

THE MYSTIQUE OF THE MARTIAL ARTS

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The eye of the tiger, the calm in the centre of the storm, ready and relaxed, calm and confident, firm but flexible, intense but light, focused while flowing, disciplined while spontaneous. The qualities of toughness with compassion, conflict into confluence, and above all, respect, honor, and integrity.

Many words and metaphors have been used by martial artists to describe what they feel is unique about their experiences in their martial art. And it is this special spiritual aspect that is propelling many people into pursuing a form of fitness training with the added benefit of a unique philosophy of personal development in harmony with the universe.

What is a Martial Art?

MARTIAL ARTS are skills of self-defence using primarily unarmed or minimally armed (weapon range less than 2 metres) strategies and skills. We are focusing mostly on those derived primarily from Japan, China, and The Orient for their practical effectiveness and especially for their spiritual foundations.

In most martial arts, the object is to develop and demonstrate strategic and technical skill great enough to vanquish your opponent, often through scoring a symbolic "fatal blow" or forcing your opponent to submit or give up the fight. While this is supposedly a zero-sum game, a win-lose paradigm where only the best competitor prevails, it is actually like any other competitive sport. That is, the opponents are in skill opposed, in spirit united, mutually building each other's ability level, with a sense of brotherhood or family in connectedness that comes from intense but respectful body contact. The aspects of effective self-defense are also helpful in promoting personal confidence, self-discipline, and self-esteem.

The martial arts arose from the natural desire for effective self-defense that seems almost primal or basic to the nature of all animals. In the European and African tradition, this developed mostly

into the arts of boxing and wrestling. The Asian tradition often involved more emphasis on the lower body, perhaps reflecting body types more prevalent in the Orient several centuries ago. From Malaysia, China, and Korea developed such forms as kick-boxing, kung fu, tai chi, tai kwon do and several other arts featuring mostly blocking, kicking, and striking with the feet, knees, elbows, and hands. A lesser emphasis was placed on grappling or the use of weapons.

In fact, on the island of Japan there was an Imperial ban on the carrying or use of weapons for several centuries before the 20th. Hence the common people of Japan had to learn forms of "empty handed" (kara te) self-defense. One of the core elements was the practice of the principle of pliability, flexibility, and gentleness (ju) in the form known as ju jitsu, the so-called gentle art. From this tree of strategies of striking and grappling evolved many subsequent branches of specialty. Karate emphasized blocking and striking. Judo (do = way, therefore judo means the gentle or pliable way) focused on throwing and grappling, and aikido specialized in subtle but effective wrist and armlocks leading to control of your opponent by avoiding or transforming his attack, moving in harmony with its energy (ai ki) or direction.

All these arts and more generated a wide selection of styles and schools (ryu) that frequently capitalized on the special physical and mental attributes of their founders. Sometimes they merely reflected the need to become autonomous and creative to overthrow an overwhelmingly hierarchical political system. Whatever the reason, the modern fitness consumer is often overwhelmed with the bewildering array of choices of styles and schools.

Choosing a Martial Art. One of the most perplexing decisions is choosing the martial art that is best suited to you as a person.

- How aggressive or combative are you in the first place?
- To what extent do you feel being able to defend yourself effectively is important to your sense of security?
- How much time and effort are you willing to invest in learning entirely new physical skills requiring fitness, flexibility and endurance?
- To what extent can you tolerate challenge or effort to go on in the face of setbacks and discouragement?
- To what degree is it important to develop internal discipline?
- To what extent are you interested in developing the personal and spiritual aspects of a martial art?

You need to have a relatively clear outlook from answering these questions to determine whether you have the motivation to accept the challenge and **take on the commitment necessary to master and enjoy a martial art**. While it will only take one lesson to be stimulated, it will take tens and likely hundreds of sessions to attain a basic level of skill enough to feel competent and more confident. It will likely take thousands of sessions before you have enough of a reliable and unconsciously memorized skillset to allow you the sense of mastery and aesthetics that is deeply enjoyable. Unlike some other sports and forms of workout, you cannot just dabble in a martial art. You need to do it at least twice a week, and preferably three or four times weekly, to progress adequately, especially in the early phases where the learning curve can be unusually steep and potentially frustrating.

