



The Eight Levels of Meditation

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Introduction

The real power of martial arts lies in linking one's physical training to one's meditation practices. Both adepts and neophytes alike, who practice various breathing and concentration exercises, will receive encouraging results for their efforts.

But even the most serious and diligent practitioners will never achieve those higher levels of their art, well within their reach. The problem is a lack of understanding with how Karate/Kempo or Yogic physical practice (asana) relates to breathing exercises and concentration techniques. Once this understanding is clear, all levels of training can accelerate.

The Hindus should be credited with the first systemization of meditation. One Indian Yogic sect breaks down the process into eight levels referred to as "The Eight Limbs of Raja Yoga" as follows:

Self-Restraint/Yama

Self-restraint is best defined as the codes of behavior that keep one at peace with the world both inwardly and outwardly. By engaging in self-restraint, the aspirant is freed from the negative Karma generated by unwholesome behaviors.

In all of the esoteric traditions, both martial and yogic, this level of practice instills a sense of righteous behavior. What many fail to realize is that an absence of past indiscretions also frees the mind in the present. Thus, a mind free from these concerns is at peace and free to focus on meditation.

The Hindus have five precepts for self-restraint, similar to the Buddhist's five precepts. The traditional prayer greeting of both Buddhists and Hindus is considered a conscious recognition of these five principles, one for each finger, by the exchangers of the sign. The precepts are:

Non-killing (*Ahimsa*)
Truthfulness (*Satya*)
Non-stealing (*Asteya*)
Sexual Continence (*Brahmacharya*)
Non-covetousness (*Áparigraha*)

Observance/*Niyama*

Observances build on the concepts of self-restraint by putting those principles into daily action. Purity of action, contentment, austerity, the study of self-development through classic treatises, physical discipline, the honoring of a spiritual teacher, and surrender of one's ego to the ultimate universal power, are all natural extensions of self-restraint.

Physical Practice/*Asana*

This is the level where most Karate/Kempo practitioners start and end their practice. Although physical practice is considered an absolute necessity to open up and develop the central nervous system in all meditative traditions, it is simply not enough. When Kempo's physical practice is overemphasized it creates an artificially low learning curve plateau.

In the hierarchy of self-realization, strengthening the central nervous system channels for energy circulation and focus in sitting meditation makes the physical aspect of one's training an absolute necessity.

In the Hindu tradition, physical practice is most recognizable as the Yoga postures and exercises practiced in a typical studio, from Sun Salutations to headstands. The majority of these exercises are stretching in character, but many *asanas* also build incredible strength.

The Buddhist and Taoist traditions have used martial arts and various *qigongs* marked by intense, physical exertion. The Buddhist *Muscle/Tendon Washing Classic Series* is one such qigong presenting us with further evidence that Buddhism was initially supported by Hindu body technology.

It is not uncommon for masters from one style of esoteric Yoga to study another form of esoteric Yoga. It is rumored that Kwan Sai Hung, a Taoist Master, traveled to India to study as a Yogi/Sadhu for some years after completing his martial studies at Huashan Mountain. This suggests that high-level masters consider the combining of Yoga and Martial Arts as the natural and ultimate progression of their development.

The mystique of Kempo as a martial art that leads to higher consciousness roots itself within this eight-fold frame. It should be recognized as a psychologically significant level, for it is here that the most noticeable effects of excellent health reward all such aspirants.

Breathing Exercise/*Pranayama*

Breathing exercises develop the connection between the cultivation of energy/Chi/Prana and the breath. Various techniques are used in Yoga, from alternating nostrils to forced exhalations to timed inhalations and exhalations. It is at this point where the production of Chi/Prana accelerates and where the fortunate disciples of Kempo end their exploration.

An advanced Kempo practitioner learns similar and other breathing techniques, like tracing the sensation of the breath up and down certain limbs or energy lines. As energy develops, many aspirants presuppose that, in the energy felt, the ultimate goal of their exploration into meditation has been realized; the ability to feel energy travel through limbs or spine.

The usual goal of such aspirants is the ability to execute more powerful martial techniques. The sensation of energy moving through the body provides verification that the ultimate goal has been achieved. Punches, kicks, and throws all improve dramatically, and the diligent martial artist surpasses the normal person in strength and fighting skill.

The irony here is that the sincere aspirant actually misses out on further development because of a preoccupation with these early gains. The highest levels of martial ability cannot be reached because the advanced levels of meditation have not been discovered.

Sense Withdrawal/*Prathyahara*

Sense withdrawal is the pulling of the five senses back into the mind and the detaching from various sense stimuli generated by the surrounding environment. This level is considered to be the precursor of 'absorption' or internal listening, and the first introduction into spiritual life.

"The excited senses of even a wise man, though he may be strong, impetuously carry away his mind. The practice demands considerable patience and perseverance. It is a trying discipline of the senses." Swami Sivananda, Fourteen Lessons on Raja Yoga

Concentration/*Dharana*

Concentration is possible once sense withdrawal has begun. The refocusing of the senses on a single concentration point begins the inward turning of the mind. The tip of the nose is the typical starting point used by both the Buddhists and Hindus.

The breath and senses merge at the nose tip to open the central nervous system in a way that is not possible by feeling any whole limb or the whole body. The nerves connecting the nose to the brain enhance the bioelectric nature of the breath. Other points are used this same way, along with various visualizations.

If one can inwardly focus on such a point in this way for twelve seconds without interruption, Raja Yoga considers this a *Dharana*.

Meditation/*Dhyana*

Meditation is the unbroken flow of the mind on a single point for an extended period. In practice, it is measured by counting the numbers of breaths focused on a concentration point, with or without a mantra.

Most aspirants' minds are interrupted from this task by either physical or emotional considerations. Worldly matters force their way into the mind just as a *Dharana* is achieved, necessitating a restart in *Pratayahara*. Re-examining one's 'Yama' and 'Niyama' practices is a continuing process for anyone pushing forward in 'Dhyana.'

Each attempt, however successful will strengthen you. One teacher explained that it was like doing pushups. The first time you try, you can only do a couple and your muscles ache. Years down the road, if you practice hard, doing a couple hundred can be quite an invigorating round of exercise.

Superconsciousness/*Samadhi*

Superconsciousness is the state of 'union' that the word Yoga directly refers to. This union is described as:

"In *Samadhi*, the meditator loses his individuality and becomes identical with the Supreme Self. Just as the river joins the ocean, the individual soul joins the Supreme Soul, the ocean of absolute consciousness." Swami Sivananda, *Fourteen Lessons on Raja Yoga*

It is at this level that a martial artist reaches the peak of his evolution. It is also where all of the great esoteric traditions merge into one, beyond their ethnic inflection.

Conclusion

The practice of Karate or Kempo is greatly enhanced by structuring it correctly with respect to meditation practices. The archetypal image of a Kempo Master is one of rapture in sitting meditation. Understanding the above process will put new levels of achievement within your reach.

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Observance/Niyama
Physical Practice/Asana
Breathing Exercise
Sense Withdrawal
Concentration
Meditation
Superconsciousness