

What Are Martial Arts Really About?

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INTRODUCTION

The title question "What are Martial Arts Really about?" can be simply answered at the most basic level - survival - and left there. However it is this writer's belief that many things flow from that simple statement. Things which do not go off the point and which are timeless in their relevance to men and women of whatever situation.

I also pose the question - What good are martial arts if they do not help us to survive better?

Basic survival is a prerequisite for all life, if we are truly human beings we aim a little higher.

I have purposely made little mention of the outright physical side of training and technique since these are obvious starting points, and there is now a great deal of literature/video material on these aspects. People can widely be seen building up their bodies at any leisure centre or gym while most people have probably seen good fight techniques demonstrated - if not at a local event then at least on film, it is difficult not to. If you are to train in martial arts then of course it is absolutely necessary to do the physical work and students should look for the best fitness and martial arts instruction they can, it is a basic given of all martial arts study.

This is especially obvious in those arts described as "hard" (such as Karate) where powerful movements are emphasised, however the "soft" arts (e.g. Tai Chi) approach from a different direction and the mix of developmental processes described here will vary from one style to another, possibly being completely reversed. Indeed it seems true that in Karate, students train to become hard and eventually find softness, while Tai Chi practitioners seek to be soft and find

hardness. This is not a contradiction, it is the achievement of balance - but all require fundamental physical training for progress to be made.

Choice of style is a very personal matter and a strong student may choose a hard art because it uses a strong body as a starting point, or a soft art because it offers to fill a gap. A physically weaker student or one with good emotional skills on the other hand may feel more comfortable with a soft art - or may make the leap to a hard style to fill the gap in their own development head on. There is only one way to find what suits you - get involved, read about it, watch some classes, talk to people in it and more importantly, do it.

I will therefore leave it to anyone interested to seek out local methods and teachers to help them build their bodies and techniques. However it is widely sensed that "there is more to it than that" and suggestions of magical abilities float around the literature and legend of martial arts. This booklet is concerned with describing what else there might be, so that those who are interested, but perhaps put off because they believe their bodies or character are not suitable, may have a chance to view a different perspective. Similarly for those who have reached a "block" in their own martial arts training - I hope this will be positively provocative.

It is also a brief resume of what one person has found over 20 plus years of training, often fortunately with some very good teachers - my greatest thanks are due to them. Perhaps I have found only what I was looking for, but after my periods of wandering in the wilderness during those years I wish that something like this booklet had come my way 20 years ago.

My best wishes to any who read this - I hope it is useful, if not please leave it aside and move on.

On the other hand if you do find it helpful, you may be interested in a more extensive view as described in my book "Fighting for Life". For copies of this book, or for Shotokan Karate and Tai Chi instruction, please contact:

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CHAPTER 1

Self Defence - Technique and stepping beyond technique.

The needs of self-defence are basic in a competitive world where the ability to defend what you have and fight for what you want is vital. In times of archaeological past this was more true for the individual on a strictly physical basis than today. Fighting skills and hunting skills were closely allied in acquiring the basic needs of food, shelter and a mate. Once acquired they needed to be defended. Somehow this became especially true for the male.

Today in "civilised" society we do not need to do this on a physical level, rather this has been largely taken over by the concepts of work and social rules leading to an intellectual equivalent of the older physical conflict. Nonetheless there is still a measure of physical aggression at large in society, and, judging from the media, an even greater level of fear about the potential of physical violence.

Self-defence of the individual is therefore still an area of strong concern with many classes teaching self-defence techniques. Often these are passed on by ex-soldiers or instructors who have some connection with the military or police. The techniques are simple and effective, they are known to work. In addition anyone can learn them and often quite quickly too.

Similarly any casual visitor to a martial arts class - Karate, Kung Fu, Jujitsu, Judo, Aikido etc. will see simple and clearly combative techniques being taught. Punches, blocks, kicks, grabs, locks and throws form the basic armoury of all such schools. These self-defence techniques are

a tool for personal survival in physical combat and that is all. There is no need or intention that they should be otherwise, like any good tool self-defence techniques are essentially concerned with practicalities and effectiveness. The same is true of the people who are experts in the field - staying alive on their abilities; if a technique is not useful then both it and its practitioner are likely to have only a short existence.

And yet we have on the one hand self-defence techniques, and on the other - martial arts.

