

# Psychosocial Benefits of the Martial Arts: Myth or Reality?

## A Literature Review

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### Introduction

There is often controversy about whether or not the practice of martial arts leads to positive or negative psychological changes in the participants. There are many who claim that practicing the martial arts develops beneficial psychological changes and encourages good moral and ethical development. Some martial arts, such as judo, were developed with this goal in mind. In contrast, some claim that participating in socially sanctioned, combative activities facilitates violence and aggression. Most images of the martial arts in popular movies and television shows probably help spread this second claim. Certainly the popularity of pay-for-view, no-holds-barred, martial arts tournaments gives the general public a one-sided view of the martial arts and a cause to rally around for legislative regulation related to these arts. The changes in Asian martial arts through history could support either view. While the Asian martial arts grew out of an environment where one killed or was killed, in more recent, peaceful times the goals of many martial arts have changed to address more diverse goals such as personal growth and self-discipline.

If martial artists are concerned with becoming better people and reducing violence in themselves and in society, it is important to know which of these claims is true. They should also be prepared to defend their ability to practice the martial arts against social pressures and legislative bans or limitations. While there is substantial anecdotal evidence to support the positive and negative aspects of practicing the martial arts, it is important to assess whether scientific research substantiates one claim or the other. A primary goal of this paper is to summarize the empirical evidence in this area of research. Several other important questions that will be addressed include: a) Are the psychosocial changes gained from participation in the martial arts different from those gained from other activities? b) What specific aspects of martial arts training affect psychosocial changes? c) If martial arts practice is psychologically beneficial, is it an effective means for psychological treatment?

### Are the Martial Arts Beneficial for Us?

It is likely that there are both short-term and long-term psychosocial changes from practicing a martial art. There are only a few studies assessing the short-term effects of martial arts practice. In contrast to the lack of research on the short-term effects of martial arts training, there is a growing body of literature about the longer-term effects of martial arts practice. The findings of most of these studies show that the practice of martial arts leads to positive psychosocial changes in the participants. In general, there is an inverse relationship between belt rank or length of time practicing a martial art and anxiety, aggression, hostility and neuroticism. There is a positive correlation between length of time practicing or belt rank and self-confidence, independence, self-reliance.

One cross-sectional study controlled for self-selection and attrition by studying both current and former students of karate, tae kwon do or jujitsu. They found an inverse relationship between rank and aggression

in students studying in "traditional" settings. Former students also had these lower measures of aggression. This suggests a decrease in aggression can be attributed to training, not attrition. Martial arts practice cultivates decreases in hostility and feeling vulnerable to attack. They also lead to more easygoing and warmhearted individuals and increases in self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-control. The style of martial art may be relevant.

### **Are the Benefits from Martial Arts Practice Different From Other Activities?**

Asian martial arts have much in common with other physical activities (such as exercise and Western sports) including: physical activity, physical fitness, skills acquisition, and social activity. However, there are also points where they differ. Many Western sports tend to emphasize competition and winning while Asian martial arts have traditionally emphasized self-knowledge, self-improvement, and self-control. Unlike Western sports, Asian martial arts usually: teach self-defense, involve philosophical and ethical teachings to be applied to life, have a high degree of ceremony and ritual, emphasize the integration of mind and body, and have a meditative component. While exercise and physical fitness has a role in producing psychological benefits, it is likely that the non-physical aspects of the martial arts have a unique influence on the long-term, psychosocial changes seen in participants.

A number of studies support the hypothesis that the benefits from martial arts training are different from other activities. When assessed one year after they finished a one semester class, martial arts students showed an increase in their scores for feelings of self-control and lower scores for feelings of vulnerability and likelihood of attack. Physical fitness students showed no changes in these measures. One semester of taekwon do increased self-esteem which was not observed in the control subjects.

### **How do the Martial Arts Lead to these Changes?**

In order to apply these results to one's own practice, it is important to understand how martial arts training might lead to these positive changes. It is also important to know if these changes occur with all styles of martial arts and all styles of instruction. It can be argued that what we get out of the martial arts is what we bring into the practice. Nonetheless, there is also the possibility that martial arts training makes us grow beyond what we bring. Some studies have tried to demonstrate the importance of class content on the changes observed in subjects.

