

EXCEPTIONAL EXPERIENCES AND SPIRITUALITY IN THE MARTIAL ARTS

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A Culminating Project submitted to the Faculty of  
Atlantic University in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS in TRANSPERSONAL STUDIES

ATLANTIC UNIVERSITY  
Virginia Beach, Virginia  
February, 2005

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## **Abstract**

This study is an exploration of the many aspects of the martial arts. Understanding is sought to determine if and how these aspects converge into the embodiment of a spiritual practice.

In this paper the core values and principles of the martial arts will be discussed. The discussion will also delve into any Peak Experiences that individuals may have undergone and the influence they may have played in the convergence of martial principles with spirituality. The natures of personal psychological boundaries are tested as they relate to the subjective perception of the Peak Experience.

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

This study seeks to determine if there is a correlation between peak experiences and spirituality in the martial arts. There could be a challenge in determining what constitutes a peak experience or spirituality because definitions can vary widely. According to Maslow (1970) “spiritual values have naturalistic meaning.” Spirituality is or can be many things and is not exclusively concepts possessed by organized churches or religions. In the context of this study spirituality pertains to the individual’s pursuit of the divine as they interpret it. This should avoid some of the difficulties found in functional definitions used by many religions, which can be narrow and confining in scope. As the martial arts are reviewed it may be necessary to separate what are clearly spiritual and in some cases religious functions from nonspiritual functions.

When discussing phenomenological events it can be difficult to translate the ineffable experience into coherent cognitive content. Charles Tart (1997) indicates that all Peak, Exceptional, and Mystical experiences have one thing in common. He states, “They are the encounters with consciousness as such, pure consciousness in which there is no subject – object distinction, no content but a transformational process that often results in remarkable behavioral changes and beliefs and sometimes translates itself into informational content.”

The preceding description would indicate that any experience that created a positive transformation in an individual’s life could be classified as a Peak, Exceptional, or

Mystical experience. Degrees of intensity may serve to differentiate between each type of experience.

### **Martial Arts as a Topic of Interest**

In many countries the practice of martial arts has been seen as or related to a form of spiritual practice for as long as several hundred years. In Indonesia and Japan the practice is dedicated to village or house deities. Shrines adorn most of the traditional training halls perhaps dedicated to spiritual deities or to the school's past masters (ancestors). Many arts have direct links to Taoism, Buddhism, Shintoism and other established spiritual practices.

It is extremely difficult to trace the origins of the martial arts due to secrecy within the martial arts community. Many Chinese martial arts scholars generally accept that some type of formal combative exercise was practiced in Taoist temples as part of their spiritual practices in the Wu Tang Mountains as early as 540 A.D., if not before that time.

Written references to the martial arts as a means of spiritual development can be found in the writings of Japanese individuals such as Takuan Soho (1573 - 1645) and his contemporary Miyamoto Musashi, the author of the widely read *Go Rin Sho* or *Book of Five Rings*. In some modern martial arts there remains an emphasis on the spiritual development of the practitioner although it does vary by degrees depending on the particular art.

My wish in this thesis is to address the overall spirituality of the higher martial arts and the events, Peak, Exceptional, or Mystical, that individuals may have experienced, causing them to seek spiritual understanding through the practice of the martial arts.

Higher martial arts emphasize in their teaching that their arts do not consist solely of a series of techniques to deal with various violent people or situations, but rather and more importantly, those techniques are paramount for the improvement of self and a method of experiencing the divine. Among practitioners of the martial arts in the United States and many Western countries it is a somewhat radical idea to view the study of combative techniques as a method of spiritual development. In Eastern countries such as China, Japan, and Korea such an approach to spiritual development is not viewed as being unusual. Rather than simply stressing combative skills, the higher martial arts have always emphasized moral and spiritual development. It is my belief that those characteristics are retained in the higher martial arts practiced in the United States today. It is also my belief that most long-term practitioners experience some event in their practice which creates a focus or emphasis on this spirituality.

Early in its popularization in the United States many martial arts movies and television shows highlighted the transpersonal aspects of the martial arts. The television show, *Kung Fu*, starring David Carradine portraying a wandering Shaolin Monk was unusual in its portrayal of highly developed intuitive and psi abilities. To a large degree these television shows and movies appear to mirror the initial reasons why individuals become involved in the martial arts, which may be to develop unparalleled fighting abilities and self-defense skills. It is generally only after a person has been practicing a martial art for some time that they “discover” the spiritual aspects of the art.

Martial arts studios are practically on every street corner of every town that a person might travel to. The World TaeKwonDo Federation boasts of having over 300,000 black belts (an individual who has received a rank of first degree or higher) worldwide. There

are many organizations with tens of thousands of members and hundreds of smaller associations.

From the popularity of the martial arts it would appear that any study researching a particular aspect of that art would have access to an abundance of resources from which to draw. This conclusion would be a misconception by individuals not familiar with the martial arts community.