Is there a difference? If so, what, why and how?

What about the mysticism and other weird esoteric practices associated with martial arts? How is it that this association has been created by severely practical people, over centuries of much greater personal violence than we now know in our cushioned western world?

It is obvious that professional fighters would seek to perfect their techniques in speed and power, for in hand to hand combat they are clearly key factors. Why then is there this apparent split between self-defence and martial arts and why do practical people look outside the obvious? Why look beyond techniques?

A point worth noting is that nearly all these martial arts developed outside mainstream western civilisation. Those forays into the esoteric such as the Berserkers of Norsk legend and Dervishes of the Middle East have long since lost their practical fighting aspect. Their place within a fighting force becoming redundant with the growth of long range fire power.

Elsewhere emphasis on the individual lasted longer into more recent times with hand to hand combat being a key feature of soldiery.

Understanding the ascendancy of long range fire power in the west is crucial to recognising the essence of martial arts which do not account for the firearm. Long range weapons largely de-skill the fighting art, replacing personal ability with technology. So where this did not happen then we see the continued handing on of one-to-one skills and their metamorphosis into practices relevant to today's environment.

Consider for a moment the life of a fighting man - at its centre is the combat itself with the type of technique we already discussed, but there is much more. This is an intelligent human being - a thinking, feeling person who has only one purpose in life - to survive as well as he can. The implications of this spread out like ripples on a pond.

Such a person seeks to learn, since by learning he may become better able to survive. He seeks to learn about the world, about others and about himself. This is all encompassing as he must live in a natural world with a social context, awareness of potential threats is vital, even soldiers spend very little of their time actually fighting (as for a hunter, the kill is only the culmination of applying many other skills)

Likewise study of self was necessary with development of practical intellectual and emotional techniques to handle the whole experience of daily living on the edge. These enabled the fighting man to deal with his fears and conflicts before, during and after a fight, with great improvements in his ability to defeat an adversary. We find this is true today just as then - it is necessary to look beyond the techniques themselves in order to become better at using them and in dealing with the experience of interpersonal conflict.

In short self-defence is about surviving a fight; martial arts are about doing it better and surviving better in life as well. Always the same criterion applies - if it works use it. This is perhaps one of the oldest holistic views of life since it balances emotional and material well-being in the same scales. To achieve your own potential it is necessary to be emotionally healthy - all the wealth in the world will only buy more technology or another to fight for you. It

will not make you yourself any better as a fighter or better able to handle conflict - in fact it may well predispose you to even greater conflicts.

CHAPTER 2

Training and the creation of an Art

We can all recognise that in the words of the old saying "Practice makes perfect", so a student learning to fight has two choices:

- Go on the streets and into bars looking for fights, if he survives then he will certainly be a practical fighter
- Study fighting in a systematised way - i.e. learn from someone else and observe for himself

The former is by definition outside our scope here; suffice it to say that the price of such a choice is high whatever the outcome, physically and emotionally with far reaching negative possibilities.

Let us then consider the latter choice. We can imagine a student learning to punch making punching movements, punching various soft or hard training aids. The moves are put together much as anyone might learn dance steps or as a child learns to write, carefully forming each letter. Punch here, punch there, use the fist this way or that, feet positioned in a particular way, push with this leg and hip, extend the arm like this and impact on target.

Diligent study over a period builds up a satisfactory library of techniques often without any sort of live opponent or training partner as the student learns to focus his speed and power.

Gradually it becomes clear that this approach has gone pretty much as far as it can, there is a limit which is quickly reached. Partner training now opens another horizon. Focus, speed and power are not enough, timing and distance become important and here it is that the student first has an opportunity to gauge his own ability. Pre-arranged attack/defence routines are learned on a he does that - I do this basis, impressively building to fast accurate dynamics. All this can still be achieved with simple dance like choreography. However again a limit is reached and realisation is often traumatic if partnered with a much more experienced practitioner. Realisation dawns that often someone slower, weaker, older etc. may easily walk around such carefully learnt technique.

So where do we go from here? Already our student has taken the first steps to an art. By moving into the path of developing specific skills based on principles, our growing fighter has stepped from the arena of self-defence into the beginning of an art.

