

The Impact of Martial Arts Training on Women's Self-Esteem

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Introduction

Most modern martial arts are rooted in combat and survival techniques developed by the ancient Asian fighting arts. The way of warriors, such as the Samurai bushido code of Japan, often included fighting and dying for one's lord with unquestioning loyalty. Today we believe more in self-dependence and personal decision-making and while physical battles need not be a part of our lives, the warrior's values of loyalty, courage, and discipline are still admirable. Martial arts practice today has evolved into a variety of styles which emphasize spiritual development, sport, and competition, as well as traditional training in self-defense.¹

The value of martial arts, such as taekwondo, is not in the execution of a perfect jump roundhouse kick but in how people use the training to develop themselves. The martial arts become a mirror, allowing students to translate the mental and physical strength developed in the dojang to facing the challenges of daily life. Thus, martial arts training becomes a means of self-empowerment. Students are likely to experience an increase in self-esteem through the practice of taekwondo or other martial arts styles:

Taekwondo builds self-esteem. As
students accomplish things they felt

were unachievable, learn to deal with failure, and learn to interface with people who are better or worse than they are, their self-esteem grows.²

Although both men and women benefit from this increased self-confidence, as martial arts is a world that has been traditionally dominated and written about by men; women often face different challenges in their training. Consequently, this paper focuses on the perspectives of women in determining the impact of martial arts on self-esteem.

Gender Differences and the Sense of Self

According to martial arts instructor Judith Fein, all personal power and freedom arise from self-esteem, and self-defense begins with the sense of self.³ For the most part, women are socialized differently than men. Many religions and cultures discourage women from developing qualities that are perceived as masculine, such as strength and fighting ability. Women are often socialized to embody a feminine identity that emphasizes “softness, vulnerability, physical weakness, and fear of injury”.⁴

Sharon R. Guthrie, a researcher in psychological and social issues in the martial arts, describes a Cartesian dualism in Western ideology where the body is labeled as inferior to the mind; females are then associated with bodily functions, while men are associated with mental functions. Some feminists, in an effort to alter this image of female identity, focus primarily on the intellectual dimensions of women to promote social change. Ironically, that focus contributes to male dominance and oppression of females in patriarchal

societies.⁵ By contrast, Guthrie promotes a feminist “care of the self” ethic to bring about healing and self-determination, through mind/body practices (not just mental attitudes alone); training that promotes health, meditation, physical strength and self-defense skills; the study of strategies for successful resistance in group settings; and empowering relationships with other women.⁶

Italian martial artist and academic Daniele Bolelli agrees that even in today’s society, women are encouraged to display femininity by remaining defenseless and weak:

By restricting women’s access to the training tools of physical self-empowerment, this type of cultural conditioning exacerbates further the natural differences between men and women, and relegates women to a subordinate position.... The fact that this lack of familiarity with their physical strength also affects women’s independence, emotional stability to stand on their own, and self-esteem, is an intentional by-product of patriarchal cultures that have little patience for strong, assertive women.⁷

Martial arts training offers women the tools to counter the disabling conditioning of these cultural traditions by stimulating them to learn to trust their ability to defend themselves and fight, to refuse to accept the victim’s role, and to push fear away during stressful situations. According to Fein, fear often controls women’s lives, and much of this has to do with the fear of fighting. The list of common female fears cited by Fein includes fears of:

- getting injured;
- hurting someone else;

- male power;
- panicking;
- being ineffective;
- losing control.

Having the knowledge and ability to take care of herself, and tapping into her own personal power, permits a woman to have the power of choice.⁸ In order to develop personal power, women must believe in their own sanctity as human beings and develop self-respect so that others respect them.⁹ When a woman learns martial arts, she learns self-defense, self-confidence and self-esteem, and acquires the ability to go out and live life with less fear.

At the Austin State University Department of Kinesiology and Health Science, in 1990, Professor Mel Finkenberg conducted his own study of the effects of participation in taekwondo on the self-esteem of college women. Finkenberg notes the amazing growth in popularity of taekwondo in this country, its inclusion as an Olympic sport, and its success as a program for mental, physical, and spiritual conditioning. However, at the time of Finkenberg's study, there was little evidence about the psychological impact of the martial arts. A 1986 study by Richman and Rehberg had assessed the relationship between self-esteem and belt level, concluding that the more advanced, higher-level belts possessed the highest level of self-esteem.¹⁰ Finkenberg chose to assess only the self-concept of women in college-level taekwondo classes, acknowledging that the experience and benefits may be very different for women and men.

