

## **Psychological and Psychotherapeutic Aspects of Martial Arts**

For many centuries, people of the Eastern cultures have used the martial arts as windows to their psyche and physical being. All forms of martial arts base their teachings on both physical and mental training, focusing on the development of both body and mind. Each component is vital to the development of the martial artist, for one cannot become a complete martial artist based on one aspect alone. One may view the physical and mental aspects of the martial arts as components of the Yin and Yang, for the body and mind exist in accordance within one's being.

Recently, over the past several decades, the martial arts have become quite popular in the Western culture. Even more recently, the martial arts have become a popular subject in the studies of psychology. Although Western media and society tend to glorify the physicality of the art, psychologists recognize the importance of the mental aspect of martial arts. Psychological studies on sport participation reveal the benefits of physical activity, for athletes sense improvement in overall well-being. These sports, however, do not emphasize the development of one's mentality as strongly as the martial arts do. Therefore, the martial arts offer psychologists a new area of research, exploring the mental benefits that accompany the physical ones.

Although psychologists have been studying the psychological benefits of martial arts in general, they tend to focus their studies on one type of martial art. The field of martial arts entails many different kinds of art, varying with the different Eastern cultures. However, these differing forms are all based on the same Eastern philosophies, uniting the differences into one concept of "martial arts." Since the scope of martial arts is wide, psychologists need to choose one

type of martial art to survey and study. Unfortunately for my interests in writing about Taekwondo, most of the literature is based on either Karate or Aikido. However, Bong Y Choi in *The Way of the Martial Art* considers Karate and Taekwondo the same martial art but from different

countries. Thus, although I will be discussing the studies based on Karate or Aikido, I will relate the studies to all martial arts, especially Taekwondo.

In this paper, I will explore the psychological and psychotherapeutic aspects of martial arts, emphasizing the psychological benefits from martial arts training. With the discussion of *Ki* and the management of energy, the reader will begin to see how martial arts positively contribute to one's overall well-being and mental health. The psychological aspect involves the study of characteristic personality traits found among martial artists and the basic mentality one develops with extended training in martial arts. The psychotherapeutic aspect of this paper deals with the application of the martial arts to psychotherapy and how martial arts teach patients to deal with everyday situations. I conclude the paper with a discussion about the limitations on psychological research of martial arts, due to its roots in Eastern philosophy.

### **The Concept of *Ki***

"The effective management of energy is an important dimension in the martial arts as well as the mental health professions" (Seitz, Olson, Locke, & Quam, p.459). These authors recognize that the concept of *Ki*, which deals with a person's internal, central energy, is quite complex and difficult to define; however, they know that *Ki* is an essential, underlying concept in martial arts. They suggest that both disciplines of martial arts and mental health focus on energy-intrapsychic energy, interpersonal energy, and the energy of being and existing. More specifically, they feel that martial arts concentrate directly on the energy involved in dealing with emotions, perceptions of trust and fear, conceptions of reality, and interpersonal relationships. Martial artists use this idea of *Ki* as a central point from which they develop self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-

improvement.

In the interpretation of the words Aikido and Taekwondo, the word *Do* denotes a way of life or philosophy of living. *Do* may be the most important element of these

words because it represents the way of life in which one expresses the energy within each individual, across societies, and throughout the universe. *Ki* refers to this expressed energy, the force behind all things in the universe. Ancient Chinese philosophers describe *Chi*, from which *Ki* is originally derived, as the nothingness of the universe, yet the energy of everything. The concept of *Do* and *Ki* stem from Eastern thought, which is quite different from Western philosophy. Seitz et al point out that Western psychology primarily deals with object reality: people need visual stimuli or tangible evidence in order to recognize reality. Westerners tend to see the spiritual through the physical. However, Eastern thinking deals with intangible concepts, thoughts which cannot be explained through physical evidence. Reality seems to be the relationship between objects, not the objects themselves. Thus, we must study the *Ki* in its Eastern context.