So a martial art becomes less about fighting and more about learning those things which will help to improve how we fight. Like a painter learning to draw or mix colours in order that his final creation would be more expressive. In the same way it becomes important for our fledgling martial artist to learn more about controlling his own body.

This is handled in two ways:

- a good instructor can provide exercises and routines which ensure that the student develops even in spite of himself!
- the student himself will need to look inward to understand how he works physically and emotionally.

The first is most important early on but the second becomes increasingly key as the student develops, and stays with him forever.

The student's inner self becomes the limiting factor in his ability to fight and there are rapidly diminishing returns to any increased level of purely physical training. It is here at a fairly early stage (often as first black belt for example) that the internal side first begins to take shape. It is here too that so many students give up, as without an instructor who can "give" them this, they find it increasingly frustrating to carry on. A great shame, since the presence of Forms in most arts gives an early signpost to future development.

Forms, performed alone, are a choreographed routine of many effective techniques and as such serve as a library or oral tradition for the passing on of a styles technique. They are more than this however, since a form provides students with a structure on which to hang self-study, leading ultimately to a true meditative state.

By breaking each technique down to its essentials, the student becomes aware of exactly how he performs a move. Slow practice and minute study are important here and new factors are identified such as balance, centering, grounding, floating and flow.

What began as an exercise in techniques can now progress into specific training to be better able to perform these techniques. We have started to place reliance on the student himself and his own ability to put the elements together in a way that suits his individual physical, mental and emotional make up. He has started to be creative with these elements and so a martial artist is born.

At the same time we can begin to see that a martial arts training is valuable elsewhere. Speed and strength are generally useful physical attributes while the ability to focus or work with timing and distance are useful in any activity that involves movement. Improved balance, grounding, centering and flow are likewise useful in daily life for we find that these are not just physical abilities but also carry over to our emotional daily lives. Floating may be less obvious in its daily purpose - but how often is it helpful to spring lightly over some difficult event rather than getting caught in its intricacies? It is also in daily life that an ability to study oneself and clarify complex matters by meditation is a great help.

Operating with common aims and common principles, different martial arts styles can be seen in this context not as fighting styles, but as different learning structures. The actual fighting style of the practitioner being individually their own - a synthesis of the character they bring to their study and the changes they make in training itself.

CHAPTER 3

Development of routines as an aid to actual fighting.

Much that has been covered so far may well take place without the student's conscious understanding; until this arrives then progress is necessarily limited. In the meantime it is likely that four types of training will be used.

1. Basics - detail work on the basic techniques can simplify actions making them faster and stronger. At the same time ensuring that a student is using his body correctly - here we can most easily eliminate old habits and begin to develop correct postures. Slow training in basics leads to an understanding of the use of individual muscle groups which is integrated into speed and power.

2. Partner work - distance and timing become vital elements physically while touch sensitivity and psychological factors become clearer here as intimidation becomes a real feature of training. Long term training in partner work develops the idea that study of martial arts is non-competitive since the need to win often gets in the way of learning.

3. Forms - these allow us to look both inward and outward. Inward to our own tensions and restrictions. Outward to visualise an opponent so that learning from partner work we may come to understand what the moves are actually doing in a person to person fight situation.

4. Freestyle - an opportunity to put it all together, to experiment and equally deal with the unexpected - a real opponent doing what he likes when he likes, not a predetermined routine.

These routines start to greatly improve mind, body, co-ordination with emphasis increasingly on relaxation and tension working together, much stress is placed on looseness of hips and use of the bodies individual muscle groups as an integrated whole, around its dynamic centre - the hara or tantien (about 4 ins below the navel) This centering relates the actions of the limbs to balance and direction of motion, aiding a student's ability to commit to techniques. Commitment becomes an important aspect of training and is often misunderstood, being taken to mean an expenditure of all available energy rather than the reality of not keeping anything back. Posture is worked on with these training techniques covering straightness of back, use of the feet (with heels on the ground for grounding and full delivery of power, also flying techniques where floating is important and power delivered from the centre).

To achieve these physical changes involves inputting them through the mind which cannot help but be likewise affected. Over a period of many years the mind also becomes more flexible, better grounded and more centred. As we understand our physical commitment we begin to practice its emotional equivalent and understand the place of intellect in overseeing both.

Each of these types of training offers lessons and opportunities for a student to forward his skill, to look at his own make-up and study how his partner/opponent works.

