

Martial Arts

by Pat Zukeran

The Origins and Popularity of the Martial Arts

Gliding across the Pacific, the Asian martial arts have become part of the mainstream of American culture. Today there are an estimated two to three million practitioners in the United States, 40 percent of which are children between the ages of 7 and 14.¹ The martial arts industry generates annual revenue topping the \$1 billion mark.

Why this rise in popularity? For one thing, people today are interested in and more willing to accept Eastern ideas. What was once considered “foreign” is now embraced as old, and thus “tried and true.” Advocates extol the physical benefits and self-discipline that result from its practices. Movies further popularize martial arts with films such as *Enter the Dragon*, *Rush Hour*, and the Oscar winning *Crouching Tiger-Hidden Dragon*. Increased crime also has people seeking to learn ways to protect themselves and their loved ones.

There are few written records regarding the origin of martial arts. The ones that do exist are interwoven with myths or verbal traditions that make it difficult to accurately trace the record. However, archaeological evidence indicates that the martial arts may have begun as early as 2000 B.C. in the Fertile Crescent.² From there, it traveled eastward to India and China.

The father of the Asian martial arts, according to the most popular tradition, was an Indian Buddhist monk named Bodhidharma who arrived in China in the late fifth century A.D. Settling in a monastery in the Songshan Mountains located in the Kingdom of Wei, he developed a series of mind-body exercises designed to improve the health of the monks and assist them in meditation. Based on the movements of different real and mythological animals, and incorporating concepts from Taoism and Zen Buddhism, Bodhidharma taught a style of combat known as Shao-lin gung fu. Gradually, Shao-lin gung fu migrated from the temples to the Chinese populace. It was adapted and refined as it spread across the country and, eventually, around the world.

Martial arts have been very popular among Christians. Scot Conway, founder of the Christian Martial Arts Foundation, estimates that between 50 and 70 percent of American martial artists – and roughly 20 percent of all instructors – consider themselves Christians.³ But some Christians argue that the philosophy of Asian martial arts is wholly incompatible with biblical teaching. They point to the origin of Eastern mysticism as a reason for Christians to avoid any level of participation. Still others say Jesus’ exhortation to “turn the other cheek” shows that using force is wrong.

How should a discerning Christian respond? Can we practice the martial arts and be consistent with our biblical convictions?

Differences in the Martial Arts

Should Christians participate in the martial arts? In order to make an informed decision, it is helpful to recognize that there are two basic categories of martial arts. It is important to note that the division is not rigid; in some cases, values from one type may be blended or subtly integrated into another. But for simplicity and clarity, we will use the two main groups.

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One type of martial art, called “internal” or “soft,” focuses on inner spiritual development, balance, form, and mental awareness. The soft arts emphasize two principles: the mind dictates action, and the opponent’s own force is used to defeat him or her.⁴ Students are taught Taoist and Buddhist philosophical principles such as the “chi” force and the “yin and yang” concept. Through breath control, soft art practitioners seek to “collect, cultivate, and store” this chi force which is located in the body. Some believe they can use the chi force to strike down opponents from a distance. Examples of internal or soft martial arts include Chinese Tai-Chi Chuan and Japanese Aikido.

The second type of martial art is called the “external” or “hard” art. This type teaches that physical reactions precede mental reaction. It also promotes the idea that an opponent’s force should be met with an equal but opposite force. While the hard martial arts systems also use breath control like the soft arts, the emphasis is on developing strength and quickness through the use of straight and linear body motions.⁵ The hard arts include certain forms of Chinese kung fu and Shao Lin boxing. The Japanese arts were adapted from Chinese kung fu. They include Ju-jitsu, Judo, Karate, Ninjitsu, and Kendo. Korean martial arts include Tae Kwon Do and Tang Soo Do.

While there are religious concepts in the martial arts, few schools would qualify as religious movements, and few seek to meet the religious needs of the student. However, a little exposure to Eastern mysticism may lead to greater involvement in the future. So as a general rule, Christians should avoid the internal or soft martial arts because of their concentration on the teachings of Eastern religions and philosophies. Several schools even utilize the occult techniques of meditation and altering consciousness. External or hard martial arts, on the other hand, concentrate primarily on physical training. These physical exercises usually do not conflict with our biblical convictions.

Before joining a dojo or martial arts gym, one needs to know the worldview of the instructor. Even some hard martial arts teachers incorporate Eastern ideas and occult practices into their styles. Look for instructors who teach the physical movements but exclude the Eastern ideas.

Eastern Concepts in the Martial Arts

Since martial arts are traditionally based on the Eastern philosophies of Taoism (pronounced “dow -ism”) and Zen Buddhism, several key concepts can be prominent in the classes. Let’s look at three of them.

The concept of “chi” or “ki” is central in some martial arts. Chi is believed to be the impersonal life energy that flows throughout the universe and pulses through the human body. By harnessing the chi in themselves, martial artists believe they can perform at higher levels of ability, or can release chi power resulting in devastating effects. Chi is controlled through specialized breathing techniques, gymnastics, and meditation.

Another common martial arts teaching is the Taoist concept of “yin and yang,” the belief that nature consists of conflicting elements which function in perfect balance with one another. Just as mankind should live in harmony with the Tao, so the martial artist must strike hard with firmness at times, but at other times accept the energy of the opponent and then turn it back against him, causing him to defeat himself. This redirection allows a relatively gentle resolution, and brings one into harmony with the opponent and the flow of nature.

A Christian must also avoid the practice of Eastern meditation. The goal of this type of meditation is to empty one’s mind, alter one’s consciousness, or unite with the impersonal divine. Scott Shaw writes, “Meditation is a sacred process. It is the method used by the spiritual warrior to calm the mind and to connect the body and mind with the infinite.”⁶ This greater awareness supposedly enables the martial artist to increase his or her performance. In many schools, the combined use of Eastern meditation and the chi are essential to mastering the art. (Not all martial arts use meditation for this purpose. Some use it to

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focus on the lesson or task at hand such as picturing the action in your mind before physically carrying it out.)

