

## Chapter 1

# Better Than a Barroom Brawl

---

### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Understanding what the martial arts are
  - ▶ Finding out about martial arts history
  - ▶ Recognizing that anyone can succeed
  - ▶ Dispelling misconceptions
  - ▶ Preconditioning to get ready for training
- 

**T**he martial arts, as systems of combat techniques, have been around for at least 4,000 years. (The ability to punch someone has been around much longer than that, but I'm talking about complete systems of martial arts techniques.)

How do I know that the martial arts are at least 4,000 years old? I know it, not because *I'm* 4,000 years old, but because ancient stories describe martial arts competitions, and old, old poems recount the deeds of brave martial artists. Sculptures, drawings, and paintings from eons ago show people punching and kicking each other in a stylized way that suggests competition, not combat.

Chinese swordsman Sun T'zu's book of strategy, *The Art of War*, is more than 2,000 years old. Other combat manuals were written hundreds of years ago in China and Korea. All these things tell us that for thousands of years, people have been interested in learning ways to protect themselves and the ones they love. *The Book of Five Rings*, written 400 years ago by the warrior Miyamoto Musashi, is a classic treatise on combat strategy. The *Muye Dobo Tongji*, which was recently translated into English, is a Korean combat manual from 200 years ago.

Anything that has been around for such a long period of time has to have something going for it. Over thousands of years, the martial arts have become refined and organized. Now they're highly efficient methods for defending yourself, becoming physically fit, and impressing your friends with your jump-spinning kick.

## 10 Part I: Martial Arts Essentials

---

### *Kicks, Flips, and Other Stuff: What Are the Martial Arts?*

The martial arts aren't just collections of combat techniques that are taught along with some combat strategy — although you can learn combat techniques and combat strategy. The martial arts aren't just for self-defense — although self-defense can seem pretty pertinent when a mugger is standing between you and your car. But martial arts themselves are more than just methods of combat. They're systems that promote physical, spiritual, and psychological values.

In fact, early martial arts may have begun life as a ritual aspect of religion, according to many historians. Until recently, Sumo wrestling in Japan was performed as a Shinto divination ceremony. Who won and who lost, and how they did so, told the Shinto diviners a great deal about the world and what to expect in the near future. This is just one example of how what appear to be methods of kicking and throwing other people took on moral and philosophical elements.

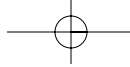
This is not to say that martial arts as they're practiced today are some form of religion. They're not. They do have spiritual elements, and they do invite practitioners to become better people. Respecting your teacher, learning to work hard, accept criticism, and finding out that you can do more than you ever thought possible helps you to grow as a person. How deeply you delve into the philosophical and character-building aspects is up to you — dig in!

### *Starting on the path*

The names of most martial arts end with the word *do* — Tae Kwon Do, Judo, and so on. Even Karate used to be called *Karate-do*, but the *do* has been dropped in recent times. The word *do* means *way of*. Thus, Tae Kwon Do can be translated to mean, “the way of the hand and foot.”

*The way* simply means *the path*. A martial art is a path that you take, a journey that you embark on . . . and you don't even know where the heck you're going. You just have to take it on faith that it's somewhere that you want to be.

If you think about it, the use of *the way* makes sense. If martial arts were just sports or a means of keeping fit, we wouldn't call them *the way of*. . . . After all, no one calls soccer “the way of the head and feet.”



## Martial arts mythology

Once upon a time, as folklore from Asia tells us, supernatural creatures called the *Tengu* practiced the warrior arts. The Tengu deigned to instruct worthy humans in these secret arts (no word on who instructed the Tengu). To gain credentials for their martial arts (this was long before the International Sport Karate Association

was founded), teachers often claimed that the Tengu had taught them their arts.

I don't mean to suggest that these early teachers were liars, but you can draw your own conclusions.

## *Achieving harmony and balance: It's more than self-defense*

Martial arts incorporate a complete way of living in harmony and balance, within you and in relation to the outside world. This harmony and balance is achieved through physical effort, meditation, and character-building exercises and requirements.

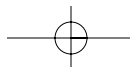
All martial arts teachers expect practitioners to become “better” people. Each style has a method for teaching students to better themselves. For instance, in Tae Kwon Do, the *five tenets* are taught. All Tae Kwon Do practitioners are expected to follow the five tenets and display the qualities of courtesy, integrity, perseverance, self-control, and indomitable spirit. The five tenets are more important — much more important — than the ability to do a flying side kick.

