

More to Martial Arts than just Technique

By Ian Deavin

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As a Shotokan 3rd Dan Shotokan and a Tai chi practitioner, I am intrigued by the unusual position of martial arts in society and the ambivalent view that people often take of activities such as karate.

This is exemplified by the response "Oh if you do karate, I'd better be careful what I say." Generally voiced with a degree of respect and humour, but clearly a lack of understanding.

Like it or not the serious martial artist (and certainly in my experience most senior grades are serious people) is looked at rather sideways by society at large. Indeed often also by our own students until they have progressed and gained a measure of understanding.

Since I believe that martial arts and associated activities have a great deal to offer people at many levels, I should like to address this issue in a general way.

For me these unusual aspects of martial arts were highlighted when I recently went with my daughter to an archery club, where we had six weekly introductory coaching sessions.

For the first time in many years I was able to compare my own experience as a student in a martial arts class and was surprised how used I had become to a high level of care and detailed instruction.

Certainly the good instructors I have been lucky enough to study with, gave of themselves throughout the class, in contrast it seems, to sporting activities where people often come together without an Instructor and coaching is a separate matter.

Why then is the role of an instructor so different in karate for example?

I believe martial arts instructors are undervalued and the recent example of NVQ's being brought into karate is part of that misunderstanding whereby martial arts are seen as a sport. This is only to see the external physical aspects — which indeed are all an outsider is aware of, but it ignores the rest.

This difference ... the internal aspect - which karate develops over many years, is what separates it from a sport and is why people continue practising at high levels when by sporting criteria they would have given up.

Indeed where else can you find someone with, for example, 20 years extensive experience passing on that knowledge every week and frequently in exchange for little more than the cost of hall hire? To become a karate instructor takes many years and the necessity that he or she be able to perform, as well as teach their art.

How many top sports people run their own regular teaching sessions, how many sports coaches are good performers?

Functionally for a student there is a simple difference:

karate-ka in general spend most of their practice time attending a class to learn from an instructor, whereas sports people seem to spend most of their time playing their sport with relatively little specific coaching.

It seems to me that the true 'good' of martial arts is to maximise the potential of a person so as to survive at the highest level possible. In this case not only is a martial artist one who is dedicated to learning, but also to healing so as to make whole both themselves and their students.

If we picture sickness as a breakdown of health, and unwellness as a negative turn from good health, then clearly the two are part of the same.

Similarly, healing (recovery from sickness) and development (elevation of health and ability) are simply a progression of the same process. The level of normal health becomes an arbitrary and moveable line.

The martial artist is therefore concerned with building up himself and his students on the one hand — effectively a healing process; and on the other with techniques of disrupting i.e. creating unwellness, in adversaries.

Similarly a holistic doctor is concerned with studying the negative process of disease in order to reverse it in healing. This is the same cycle:

A good martial arts instructor will seek to heal his students' disease in order to help them in achieving their maximum development and greatest proficiency in technique. At the same time, by learning about the human system, he is able to learn more effective ways of disrupting it. With positive intention this cyclic process leads to a fully balanced person able to live positively.

If this process is undertaken with negative intent (i.e. focus on the destructive part of the cycle) then the student also achieves what he desires -- in this case experience of life at the negative end of the spectrum — disease, destructive behaviour, negative lifestyle and ultimately perhaps becoming what is often referred to as "evil".

Clearly it is important to be aware of the whole cycle and to choose how we each use it.

Interestingly, Western medicine seems to concentrate below the 'normal' health line (healing sickness) whereas complementary medicine seems more appropriate above it as a support to invasive western style medicine.

In this way we can see that martial arts and medicine both use the same cycle to the extent that any line between them becomes so blurred as to practically vanish.

The relevance of the traditional "martial arts healer" may be explained by this approach and I believe that it has much to offer our Western culture.

Who is better placed than practitioners of the martial arts to spread understanding of the conflict and violence we see portrayed in our national media?

It seems to me that at its best the martial arts approach to life is of one who specialises in being a generalist - Renaissance Man, the Soldier Scholar — but given a different spin in today's society.

The balance is different today with extremes wider than ever before — stresses of life and the breadth of technology mean that even the generalist must delve into the specialities of the age and the rugged individual must learn the special skills of co-operative existence.

From a female point of view the relevance is also there, but perhaps different - for by learning the rugged individuality aspect of martial arts women can perhaps find their own expression as fully empowered individuals in a co-operative society.

At the basis of all martial arts lies physical practice of effective technique for self-defence, but the eclectic nature of martial arts philosophy also means that physical development goes hand in hand with the intellectual and spiritual — absorbing only what is useful in the production of a balanced fully formed and effective human being.

The modern wording of this article clearly echoes the ancient philosophies of the Tao, of Zen and of the Chinese five element systems we are aware of today but by no means exclusively. Indeed, in my own classes, I often find the concepts of body language and modern body centred psychotherapy useful.

Since they can reveal to us the emotional blocks (inner conflicts) that hold back our techniques, I believe that as instructors, we can each in our own way offer some insight and make a contribution to the development of harmony in our students and in society at large.

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