However, the mysticism of Taoism and Buddhism is not compatible with Christianity; nor is Eastern meditation the same as biblical meditation. The Bible does not teach altering our consciousness or emptying our minds. Instead, the goal of Scriptural meditation is to *fill* our minds with God's Word (Psalm 1:2). Another danger of Eastern meditation is that it can open our minds to the occult, a practice the Bible prohibits. The Bible does not teach the Eastern idea of chi, that there is an impersonal life energy of the universe within us. Rather, the Bible says that each individual has an eternal soul that will either go to heaven or to hell based on whether or not the person has a relationship with Christ.

Self Defense or Turn the Other Cheek?

Besides concerns about the role of Eastern religion in the martial arts, some people think martial arts encourage violence. Martial arts teach fighting, and so are contrary to the Bible's instructions about pacifism. Is there ever a time when Christians can use force?

Christian pacifists believe it is always wrong to injure another person. Many interpret Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:38-48 ("Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also . . .") to mean never use violence. Jesus exemplified this in His own life when He suffered silently and did not retaliate while enduring torture even unto death.

Despite these arguments, the proper interpretation of the Matthew 5 passage does not teach pacifism. In Jewish culture, to be struck or slapped on the cheek was an insult (2 Corinthians 11:20). Jesus was teaching that when a disciple is insulted for being a follower of Christ, the disciple should not retaliate with force. However, being insulted is a very different situation from being attacked by a mugger or your wife being assaulted by a rapist.

In the Gospels, Christ did not resist violent attacks because of His unique mission to be the sacrifice for our sins. However, in the Old Testament the preincarnate Christ judged wicked nations with the sword (Judges 6:11-16). Not only did He smite His enemies, He aided Israel in being an instrument of judgment as well. In the New Testament, Jesus and His disciples did not teach military leaders to withdraw from the military (e.g., Matthew 8:8-13, Luke 3:14). In Romans 13, Paul writes that the government has the right to "bear the sword." In other words, a righteous government can use capital punishment when an offender is deserving of death. Revelation predicts the glorified Christ coming back to judge the nations with a sword.

Therefore, complete pacifism is not the spirit of Christian teaching. In fact, the most loving thing to do when a friend or family member is attacked by a harmful foe is to risk one's life and use force to restrain the enemy. If a man is attacking a child, or a woman is being raped, it would be morally wrong not to sacrifice your life and restrain the assailant even with deadly force if necessary.

The Bible allows a Christian to use self-defense and force when confronted with a criminal act. However, force may not be used for revenge or out of unjust anger. Christians who engage in the martial arts should have a clear understanding of this. The use of martial arts must be for self-defense and protecting loved ones from acts of evil. One should never use one's fighting abilities to instigate combat or seek revenge.

Should Christians Participate in the Martial Arts?

To summarize what I have covered so far, I believe that the physical aspect of martial arts can be separated from the Eastern religious and philosophical teachings. Also, I believe the Bible teaches us that there is a time when we are called to use force, even deadly force, to halt acts of evil.

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Here are some practical guidelines for deciding whether to participate in the martial arts or for selecting a school. First, a person should check his or her motives. One should not engage in martial arts if one's motives include becoming a tough guy, showing off, or gaining revenge. Parents should make it clear to their children that the martial arts are never to be used for affectation or for instigating conflicts. Unworthy motives are detrimental to one's walk with the Lord and witness to others. Positive reasons for practicing martial arts include physical conditioning, discipline, and self-defense. Develop parameters for limiting the use of force. One of the fruit of the Spirit is self-control. Force is to be used for defensive purposes only.

Generally speaking, Christians should avoid the soft or internal form of martial arts because they tend to emphasize Eastern philosophical and religious ideas. External or hard martial arts emphasize the physical training. However, it is wise to be on guard because, as I noted before, some instructors of external martial arts incorporate Eastern mysticism into their systems as well.

Find out the worldview of the instructor. The role of religion in the martial arts depends mostly on the instructor, so choosing a proper instructor is the most important factor. Some instructors claim to teach the physical aspect only. However, as students advance, instructors begin to incorporate Eastern religious ideas to help students attain a higher level of performance. Observe advanced classes to see if they incorporate Eastern practices. There is also helpful information available from Christian organizations such as Karate for Christ and the Christian Martial Arts Foundation.

The Christian life involves caring for the nurture and growth of our mind, our spirit, and our body, which is the temple of the Holy Spirit. I have benefited greatly from my time in the martial arts. It has provided great exercise, discipline, and opportunities to witness for Christ. There have also been times in my life when I had to use force to restrain hostile persons or protect loved ones. I believe that the martial arts can be beneficial to Christians who are informed and mature.

¹ Glenn Rifkin, "The Black Belts of the Screen Are Filling the Dojos," *The New York Times*, 16 February 1992, 10.

² Howard Reid and Michael Croucher, *The Way of the Warrior*, (Woodstock, N.Y.: Overlook Press, 1983), 16-17.

³ Erwin Castro, B.J. Oropeza, and Ron Rhodes, "Enter the Dragon? Wrestling with the Martial Arts Phenomenon Part I," *Christian Research Institute*, (www.equip.org), 2.

⁴ Howard Reid and Michael Croucher, *The Way of the Warrior*, (Woodstock, N.Y.: Overlook Press, 1983), 229.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 61 & 227.

⁶ Scott Shaw, *The Warrior is Silent* (Rochester, Vt.: Inner Traditions International, 1998), 53.

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