



WHICH MARTIAL ART SHOULD I STUDY?¹

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The oriental martial arts have their roots in the centuries of military conflict that took place in China, Korea, Japan and other far-east countries. Under the stimulus of practical necessity, many different combat activities were analyzed and systematized, and the fact that there was constant fighting meant that this development and refinement took place under the stringent, practical conditions of the battlefield. The warriors studied subjects ranging from strategy and military theory to horsemanship and swimming and techniques of armed and unarmed combat.

Another element in the warriors' training, and one that was very important, was the practice of meditation. It was recognized that even the slightest fear of injury or death led to a weak, hesitant state of mind that made concentration and courage impossible. The fighters had to remain completely calm, alert and determined even in the danger and confusion of battle, and the key to this lay in overcoming fear. By practicing meditative exercises, the warriors gained an understanding of the nature of the self and a calm acceptance of death, and so meditation became the foundation upon which fighting skill was built.

Much of this knowledge has been codified and preserved in the martial arts that are taught today. In addition, over the centuries, the scope of martial arts training broadened to include more than just preparation for warfare and combat. Many modern martial arts focus specifically on teaching combative practices ranging from ordinary self-defense to the specific forms of combat knowledge required for police or military work. Many modern martial arts also focus on meditative or sportive elements, and the focus of the martial art will determine what its practice is like.

Many people look into martial arts for self-defense. In looking for self-defense, there are two things to keep in mind. First, the martial arts that focus on self-defense are still *arts*. They are structured on the basis of the idea that the student will practice the art for many years to attain true proficiency. Though in the long run the arts teach effective defense skills, the basic elements of the arts, which can be learned in a short time, are often not practical self-defense skills in and of themselves. It may be more appropriate for some people to take a specific self-defense course than to embark on the study of martial arts. Second, it sometimes happens that schools in which the focus of the art is simply learning how to injure and kill people wind up

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falling into very harsh, negative states of mind. There is no reason why martial art practice should be abusive or destructive.

Because a large part of martial art practice involves attaining insight into the nature of the self, many people have taught and practiced martial arts primarily as meditative disciplines rather than as combat tools. Because conflict often stems from feelings of vulnerability and weakness that are part of confusion about the self, martial arts have been used as ways of learning to live in a peaceful and harmonious manner. Sometimes martial arts which focus primarily on mind-body awareness and self-discipline to some extent lose their utility as strict combat systems.

Another element that became part of the martial arts was sport competition. It was natural for people to want to find out how good their fighting skills were without actually having to kill people in real fights. The sport contest is an "artificial" fight, a situation in which there are agreed-upon rules so that the competitors can, in relative safety, fight to determine who is most skilled. One thing that must be kept in mind, however, is that the rules make the sport competition very different from real combat, in which there are no rules at all. Very often, people practicing sportive martial arts are so conditioned to fighting in accord with the rules that they are under a severe disadvantage in a real fight. Many sportive martial arts have lost much or all of their utility as effective self-defense. Likewise, the goal of winning a sport competition and gaining a trophy may often be incompatible with the goal of attaining self-knowledge and inner harmony.

There are a large number of different martial arts systems, although many of the systems are not extensively taught outside their native lands. All of the arts have different emphases and approaches both in their methods and goals of training and in the fighting skills themselves. There are, however, a number of questions to consider that will help you organize the diversity of the arts and decide which you would like to practice.

Is the art Chinese, Korean, or Japanese? These are the three countries whose arts are most widely practiced though there are martial arts from many other countries such as the Philippines or Malaysia. There tends to be a stylistic family resemblance among all the arts from a given country, and you may find one manner of moving more pleasing to you than another.

Is the art oriented toward practical combat methods, personal discipline, sport, or some combination of these?

Is the art concerned with armed or unarmed combat or both? For what forms of attacks are defenses learned? Are kicks and punches defended against? Chokes and joint locks? Throws? Pins on the ground?

What weapons does the art deal with, both in terms of offensive use and in terms of defending against?

What proportions of the training are spent in prearranged defense drills and free fighting practice? To what extent does the training utilize solo movement forms (often called *kata*)? To what extent does it utilize two person drills, or teach defenses against group attacks?

Does the art focus on grappling methods of combat (joint locks, throws, and ground work) or striking methods (blocks, kicks and punches)?

Is the art an external or an internal art? External arts are those which base their training on learning how to execute movements with strength and speed. Internal arts are those which base their training on delicate sensing of the inner mental energy which underlies movements.

Is the art a hard or a soft art? Hard arts are those which meet and destroy attacks with direct force. Soft arts are those which yield to an attacker, go along with the force of the attack and use it against the attacker.

Does the art emphasize linear or circular movement? The feeling of an art that moves in straight lines will be different from that of an art that moves in spirals and circles.

Does the art emphasize injuring and disabling an attacker or does the art aim at protecting the attacker (to the extent feasible)?

As you can see, there is a lot to consider in deciding which martial art would be right for you. Many people want to know which is the best martial art. Sometimes they are more specific and ask which is the most effective martial art for combat. There is no answer to these questions. Which is best depends on what you want. And which is best for combat can never be determined. Best for whom, under what circumstances? Two people who are 6' 3" and 5' 1" may find that the art that is most effective for one is not most effective for the other. And which is more effective, an art that consistently wins *every* fight after thirty years of practice or an art which wins 70% of its fights after only five years of practice? And then again, how long it takes to master an art depends on what level of awareness and physical skill the individual starts with.

The best thing to do is look around at as many martial arts schools as you can. As you watch the various styles of practice, begin making decisions about what you want to learn and how you want to learn it. Try to get a sense of what kind of practice would be most satisfying to you. Check out the atmosphere in the school. Are you encouraged to come observe the classes? Do the teachers and students treat each other in respectful ways that feel comfortable to you? Is there a narrow-minded attitude in a school that the martial art taught there is the only true martial art? Ask questions. Are your questions answered patiently and fully? Find out who the instructor studied with, where and for how long?

Then try out a class. Are you allowed to try out a class for free? Are you encouraged to sign up for a short time so that you can experience the art and then decide whether it is right for you? Or do you feel pressured to undertake a long-term commitment?

The more you look around to see what is available, the better your chances of finding what is just right for you in beginning your martial art practice.