

## ***Martial or Artist?***

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The phrase “Martial Arts” is comprised of two rather simple words. The first “martial” comes from the “Mars,” the Roman god of war; the second “Arts” comes from the Latin “Ars,” meaning “a way of being or acting, hence a skill.” Martial Arts then are collections of endeavors in which practitioners either act like warriors or develop certain skills common to military people.

If you are eager to act like a soldier, join the army and see the military world. Over-aged? Join the reserves or various police forces. That is probably not what you had in mind when you thought of studying a martial art, but it is important to know that that is the “martial” extreme.

On the “artistic” extreme lie arts that have martial movements, but no intention of preparing for personal combat. Arts that fall into this artistic extreme are several styles of t'ai-chi, Aikido and karate styles that train for only *kata* (form) competition or exhibitions.

Most schools stand somewhere in the middle of the spectrum. A potential student should decide where on the spectrum his/her aspirations lie. The question for the majority of students is, “What percentage of *martial* should I mix with what percentage of *artist*?” I would advise the potential martial artist to seriously consider not only what he/she wants to be today, but also how he/she might feel about training tomorrow.

Too many candidates think they will achieve some rank then stop training, having become Superspy for the rest of their lives, holding members of the opposite sex in awe while they order in 12 languages from the menus of uppity up-scale restaurants and adjust their wrist radios so that they will not emit inappropriate laser beams until they are in the field again. Their fantasy ideals have led them into a study of martial arts that may not support their end-goal. The schools that encourage this type of fantasy are usually not worth the effort it takes to put on their uniform. The schools that discourage fantasies usually come closer to producing real physical and psychological change in the student, but can't attract the consumer as readily.

Real martial arts study can go on indefinitely. Training becomes not just a mean to an end but a method to support and enhance one's self-development over a lifetime. Training constantly challenges you, makes you humble, and rewards you. With the proper perception of what traditional martial arts training is about, you can stay interested for decades, keep your unrealistic fantasies in check, and quietly garner benefits galore.

**Artistry** for martial artists means body control, aesthetic performance, creative problem solving within an emulated combat context, and developing skills within the framework of the training. **Martiality** means discipline and combat effectiveness. Many school offer a program of rigid discipline (the martial) with effectiveness measured only by trophies. Others offer relaxed discipline, exercise with no attempt at combat effectiveness. Still others offer moderate discipline, effective technique, but training geared to developing skill

for skill's sake. Yet others train for effectiveness, but first train for artistic performance to develop body control then adapt these skills to more realistic situations.

Interviewing a school will not tell you what percentage of martial and artist that school offers. Any potential student should observe several classes over a period of time and then ask about the rationale behind certain practices. If you are interested in self-defense, ask how this exercise relates to self-defense skills. If you are interested in exercise, ask how a certain drill will affect one muscularly or aerobically. If you are interested in aesthetics, observe what type of detailed corrections are made and ask why they are made just that way. If you don't know what you are looking for, you are more likely to find it in fantasies than on the dojo floor.

*Next week, we discuss how observing a school's student body helps you judge both the school and the teacher.*

**Comments on this article:**

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I would like to commend you first on your insight, second on your (yes) courage, to write this piece.

I began my studies in 1971 and have seen many changes (more negative than positive in my opinion) through the years. You are right on target and have the guts to put it out there in "cyberspace". This unfortunately gives opportunity for the know-nothing, "key-board masters" to attack you. It is obvious that you are willing to share your well grounded "when the Arts were really the Arts in this country" insights with others. A rarity now-a-days for sure, but very much appreciated by those of us who remember "when the Arts were the Arts".

Yours in the Arts,  
Stephen J. Gamma