

Discipline and the Martial Arts

The pursuit and study of martial arts consists of certain core elements, each of which must be emphasized throughout the course of one's training in order to give the student a better understanding of what it is that he is doing, and why. What martial arts can provide, well beyond the immediate benefits of self-defense, is self-development. Over time, through dedication, work, and reflection, an individual can evolve and come into a greater knowledge of both self and surroundings. Many tools exist to aid the practitioner in attaining this goal, among them being organized instruction, repetition, examples to follow, and reading materials. However, the cornerstone elements of martial arts which are essential keys to attaining such an understanding, are less tangible: humility, an open mind, and *discipline*.

Discipline is an abstract concept, with numerous connotations and meanings. Non-practitioners often associate the martial arts with an *environment* of discipline (quite often this association is made in the negative context of "disciplinarian"). Conversely, others take up the martial arts as part of a search for discipline.

In order to understand the presence and place of discipline in the martial arts, one must first understand discipline itself. In a raw form, at its core, discipline is a product of one's own will or that of another person. Discipline generally takes one of two forms, both of which can be found in martial settings. The first, "enforced" or "external" discipline, is closely linked with the instruction environment, and exists primarily as an extension of the instructor and of his or her expectations. The second type, "internal" or self-discipline, resides in the

individual student, and is cultivated over time. Both types of discipline are necessary; the study of martial arts is a personal undertaking, and as such, true discipline must come from the

individual. However, an atmosphere of discipline external to the individual is often effective (and sometimes necessary) in eliciting self-discipline.

Properly cultivated, discipline serves several purposes. Externally, this discipline exists as calls for repetition, standards for performance, and expectations of conduct. Internally, this discipline manifests itself as perseverance and commitment. Together, they function as a learning tool. They serve to help their user learn a particularly hard personal lesson or training technique.

Discipline also works as a tool for control. Externally, discipline can assist in control of a group, and can thereby work as a tool to direct the group toward the task at hand or toward the understanding of a particular lesson. The internal control offered by self-discipline is a suppression of the ego, and an opening of the mind.

Eventually, these tools bring their weight to bear in the individual's progress in self-development. The tools that such discipline creates stay with the user, but another type of discipline is created as a product. The practitioner begins to develop a disciplined mind and spirit, that stand ready to draw upon their conditioning and training to elicit the proper response to a situation in which they are needed.

II. External Discipline

A practitioner's first encounter with discipline in a martial setting usually comes from the instruction regimen. Martial arts instruction trains people to move and use their bodies in ways, which are at best unfamiliar, and in most cases, completely unnatural. These movements can eventually be learned only by focusing one's attention and expressly toward learning them. In the case of the

beginner, the student's will is often insufficient, and his or her attention can easily stray. Therefore, rather than permit excessive amounts of talking and discussion about the difficulty of the lesson, an instructor must voice or otherwise make

apparent the expectation that the students truly try to learn the techniques. Constant reinforcement of this expectation will eventually make attention to the lesson second nature for the student.

Many misconceptions about discipline and martial arts find their origins in this particular issue. Often, an instructor will demand that the class perform supplemental exercises when their attention is lacking, or when their spirits are flagging. These exercises do not constitute discipline in and of themselves, although they are often viewed as “discipline” or punishment.¹ A change in tone of an instructor’s voice, a well timed pause, use of an example, or a set of push-ups are all methods which can be used in such situations, and have the effect of refocusing the students’ attention upon the lesson and upon their training.

The instructor, through personal experience as both a student and teacher, knows that the new student will eventually be able to perform the techniques, even though the student himself may not feel so sure. The instructor has a better perception of the developed person, of idea of the martial artist. The student’s perspective, on the other hand, is limited to a much narrower scope, which extends only a little way beyond the day’s lesson. That is to say, the instructor is in a better position to see the student’s potential as a martial artist than the student is himself. From this vantage point, it is the instructor’s responsibility to set initial expectations of the student, until the student progresses sufficiently in his understanding of himself and of the martial arts to take on the responsibility of the discipline required to progress.