## **Martial Arts and Psychology**

People of all cultures who practice martial arts have long been associating self-confidence, relaxation, enhanced mind-body coordination, self-mastery, and peacefulness with martial arts. Those who practice the martial arts have become the subjects for recent studies involving the psychological benefits of these arts, which serve as alternatives to psychotherapy. Fuller (1988, p.318) explains, "From a psychotherapeutic viewpoint, the martial arts may be viewed as formalized, refined systems of human potential training which provide interesting practical models and mechanisms of psychological intervention." The martial arts are not only forms of physical conditioning or self-defense practice, but they involve a psychological training component that makes them an interesting candidate for psychological research.

A predominant theme in the area of martial arts research is the study of

personality traits of martial artists. The general trend in personality differences is that the advanced martial artists tend to be more self-confident and self-sufficient compared

to less experienced martial artists and non-martial artists. Kroll and Crenshaw, (1970), found Karate students to be more self-sufficient, reserved and detached than players of combative sports such as wrestling and football. Duthie, Hope, and Barker (1978) found that advanced students were more confident and achieved compared to beginning students. Also, Rothpearl (1979, 1980) found that anxiety and hostility levels were lower amongst advanced students, suggesting that a beneficial trend occurred following extended training. Increased assertiveness in advanced students was another trait measured by Konzak and Klavora (1980). Konzak and Boudreau (1984) later measured personality traits according to a similar system used by Kroll and Carlson in 1967.

Kroll and Carlson (1967) in Fuller (1988) and Konzak and Boudreau (1984) both conducted studies examining 16PF personality profiles of Karate practitioners at various levels of proficiency. Kroll and Carlson found no significant differences in personality traits among the groups, whereas Konzak and Boudreau found some interesting results. The methodology of the two studies differed in that Kroll and Carlson used an "advanced" category consisting of black, brown, blue, and yellow belts with at least one year experience. Konzak and Boudreau felt that this group of practitioners misrepresented the "advanced" category, for one year's experience and yellow belt ability were insufficient criteria for an advanced level. In fact, they felt that, " Someone who has only a yellow belt plus a year of experience, far from being considered 'advanced,' should probably be classified as a relatively deficient student (since after one year he would normally attain a higher rank)" (Konzak and Boudreau, 1984, p. 3). Thus, they discredited the research method of Kroll and Carlson and developed their own criteria for (1) advanced students- black belts with at least three and one-half years of experience, (2) intermediate students- green belts and higher with at least

six months of experience, and (3) beginner students- white belts with only two weeks of training.

Konzak and Boudreau (1984) examined the personality traits of 84 Karate practitioners, 42 male and 42 female, using the Cattell Sixteen Personality Factor



questionnaire, or the 16PF test, which measures the main dimensions of personality. They conducted separate analyses for males and females, since sex differences have shown to be powerful factors in any personality analysis. The results of the analyses showed that advanced female practitioners were "more intelligent, emotionally stable, assertive, lively, forthright, self-assured and relaxed" than less experienced females (Fuller, 1988; Konzak and Boudreau, 1984). The advanced males showed to be "more intelligent, emotionally stable, lively, expedient, venturesome, tender minded, imaginative, forthright, self-assured, self-sufficient and relaxed than males of less advanced groups" (Konzak and Boudreau, 1984). Konzak and Boudreau also interviewed the subjects to get insights into their perceptions of personal development through Karate training. The interviews included questions about health, physical fitness, self-confidence, personal assertiveness, feelings of aggression, relaxation and inner calm, and self-discipline and self-control. Ninety-three percent of the subjects reported that Karate had an important effect on their lives. Also practitioners reported that Karate enhanced their sense of assertiveness. However, concerning aggression, some reported feeling more aggressive in terms of assertiveness, while others felt less aggressive in terms of having more self-control. Overall, Konzak and Boudreau found that karate practitioners differed as a function of degree of training and considered themselves "improved" as a result of Karate training.