But they are not fighting and ability in any one is only a means to an end.

Like a painter practising his drawing, brush strokes, awareness of light and textures who does not know what his creative painting will look like until he does it, the martial artist does not know how he will fight until the situation arises and he automatically pulls all the elements of his training together. This is a unique blend dependent upon that individual and uses his creative unconscious to operate at an automatic level, the conscious mind being left to deal with the direction of events.

It may be likened to being offered a library to study, in the knowledge that someone will one day ask you a very difficult question. Now the question may not even look like a question, and the library may not contain the answer but when it happens your answer has to be good enough, even if you need to make it up.

The better your answer the better you survive and how you put it together depends solely on you.

In one way or another we are asked questions like this in life every day. It is the internal aspect of martial arts which affects the way we answer.

So we can now see that martial arts are not so much about fighting as the study of anything that might be useful and by means of training exercises, the development of ways of behaving that will be advantageous to our ability to survive. We have seen that training builds speed, strength and focus, develops balance, centering, grounding, floating and flow. That intimidation and fear come to the fore in partner work so giving us an opportunity to learn how to deal with these. Visualisation techniques enter the training hall when we imagine an opponent in front of us and combines with touch sensitivity when we remember what it feels like to contact a training partner, this combination ultimately enabling us to "feel " what is going on inside that other person's body.

Meditation too begins at this level when the ritual of a form allows the mind to release control of our body becoming at once observer and observed.

A clear mind in a relaxed body each acting in harmony with the other.

None of this is actual fighting but all of it builds techniques and abilities that help us to survive conflict situations. The crossover of mind and body begins here when we observe that in seeking desirable physical characteristics these also develop in our mental and emotional lives.

CHAPTER 4

Individual limitations.

When a junior grade achieves black belt they are often greeted with "Welcome to the beginner's class!" at a time when they feel that they have just achieved the greatest goal of their training. It is however a recognition that they have learnt the basics - like a child they have learnt how to spell, have a workable vocabulary and can form workable sentences, now they are moving into the creative area of storytelling. The techniques are in place (and will constantly require attention) but the emphasis turns to self-expression - how the individual may best put these techniques together for themselves.

This is a major change and takes a long time to establish. Along the road most students find that they continue to train hard putting more and more effort into the physical training, perhaps travelling to various courses and are even rewarded with higher grades - 2nd or 3rd grade black belt for instance. However whether they know it or not two things are happening:

- 1) They approach the limit of what purely physical training can achieve.
- 2) They start to learn about emotional aspects of conflict and training, albeit subconsciously.

Put another way one phase is ending and another is beginning - until this happens the next stage of development cannot move on. This is perhaps the hardest part yet when there comes the realisation that it is the student's own emotional make up that is limiting him. All the training routines - basics, partner work, forms and freestyle have set this up, built to the point where he must (and now can) look at what he has become so that he can begin to understand what he might be.

The training routines are just that, choreographed routines, it is only when a student makes them his own by entering into them fully with all his mind and spirit as well as his body that they can become more than choreography. To achieve this requires a deep commitment to understanding and dealing with the student's own subconscious, his deepest thoughts and emotions. For without this then the emotional blocks that hold him back cannot be removed. Recognition of anger, love and fear, what they are and the part they play in our lives is essential so that the conflict between them may be dealt with.

It is these conflicts, working within our bodies that create tensions and these tensions which restrict our speed and power.

So we return to training routines where study of posture can be interpreted as basic body language and fear may be recognised from the way we behave. It is this aspect which is frequently the most difficult, since the popular macho image of martial arts mitigates against the honest open acceptance of fear. And so it is that many students are unable to move forward - this is a road requiring total commitment and honesty. To give these two and yet remain fallibly human is not easy; fortunately there are teachers who can give pointers along the way.

For example, an instructor may see that his student behaves in a fearful way, seeing too that the fear reaction slows the technique. By handling his fear this student may remove the reaction that gets in the way of effectively dealing with his opponent. Likewise anger may well increase energy levels but can severely put off timing, centering, grounding and flow leading to dissipation of those energies, lack of focus and reduced effectiveness. In the same way a student who suppresses his darker emotions exhibiting only gentle caring may lack the focus to deal with immediate danger.

