

Do: The Martial Arts Way

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From my father I learned to listen, to explore and to work with my hands. From my mother I learned determination, independence and a love for strength. From my brothers I developed a thick skin, a quick tongue and even quicker feet. From my students I have learned to think on my feet, that the little things really do matter and that I am always a student first and foremost. From martial arts I have learned self evaluation, humility, patience and most importantly about life.

The martial arts way is physical, mental and emotional. It is a philosophy, a physical act and a way of life through understanding. It is not just about developing yourself, but developing your extended family, your support system and your community. Marcus Aurelius (1997, pg. 15) once said that *"if you find in human life anything better than justice, truth, fortitude, anything better than your own mind's self-satisfaction...turn to it with all your soul, and enjoy that which you have found to be best"*.

Each of us begins our training for our own reasons, and we look for a martial arts instructor that can satisfy those needs as we understand them at that time. Some look for an activity to share with a friend, others for exercise;

some for sport or self-defense education. Every student starts on a different path and must learn how to navigate that path. The training, the classes, the instructors, students and friends are only guides. The martial arts way is a self-developing process and within the process the sharing of knowledge can be a guiding force; but ultimately we are all walking alone (Miyamoto, M., & Wilson, W. 2002, pg. 31).

My first understanding of the martial arts way was completely physical. I had stumbled upon classes by chance; through a friend. At the time I had no intention of “sticking around”, and thought that this would just be a fun outing. Yet here I am today running and working my own gym and learning from my own students. Working to create strong and confident students and community leaders with a strong martial arts spirit.

Most students start as I did, with a physical understanding of the martial arts. Joining a class and struggling to learn the physical nature of the subject. Working the kinks out of their kicks, understanding the striking area for a punch, and working on understanding the movements of their patterns. Thinking only of what combinations they will need to memorize for the next test. Focusing on the correct movements, balance, coordination and general body awareness.

The majority of students that have trained under my direction have responded to kinesthetic instruction. By tailoring the way we explain the subject and combinations, the students are able to retain this information quickly. Kinesthetic learning is external, immediate and can be developed through constant practice and is most often developed during class time under the direction of a trained instructor.

Time and time again I see students develop a physical understanding or memorization of a technique far before they begin to understand the practical application. I can clearly visualize students learning three-two-one steps and going through the motions, not understanding the history and practical application behind the techniques. This physical understanding is the first step of the martial arts way.

This is where head instructors, black belts and advanced colored belts play a large role. An instructor's primary job in the beginning is it to help develop the physical understanding and prowess of their students. This is achieved through multiple ways of instruction, drills, communication and demonstrations. It is important that these instructors stay focused and yet open to all ways of instruction and learning. Not every student learns the same way. By allowing and encouraging instructors to be fluid and flexible the beginning of the martial

arts way is more accessible. By extending the martial arts way to different types of learning we help the students and ourselves make stronger connections to the martial arts and the world at large. To be too rigid is to fail the students.

As an instructor we need to understand our own bodies strengths and weaknesses. The same is true for our student's strengths and weaknesses. A good instructor will observe his/her student's movements, timing, technique and begin to develop a physical understanding of that student. This physical understanding allows the instructor to teach to the students in a way that will best benefit them.

If the instructors embody the philosophies of the true martial arts way, every moment is a teaching moment. It is often the "silent" moments before class, after class or seeing a student outside of the gym that impart the most knowledge. These particular moments encourage students behaviors, habits and mannerisms to reflect a true martial arts attitude regardless of where they are.

These "silent" moments bridge the gap between the "in the gym training" to the bigger picture of the martial arts way. It is in these moments of ambiguity that the students develop their critical thinking skills regarding empathy, respect, right versus wrong and building their indomitable spirit.

In my personal experience I am initially excited for the new subject and material taught at a workshop or seminar. However looking back on the events, I remember and cherish the conversations and stories of my mentors, instructors and peers far more than the subject taught.