As mentioned above, the martial arts may affect one's level of aggression. Because of social implications, the relationship of martial arts practice to aggressive behavior has attracted research interest. According to traditional martial art views, training reduces aggressiveness. This idea contrasts with some social-psychological beliefs that aggressiveness increases with a new aggressive repertoire and with reinforcement of aggression through competition (Fuller,

1988). According to a study conducted by Trulson (1986) in Fuller (1988), the type of Taekwondo training affected the levels of aggression and anxiety for juvenile delinquents. The first group of youths

received seventy-two hours of traditional Taekwondo training, the second group underwent a sparring and self-defense form of Taekwondo, and the third acted as controls. After six months, the test resulted in decreased aggression, reduced anxiety, and increased self-esteem for the participants of traditional Taekwondo. The second group of students showed accentuated delinquent tendencies and negative personality shifts, including a rise in aggressiveness. The control group showed little change. After one year, delinquent tendencies were absent from the first group but still present in the other two groups. Hence, traditional Taekwondo was more effective than modern Taekwondo in dealing with the problems of juvenile delinquents (Columbus and Rice, 1991). Thus, decreasing levels of aggression depend upon training that includes "meditation and philosophically inclined instruction, emphasizing respect for others, physical fitness, patience, perseverance, honour, and a sense of responsibility" (Fuller, 1988, p. 322).

Konzak and Boudreau (1984) discuss the process of "resocialization," in which participants of a martial art are essentially "brainwashed" to accept a new environment, set of rules, and philosophy. They explain that the student "will learn to follow the etiquette of the training hall until it becomes second nature, and the constant group reinforcement will solidify in the student's mind the essential characteristics of [martial arts] training (Konzak and Boudreau, 1984, p. 7). They continue to emphasize group belonging and cooperation, sharing of common ideals and rituals, mutual help and criticism, and the positive effects of meditation, rhythmic breathing, and relaxation which result in self-hypnosis. Fuller (1988) summarizes the ideas of Konzak and Boudreau, "They deem that appropriate training can act as a highly effective form of self-help or resocialization agent, as a means of personal development, or as an inoculation

against stress and anomie encountered elsewhere in daily life, and recommend that the martial arts be taken seriously as a form of therapeutic activity" (Fuller, 1988, p. 321).

## **Psychotherapeutic Benefits of Martial Arts**

Over the past twenty years, psychotherapists have come to recognize dance therapy, art therapy, psychodrama, and meditation as forms of psychotherapy, which provide active, physical routes for the discovery and expression of emotions. Just recently, psychotherapists have recognized that martial arts should be a part of this psychotherapy as well. Martial arts has proven to promote both physical and mental health, and are now understood more as methods of self-defense, which may have therapeutic value, rather than methods of aggression. Within the last four years, the literature on martial arts has proliferated, and "Martial Arts and Psychology" has become an accepted Medical Subject Heading term (Weiser et al, 1995). This rising new interest in martial arts as psychotherapy may benefit not only individuals who seek mental health but may benefit society as a whole.

When Fuller published in 1988, research into psychotherapeutic applications of martial arts training was limited. Konzak and Boudreau (1984) mention the use of Karate programs in the homes for the mentally handicapped and physically disabled and in the staff training courses of businesses, psychiatric hospitals and prisons. Madenlian (1979) in Fuller (1988) reports a study comparing martial arts training with conventional psychotherapies. Sixty-six boys between the ages of 12 and 14 with behavioral problems joined one of the following groups: (1) Aikido training for four months, (2) traditional therapy involving individual, group, or family therapy, or (3) control group. Psychologists determined "self-concept" as the dependent measure, since it has pervasive effects on personal adjustment and academic achievement. The results showed that Aikido training was more effective than psychotherapy, with no

change among the controls. Another study conducted by Heckler (1984), a martial artist himself, applied martial arts to individual psychotherapy. He employs basic Aikido exercises which are "simple, non-strenuous, and also focus on various ways to deal with

conflict encountered in the personal environment" (Fuller, 1988). These exercises, taught during weekend seminars and workshops for the general public, focus on movement therapy and help distressed clients restore a sense of personal integration.

