoughts to be able to focus on your practice without a lot of noise going

on in your head. You want to create gaps so it will allow you to get into and stay in the zone.

Both yoga and meditation take practice just like anything else, the more practice time you put in the better the results. You do not have to change anything, not your religion or diet or your beliefs, not a thing. You don't have to stop thinking or clear your mind, all you need is a desire to learn and the ambition to add more skill sets to your karate training. The more you practice the more you will notice the benefits unfold naturally and effortlessly.

Both yoga and meditation are a work in progress, just like your karate practice. To make or break a habit takes 21 days, and continued practice will foster a training in attention and awareness in your mental processes creating a general mental well being and development and or specific capabilities such as a calm, clear and a focused concentration that are important in your karate practice.

Implementing yoga and meditation into a karate training regime, has empirically verifiable benefits associated with lessening the flight, fight or freeze response and feelings of anger, (the sympathetic state I talked about in the last paper). According to Andrew Newberg, MD, "Of all the emotions we are born with, anger is the most primal and difficult one to control. No matter how discreet, anger generates anxiety, defensiveness, and aggression in the other person—the famous fight or flight reaction that every living organism contains. And if you respond to someone else's anger with irritability—which is the way most brains are designed to react—the problem only gets worse. Anger interrupts the functioning of your frontal lobes. Not only do you lose the ability to be rational, you lose the awareness that you're acting in an irrational way. When your lobes shut down it is impossible to listen to the other person, let alone feel empathy or compassion. Instead, you are likely to feel self-justified and self-righteous, and when that happens the communication process falls apart. Anger also releases a cascade of neurochemicals that actually destroy those parts of the brain that control emotional reactivity."

Karate students that have more mindful traits are better able to stabilize their emotions and have better control over their moods. The competitive nature of all athletes cause them to have to deal with a roller coaster of different emotions. It is a training that will enable a karate student to enter the zone, or flow, and stay there. In karate, the moments when you feel totally in sync with your body and your surroundings are referred to as the zone or the flow, which is a meditative state. When you are in the zone, time seems to slow down, you can see everything clearly as it unfolds before you. Your head is clear and you know exactly what you need to do. By practicing your powers of concentration through meditation and yoga, you can develop the ability to enter the zone more easily in every situation. And if you find yourself in a reactive situation, which happens in karate because it is a fighting sport, you can easily defuse it. And if for some reason you get knocked

out of the flow, with meditation training it is easier and faster to get back into the flow or the zone.

Anyone that is in competitive karate and has competed knows these feelings of anger and frustration and how hard it is to turn them around, once they get a hold of you. Garret Kramer, the author of *Path of no Resistance*, believes that, "Your experience does not create your state of mind; your state of mind creates your experience." Garret believes that is how life works out. "If you're looking at anything external (surroundings, other people's opinions, number of games or tournaments played, etc.) to calculate one's faculty to excel, you're looking in the wrong place. Human beings can only create their success and failures from within themselves. Experience, talent, and the environment are always trumped by the degree to which a person sees that his or her feelings and perceptions are shaped from the inside-out."

Anger losses tournaments when you cannot get a handle on it. You can't win when anger takes over. All athletes know this but sometimes their anger takes over and controls the athlete. You are not going to get rid of the anger emotion but you can learn to harvest it and make it work for you. A very uncomplicated solution is meditation and yoga.

Meditation and yoga are a training from the inside out, a personal internal practice interrupting the noise to create the gap to which you can see and think clearer. You don't have to be part of any religion, both yoga and meditation are a science, which means that the process of meditation and yoga follows a particular order and has definite principles and produces results that can be verified. A Harvard neuroscientist, Dr. Sara Lazar used MRIs to study brains of meditators and compared the pictures of their brains to a control group of non meditators. The results were that the cortex was thicker in the meditator's brains than the non meditators. She also found structural changes in the prefrontal cortex and the insular. These areas of the brain are what manages executive functions, such as planning, decision making, judgment, and choosing socially appropriate behaviours.

Meditation and yoga are fundamentally easy to practice. Either one can be practiced anywhere, anytime, on your own or in a group, obviously, some places are more ideal than others but there are no limitations. Five minutes, an hour and a half or anything in between, again ideally you should set a time and place that is more convenient, nevertheless, you will benefit from a five minute practice, however, the more time you put in the better the results, like your karate practice.

In any sport especially a fighting sport it is imperative that you do not loose your temper and that you keep your anger in check. It is very easy for anger to creep in while you are in the ring. It is a very distracting and destructive emotion, not one

that is helpful. Anger makes you lose your focus and your focal point gets transferred to the anger emotion.