I was once told that to be healthy each person needs social health, physical health, mental health, emotional health and financial health in balance. At the beginning of each student's martial arts journey their physical health and understanding is a priority. As they begin to feel comfortable and confident in their physical understanding of the subject and relationship with their instructor, the student begins to develop their mental awareness in the martial arts.

The martial arts strengthens, cultivates and develops mental toughness, fortitude, and resilience. We encourage students to think positively, to strive to improve and engage themselves at all times; in all aspects of training and life. It was said by Miyamota Musashi that your frame of mind for the martial arts should be your frame of mind for the everyday. (2002, pg. 64). By working to harness the skill of focus, yet open mindedness we strive to become the best versions of ourselves physically and mentally.

Optimism comes from the latin word *optimus*; meaning "best". Our training philosophy harnesses the idea of optimism and positive thinking. Striving to be your best leaves no room for negative thinking, and thus only room for improvement and acceptance that learning takes time.

This trait of positive thinking sets a standard that will affect the student for the rest of their life. In essence, the mental training bridges the gap between "in the gym training" to "real world" applications. In life there is stress, ambiguity and different perspectives that everyone has to deal with on a regular basis. Students need to utilize their abilities to critically think through situations, stay open minded and unbiased if they are going to continue to grow personally, professional and within their community.

Positive thinking is a trait developed through mental training. In addition to the physical training every student learns, it is the instructor's job to help develop their mental aptitude. Instructors utilize the gym as a simulator to practice and facilitate mental training for all students.

By creating situations where the students are under physical stress and physically fatigued, the student begins to rely on their mental toughness and fortitude. As the student begins their martial arts training the simulations are designed to fit their needs. As the student progresses and becomes more

acquainted with the gym, students and themselves the simulations adjust with them. Each simulation is designed with a specific purpose in mind, even if the student is unaware of what that purpose might be.

At each level of training, a different level of focus or mental strength is needed. Just as the instructor assesses the students physical needs it is just as important to understand the student cognitive needs.

I can clearly remember my instructor telling me that all my worries, doubts, problems; or as he said “baggage” could be left at the door of the gym. By encouraging students to train in the moment, free of distractions, allows for a clear and more precise understanding of the subject and ultimately themselves. This act of separating and managing stress or other tasks will develop into a skill that will help the student grow.

The martial arts way is not limited to the physical and mental abilities of a student but also their emotional health and understanding. We strive for balance in ourselves and in our students. If a student isn't aware of their emotional state or balance, this imbalance can affect their physical training as well as their focus.

Instructors are tasked with developing an understanding of the full student; weaknesses and strengths included. This understanding allows the

instructor to create training that will boost the students confidence and enhance their natural abilities; helping to bring themselves back into balance.

Instructors continually strive to help bring self awareness to their students regarding their physical, mental and emotional health. The student's must begin to be able to self recognize and work toward making proper adjustments.

Emotional health can be hard to recognize and understand without proper communication and mutual respect between student and instructor. This relationship between student and instructor is critical to both parties' continued development in the martial arts.

Nurturing a relationship starts with the "silent" moments and extends into training. Reaching out to a student and their parents about other events in their life helps enhance the existing relationship. Being patient and meeting the student at their level while helping to extend their comfort zone. Creating authentic dialogue and working to relate to your students helps develop a strong foundation on which to build emotional connections.

In my own training it is an unspoken compliment when an instructor, higher than myself, comments on or inquires about a situation in my life. It is clear that they care about me as a person, my life as well as my development as a



martial artist. This emotional support is important to build so that students have the self confidence to continue to work towards their best.

The martial arts way isn't easy. It takes a life-time of constant study, physical training, mental fortitude and emotional development. It takes sweat, blood and even sometimes tears. It takes someone who is willing to walk with you on your path and provide advice, answers and at times only support. It takes friends, family and a support system. It takes competition, self confidence, doubt, fear, love, a willingness to always learn and an instructor brave enough to say "figure it out".

I am frequently reminded that the martial arts way is designed for everyone. And that everyone must walk their own path. I can merely be a guide for my students using my own martial arts journey as a compass for how to climb the mountain.

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