You also need to consider **philosophical differences** between the arts to assess how you want your philosophy of life to develop over the years.

- Forms such as **karate, tae kwon do, and muay thai** feature very intermittent contact with your opponent. The philosophical position is often a sense of "you against the world, "where you are the calm centre of your otherwise chaotic world.
- **Boxing**, although more of a sport with defined rules and limits on the kind of attacks and defenses, encourages a still basically self-centred life-view of opponents as threats to one's being.
- The rougher forms of **ju jitsu, ninjitsu, and kempo** feature combinations of blocking, punching, kicking, and throwing and grappling where the contact with the opponent is more sustained but still erratic. The emphasis is mostly on self-defense and "whatever it takes" pragmatism in taking out your opponent. Not necessarily refined or artistic, the techniques are nevertheless simple and effective. Often the prevailing mental attitude is mental toughness against the challenges of a potentially hostile world.
- The Chinese arts of **tai chi and kung fu** are more elegant and aesthetic, in which all straight lines are made curved, and your opponent's force is curved through space. Although often practiced alone or in intermittent contact with an opponent, the philosophy engendered is that of curves and assertive counter moves. There is slightly more of a sense of harmony with field forces that are not to be defied, but rather, deflected and joined with.
- The martial arts of **judo and aikido** take this principle even further. In both, the **contact with the opponent is sustained throughout the entire process of conflict into confluence**. That is, a judo player grips his partner's costume (gi) and tries to throw him forcibly and decisively, then if necessary pin him down or get him to submit to strangles or joint locks. (And they call this "the gentle way!") Nevertheless, you need to make some shifts in your basic assumptions in order to master the effectiveness, efficiency, and elegance of this art. Because your bodies are connected, you are inexorably part of a biomechanical system of usually 300 lbs. or more. Often your

centre of gravity is outside both of your bodies. You are required to consider the whole bioenergetic system of **you-connected-to-your opponent**, and this tends to slowly reshape your orientation and connection to life in general.

While **judo** endeavors to use your opponent's force against himself, the Olympic sport of modern judo also emphasizes your own initiative to drive your opponent off balance and out of position so that you can finish victoriously. In the name of action for an international TV audience, **the sport has moved beyond the martial art**, so that patience and aesthetics are no longer featured as much as they were in former times.

Aikido in modern practice is closer to the philosophy of judo. While far from passive, this art also has constant contact while you continuously deflect, curve, and capitalize on your opponent's movement and energy. In this philosophy one could say that irony is the driving force of the universe, because there would be no contest if not for your opponent's initial and sustained aggression. This art is highly systemic and elegant, but it is difficult to attain the level of skill necessary for adequate self-defense. The attacks of real life aggressors often do not lend themselves to an aikido defense, unless one is at the black belt level.

Speaking of black belts, I would guess that almost all of you know that many martial arts have a skill level designation in which the darker the color, the generally higher the level. Black belts are in the aristocracy, while other colors such as red-and-white can be worn for ceremonial purposes by higher black belts (dan grades).

You might think the higher the rank of participant, the more philosophically or spiritually evolved. However, sadly this is often not so. The martial arts are not immune to control struggles, politics, and egos that permeate nearly all forms of human activity and striving. Higher ranks of skill and proficiency merely indicate a greater likelihood of exposure to, and perhaps absorption of, the main philosophical principles of that art.

Choosing a school (dojo). Like other clubs or studios of other arts or sports, you will likely want to

- **consider the reputation, integrity, and technical and teaching ability of the chief instructor** (sensei or sifu), and the **teamwork** of the coaching or instructional staff.

- You will want to **observe two or three workouts**, the facility setting and amenities, the fun people have, the vigor and intensity level of the workouts, and the group or social atmosphere.
- Pay particular attention to **interviewing** at least one **student or member** at the beginner, intermediate, and advanced levels of the art to get their perspective or what makes membership their satisfying.

One final point: often the philosophical aspects of the art are not taught directly, but absorbed in incidental learnings of the principles in practice. This is often a better way to go, because a workout that features dynamic action and skill training, rather than words and thoughts, will ultimately be more worthwhile. The mystique materializes as meditation in motion, while the philosophy becomes absorbed and integrated in a slower but more thorough way. **It is the steady rain that soaks.**