If karate implemented a formal training in meditation and yoga, they would have a better understanding of how the process works and then they could utilize these practices to better their training.

Karate has its own set of skills that apply to the sport in specific, and if you want to grow in your skill set in karate, the more skills you learn in this field, the more time and effort put in, the bigger the reward. At any level of sport it takes a certain type of person to want to step into the ring/field and lay it down. What makes an elite athlete is no easy feat, but the personality traits and characteristics that an individual must possess to succeed in the sport of karate is generally a driving force and a combination of traits and behaviours.

Once a karate student loses control, it's very difficult to regain the control back and refocus. Anger is one of the biggest distractions that interferes with one's performance. Being able to recognize these emotions could lead karate practitioners to better be able to use their emotional experiences, in turn, increasing their ability and performance. Karate students need to learn how to recognize, manage, and understand their emotions in order to reap the rewards and benefits of experiencing them surrounding a competition.

Adding simple meditative and yoga practices are positive approaches that can help gain that control and still leave an athlete with an edge to succeed.

There are two types of meditation, a sitting meditation, and a moving meditation, yoga. One balances the mind and the other the body. They work together to create a balance between mind and body. Simply put, meditation is training to be a mono-tasker with 100% of your focus on a task at hand. Meditation is a word used to describe the many modern and ancient techniques and practices that settle your nervous system and train your brain to be more focused, engaged and less reactive. In a single day we can have between 60 to 90 thousand thoughts running through our brain, that equals out to about one thought every 2 seconds. That is a lot going on inside your head while you are trying to maintain a focus on your practice. In saying that, it is impossible to get rid of all your thoughts, it's your brain and that is what your brain does, it thinks. The trick is to interrupt those thoughts so it is easier to focus on your practice.

With all the scientific evidence coming out in the past several years, meditation is becoming something that can't be overlooked. As anyone who's ever been involved in a sport knows, the biggest opponent is always internal. Meditation gives you ways to come to terms with this opponent.

It doesn't matter what sport you play, any athlete can benefit from the positive benefits of meditation. Meditation has been shown to help in other areas that could relate to athletic performance.

Here are a few reasons why every athlete should consider the practice.

1. It helps you focus. Your focus will determine if you win or lose a game. When you're at the free throw line, and you're not focused, you may miss the shot. Why not train your mind to focus?

Meditation has been proven to increase states of focus within the brain. Every athlete, no matter what sport they are playing, could work on bettering their focus.

2. It helps you cope with pain.

There's an old cliché around professional athletes that no matter what, they're always dealing with some sort of pain. High endurance sports do a number to your body. Meditation has helped people cope with pain.

3. It helps you deal with fear.

Fears can hijack our minds from the present moment; this can lead to so many errors in sports. Meditation can help calm the fear centre of the brain known as the amygdala even when you're not meditating. This information alone is worth millions of dollars to a professional athlete.

4. It strengthens your immune system.

An athlete cannot afford to be sick; if they're sick they can't play. Athletes are always looking at various ways to avoid becoming sick, why not try meditation? Meditation can strengthen our immune system. By meditating you can decrease your stress level, which will strengthen your immune system.

5. It reduces our mind from ruminating.

Ever lose a game, miss the game winning shot? Fail hard? We all do. Sometimes it becomes hard to bounce back; we run obsessive thoughts through our mind. Meditation has can reduce rumination; mediation will essentially help us reset our mind to focus on the present.

6. It makes you resilient.

The greatest athletes in the world are the most resilient. Everyone knows you have to fail over and over again until you succeed. Meditation helps you detach yourself from the negative thoughts that keep you from achieving your goals.

7. It reduces stress.

Athletes are always under stress. They pride themselves on the ability to be in a high stress environment. Why not embrace a practice that has been scientifically proven to reduce stress? Incorporating a little bit of meditation before the game could help.

8. It helps to stabilize emotions.

Studies have shown that people with more mindful traits are better able to stabilize their emotions and have better control over their moods. The competitive nature of all athletes causes them to have to deal with a roller coaster of different emotions. Why not embrace meditation and uses mindfulness throughout the game?

9. It helps with sleep.

One night of lost sleep could lose a championship; quality sleep is one of the most valuable things every athlete should have. Meditation can improve our quality of sleep.

10. It helps us to see our blind spots.

Athletes train over and over again to perfect their craft. It's one of the reasons why coaches exist; they are able to help you to see your blind spots. Our blinds sports cause us not to perform well, and meditation can help recognize our blind spots. By recognizing these blind spots, we can work on becoming better.

Meditation could be that extra edge that helps you win the game-winning point or helps you go the extra mile when you think you can't. Why not incorporate it into your training regime? It just might make you a better athlete.