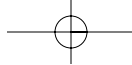


People sometimes confuse aerobic-class martial arts, such as cardio-kickboxing, with the real thing. Just because you work out with your Tae Bo tape each day, does not mean that you're prepared to defend yourself against a mugger. Only specific self-defense or martial arts training can give you the knowledge and experience that you need to defend yourself.

## *What It Ain't: Martial Arts Misconceptions*

Frankly, its slightly sinister reputation was one of the reasons that I began training in the martial arts. I knew martial arts were *not* aerobics, and that appealed to me.





## 12 Part I: Martial Arts Essentials

---

Martial arts are definitely not for people who are unwilling to work hard, sustain a bruise or two, and cultivate a certain toughness of mind and body. On the other hand, misconceptions about the martial arts that might stop a person from trying them. I try to dispel some of these misconceptions in the following sections.

### *Clarifying the spiritual aspect*

Martial artists are not all Buddhists or followers of some obscure religious sect (although some of them are and do). Many martial artists are Presbyterians. I know one who is a Methodist minister. Others are Muslims, Catholics, Zoroastrians, agnostics, and atheists. It doesn't matter what religion you practice: Anyone can be a martial artist. When martial artists talk about spiritual matters, they mean a higher being or a higher level of existence — not a specific religious creed.

### *Demystifying the black belt mystique*

The idea of the black belt “lethal weapon” is sorely misunderstood. To become a black belt, you don't have to be initiated by doing any of the following:

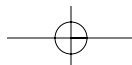
- ✓ Defeating a black belt in a no-holds-barred fight to the finish
- ✓ Injuring or maiming innocent (or even guilty) people
- ✓ Firewalking across burning coals

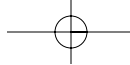
You don't have to do anything remotely like the misconceptions that are listed. I know it may sound boring, but you become a black belt through dedicated practice and perseverance. And no, you don't have to register with the local police department when you earn your black belt. Although you can if you want.

### *Violence: Turning the other cheek*

It seems hard to believe, but martial artists may be, as a group, the most peace-loving, laid-back bunch of pacifists you ever met. All martial arts emphasize nonviolence. Using martial arts techniques to attack another person is never acceptable. The martial arts are to be used only to defend or counterattack.

Martial artists are taught to use their skills only in self-defense (or in defense of someone else). They should never attack another person. If an option to fighting is available, such as running away, they're trained to take it.





However, martial artists who must fight use only the amount of force necessary to end the fight. Along with fighting skills come certain responsibilities. People are justly outraged when trained boxers or other fighters use their skills outside the ring in an unprovoked attack or excessively in self-defense.

Trained fighters who go beyond what's called for are more severely punished than untrained people who panic and lose control. The punishment is more extreme because trained people know what they're doing and are intentionally inflicting more physical damage than is absolutely necessary.

## *Why all the board-breaking stuff?*

Some martial arts styles, such as Tae Kwon Do and some forms of Karate, require board and brick breaking. Martial artists joke about breaking boards with their foreheads, but it's never attempted — at least not by legitimate martial artists. What they do at the circus is their own business.

Boards, bricks, or concrete blocks are broken using combat techniques, such as punches and kicks. You may be wondering, "Why break boards? How many times has a board attacked you?" The answer is that a board-wielding maniac has never attacked me, but I will be perfectly prepared should I ever encounter one. In fact, martial artists break boards for several reasons.

### *Full contact application*

First, martial artists usually don't spar full contact with sparring partners, at least not on a daily basis. You can run through sparring partners pretty quickly if you knock one out every afternoon. Breaking a pine board that's one-inch thick, which is the equivalent of breaking a person's ribs, gives you a sense of the power that you need to actually stop an attacker. Being able to break boards consistently, under different circumstances, gives the martial artist confidence that she can produce the same amount of power against an attacker.

### *Developing correct technique*

In addition, you must execute techniques correctly to break a board. If you don't execute the technique properly, your hand or foot will bounce off the board — and that stings . . . plenty. Board-breaking, therefore, helps martial artists correct and perfect their technique. Further, to break a board, you must strike through the target, thus doing the greatest amount of damage. It can be difficult to learn this skill using any other method.