This transition occurs when the student begins to not only see technical improvements in himself, but also to feel the start of the personal side of martial

¹ However, this is not to say that no limit exists in judging what is appropriate to refocus the attention of the students. Excessive supplemental exercises or severity from the instructor create an environment that becomes a hindrance, rather than a tool, to learning.

training. Upon recognizing changes in himself, the student sees the result of the external discipline imposed upon him by the instructor, and in making the correlation between expectations and results, begins to formulate expectations of his own. These expectations are generally the same as the instructor's; simply, that he will persevere and continue to learn, even though the task before him may be difficult. At this point, the student begins to supply the discipline required by martial training.

III. Internal Discipline

This internal, or self-discipline is what opens the doorway for true development as a martial artist. Drawing upon the memories of the first small successes, the student continues to work at approaching new topics and challenges. However, having seen how those goals were attained, the student's attitude and approach is markedly different. The student sees that through focus and perseverance, especially during difficult phases of training, he eventually arrived. The student begins to understand the power of a disciplined will.

The focus of the will toward a specific end is the nature of discipline. A physical illustration of this focus of the will would be that of someone trying to break a stack of bricks by simply placing an even force across the entire surface area of the top brick. The success or failure of the break then becomes a question of nothing more than brute strength, and quite often the bricks will hold. However, when the breaker focuses his attention on a precise point at the center of the brick, and strikes directly at that point with spirit, confidence, speed, and absolutely no hesitation, the bricks will give way. If a student goes through the class lessons half-heartedly, he will learn little. On the other hand, by focusing on the lesson, continually trying to understand and correctly perform a technique,

with the

confidence that such a goal is indeed attainable, the student will make strides toward a mastery of the technique.

Initially, the instructor helps the student to focus his will, but after time, the student assumes this responsibility in his training. The student exerts increasingly greater self-discipline during training, and therefore requires increasingly less external reinforcement from the instructor. At this point the student begins to become much more aware of himself and his limits. Usually, the student finds out that the limits to his abilities are in fact beyond what he had previously thought. Constant training and sustained self-discipline produce many small successes, all of which build upon each other and provide the student with a tiny insight into himself as he develops into a martial artist.

Each challenge that is attempted, whether it results in success or failure, teaches the student something about how much energy and effort is required by each task. Over time, the student acquires a wide range of experiences from which to draw evaluations of ways to approach new challenges. The student can, with increasing accuracy, properly gauge the difficulty of a given technique, lesson, situation, or adversary.

Reinforcing the student's growing understanding of challenges before him is a corresponding understanding of his own capabilities and limits. By training in a disciplined manner, the student's estimations of his range become more accurate. Because the student has maximized the efficiency of his training by focusing his energy upon it, the successes he encounters cause old limits to fall and allow the student to set personal barriers higher than they had been. Likewise, the failures the student encounters will be just as educational; rather than not succeeding because of a lack of effort, the student, having truly put himself to the task, will come away with a better understanding of what lies

outside of his reach for the time being.

These two growing understandings, of various challenges and one's ability to meet them, combine to provide clarity of vision in measuring oneself against a situation. By honestly evaluating both the situation and the range of one's strengths and weaknesses, the student can formulate the best approach to the task at hand.

IV. The Clarity of a Disciplined Spirit

When a student begins to focus his will toward his training, the knowledge he gains reinforces that training. The student learns faster, and by using the will to suppress the ego, can better maintain the state of humility and open-mindedness (or more correctly, "empty-mindedness," being devoid of preconceptions) required to learn a technique without having to waste energy unlearning other techniques or habits first.

Moreover, because of the student's focused attention, he becomes increasingly aware of his body and technique. The student can feel his errors and make the appropriate adjustments, constantly fine-tuning the execution of techniques across a series of repetitions. However, this is not to say that the student no longer needs examples to follow or an instructor from whom to learn. Examples are always helpful, and the instructor can still help the student to understand fine points that are more difficult to grasp. However, increased discipline as a constantly present element of training permits the student to rely upon both himself and the instructor, thereby doubling his number of available resources.

Finally, the student learns to correctly appraise the size of obstacles in his way. When one first undertakes martial arts training, minor injuries such as strains and pulled muscles are not uncommon. Often, they are not severe, but

they are nevertheless annoying and sometimes disheartening (especially for the beginner). Many new practitioners, whether out of concern for their own safety or

discouragement, take a break in their training when such an injury occurs. This is generally the best step for the beginner, as it avoids serious injury (easily incurred by working out when one joint or muscle is weakened) or "burn-out."