Training routines provide a forum and a context for this emotional work as the student begins to understand the link between his mind and body - they are closely connected - what occurs in one will be reflected in the other. In particular students need to learn to work together physically and verbally setting up new situations, making suggestions, observing each other, trying things in different ways. This requires that the competitive side of a macho ego be replaced with the ability to trust and learn from mistakes.

Consequently the senior student will often start to train very slowly so as to more easily notice these effects or will begin to study meditation and other tools of emotional management - because they work.

They work both as a means of releasing the body to better performance and as a way of dealing with pre-fight conflict or post-fight release. Focus is fine but real focus can only come from a relaxed person who has reached a manageable accommodation with their inner emotional conflicts. The student begins to learn that resilience is crucial, mentally as well as physically and that far from giving up speed and power these are enhanced - a healthy mind in a healthy body becomes an absolute prerequisite for further development.

CHAPTER 5

Applying training to conflict

Gradually it becomes clear as our notional student develops that martial art is not about goal orientation, winning or losing. It is about being the best human being you can - in relation to whoever it is you are confronted with.

How does our student beat an opponent - after he is attacked - before the attack - in the preceding argument - before the argument - when eye contact was first made - when he chose to enter an environment of potential conflict? If we say yes to any of these and not the other then he is missing an opportunity. Surely this is a full time activity and began when the student first decided to study martial arts.

On a simplistic level we can see that what works with one opponent will not necessarily work with another and so a student must learn to deal with each opponent differently - this is the beginning of a broad view. The view simply is that martial arts are the study and practice of our relationships with particular emphasis on heavy conflict.

So emphasis grows gradually on study of the opponent. This may be an early feature or come only after many years of introspection but it is important that it happens so that the very specific techniques of fighting can be put in the context where they are likely to be useful - that of social interaction.

It is said that some martial arts masters can read minds and this is often seen as a magical ability that gives them a sort of unreal protection. But there are many people who can read intent and state of mind. These are people who study other people - psychologists, criminologists, or "mind reading magicians", mothers who study their children. This is not magic rather a finely tuned human skill.

So who is the most successful martial artist, one who is constantly fighting and winning or one who achieves what they want without physical fighting?

When faced with an opponent, study of his body and particularly the eyes can give good indication of what is going on for him - anger, nervousness, hate, fear can all be read as can the tensions that will restrict bodily movement. Our student will also learn how these strong emotions are "catching" and may be unknowingly picked up from someone (the way fear is communicated in a crowd) and how to notice this, so that he may deal with it.

That these emotions may also be projected intentionally then follows as does an understanding that such games are ultimately self-limiting. Martial arts practitioners pick up on the esoteric, developing intuition and opening up emotional awareness because this is a process that works.

A martial artist should become able to understand the individuals around him and in this way enhance his own survival not only in a physical sense but also as a means to survival in a better relationship with them. Awareness with understanding aids survival - it also makes living easier. Better relationship with our environment leads to harmony and to the dissipation of conflict at an early stage.

So we find that development of practical physical techniques leads to an opening up to the world when a student begins to understand how it works and his place in it. Such a martial artist has almost come full circle for in seeking to succeed in conflict he has come to understand better how to live with it. The harmony referred to in this case is not a passive matter of allowing oneself to be swept along on the tide of life. It is a very active process, like the progress of a swan, stately calm movement is achieved with lots of activity out of sight - with a swan under water, - with a martial artist in his subconscious which he has trained to behave on the same principles as his body.

Maintaining this harmony is a constant process which gets easier with practice as the student becomes more comfortable and more skilled in dealing with his ever changing environment and the people in it. The emotional changes required to relate to other students are at first quite gross but with progress they are minimalized. So too are physical techniques - some Forms have a version with large movements and one with small movements - the difference is that only a skilled practitioner can achieve effectiveness of technique with small movements which require a myriad of fine muscular movements all delicately co-ordinated. The end result is that the student can perform with such slight movements that it is difficult to see what is actually happening until the techniques are done with an opponent.

It is for all the foregoing reasons that individual martial artists are drawn to philosophies such as Zen and Taoism which offer world views and emotional tools to match his needs and in perfect alignment with the mental/physical balance that develops.