Olson (1989) in Seitz et al (1990) discuss two Japanese concepts of *Hyoshi*, an interval in time, and *Ma-ai*, an interval in space. These concepts are important in both the martial arts and Western psychotherapy. In martial arts, timing (*Hyoshi*) is important for recognizing an opponent's position and exploiting that position (*Sen*), seeing an opening while already executing a technique (*Sen No Sen*), and having an intuition which perceives an opening when the technique is already applied (*Sen Sen No Sen*). In therapeutic processes, psychologists may relate *Sen* to behavioral conditioning patterns: the time interval between conditioned and unconditioned stimuli. *Sen No Sen* parallels the psychologist's intuitive interpretation of the patient's remark. For example, "a well-timed interpretation in psychotherapy is like a quarterback passing a football to a spot his receiver has not yet reached, relying on 'intuition' and practice in executing a completion" (Seitz et al, p. 460). Interval in space (*Ma-ai*) refers to the physical distance between two people or the psychological distance which a martial artist uses to destroy the spirit and technique of the opponent. This concept of physical and psychological distance relates to psychotherapy through group therapy and body language and can influence the levels of people's vulnerability and intimacy. Thus, both Oriental martial artists and Occidental psychologists can apply the concepts of timing and space to their everyday lives.

Weiser et al (1995) take a similar stand on the ideas of timing and space and describe, "As the physical and psychological space grow nearer, strategies for coping with increasing levels of vulnerability and intimacy must change. Both

martial arts students and psychotherapy clients learn to understand and deal with resistance...to manage both evasion and confrontation, and to cope with both aggression and vulnerability" (Weiser et al, 1995, p. 120). The analogies drawn here relate to parallels



between the goals and methods of the martial arts and verbal psychotherapy, in that both are disciplines for gaining an understanding into one's character with the aim of continuing personal growth.

Although the martial arts and psychotherapy share similar goals and methods, the martial arts achieve these goals through a physical, as opposed to a verbal, route. According to Weiser et al (1995), "The physical learning through the nonverbal exercises of the martial arts directly improves mental health" (Weiser, 1995, p. 123). They suggest that physical learning stimulates the integration of mind and body and teaches the martial artist to relax, focus, communicate, persevere, and be self-aware while striving for excellence. Also, physical exercise contributes to minimizing fear and anger in order to maximize focus and concentration. Thus, martial arts training, like psychotherapy, heightens feelings of harmony and control, self-confidence and self-esteem.

Weiser et al (1995) suggest that the methods of teaching the martial arts also parallels the methods used in psychotherapy. In Zen-oriented methods, a teacher will not answer a student's question but will encourage the student to seek the answer for him/herself. Similarly, psychotherapy involves a therapist encouraging the growth of patients, particularly those who have feelings of inadequacy, low self-esteem, depression, or aggression. A therapist will foster a positive environment, so that the patient will be able to learn about oneself and seek answers within oneself. Martial arts may also help the chronically mentally ill through its physicality. "The repetitive, fixed exercises can be organizing, whereas the chaotic thoughts and behaviors of such patients restrict their ability to utilize a verbal mode" (Weiser et al, 1995, p.124).

