

THE MARTIAL ARTIST
AND
PHILOSOPHIES OF SELF-CONTROL

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INTRODUCTION

The martial arts instructor faces a dilemma shared by his peers for a long time. As a student develops proficient fighting skills, what will direct the student's conduct to the benefit of society? The philosophy of self-control to which a student adheres (or does not) will determine if the student will behave in a socially acceptable manner.

There is little the instructor can do to assure that students develop positive mental and emotional traits to accompany their physical skills. An instructor must assume responsibility to teach a philosophy of self-control, that one's skills must only be used to defend oneself when no other course of action exists. Some students will not be receptive to such teaching. Setting a good example by one's lifestyle is still the instructor's most productive method of conveying proper social behavior for martial artists.

The intention of this paper is to identify some elements in the philosophy of self control for a martial artist. The paper begins with a cursory historical perspective, as the author understands it, of the philosophy of self-control martial artists of an earlier age were expected to follow. This background information is followed by some thoughts on how observance of a philosophy of self-control can benefit the contemporary martial artist.

I. DEVELOPMENT OF THE TRADITIONAL PHILOSOPHIES

The origins of martial arts are hidden in legend. Stories have been passed from one generation to the next depicting how one style of martial art or another began. Similarities arise in these stories that provide evidence of the origins of the martial arts we study today.

The basis of the martial arts must be nearly as old as mankind. Our earliest ancestors found it necessary to do battle for survival against the hostilities of nature, wild beasts, and enemies among other humans. These struggles were conducted using very simple weapons or empty hands.

Our ancestors must have quickly realized that in dealing with the natural elements, struggle was fruitless, and one's chances of survival were greater if one made accommodation to the forces of nature. It was in the more evenly matched hostilities between human beings that techniques began to evolve designed to give the practitioner an advantage in a fight. These techniques, which would be refined through the ages into the various martial arts, are the basic elements of ferocious fighting arts and self-defense.

It is a commonly held belief that the fundamentals of modern martial arts were developed by Buddhist monks that sought a form of rigorous physical training to, initially, improve their physical health and, later, to defend themselves and their temples. Because the Buddhist faith was practiced throughout Asia, the forms of this physical training spread from temple to temple in the countries of that continent. As monks from one country visited temples in another, techniques and refinements of techniques were shared. Common traits began to evolve in the training practiced in many of the countries. These similarities in techniques are apparent today among many of the Asian styles of martial arts.

For Buddhist monks, the study of martial arts was a means of moving toward self-enlightenment. The monks lived lives of self-control, meditation, and humility which provided appropriate curbs to any potential excesses that might have come from the physical capabilities their martial arts training gave them.

Eventually, training in the martial arts was introduced to the secular world. Members of the warrior classes, most commonly known by the Japanese word "Samurai" began to train in the temples and eventually brought martial arts training out of the temples and into the greater population.

Ancient feudal times was a period of nearly continuous warfare in Asia. These wars were fought by men with fighting skills which elevated them to a rank of nobility. Because these people held the power of life and death in their hands, a philosophy or mode of appropriate conduct had to evolve to control their social behavior.

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All oriental philosophy is based on religious teachings. Like all major religions, Buddhism is based on living a peaceful and harmonious life. Religious beliefs in Asian countries also promoted loyalty and a sense of duty to sovereigns and family members. These beliefs helped impart some control and passivity over Samurai class individuals who, due to their deadly capabilities, were otherwise quite arrogant.

Codes of conduct that the martial artist of ancient Asia was expected to observe contained elements of virtues common to most societies. The most essential belief held by the Samurai was the importance of justice. It was felt that a person who could exercise the power of life and death needed to do so righteously; that is, to identify and support the right or good cause.

In ANALECTS, Confucius stated, "Perceiving what is right and doing it not, argues a lack of courage."

Courage, then, a willingness to fight, was not considered a virtue unless it was exercised in the cause of righteousness.

Martial artists, because of the tremendous strength of body and spirit they possessed, were expected to develop a deeply humanistic nature as a means of self-control. The ability to relate to one's fellow beings, to express love, sympathy, and pity were considered supreme virtues -- when tempered with objectivity. In Japanese, this element of conduct was expressed as:

"Bushu no nasake" -- the tenderness of a warrior.

Honor was the fulcrum on which the martial artist's conduct balanced. This honor -- implying a vivid consciousness of personal dignity and worth -- could lead the ancient warrior to act, and kill, on rash impulse or to behave with calmness and self-control. One might take offense at the slightest provocation and kill, with impunity. To counterbalance this fact, magnanimity and patience were preached as virtues.

So the martial artist of ancient history faced two stringent demands. He needed to be a ferocious fighter possessing skills of killing proficiency, but, to allow some social order to exist, had to observe a moral code or philosophy to determine when it was appropriate to unsheath the weapon, whether that be a conventional weapon or the empty hand. The Samurai code observed in the use of one's weapons: "A self possessed man knows the right time to use it, and such time comes but rarely."

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II. SELF-CONTROL AND THE MODERN MARTIAL ARTIST

For the contemporary martial arts student, the traditional philosophy concerning conduct takes on a more personal characteristic. The laws of our society now govern the conduct of all citizens. Those who are skilled in the fighting arts are expected to follow the laws just as everyone else must. In application of the laws, the trained fighter is typically subjected to stricter adherence to the laws than anyone else. These laws are intended to replace a philosophical code of conduct to control the "arrogance of the Samurai."