A sampling of fifty-one women who were enrolled in taekwondo classes was compared to forty-nine

women enrolled in general health courses. All the women were administered the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale (TSCS) in the first week of the semester, followed by a post-test eighteen weeks later. Neither the taekwondo women nor the control group had had previous martial arts experience. The women ranged in age from eighteen to thirty-two years. The TSCS tests perceptions of physical self, social self, identity, self-satisfaction and behavior. Analysis of the results of the TSCS revealed significant differences between the two groups of women on total self-concept scores, with the mean self-concept scores for the taekwondo classes being higher than the control group. The taekwondo group also scored significantly higher on five of nine sub scale scores. Finkenberg's study concluded that women in martial arts classes could expect to raise their level of self-esteem in two months time, but a longitudinal study of a larger group would increase the validity of the findings.¹¹

Martial Arts Training for Women

The effect of martial arts training upon "women's embodiment" or "the way women experience their bodies and minds" was also studied at Thousand Waves, a dojang in Chicago for women only. Seido karate, a kicking and punching art, is the main form of martial arts taught at the school. Meditation instruction assists the students in focusing on the meaning of the movements. Seido also encourages strength training, aerobic activity, and a vegetarian diet. Thus, training in Seido karate promotes not only physical prowess, but also "a spiritual practice that fosters individual awareness and growth, as well as

connections among mind, body and spirit and among self, others, and the universe".¹² Although other dojangs may offer training with a similar focus, including spiritual practice, Thousand Waves uses a feminist approach that seeks to empower women, and "reconstruct gender relations by creating an environment that ... allows them to heal from the wounds inflicted by patriarchal oppression".¹³

Attention is paid to making the physical space particularly welcoming to women, by displaying feminist art and literature, and offering a high degree of comfort and safety. Activities that promote self-growth and help the participants to build cooperative relationships are emphasized over tournament competition. Even political involvement in the community is expected: students demonstrate martial arts skills at events such as those celebrating International Women's Day or put on by The Women's Cancer Project. More than a martial arts training facility, Thousand Waves is a feminist sanctuary that strongly cultivates the participants' development of self-esteem. Most of the women at Thousand Waves claim that they would have quit their karate classes at a male dominated facility. However, it is interesting to note that these same women now believe they could be successful at a coed dojang, having learned attitudes and skills that "empowered their perceptions of their abilities to mediate patriarchal environs."¹⁴ All of the women at Thousand Waves who were interviewed for Guthrie's study reported physical, mental, and spiritual empowerment as the most important benefit from their martial arts training. A major component of their heightened sense of

empowerment and self-esteem was the realization that they have the right to defend themselves. Explained one Thousand Waves member:

This requires another level of acceptance, rooted in a valuing of the self which many women don't possess. The skills are worthless if you don't feel you have the right to defend yourself on the street, at home, or in the workplace.¹⁵

Another factor that fosters empowerment at Thousand Waves is the way in which martial arts training allows women to break through self-imposed boundaries and limits. One woman describes her personal experience this way:

I always felt fragile and fearful of harm. I thought that was how a woman was supposed to feel. The more fragile I felt, the more attractive I believed myself to be. Hence, I worked at this and was quick to turn my power over to others, particularly men. At Thousand Waves we gain a more accurate assessment of our bodily powers; as a result, we are able to shed warped notions of our own fragility ... Martial arts has helped me to break out of traditional feminine training and to recreate myself.¹⁶

Guthrie also argues that enhanced body image and awareness correlates with higher sense of self-esteem. Women, traditionally lacking confidence in their motor skills, and feeling uncoordinated and clumsy, experienced significantly improved perceptions of their bodies through the Thousand Waves martial arts training. Martial arts styles, such as taekwondo or Seido karate, where participants are allowed to achieve at their own pace, encourage a supportive,

non-elitist environment. Women who had previously suffered from weight issues and yo-yo dieting now reported acceptance of their bodies.¹⁷ Author Carol Wiley, who holds a second-degree black belt in taekwondo, includes a chapter on learning to accept her body in her book, **Women in the Martial Arts**. Initially, Wiley was pleased to keep her weight a bit more under control through disciplined training sessions at the dojang. She took pride in her improved coordination, strength, and endurance. But she soon realized that the mind is a more powerful weapon than the body. She became more focused, aware, and self-confident in both self-defense situations and her daily life. She stopped dieting, began to eat nutritiously, and let her weight find its natural level. Weight watching became a much less important part of her life as training her body, mind and spirit assumed the central focus of her attention.¹⁸