### *Peer pressure: Mental discipline*

Finally, board-breaking improves mental discipline. If you tell yourself that this board is never going to break, then you're right. You have to decide that

## 14 Part I: Martial Arts Essentials

you want to hit the block of wood hard enough to break it and that you *can* hit it hard enough to break it. And if you give up at the last minute, everyone watching will know.



More than one person has watched a martial artist break a board or a brick and then tried to do the same thing with the scrap lumber in the garage. Don't try this at home. Board-breaking should only be done by trained martial artists under the supervision of a trained instructor.



Although many misconceptions about martial arts circulate, a student at a well-run school will always feel safe and confident during practice (see Chapter 4).

### *Pick a Flavor, Any Flavor: The Different Types*

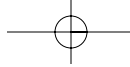
This section supplies you with a brief rundown of many of the different types of martial arts that exist today. This section gives you the basic defining characteristics of each type. For more information about the different types of martial arts, get something to drink, get comfy, and flip on over to the appropriate chapter in Part III.

#### *Chinese martial arts*

Over the thousands of years that martial arts have been practiced, hundreds of Chinese martial arts have developed. Unfortunately for people who like clearly defined categories, most Chinese martial arts fall under the name *Kung Fu* or *Wushu*, broad terms meaning something like *human effort*. Practically anything can, and does, fall into this category, including cleaning the kitchen and doing the laundry. But we still use the term *Kung Fu* for lack of a better one.

#### *Jeet Kune Do*

Bruce Lee, the founder of Jeet Kune Do, was a Wing Chun Kung Fu practitioner for many years before he became dissatisfied with the style — he felt that it was somehow incomplete as a fighting system. He was interested in the purely defensive aspect of martial arts, so he developed a system of fighting that was, in essence, tailored by each individual to suit his needs. He advocated learning from many different martial arts and keeping only those techniques and tactics that work well for you.



## Everybody was Kung Fu fighting

The Kung Fu types are all different from each other. The different types tended to be passed on in family groups. Sometimes, the teacher would refrain from teaching his students all the techniques in a system. I suspect that this was so the teacher could always defeat any student who challenged him.

Monastery-based martial arts were usually taught to others in secrecy. In Zen Buddhism,

physical effort and movement, when done correctly, is thought to aid enlightenment, which explains why all the monks and nuns spent so much time learning some pretty hairy techniques and tactics. See, David Carradine and *Kung Fu* weren't that far off the mark

Along the same lines, many martial artists begin training in a traditional martial art and then alter or modify it to better suit their needs. Then they begin teaching this “eclectic” art to others. (For more on Jeet Kune Do, see Chapter 22.)

### *Kung Fu*

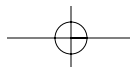
A complete understanding of Kung Fu (Chapter 15) takes a lifetime to develop. Over 400 different kinds of Kung Fu exist, with some resembling Karate or Aikido (see the following). Generally, grappling techniques aren't taught. Weapons are used in some kinds of Kung Fu but not all. Chinese weapons vary widely from chain whips to paired swords to segmented staffs.

All Kung Fu schools teach postures, guards, and fist and foot attacks, as well as *forms* (predetermined patterns of movement). Sometimes, Kung Fu styles are classified as Northern or Southern style, with *Northern styles* emphasizing foot techniques and *Southern styles* emphasizing hand techniques. A distinction is also made between inner and outer Kung Fu styles. *Inner-style* Kung Fu focuses on chi and philosophical elements of training, and *outer-style* Kung Fu focuses on force and rapid movement.

### *T'ai Chi*

T'ai Chi (Supreme Ultimate Fist) is one of the oldest martial arts in the world. It's so ancient that its origins have been lost. Nothing is known about its early history, although its legendary founder is the Taoist Chang Zhangfeng. T'ai Chi consists of slow, connected movements used mainly as a means for keeping the body in shape and relieving stress. Truly accomplished practitioners can also use its techniques in self-defense.

The three segments of T'ai Chi practice are weapons training, push hands training, and *forms* (often called *kata* or *hyung*, these are precise patterns of specific martial arts movements). The art emphasizes practicing moderation in all things, following the Middle Way — the Way of Balance and Harmony —



## 16 Part I: Martial Arts Essentials

instead of going from one extreme to another, such as extreme austerity or complete indulgence, and understanding the importance of yielding, thus allowing the attacker to defeat himself. (For more on T'ai Chi, see Chapter 23.)