A martial artist who does not understand the limitations of hierarchical power structures embodied in most western paradigms limits the achievement of his own potential as a martial artist and as a human being. These world views promote concepts of power conflict as a means of social relationship without real regard for the well-being of others so far have they gone from their original theses. The personal survival of a martial artist however promotes a view of oneness with others that recognises similarities as well as differences. Philosophies that deal with fear, love, flexibility, openness and caring, advance technique and harmony and are immensely practical in that they offer a pragmatic spiritual equivalent to the physical characteristics a martial artist seeks.

CHAPTER 6

Personal Development the logical end?

The very physical world of fighting now seems, by these arguments, to have expanded out of all recognition. This has taken in not just physical training but also the visualisation technique of "seeing" an imaginary opponent or "feeling" one's centre. Study of self has been used as a starting point for studying others and I have put forward the justification for these practices and philosophies that they work, in the sense that they help us to survive better in life as a whole as well as in fighting itself when our pre-combat skills have proved inadequate.

It is a logical development that has been followed by many in the past connecting the warrior and the monk. At first a connection which appears tenuous but has its own inevitability. Between these two aspects and the social world that we live in there is a balance which each of us in martial arts wish to achieve if we stay in it long enough.

The end result is that we seek to achieve our own maximum potential as individuals living in a social context (for without such a social context there cannot be human conflict). In seeking this we are automatically expressing ourselves and we can see that there is a long history of martial artists being seekers of learning and creative artists.

The pen, or brush, and sword have often been wielded by the same hand and many have found that it is only when they have thrown out the fighting style of their teacher in order to create their own that they can truly feel comfortable.

No man is an island (they say) and by becoming the best that we can as ourselves, as human beings, we maximise our ability to survive whatever is thrown at us, in whatever area of human activity. There is a French expression "to fit one's body" which is appropriate as well since when we do have the confidence that goes with this unity of self we can stand up anywhere without reservation.

The creative process of connecting our knowledge with our skills is unique to each of us and is fundamentally affected by the subconscious training in martial arts. By taking on this training as a tool we can use it in all spheres of our lives - its symbolism and principles hold true in day to day work or social interactions. Learning about opponents we learn to read everyone better. Understanding conflict we can understand and deal with it better from daily teasing, or a boardroom battle, to a car park confrontation. Training with our bodies martial artists come to know the importance of understanding the reality of what is going on, and not kidding themselves. This very basic honesty and many other spiritual qualities are the theoretical foundation of many martial arts schools.

Again this is true because they work - for example one who lies to others has trouble being honest with himself and will not be able to judge situations clearly, there is always a conflict within that gets in the way.

So finally we come full circle, in seeking to deal with the conflict outside the martial artist finds that he must deal with that which exists within.

Many start training unknowing where it may lead and without clear guidance cease to progress or give up.

Perhaps it is clear that each individual student may go as far down this road as they wish. I hope too it is clear that this is a very personal road and yet one of very deep community with those who share the way. Also I believe that through our deepest expression of self we can become better able to be happy, which is surely the best kind of survival.

CHAPTER 7

Spirituality

Human spirituality is a very emotional matter and I suggest that indeed our spirit and our emotional self may be considered one and the same. For practical purposes this seems to work and if we follow the logic of conflict to its end we see that a martial artist will at some point approach the ultimate inner conflict of death. For without the internal fear of death there is no reason to hold back in an all-out fight either. How each person comes to terms with their own mortality varies, and since by now we have expanded our scope to cover the world, the universe and everything then the solution could come from anywhere.

The point is that martial artists are in a forum where this issue itself becomes limiting and constitutes a block to further development, for a day to day fighter it presents itself every-day, for the rest of us, martial arts training is probably the closest we get to regular, all out physical violence. The mugging victim, abused child or battered wife have violence imposed on them, and feel helpless within their situation, however by making a deliberate choice to study and personally become involved with violence we can begin to take some control of our life and our death .

There are many who would take the argument of survival one stage further, saying that the ultimate end is to enable us to survive better after death. It may be that I simply haven't got there yet, but this is one aspect I have not personally experienced. It is anyhow a much more difficult area again, and one which needs no comment here in any event, since any student able to deal with this view of their life will probably have gone through everything else en route. Suffice it to say that for those who seek it, the principles, practices and philosophies that help make martial arts techniques work better have been widely used in relation to the spirit probably for as long (or longer) than in martial arts.

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