Another closely related sense of physical empowerment that has been reported in martial arts training for women is that improved body perception leads to changes in posture, or the way women carry their bodies. One woman at the Ten Thousand Waves dojang describes this physical benefit in her training:

There's been a big change in the way I posture in my body. I call it 'posturing for power.' I don't have the same victim stance. I use my body differently than I did in the past and use space differently. Early on I noticed a drastic reduction in harassment on the street and social settings. You start putting out confidence vibes and energy; it has a lot to do with changes...in the body.¹⁹

After participating in martial arts classes, feminist

activist Martha McCaughey was forced to rethink her assumptions about physicality, violence, and nonviolence. She explains that the female body is often a real or symbolic object of male violence, and violence is perceived as oppressive, diminishing, inappropriate, and masculine. Feminists have therefore concluded that violence is symptomatic of the ills of a patriarchal society. To McCaughey, engaging in martial arts or self-defense classes seemed like a kind of “sell out,” for women would be acquiring the “male tools” of violence.²⁰ Her views changed greatly after she joined in a martial arts class:

I came to question my feminist understandings of violence and its prevention after immersing myself in a culture that rehearses, and even celebrates, women’s potential for violence. Along with many other women in [martial arts] classes, I learned to jab, punch, kick, yell...and I loved it... Self-defense not only teaches women new responses with which to thwart assaults, it challenges basic assumptions about men’s and women’s bodies... Most significantly, I went through the self-defense metamorphosis. The ‘fighting spirit’ means more than a set of fighting tactics. Self-defense transforms what it means to have a female body.²¹

McCaughey makes an interesting observation that our culture is wedded to the notion of distinguishing between male and female bodies. There is a cultural, political, aesthetic, and legal acceptance of men’s aggression. In contrast, there is a deep skepticism, fear, and self-prohibition of any signs of aggression in women. Women’s martial arts classes allow a

reprogramming regimen for the mind and body. In martial arts, women can “rehearse a new script for bodily comportment.” The female body is no longer a place for patriarchal power, ideology, or brutality; it becomes a potential place for resistance. Female martial artists are able to develop a new self-image, a heightened awareness or self-esteem, and an understanding of the “fighting spirit”.²² Some of the women that McCaughey interviewed remarked that martial arts training increased their self-confidence and self-esteem, and helped them to develop a greater sense of courage in facing everyday situations.

The elevation of women's self-esteem in the martial arts is not just confined to able-bodied participants. One case study related by Carol Wiley tells the story of a wheelchair-bound woman named Lydia, who practiced aikido as well as holding a black belt in karate. Her training began in 1984 in Amsterdam. Although the techniques were adapted for Lydia, the principles of aikido were unchanged. As a martial art that focuses on developing internal chi, and uses circular body movement more than raw strength, aikido was well suited to her special needs. Lydia learned to reuse her body in fighting classes, but she also learned to love her disabled body again. The empowerment and self-confidence that Lydia gained through her training prompted her to begin teaching women with other disabilities, including spastic women, and women with hardly any strength or movement. Amazingly, Lydia eventually learned to teach karate and other self-defense classes to mostly able-bodied women.

Teaching women and girls to kick is very

challenging if you yourself cannot kick.
But a lot of creativity from my side... and
the love and understanding from my
Karate students makes it possible.”²³

Case Studies from UCMAP

In an informal polling of female participants at the UC Berkeley Martial Arts Program (UCMAP), the notion that training in taekwondo or other martial arts is likely to elevate one’s self-esteem was generally supported. All names have been changed to protect the anonymity of the respondents. Herewith are some insights and excerpts from several personal interviews conducted during the spring of 2003.

