

Wellness and the Adult Martial Arts

As a society, we have gone beyond the morning jog, beyond the health-club membership, beyond the fad-diets and have considered ourselves as whole beings. We now seek not only physical but also mental and spiritual wellness. A century ago, karate masters offered martial arts teachings to middle schools in order to benefit Okinawan youth. About four hundred years ago, samurai, retired from the fighting field, founded schools of martial arts to make both young and mature adults physically, mentally and spiritually healthier. A thousand years before that, Chinese monks engaged in martial training, even though they were dedicated to peace, because it benefited them physically, mentally, and spiritually.

Traditional martial art training is about self-defense, to be sure, but it is also about self-development. How does the contemporary adult want to be developed? As Okinawan masters, Japanese samurai, and Chinese monks wanted to be developed: physically, mentally and spiritually. Isn't that what wellness is all about?

Not all martial arts schools are alike. To be fully developed, one must be supported as well as challenged at his/her own level. Intelligent, mature adults may have found a wellspring of wellness in arts that have a history centuries older than jogging, health-clubs and fad-diets — traditional martial arts. Traditional martial arts may be taught in modern ways, but they are decidedly not the fad martial practices of the day. Traditions endure because their benefits endure. The martial arts served to strengthen the passive Shaolin monk, prepare the aggressive Japanese samurai for battle, and bring Okianwan youth to healthy adulthood and now serve to bring twenty-first century Westerners out of the less-than-healthy day-to-day drudge into a much-better-than-average self-actualizing pride.

Wellness is not at the bottom of a vitamin bottle or at the end of a fad diet; it is in the dojo. All you have to do is arrive.

Most martial arts schools cater to kids. That's fine, especially if the class is created with kids in mind, is small, has material that is age-appropriate, and enjoys a qualified instructor's full attention. But kids aren't capable of understanding the subtleties, the depth, and the wide-ranging benefits of traditional budo.

It has often been said that youth is wasted on the young. It is not their fault, of course, that kids miss opportunities which, years later, they wish they had taken advantage of. It has also been said that you are only young once, that you are not getting any younger. Adults, as well, should not miss opportunities which, years later, they wish they had taken advantage of. If they do, it is their fault.

Martial arts were originally for adults. If taught correctly, traditional martial arts are best appreciated by mature, intelligent adults, especially if the class is created with adults in mind, is small, has material that is age-appropriate, and enjoys a qualified instructor's full attention.

Just as all martial arts are not alike, all martial arts schools are not alike. Some are kindergartens that open their classes to adults. Others are graduate schools that have appended small, unique children's programs to get the kids ready for higher education. This is the BUSHIDO-KAI type of school.