However, even a short time out from training is time during which one's skills can deteriorate, and such breaks are best kept as short as necessary. As the student progresses, the focus placed upon his body and training pays off in this respect, and the more experienced student can distinguish minor injuries from serious ones. The student knows how to moderate his training, and in the case of a minor injury, can often continue training in slightly modified manner (different exercises, length of workouts, etc.) in order to accommodate the injury without entirely discontinuing martial arts study.

Even this technique of training through minor injury can impart its own lessons, when approached with a disciplined attention. By garnering experiences of how to accommodate injury, a student learns what injuries can be allowed for without interrupting training (the ones that can simply be worked through), and which ones require a break in training in order to heal. The disciplined student is therefore capable of performing an honest self-evaluation of his fitness and injury state.

In the event of an injury, taking a break in training is often the best solution, but sometimes it is the easy solution, taken out of discouragement. However, many injuries that keep people out of class are not as serious as the students let themselves believe. Discipline allows one to ignore extraneous factors in such a self-evaluation, and therefore make the best decision appropriate to the situation. If a student in such a situation has approached his training with discipline, he will make the best decision possible, based on past experience, not on the minor aggravation of the moment. Conversely, the disciplined student is also able to

swallow his ego and drive to train. If the particular injury is one that demands a break from training, discipline also allows the student to acknowledge that fact, and take a break in order to prevent further injury.

More often than in the case of injury, discipline comes into play when a student is confronted with fatigue or a particularly tough opponent. By focusing one's spirit on the fatigue or on the difficulty of the opponent, the student creates an effect not unlike that of a magnifying glass focusing the rays of the sun onto a central point. All of the student's strengths and energy are then devoted to training or fighting through fatigue, knowing that the opponent *can* be beaten, or that the exercise *can* be completed without giving up, in spite of how difficult it may be. In this instance, discipline is the act of putting aside all distractions in order to see clearly what needs to be accomplished, making no excuses to oneself, and doing it.

Viewed in this context, discipline achieved through and applied in the study of martial arts is by no means confined to the realm of martial arts. Discipline can be a learning tool, and can be used as a tool to attain a goal. Whether the student encounters such a goal in a training context or a personal context, the discipline attained through martial arts is equally valuable. Professional, academic, and personal problems and challenges can all be better faced by one who is capable of clearly evaluating the correct path to a solution, and focusing both attention and will toward arriving at that solution.

Finally, the application of discipline in one's life, both inside and outside of the training environment, creates a "state" of discipline. This state is one in which the focus on training is so strong that the response to a given situation is fast, precise, and correct. This could be simply conditioning oneself to deliver the correct counter to an attack, or in a non martial context, to pause to reflect before

reacting immediately to a heated situation in one's personal life.

Constant repetition and focus (as opposed to blind repetition, the act of doing something simply to fulfill an obligation) lead to the mind being unconsciously disciplined, which is the pinnacle of discipline. Discipline is generally defined in contrast to how one normally exists. It is usually expressed as a state of being, or an enforced condition that places unusual demands upon a person. In martial training, discipline begins as the expectations of the instructor, and slowly evolves into an expression of the student's expectation and knowledge of himself. Finally, over time, the student does not need to make an effort to bring discipline into the different spheres of his life. It is already there, inseparable from the task. The student has spent so much time and energy focusing on such tasks with his entire attention and being, that he doesn't know how to do otherwise.

V. Conclusion: Discipline, an End in itself.

Put simply, discipline is a word to express the idea of focusing one's will toward the achievement of a task. It can be a part of one's environment, a temporary state, an event, or as a way of life. It can be found in oneself, one's surroundings, or in other people. All of these individual descriptions and locations of discipline are equally valid and tightly interdependent.

The power of the will is greater than most people realize, and discipline is the focus that allows a person to tap that power and use its potential. Will alone is capable of compelling people to rise above their conceived limitations. Initially, this focus can usually only be maintained for a short duration. Over time though, it sharpens, and through repeated use, it becomes a more familiar and comfortable aide in life.