### *Japanese martial arts*

Formal martial arts systems sprang into being in Japan in a more militarized way than they did in China. These systems were formed around combat methods to be used in battle. The Samurai, for example, were mounted warriors trained in attacking techniques, self-defense techniques, and all aspects of sword fighting.

The Japanese Samurai were high-ranking noble warriors who practiced the combat arts and controlled the government of Japan for many centuries. Like medieval chivalric knights in Europe, the Samurai were expected to follow a strict code of conduct. The Samurai ideal was difficult to actually practice — many warriors failed to attain it.

### *Peasantly surprised*

Peasants, on the other hand, learned martial arts techniques mostly to defend themselves (often against the Samurai). The Samurai were clever: They forbade peasants from owning weapons, such as swords. The peasants were even cleverer: They used anything that they could get their hands on as weapons.

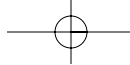
### *Japanese weapons*

Japanese martial arts weapons are unusual, to say the least. *Nunchuku*, the Karate weapon consisting of two short sticks linked by a chain, was actually a flail used for threshing rice. It became a martial arts weapon when some enterprising peasant used it to thresh a Samurai (or maybe just an irritating neighbor).

## Out of the closet

The *Boxer Rebellion of 1900* was a rebellion by Chinese nationalists against foreign rule. These “boxers” were martial artists who had been trained in secret societies, some of which still exist today. When an international army crushed the rebellion, many of the boxers fled to California, where they joined the Chinese-American community. In California, they continued to teach their martial arts in secret.

Bruce Lee was one of the first individuals to teach Chinese martial arts to people who weren't Chinese. He felt that the knowledge should be shared with anyone willing to put forth the effort. As a result, Lee was threatened and even severely beaten at one time. But in true Bruce Lee fashion, he didn't let it stop him.



The *tonfa*, a stick with a handle attached at a right angle, started out as a crank on a handmill that was used to grind rice. Fighting staffs, in all their variations, were originally walking sticks. In the hands of peasants, chains became whips, scythes served as swords, and scraps of metal became throwing stars.

Women of high rank also had to contend with the Samurai and other hoodlums. Because the noble women could possess weapons, they often chose the *naginata*, a bladed weapon similar to a halberd. The *naginata* could effectively counter a sword. Women routinely trained in *naginata-do*, so they could defend their homes. Women also concealed short daggers, called *kaiken*, in their clothes. Now you know why the Samurai treated high-ranking women with respect. (For more on weapons, see Chapter 12.)

### *Aikido*

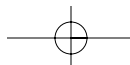
When translated, Aikido means “the Way of Harmony with Universal Energy.” Aikido stresses the harmony of mind, body, and moral outlook. This martial art, founded in 1931 by Ueshiba Morihei, is based on elements of Jujutsu, a grappling art. Aikido, however, is a purely defensive art. Its quick, decisive movements are designed to use the attacker’s momentum against himself. Aikido doesn’t teach punches or kicks, although sometimes weapons — especially the fighting staff — are taught.

Aikido techniques fall into two categories: *controlling techniques* and *throwing techniques*. The techniques are taught in a way that’s intended to help students surmount any physical or emotional barriers. Aikido practitioners are trained to become more relaxed and harmonious within themselves and within the outside world. (Turn to Chapter 18 for more on Aikido.)

### *Judo*

Judo (the Way of Gentleness) is a defensive martial art that was created in 1882 by Jigoro Kano. It is based on Jujutsu, an ancient martial art that relies on grappling, throwing, and joint-locking. Judo emphasizes throwing an attacker off balance and using the attacker’s momentum against himself. Judo practitioners work on flexibility, balance, speed, and finesse. Alertness, serenity, calmness, and self-discipline are essential elements of Judo practice. No weapons are used in Judo.

Although the founder of Judo discouraged competition — he felt that Judo was a personal means of training oneself — Judo competition has become increasingly popular. It first appeared as an Olympic sport in 1964. Judo, which is an obligatory sport in Japanese schools, is one of the most popular martial arts in the world. (See Chapter 17 for more on Judo.)



# 18

**Part I: Martial Arts Essentials**

## *Okinawan martial arts*

Settlers and monks brought Chinese martial arts with them when they traveled to Okinawa, an island off the coast of Japan. A style of unarmed combat called *Te* had been practiced in Okinawa for many years. The Chinese techniques were combined with *Te* to create *Kara-te* or *Chinese hand*. Although Karate is famous as a martial art from mainland Japan, it actually originated in Okinawa.