Yoga:

Yoga is for everyone, athletes included. Yoga works on strength, flexibility, balance, agility, endurance, core, and overall strength, among other things. Any athlete could benefit hugely by adding yoga to her or his training regimen. Some examples are;

1) Strength: No amount of weight-lifting with free weights will give you the strength that consistently holding up your own body weight will.

2) Flexibility: Practicing yoga increases flexibility and ease of movement, therefore increasing range of motion. In particular, athletes in sports that require swinging action such as karate. Flexibility in general also helps to prevent injury.

3) Balance: Balancing poses in yoga improve overall balance in everything you do, preventing falls and injury. When you learn how to be soft and go with the flow, you can more easily bend and are less likely to break or fall over.

4) Endurance: The endurance that the ease of yoga gives you lends to endurance for fighting. When you learn to tune into your body and mind, everything can be a meditation—sports included. Yoga also helps you learn how to pace yourself: slow and steady, in it for the long haul.

Core: Almost everything you do in yoga works on your core strength. Strong core equals a healthy back and a healthy body.

5) Stability: Yoga helps strengthen all of the little stabilizing muscles that people tend to miss in other physical workouts and are vital in protecting your joints and spine (among other things).

6) Recovery: Yoga also helps put athletes back together after injuries. Again: You're tuning into your body and giving it the care it wants and needs. Yoga also elongates all of the muscles that athletes spend so long contracting, so it is a great counter-action.

Why it is Important to Learn How to Breathe for Your Karate Practice

Breathing during exertion is important in preventing internal injury such as hernia, blood vessel strain, and high blood pressure.

Breathing is an essential function of life. It comes before strategy, before technique, before ANY complicated fighting movements. It's easy to forget how to breathe because you never learned it in the first place. Breathing was always natural until you got in the ring and got distracted by all the fighting.

Breathing gives energy to all movements. Slow and deep movements will need slow and deep breaths. Fast and bursting type movements will need fast burst breaths. Just as the character of your movements change, the character of your breath must change with it. Learning how to breathe during a fight requires learning how to breathe in different ways, not just one way. It's awkward to breathe slow while moving quickly and as well as breathing fast while moving slowly. Try throwing punches as you exhale a deep breath slowly...notice how your punches seem to force the air out of you? That's because your muscle contractions and your breathing rate naturally works together.

Learning to Breathe

Breathing deeply does not necessarily mean you are breathing correctly. You need to focus on breathing in a rhythmic way that engages the core diaphragms. Slow down your breathing process and try to focus on your rhythm. Here is an example of correct abdominal breathing:

- 1) Close your eyes and breathe in through your nose until your lungs are full on a count of 3 use your abdomen to inhale completely. We want belly breathing, not chest breathing.**
- 2) Once you've inhaled completely, hold your breath for 16 seconds. This is to allow a proper exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide. You should feel full of air, from your rib cage to your stomach muscles.**
- 3) Breathe out all the air through your nose on a count of 8. As you exhale, try to visualize your cells releasing waste and absorbing energy.**

When done correctly, engaging your lower diaphragms in proper diaphragmatic breathing exercises can bring you numerous health benefits, like reduced heart rate, lower blood pressure, a boosted metabolism, and an increased blood circulation level. It can also help to relax your mind and body. The increased blood circulation is particularly beneficial, as it carries oxygen to muscles damaged during training efforts. This effect can assist in post-workout recovery. This exercise is very helpful for improving lung capacity and overcoming shortness of breath. It makes your mind calm, improves sleep, reduces anxiety, and efficiently relaxes your entire body. If done correctly you can feel the air flowing into the chest. To practice the balanced breathing technique, take a calming breath by inhaling through your nose while counting from one to four. Now, exhale through your nose and count back from four to one. Make sure that the force for breathing is generated by belly breathing, using the abdominal and pelvic diaphragms. Once you master the basics of this technique, try for 6-8 counts in each breath. This exercise relaxes the body, improves focus, reduces muscle tension, and eliminates stress.

Guided Meditation Technique

Guided deep breathing exercises help eliminate stress and muscle tension. To begin, close your eyes and focus on visualizing pleasant images, natural surroundings, and positive thoughts. Breathe very slowly, inhale through your nose on a count of 3, exhale through your nose on a count of 3. Clear your mind and discard negative thoughts. Try to redirect your focus to a positive image while continuing to breathe deeply. This will increase mindfulness, flush negative thoughts and make you feel refreshed and stress-free.

Yoga, meditation and proper breathing techniques changes the way you think and approach everything in life. When you learn to move with ease and stop forcing things, breathe through things, you will prevent injuries and your body will open with your mind, increasing your flexibility all around.