Discipline can exist as part of one's surroundings, and although the

discipline belongs to the individual in this case, it is only there because some external force

expects a certain degree of attention from the individual. At this point, even though such discipline has previously been referred to as “external” discipline, it could be more correctly defined as unrefined self-discipline, brought out by external expectations placed upon the individual. This discipline is brought out by a combination of the instructor expecting a level of performance from the student that can only be attained through the student's focused attention, and secondly, a system of reminders to redirect the student's focus should it waver.

As the presence of this budding self-discipline in the student's training increases, it grows into a tool that he can call upon more readily. Eventually, it becomes part of the student, no longer just an ancillary skill, but a fundamental part of the student himself. At this time the student's focus is not only directed on tasks to accomplish, but inward toward himself as well. The student benefits from this discipline by learning to candidly evaluate himself and his surroundings, and the relationship between the two.

Self-discipline brings with it the ability to discard extraneous or distracting information, and pay attention to strictly the information that is crucial to the matter at hand. This clarity allows students who might normally be inclined to fall back to push themselves, and those who would normally push themselves to not push themselves to the point of injury or burnout. Not only is discipline a tool for learning new skills and surmounting new challenges, but it is also a trait which keeps the student training at a continually beneficial intensity level.

The discipline incorporated into one's training eventually reaches out to encompass other areas of one's life, and the lines that separate martial arts training and daily life start to blur. The method of appraising oneself and surroundings, examining each challenge for the best solution, and persevering in

the effort to overcome obstacles moves beyond the training environment, and
applies itself to

corresponding situations in the rest of the student's life. The mental composure and attention demanded as a part of training becomes part of the individual, and are no longer qualities that must be summoned up as class begins.

Finally, the power of discipline begins to bring its weight to bear on the student's life as a whole. The discipline that is now part of the student's being allows him to address challenges in any aspect of his life, with the knowledge of how to measure his will against the challenge, and then use it completely as he meets the challenge. Difficult personal times can be weathered through confidence in oneself and perseverance. Academic challenges can be met by focusing one's intellect on the problem at hand, constantly searching for new ways of looking at the problem until one finds the right solution. The martial artist knows how much he has grown on a technical level through discipline, and continues growing by cultivating discipline in intellectual and spiritual areas of his life.

Over a very long period of time, the individual's actions are no longer a product of his will, but become instead an *extension* of it. The martial artist sees correctly what needs to be done, and does it, with a minimum of wasted time, energy, or reflection. Years of training build a library of instinctive, automatic responses that the martial artist can draw upon. This state is a lasting change that discipline creates in the character of the martial artist.

Although this change is one of the end results of discipline, the benefits passed to the user along the way to this point are worthwhile in and of themselves. Therefore, discipline is not merely a tool for learning and self-development, or only a means to acquire automatic responses to various situations, but a worthwhile pursuit in its own right. Discipline is a quality of

character that enables its user to accomplish difficult tasks, and it is also a state of being, essentially a heightened state of readiness should a situation require an immediate response.

Discipline is therefore a cornerstone to the foundation of not only the martial artist's training, but the rest of his life as well. Martial artist and author Deng Ming-Dao makes a clarifying distinction between what most people think discipline is and what it *truly* is.

"People sometimes subscribe to the mistaken notion that discipline is restriction. That is not true. Discipline enables one to act. Only with discipline can one truly be all that one wishes to be. With discipline, one is able to carry out a decision free from fear, doubt, ambivalence, and laziness. Being a warrior means being disciplined. Training is discipline. Fighting is discipline. Discipline is freedom."²

What most people see when they look at discipline are the boundaries of focused attention and will, so they mistakenly see discipline as a confining trait in a person's life. However, discipline removes from one's life the barriers posed by distraction and negative attitude.

Discipline is the freeing characteristic to a martial artist's person that allows him to grow and evolve. It not only facilitates such growth; rather, it is the source of growth. Technical, intellectual, and personal growth are all the goal of the martial artist, and through discipline, these goals are attainable. Without discipline, a person is confined to a life defined by one's preconceptions, false limitations, and current capabilities. With discipline, however, a student has complete access to the development of his full potential as a person, and the door is thereby opened to this core component of martial arts.