Fuller (1988) applies the principles from Aikido to psychotherapy to demonstrate the usefulness of martial arts as psychotherapy. He suggests that

Aikido may be useful as a general means of mobilization in a group therapy format, due to its gentle nature of interactive exercise geared to flexibility rather than strength or stamina. Because Aikido involves natural capabilities, this can immediately attract the interest of novices, who

may be difficult to recruit otherwise. Also, psychotherapists may apply Aikido to stress management and inoculation. This therapy involves techniques for relaxation training, self-monitoring, and social skills training. However, psychotherapists implement these programs via verbal-cognitive modes, in contrast to the non-verbal inoculation ideas of Aikido. The programs teach strategies to accomplish mental calmness, physical relaxation, adaptation to sudden obstacles, and one-at-a-time problem solving. Aikido exercises can also train individuals to apply physical analogies to everyday conflicts and problems. Aikido may also teach people simple strategic guidelines for assertive behavior, since Aikido philosophy deals with approaching problems in a positive manner, moving around resistance, ignoring distracting obstacles, timing evasions and confrontations, and remaining positive during retreat. In addition, an Aikido environment fosters cooperation rather than competition, desensitization to intimate physical contact, and feelings of both control and vulnerability when working together. Thus, Aikido, as a "soft" internal martial art has many positive aspects which therapists may apply to the study of psychological health care.

### **Problems With Psychological Research on the Martial Arts**

In order to understand how the martial arts may assist the progression of mental health care, Columbus and Rice (1991) suggest that one must first try to understand the martial arts in its true context. Because the martial arts originated from Eastern culture and stemmed from the teachings of Taoism and Buddhism, the people of the Western culture may find difficulty in grasping the true meaning of the martial arts. Also, since the cultural and psychological values and meanings of the Oriental martial arts may change when placed in a Western context, the original methods, content, and therapeutic influence of the

martial arts may become altered as well. Thus, psychologists face two problems in the study of the martial arts: (1) the problem of

understanding the martial arts as Oriental arts, and (2) the problem of understanding the Oriental martial arts in a Western context.

A significant problem with understanding the martial arts is that they originate from Eastern philosophies that are conceptually very different from Western teachings. An example which illustrates this idea is the system of ranking in martial arts. In particular, researchers of the West frequently classify first-degree black belts as advanced martial artists. A martial artist will generally take about three years to achieve black belt ranking. However, according to the teachings in the East, a student of first-degree black belt is a beginner and starts his/her formal, serious training after receiving this ranking. Only after acquiring a black belt can the martial artist begin to learn the way of the art.

Another example illustrates the differing Eastern and Western outlooks on martial art meaning. According to Columbus and Rice (1991), sport participants tend to assimilate rather than accommodate culturally to different sport forms. The participants change the meanings and values of culturally different sporting activities to reflect the cultural identity of the participants. For example, Easterners view Zen-influenced martial arts as *arts*, which are intrinsically rewarding for their own sake. In contrast, Westerners tend to interpret the martial arts as *sports* and place heavy emphasis on competition, winning, and fighting. The following quotation reflects this idea of assimilation rather than accommodation to the Oriental martial arts:

To be blunt and concrete about the matter, in this country [United States] students are not especially interested in learning foreign terminology, in meditating, in doing lots of drills, in concentrating on only a few techniques as beginners, in training diligently and repetitively in forms. Most students tend not to be committed to a martial art for years, and want proficiency and rank advancement quickly. They also want

to learn advanced techniques and forms, and are

often interested in free sparring and tournaments to the exclusion of more restricted and less public activities (Back & Kim, 1984) in Columbus and Rice (1991).

This above quotation vividly represents the differing attitudes of American and Eastern martial artists.

In conclusion, although the Western interpretation of martial arts may be skewed due to its origins in Eastern philosophy, if psychotherapists can apply therapeutic benefits of martial arts to effectively help patients deal with their inner struggles, then the application of martial arts to psychotherapy is valid and should be further investigated. All the recent research concerning martial arts and psychology contribute to the understanding of martial arts as a tool to improve psychological mental health. Through the various examples of Aikido, Karate, and Taekwondo, one comes to realize that the martial arts not only improves one's physical fitness but improves one's self-awareness, self-esteem, and self-confidence. These positive effects are helpful to all individuals seeking personal enlightenment and peace.

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