### *From China hand to empty hand*

In the twentieth century, the meaning of the word *Kara-te* was changed from *China hand* to *empty hand* by using a different set of characters that were pronounced the same way. In other words, the founder of modern Karate, a patriotic Japanese martial artist, didn't want his students to think that they were learning a Chinese martial art.

### *Karate*

Karate is a centuries-old style of martial art that incorporates techniques from Chinese and Japanese martial arts. Karate (see Chapter 14) sometimes uses Japanese weapons, such as nunchuku, but bare hands and feet are the primary fighting implements.

Although many different styles of Karate exist, they all have some things in common. Karate uses striking techniques such as kicks, punches, and sweeps. *Grappling* — throws, pins, and holds similar to wrestling — isn't used; the Karate practitioner intends to stay on his own two feet. Speed of movement, power of techniques, and timing of attack are all taught. Mastery can take years, and many advanced *Karate-ka* (Karate practitioners) say you can never master the art.

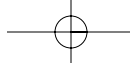
## **Make love, not war**

In Silla Kingdom Korea (A.D. 668–935), young nobles who were preparing for military leadership were called the *Hwarang* (flowering youth.) Like the Japanese Samurai, they were instructed in martial strategy and were expected to live up to an ideal of loyalty, courage, and justice. This code of conduct was called *Hwarang-do*.

In 1231, the Mongols invaded and occupied Korea. Later, they were expelled. Korea then closed itself off to the outside world. Only China was allowed access to Korea. Because of its

isolation, Korea was nicknamed the *Hermit Kingdom*.

Military leaders and all high-ranking individuals were expected to train in martial arts until late in the fourteenth century. What happened then? Confucianism replaced Buddhism as the dominant philosophical belief among Koreans. Confucianism, as a philosophy, disapproves of war and martial deeds and would happily do away with warriors. Cultural and intellectual achievements are considered more important than any battle.



## Korean culture rises again

Japan occupied Korea at the beginning of the twentieth century and could not be persuaded to let go of the country until after World War II. During this time, the practice of martial arts was forbidden, as were most Korean cultural practices. Apparently the Japanese wanted the Koreans to forget that they were Korean.

No such luck. After the Japanese left Korea, the previously banned martial arts flourished. General Hong Hi Choi, the founder of modern Tae Kwon Do, consolidated many of the different Korean styles into one. In the 1950s, the name *Tae Kwon Do* was given to this new martial art. Now, it's as popular as Karate.

## *Korean martial arts*

In Korea, Chinese martial arts affected the development of Subak and Tae Kyun, the early Korean martial arts. Korea had isolated itself from everyone except China, so China's martial arts influence was the only one that it absorbed.

### *Hapkido*

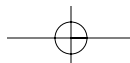
Hapkido (the Way of Coordinated Power) is a modern martial art based on the traditional Korean art of Yu-Sol. All techniques are chosen and used solely for their practical application in self-defense. The unnecessary, difficult, and flashy techniques have been eliminated, leaving a set of highly effective techniques that can be used in any fighting situation.

Hapkido was organized and systematized in the 1930s by Choi Yong Shul. He polished the techniques of Yu-Sol and added techniques from Aikido to develop an art that uses both direct linear attacks and circular movements to redirect an attacker's energy. (For more on Hapkido, see Chapter 20.)

### *Tae Kwon Do*

When Tae Kwon Do was first introduced to the United States, it was called *Korean Karate* to show its relationship to the well-known martial art. Now Tae Kwon Do is recognized in its own right as a complete fighting system. Like Karate, Tae Kwon Do teaches punches and kicks. Tae Kwon Do is sometimes thought to be a kicking art, but numerous hand techniques are taught as well. They just don't look as cool as the spectacular jumping kicks.

Tae Kwon Do teaches techniques similar to Aikido, such as *joint-locking* (manipulating the joints to control and attacker) and *vital point-striking* (attacking vulnerable parts of the body, such as the throat and groin). Tae Kwon Do stresses the importance of the correct balance of mind, body, and spirit. (See Chapter 16 for more on Tae Kwon Do.)