Nosanchuk and MacNeil (1989) examined the aggressive tendencies of participants at 7 schools offering karate, taekwon do, or jujitsu. At each school, they evaluated the relative importance of meditation in the class, the amount of respect the students showed towards the *sensei*, the *dojo*, and each other, the level of contact allowed to vital areas of the body, and the relative importance of *kata*. Based on this evaluation, they classified 4 of the schools as "traditional" (more meditation, respect and *kata*, less contact to vital areas) (***FEAR KNOT is considered a traditional school***) and 3 of them as "modern". More advanced students in the traditional schools showed lower scores for aggression than beginning students. There was no change in the scores of the students at the schools with the "modern" emphasis. Egan (1993) found that both traditional and modern styles of training led to improvements in general mental health. However, the traditional martial arts students showed significant increases in scores for self-acceptance which were not reported for the students with a modern emphasis in training. Most research supports the hypothesis that it is the training environment and style of instruction influencing these differences.

### **Are the Martial Arts Effective as a Means of Psychological Treatment?**

Recreational and fitness activities have been shown to be helpful for various special needs populations. Since martial arts practice can have beneficial outcomes, a number of people are looking to the martial arts as a means to treat psychological problems. For instance, Guthrie (1997) found that women recovering from

psycho-sexual abuse, eating disorders, substance abuse and growing up in dysfunctional families reported that karate training was helpful in their recovery.

One of the most cited studies in this area was conducted by Trulson (1986). Adolescents identified as juvenile delinquents were assigned to one of three groups. The first group received traditional tae kwon do training (involving meditation, warm-up exercises, brief lecture about tae kwon do, and the physical techniques of tae kwon do); the second group received modern tae kwon do training (only the physical techniques were taught); and the third received a program of increased physical activity not involving the martial arts. All groups were taught by the same instructor for the same amount of time and in the same room. At the end of six months, the students in the traditional tae kwon do group showed a decrease in aggressiveness and anxiety and an increase in self-esteem. In contrast, the modern tae kwon do group showed an increased tendency towards delinquency and an increase in aggressiveness. Students in the exercise group showed an increase in self-esteem, but no other significant changes.

Aikido has been successfully used as an intervention strategy for middle and high school students with severe emotional disturbances (Edelman, 1994) and other research indicates that martial arts may help reduce behavioral problems in children (Gonzalez, 1989).

Perhaps the positive results should not come as a surprise. There appear to be a number of parallels between psychotherapy and the martial arts including the concepts of energy (*ki* or *chi*), distance, timing, and positioning. In addition, blending, centering and pre-empting have a practical usage in mental health therapy. The concept of giving way (*ju*) to use the strength of your opponent is similar to concepts found in the writings of Erikson and others regarding methods of therapy. One of the central goals of both psychotherapy and many martial arts is knowing oneself and the world around us. As Master Sun says, "know the enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles you will never be in peril". These battles can be waged both inside and outside of ourselves.

## Summary

Empirical evidence supports anecdotal reports about the positive psychosocial consequences of martial arts practice. Numerous investigations into this topic over three decades show that the practice of martial arts promotes positive psychosocial changes. Only three studies report no changes promoted by martial arts training. It is not entirely clear how the martial arts lead to positive psychosocial changes. Nonetheless, it is likely that inclusion of the non-physical aspects of the martial arts during training or the instructor acting as a positive role model or both play a role in promoting long-term changes. Despite the unanswered questions about how these changes occur, the martial arts are finding a niche in the treatment of psychological disorders and will likely prove to be a useful complement to verbal therapy. It is gratifying to know that research is beginning to support the claims of the old masters: the martial arts can help develop both better bodies and better minds and may lead to a better, more peaceful society.

**\*Please note that all Footnotes, References and Acknowledgments have been removed for space considerations.**