Jane's Story

Jane, a twenty-one year old hankido student, has been involved in UCMAP for over two years, and believes that her training has improved her self-esteem:

Even just the acknowledgement that I am participating has been good for confidence, but the fact that I have peers that somewhat look up to me, or even more flattering, consider me to be an equal, has been extremely rewarding. I might even go so far as to say my experience...has ‘made’ me, given me an identity, or at the very least, shaped a part of my college experience.²⁴

Although Jane does not feel threatened or disadvantaged as a woman, she believes there is a big potential for women to be uncomfortable, particularly in hankido, due to the wrestling and throwing of each

other. Jane points out that women who participate in martial arts need to be disciplined, willing to endure a little pain, be a little tougher, and ready to stand up for themselves. She makes a comparison between gender specific goals among UCMAP members, saying that many women participate for the self-defense aspect, asking themselves, "How do I defend myself," while men might participate more for the physicality of the art, saying, "They want to learn how to fight". In general, Jane claims, "most men acknowledge that I can handle what they have to dish out... Sometimes, I feel I have to exceed their expectations because I am a girl."²⁵

Kim's Story

In an interesting contrast, Kim, a twenty-eight year old martial artist, believes that her three-year involvement in taekwondo actually resulted in a gradual loss of self-confidence over that period! She had the opposite experience during eight years of hankido, with an increase in self-esteem. Kim was unable to describe the male/female experience in UCMAP taekwondo as positive, particularly in comparison to hankido or wushu. She did feel empowered by her martial arts training, a sentiment that was particularly validated later, when while living in a foreign country, she stopped someone from mugging her friend.

Bea's Story

Bea, a twenty year old black belt in taekwondo at UCMAP, has trained for seven years. Her self-esteem has been elevated to a certain extent, in that she feels

more confident about defending herself, if assaulted, because of martial arts.

I believe sports in general give women self-confidence ... and empowers them.... All the females [at UCMAP] are friendly and supportive of each other.²⁶

In response to the question of whether females have a different experience than males at UC Berkeley taekwondo, Bea's answer is unsettling:

Yes, [the experience is different] with the segregated competition practices. There the women were treated very badly. Things that included harassment and hazing occurred.²⁷

Finally, Bea says that most women at UCMAP are not there to be competitive; rather they are there for self-improvement, self-defense or to build self-confidence.

My Story

My own experience over four years in the UC Berkeley taekwondo program has been wholly positive, enhancing my self-esteem and giving me a level of confidence in various situations that I previously lacked. Although I have been active in 'extreme' sports most of my life (rock-climbing; kayaking; boxing), my shy nature has always hampered me to a certain degree. In high school, testing with college students in front of a panel of judges forced me to conquer my fears and trust in my well-practiced skills. At UCMAP, the generous support of the masters and other black belts, including many women, has bolstered my mental strength as much as push-ups and sparring sessions have aided my

physical vigor. Women in the UCMAP program, particularly Sally Ho, Laura Chan, and Brandi Barrows, have served as outstanding mentors, giving me the determination to continue in my training, wherever my own college-bound career takes me.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Wiley, 1993, p. 3.
- ² D'souza, 1.
- ³ Fein, 1996, p. 21.
- ⁴ Guthrie, 1995, p. 109.
- ⁵ *Ibidem.*
- ⁶ *Ibidem.*
- ⁷ Bolelli, 2003, pp. 50-51.
- ⁸ Fein, pp. 20-21.
- ⁹ Fein, p. 30.
- ¹⁰ Richman & Rehberg.
- ¹¹ Finkenberg, 1990, pp. 891-894.
- ¹² Guthrie, 1995, p. 110.
- ¹³ *Ibidem.*
- ¹⁴ Guthrie, 1995, p. 111.
- ¹⁵ Guthrie, 1995, p. 112.
- ¹⁶ Guthrie, 1995, p. 113.
- ¹⁷ Guthrie, 1995, p. 113-114.
- ¹⁸ Wiley, 1993, pp. 59-60.
- ¹⁹ Guthrie, 1995, p. 114.
- ²⁰ McCaughey, 1998, p. 277.
- ²¹ McCaughey, 1998, pp. 277-278.
- ²² McCaughey, 1998, pp. 280-281.
- ²³ Wiley, 1993, p. 65.
- ²⁴ Personal interview sessions, Berkeley, Spring 2003.
- ²⁵ *Ibidem.*
- ²⁶ *Ibidem.*
- ²⁷ *Ibidem.*