## From India with love: Flying monks and nuns

Martial arts first developed in India. Historians know that martial arts first developed in India because . . . well, trust me, they know it. From India, martial arts spread throughout China, Japan, and Korea over a period of centuries. Bodhidharma (A.D. 460–534), an Indian monk, founded Zen Buddhism and left India to spread his message. According to legend, he taught martial arts, as well as Zen Buddhism, to the monks he encountered. During his travels, Bodhidharma arrived at the famous Shaolin temple, a monastery in the Hunan province of China. The Shaolin monastery was founded in the late fifth century to honor Bodhiruchi, a devout Buddhist monk. According to legend, Bodhidharma taught his martial arts techniques to the monastics at the temple. This aspect of the legend is in dispute, although it's possible, even probable, that he brought some method of physical exercise — perhaps a form of yoga — with him.

What is not in dispute is that the Shaolin monastery and its inhabitants managed to irritate

the unstable government of the region an average of about once a week. Because the monastery sheltered rebels and dissidents, as well as monks and nuns (some of the monks and nuns were also rebels and dissidents), government forces destroyed it repeatedly. Eventually, it was moved to the Fukien province in the south. The second Shaolin temple was also destroyed. This time, the monks and nuns scattered permanently, becoming itinerant martial arts teachers who earned a precarious living. (Most martial arts instructors will tell you that little has changed today.)

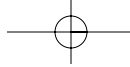
Many modern martial arts claim to have originated at the Shaolin temple — much like in earlier times, when teachers claimed that the Tengu had taught them. Although martial arts historians (yes, there is such a thing as a martial art historian) dispute which aspects of the Bodhidharma/ShaoLin temple legend are true, doubt doesn't cloud the belief that the practice of martial arts steadily grew and spread throughout China and all of Asia.

## Indonesian, Filipino, and other martial arts

As the practice of martial arts spread throughout the world, many cultures became influenced by it, including Indonesian, Thai, and Filipino cultures, which developed their own indigenous styles of martial arts. These styles are less well-known than Japanese, Chinese, and Korean martial arts, but they're becoming more popular and more widely recognized in the West.

### *Escrima*

Escrima, meaning *skirmish*, is a Filipino martial art that teaches stick fighting. Two other arts, *Arnis* and *Kali*, are also common in the Philippines. All three arts teach many of the same techniques, strategies, and tactics. They just go by different names in different parts of the country. In the West, the name that is most well-known is Escrima. This martial art came into existence in the ninth century and was influenced by Indonesian and Chinese warriors.



In the sixteenth century, Spain invaded the Philippines. The Philippine natives had mostly wooden weapons to defend themselves against the swords, so they learned how to strike to the attacker's body (rather than the attacker's sword) with their sticks. Techniques of fencing and swordsmanship influenced the development of Escrima. Escrimadors (Escrima practitioners) use sticks and their hands and feet to fight. One form of Escrima also uses a sword and dagger. (For more on Escrima, see Chapter 19.)

### *Muay Thai*

A martial art called Muay Thai (see Chapter 21) developed in Thailand hundreds of years ago. It may have developed from Chinese martial arts, and soldiers may have used it as a part of military training. Excellent Muay Thai boxers could draw huge crowds of people. The boxers often performed to honor the king. Even now, modern Thai boxers are able to draw huge crowds.

Muay Thai is the forerunner of modern kickboxing. But unlike kickboxing, Muay Thai has a ritual and philosophical background. It's also an extremely brutal martial art. Muay Thai boxers use elbows, knees, and shins, as well as hands and feet to strike. Muay Thai boxers generally have short careers.

## *Who, Me? Anybody Can Succeed!*

People often believe that they have to be a buff 20-year-old man to succeed at Karate (or Escrima or Muay Thai . . .). Or they think that a medical condition or disability means that they have to sit on the sidelines and watch their kids have all the fun. Not so.

### *It takes all kinds: Diversity "R" Us*

Anyone can participate in martial arts, and anyone can succeed. The buff 20-year-old men are often the ones who *don't* succeed because they're not willing to learn the lessons. They think they already know it all.



If you can commit to training, persevere, and simply try to become better than you were yesterday, you can be a success no matter where you're starting.

A typical martial arts school has students of both sexes, as well as students of all ages, abilities, physical conditions, and ethnic groups. I've taught children as young as 4 years old — and they also taught me . . . patience, that is. I've also taught 70-year-old white belt beginners. (On some days, I felt like a 70-year-old white belt beginner.)