Not everyone will observe all laws. And a law cannot control conduct, but only provide a justification for social retribution in response to certain behavior. Not all who possess fighting skills will control their impulse to use them. Not everyone has a personality which is conducive to self-control. However, most of those studying martial arts today will never use the skills they develop in a real combative situation. This fact does not diminish the importance of a philosophy of self-control. The martial artist can benefit from such a philosophy, both in physical development and in improvement of one's mental and emotional approach to life.

There is an ancient Samurai Maxim which states:

"A man who has attained mastery of an art reveals it in his every action."

A. CONCENTRATION

As a person strives for increased proficiency in martial arts it becomes apparent that mental control as well as physical control must be developed. In fact, the two are inseparable. As the body is trained to respond automatically to an attack, so must the mind be trained to automatically "let go" to allow the body to relax, and allow concentration or focus to dominate over thought. In the proper execution of a martial art the mind and body work as one without conflict.

"The mind should be nowhere in particular." -- Takuan, Zen
Master and Swordsman

The whole of the person should be concentrated on the exercise. Any self-consciousness the mind wants to generate must be subordinated to concentration. The mind must move freely and respond to each situation immediately, no self is involved. This "relaxation" is one of the most difficult techniques the martial artist must master. Without it, regardless of one's physical capabilities, the level of proficiency one will reach in martial arts is limited.

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The same limitations could be expected in one's life outside the martial arts arena. In the conduct of daily life, mastery of the martial arts can provide tools for the mastery of living. The elements of self-control taught to martial artists in the traditional philosophies: patience, curbing one's anger, relaxing the mind to respond automatically, all lead to building concentration. Concentration is at the root of being involved in the essence of life. It is much of what is expressed by the oriental tradition of Zen.

"The Zen of martial arts de-emphasizes the power of the intellect and extols that of intuitive action. Its ultimate aim is to free the individual from anger, illusion, and false passion."

B. CONTROL OF ANGER

Freedom is, in many ways, achieved with controls. If one controls anger, one is free of the hindrance imposed by anger, in martial arts as well as life. Anger dissipates concentration; it does not demand action (intuitive response). When one acts in anger, one loses self-control. If you lose your temper, you lose yourself.

Another Samurai maxim:

"The angry man will defeat himself in battle as well as in life."

C. PATIENCE

If one is to succeed in martial arts, one must develop patience to await the proper opportunity to strike. In a similar manner, patience in matters of daily life allows one to maintain concentration on activity and react when the time is right, rather than scattering and squandering energy merely to act immediately.

Korean Hopkido Master Han states:

"Those who are patient in the trivial things in life and control themselves will one day have the same mastery in great and important things."

Martial arts instructors try to teach their students to be patient to "learn to allow patience and stillness to take over from anxiety and frantic activity for the sake of doing something."

D. SECURITY AND PEACEFULNESS

There is an apparent contradiction in martial arts training. While one works to develop highly refined fighting skills, one also develops means of self-control which, when applied to daily life, can eliminate one's need to fight. Rather than a contradiction, what develops in the mastery of a martial art is a personal security born from acceptance of one's mental and physical capabilities.

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In the words of Ed Parker - Kenpo Master

"... the only reason men fight is because they are insecure; one man needs to prove that he is better or stronger than another. The man who is secure in himself has no need to prove anything with force, so he can walk away from a fight with dignity and pride. He is the true martial artist -- a man so strong that he has no need to demonstrate his power."

Mastery of martial arts can provide a means of reaching a peaceful, serene mental state and true self-confidence. One must learn control to master the art, and in return the art teaches control to master life.

From the Bhagavad Gita:

"For the uncontrolled there is no wisdom, nor for the uncontrolled is there the power of concentration; and for him without concentration there is no peace. And for the unpeaceful, how can there be happiness?"

To the older generations of martial arts masters, the prospect of using their skills was abhorrent, even to defend oneself. The belief was that a true master should be able to control the situation without resorting to violence.

The late Gichin Funakoshi was considered among the greatest of karate masters to come from Okinawa. He is attributed with the popularization of karate in Japan during this century and was the founder of the Shotokan style. Master Funakoshi recounted that the incident he regrets most was when attacked by a would be robber attempting to steal his humble possessions, he physically restrained his attacker. He did not strike or kick the attacker, but only used sufficient force to subdue him. This was, to Master Funakoshi, a failing on his part to have done so to defend himself, and he was, at the time, a man of age seventy.

It would not be reasonable to expect a martial artist, today, not to defend his or her being if attacked. The elements of self-control provide the basis of a personal philosophy that eliminate the use of force except in the most dire of circumstance because the martial artist is secure in the possession of strength.

"King Hsuan of Chou heard of Po Kung-i, who was reputed to be the strongest man in his kingdom. The king was dismayed when they met, since Po looked so weak. When the king asked Po how strong he was, Po said mildly, 'I can break the leg of a spring grasshopper and withstand the winds of an autumn cicada.'" Aghast, the king thundered, 'I can tear rhinoceros leather and drag nine buffalos by the tail, yet I am shamed by my weakness. How can you be famous?' Po smiled and answered quietly, 'My teacher was Tzu Shang-chi 'ui, whose strength was without peer in the world, but even his relatives never knew it because HE NEVER USED IT.'"

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The quoted statements identified in this paper were taken from the following sources:

1. Zen in the Martial Arts, by Joe Hyams, J.P. Tarcher, Inc., 1979
2. Bushido, The Warrior Code, by Inazo Nitobe, Ohara Publications, 1979
3. Karate-do, My Way of Life, by Gichin Funakoshi, Kodansha International, 1975