

Emphases, Age, Gender, and Martial Arts

I have suggested many times in these articles that the original emphasis of, and my preferred emphasis in, traditional martial arts is a combination of high quality self-defense and superior personal development. This means that artistry and sport, despite their attractions and benefits, take a back seat, as far as I am concerned. Even with specific emphases such as mine, however, the contributing emphases within those specifics are easy to ignore. What sort of self-defense? What kind of self-development? How should one study to develop in these areas? That depends, I think, on one's age and one's time-in-grade.

If you start a martial art as a child, your personal emphasis is probably on self-defense and feeling unique, so you'd like to learn athletic kicks and cool throws. Your sensei, on the other hand, would like you to learn general coordination and timing as well as some rudimentary form.

If you begin as a young teenager, you are looking for self-defense by way of speed and power. Your sensei, however, would like you to develop some control and posture.

If you begin as a young adult, speed and power may still be relevant, but you are able to appreciate the refinement of technique, knowing that even the strongest batter can't hit homeruns without working on the form of his swing. Your sensei concurs. If he is close to your age, he may emphasize measuring your technique via tournaments, since he does not see much difference between sparring and self-defense. If he is older, he has you work on the skills of kata and one-step sparring, instead.

If you begin martial arts training as a more mature adult, you are interested in efficiency. You assume that you cannot be faster or stronger than the younger guys, so you want to be able to "out-technique" them. Sensei, assuming he is also a mature adult, is glad to help.

Notice that in all the examples above, I have assumed that both the student and the teacher are males. Although the majority of martial artists are, in fact, male, there are many women in the dojo/dojang/kwoon. What about the emphases for them? They realize earlier than most guys that speed and power, although desirable, will not cut it against big, nasty male bad-guys. If they start as a girl, their emphasis is not much different than as for a boy. As a young teenager, the size and power differences between men and women make themselves obvious. The teenage girl will depend on her speed and limberness. As an adult, she may be less quick and less limber, so she concentrates on the niceties of technique, decades before a man will. If her sensei's emphasis was tournament sparring, she'll do well against other female competitors, but what if her sensei's emphasis is self-defense? She does not measure herself against the rare female mugger; rather, she knows she will have to handle a male accoster, so she had better get to the stuff that works against bigger, stronger people as soon as possible.

In the early days of judo, Dr. Kano limited women's ranks to fifth dan. It is easy for us to assume, probably with some validity, that he was subject to the sexism common to the late-nineteenth century. After all,

in those days up until the early 1960s, women had to wear a white stripe through their belts, to show they were separate from the men. Since white was the color of beginners, we interpret that old-fashioned stripe as a statement that women still had, by their smaller, weaker, slower anatomies, some beginner in them. I think that today, Kano might even plead guilty to that charge. What we ignore, however, is that Kano opened his Kodokan to women when they were unwelcomed in more traditional martial arts, and that when observing the women's section of the Kodokan, he marveled at the quality of the women's technique. While the men were still using strength and speed, the women were focusing on skilled execution of waza that exemplified Kano's ideals of *seiryoku zenyo* "Maximum Efficiency with Minimum Effort".

Kano had another ideal called *jita kyoei* "Mutual Welfare and Benefit". By using better technique earlier in their development, women at the Kodokan were not only benefiting each other (rather than trying to determine who was the meanest mother in the valley as the men were), they were also setting a technical example that Kano wanted the men to aspire to.

Judo, Aiki, TKD, Kempo, Karate—it doesn't matter which art: look to those who are refining their technique with the idea of Maximum Efficiency if you expect to Mutually Benefit. Oh, kinda sounds like good quality self-defense and superior personal development, doesn't it?