## 22 Part I: Martial Arts Essentials

### *Medical problems and disabilities*

People with medical problems ranging from asthma to heart disease have participated in martial arts training. When I started, I had been suffering from rheumatoid arthritis for eight years. My condition actually improved the harder that I trained my body.

Those who are physically different can also succeed. One White Crane Kung Fu practitioner has been training from his wheelchair and recently received his teaching certificate. A high-ranking martial artist who taught me a great deal about sparring is deaf. I know of one martial arts instructor who is blind. People with muscular dystrophy, limited mobility, and other problems have succeeded in their martial arts training.

### *Focusing on the positive: Modification and adaptation*

How can it be that so many people with differing abilities have succeeded in martial arts? Simple. Martial arts are about becoming a better person. The martial arts are also about becoming more skilled and more capable of defending yourself. You can accomplish these goals in an infinite number of ways. I know of one black belt in Tae Kwon Do who has a permanent hand injury that prevents him from closing his hand to make a fist. He simply uses open hand techniques instead of punches.



Don't assume that just because you have a medical problem or disability you can't do certain techniques. It never hurts to try. But if you really *can't* do certain techniques, make sure that you speak with your instructor about good ways to modify and adapt the techniques that you're learning.

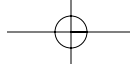
All techniques can be modified and adapted for people of differing abilities. Your progress and success is based on finding what you can do rather than focusing on what you can't do.

### *See your physician first*

Of course, before you embark on any physical exercise program, you should clear it with your physician first. Yes, you may have to admit that you want to take Kung Fu lessons, but that's better than fainting in the middle of your first class and then finding out that you're hypoglycemic.

## *It's All About You: The Benefits*

So why should you train in the martial arts? (Besides wanting to pull a Steven Seagal armlock on your boss the next time that he opens his big mouth.)



Practicing the martial arts has many benefits. Some of these benefits are obvious. Knowing how to kick an attacker in the groin can come in handy in a deserted parking lot on an early Monday morning. Exercising regularly improves your fitness level and can help you lose those extra pounds that you've put on since college.

But wait! There's more. Martial arts are intended to teach three things:

- ✓ Character
- ✓ Combat techniques
- ✓ Self-confidence

The benefits go beyond losing a dress size and improving your cardiovascular fitness. When you train in martial arts, you're expected to adhere to a certain code of conduct. You're expected to follow this code of conduct every day in all aspects of your life. You learn to be proud of yourself and the things that you can do.

## *Sitting couch potato, hidden tiger: Physical benefits*

Even if you're already in pretty good shape — heck, even if you're one of those buff 20-year-old men that I keep picking on — martial arts practice demands much more from your body than weight lifting regimens or standard aerobics classes.

When you practice martial arts, you develop strength, agility, flexibility, and endurance. These physical benefits can help make ordinary tasks, such as running after a mischievous 3-year-old, much easier. They can also improve your competence at other sports. You may even be able to beat your teenager at basketball now and then. (But I make no promises.)

## *Peaceful warrior: Mental and emotional benefits*

Mental and emotional benefits are also associated with training in the martial arts. You increase your self-confidence as you learn to control your body. Your self-esteem grows as you master new skills. Being able to see your ribs again, after they've been buried under fat for years, can lift even the most downtrodden of spirits.

## 24 Part I: Martial Arts Essentials

Self-defense skills may make you braver and more courageous, not just in the training hall but in the outside world, as well — and not just when confronting knife-wielding attackers, but when handling nasty bosses and edgy spouses.



I often tell people that the most dangerous martial artists are green belts, not black belts. In Tae Kwon Do, my main martial art, a green belt is an intermediate rank. At this stage, students have learned the basic techniques and are starting to feel tremendously confident of their physical skills — but they haven't developed much humility yet, so their judgment is poor. Watch out for this stage — don't let confidence become overconfidence and get you into situations you'd do better to avoid.

### *Becoming empowered*

Martial arts training can be empowering and liberating. When you train in the martial arts, you may be more willing to take risks and open up to new experiences. You may also become more assertive.



As Confucius once said, practice moderation in all things, including assertiveness. After a few months of training, I went from Walking Doormat to Crouching Tiger. The change seriously annoyed my friends and startled innocent co-workers. It was some time before I found the right balance and became assertive with important things and easygoing with unimportant things. (Although some would dispute that I'm ever easygoing with anything.)

### *New strength and beauty ideals: Who needs supermodels, anyway?*

Martial arts training teaches you that we're all beautiful when we do our forms right and that we're all strong when we execute our techniques correctly. We don't all have to be strong and beautiful in the same way — such as whatever version this month's *Glamour* or *Esquire* is pushing.

## Discovering your inner stupidity

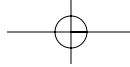
When training in the martial arts, you may tap into sides of your personality that you never knew you had. For instance, I never knew that I had a stupid side until I began training. I injured my knee once, and my doctor told me to rest it for two weeks.

"But I have a competition this weekend!" I wailed. I went to the competition anyway, made the injury worse and ended up having to stay off my knee for *three* weeks.

Prior to this time, I had never been interested in physical competition. Any excuse to avoid

physical exertion was a good excuse. For me, to choose to compete when I had been advised not to was a change of mind-altering proportions, at least according to certain family members who knew me when.

I hope you react in a slightly healthier way and listen to what your doctor says. But if you don't, allow me to recommend Chapter 7, which discusses injuries and injury prevention.

***Self-discipline and focus: Bye bye space cadet***

Mastering martial arts techniques leads to self-discipline and focus — both can benefit you in other areas of your life. You must regularly practice. You must repeat techniques thousands of times to master them. You must develop intense focus to do what you didn't think you could accomplish before, such as breaking boards with your bare hands.

***Check your worries at the door: Stress-Relief***

An intensely physical workout is stress relieving. You leave all your outside worries at the door. In the training hall, your only worry is to do the best you can (and to maybe avoid that jump-spinning-wheel kick coming at your head at 70 miles an hour).

***It's just a darn good time!***

One final benefit of martial arts training that's often overlooked is camaraderie. You train with interesting people from all walks of life. You root for each other as you master techniques, teach each other, and compete against each other. Almost all my closest friends are martial artists, and they come from diverse backgrounds. You find that you can share interests with people who are older than you, as well as those who are younger than you. You may enjoy having 10-year-olds cheer you on, as much as you enjoy cheering them on.

## ***Preconditioning Your Mind and Body***

So you're raring to go. Hold on there, cowboy. You have to do a couple of things first, such as choose a martial arts style (see Chapter 3) and a school or instructor (see Chapter 4). But even before you do that, you need to precondition your mind and body. That is, you need to get ready to get ready.

How do you get ready to get ready? First, you need to assess your physical condition. Your healthcare provider can help with this assessment. Although you can start learning martial arts no matter what condition you're in, it makes sense to spend a little time preparing your body for what lies ahead, especially if you spent most of the last ten years imitating a vegetable.

### ***Work out (or at least get off the couch)***

While you're choosing a martial arts style and school, you can start a light workout to help prepare yourself for your first training session. Because martial artists need to be flexible, you can do some light stretches a couple of times a day. Martial artists also need endurance. To help increase your endurance, you can start walking the dog every afternoon. Be sure to walk briskly or run. The dog will love it!

## 26 Part I: Martial Arts Essentials

---



You can also focus on fixing potential problem areas. If you have problems with your knees, for instance, you can spend some time at the gym building your leg muscles to help strengthen those knees.

### *Condition your mind*

Preconditioning your mind doesn't require as much physical effort as preconditioning your body, but it can be just as important. You're on the right track because you picked up *Martial Arts For Dummies*. You can also find other reference books on any of the specific martial arts that interest you. You can rent a couple of Bruce Lee movies to get you in the mood for practicing martial arts. Stop by a martial arts school and watch a class. Find someone who is a martial artist and interview her. Ask her what you can expect from training.

You can also think about what you want to get from your training. If you know your goals ahead of time, you'll be more likely to achieve them. If you want to lose weight and get in shape, for instance, you may have to make some changes to your diet as well as starting a martial arts class. But always approach your martial arts experience with an open mind. It's what you don't expect that's often the most rewarding aspect of martial arts training.

By giving yourself the opportunity to precondition your mind and body, you can be better prepared for the challenges of martial arts training. You may be less likely to suffer from burnout and injury if you spend some time getting ready to get ready. You'll also feel more confident about tackling the challenges of martial arts if you've walked around the blocks a couple of times before learning how to do a flying side kick.