There are martial arts and then there are “Martial Arts.” Many martial arts schools are ran by overnight wonders who boast of multiple world championships and the title of Ultimate Supreme Grandmaster all at the tender age of twenty something and after only a very short time of practice, at best a few years. Curriculumms consist of anything from karate aerobics to a composite of styles that are popular at the moment. Commerciality is the main concern and focus of these schools. The constant drive is to recruit ever more students; quality is usually sacrificed to ensure retention and profits. At best the martial arts taught in these types of schools are nothing more than a pretty set of dance movements.

Individuals who teach Martial Arts, the more traditional combative arts, are becoming a very rare breed. These individuals may not have a public training hall. Many limit the number of students they teach to a mere handful of five or six people. Most often they reserve their complete teaching for only one individual. Their methods sometimes seem harsh and are always demanding.

One such individual was convinced by his students to open a “commercial” training hall; they had been training in his garage for many years. This individual eventually consented, found a location and opened his door to the public; the first night his training

hall was filled with 60 new martial art aspirants. Two weeks later after some very arduous training the senior students walked into an almost empty training hall. Of the 60 new students only one remained. The senior students were sure that this was the end of the school; they were concerned that their instructor would be sorely disappointed. When the instructor arrived he stood and surveyed the almost empty room. To the senior students' surprise, rather than a scowl a big grin came across the instructor's face as he stated, "finally, now I can start teaching real karate." This instructor never has or wants more than ten or fewer than five students.

Individuals who teach the higher martial arts or combative systems are not as accessible as it may appear to the general populace. Even when a person is fortunate enough to become acquainted with one of these individuals, it takes time and effort to get to know them and gain their confidence.

Martial arts are not a secret entity but are an entity with jealously guarded secrets. Knowledge involving the more esoteric aspects of the martial arts has been kept relatively secret from the general population. This was done in part so that those in the upper ranks could maintain their position of authority. Practitioners of this more traditional type of martial art rarely share very much information with others outside of their art. This mentality can be traced back to a feudal way of thinking. Just as in other aspects of society there is an overt culture and then there are many and various subcultures. People who are involved in these martial arts compose part of one of these small elitist subcultures. A good amount of their martial curriculum, along with their practice, is held as a closely guarded secret. Gaining access to this information requires

becoming a trusted member of the group. Even then the entire curriculum is rarely passed on to more than one or two of their students.

The typical practitioner of this kind of martial art is very much a unique individual, who has devoted a good portion of their life to following a mental and physical discipline that most of us can hardly imagine and fewer would be able to understand. Martial artists of this kind learn to deeply suppress the display of any emotion. The Japanese liken this to hiding feelings behind a sevenfold gate. The surface always remains calm no matter what the inner turmoil. Yet these hardened individuals seem to possess a profound spiritual presence. The challenge that faces the researcher in this study is, in part, finding this type of individual, but even more difficult is building the rapport and trust, in a short period of time, that will convince the person to open up and expose a part of their inner nature; an inner nature that over the years has been subject to extreme disciplines in an effort to hide it from the world at large.

### **Personal Background**

My interest in the spiritual aspects of the martial arts evolved from my long time involvement, first as a student when I was approximately 13 years old, then as an instructor. Like most youngsters of that time, my exposure to the martial arts had come in the form of comic books, television shows, and some movies. The dominant martial art in the mid-sixties was Judo. Other arts were very mysterious and all but unknown. One evening when my sister's boyfriend came to pick her up for their date he informed me that he had been enrolled in a newly formed Karate class. With his assistance I was able to convince my mother to allow me to enroll in the class. I became a student of



KyokushinKai Karate a physically severe and at times even brutal style. The focus was intense physical conditioning and real-life combat.

From that beginning I have had the opportunity to study several other martial arts, all unique in their own way in technique and philosophy. My passion for the martial arts has taken me from Japanese Karate to Korean Taekwondo to Filipino Kali to an American Eclectic style and finally to Chinese Tai Chi Chuan. In total I have approximately 39 years of experience in the martial arts. All this experience has led me to investigate peak, exceptional and mystical experiences and their relationship to spirituality in the martial arts.

### **Martial Arts and the United States**

The first public American training hall is attributed to Robert Trias who opened his facility around 1946 after returning from overseas military service. Since then the martial arts in America have undergone many changes.

Americans have many and varied reasons for beginning training in the martial arts. Some view the martial arts as an opportunity to learn how to defend themselves in an increasingly violent world. Others see the martial arts as an exciting and exotic way to get into shape so for them it is a new and different exercise program. There are some individuals that read books such as the *I-Ching* or *Tao Te Ching* and seek an active interpretation of the philosophical principles and concepts contained in those writings by exploring such practices as Tai Chi Chuan. Training may even have begun for some as a method to reach enlightenment. In his book *Zen and Japanese Culture* (1959) Suzuki kindled and nurtured the romantic concept of the martial arts as a path to enlightenment.

Many hold the perception that the martial arts can be a form of moving meditation or Zen. When an outsider views the sometimes harsh discipline of the Japanese Zen meditation temples, it is easy to draw a correlation between the two pursuits. As with all practices, a martial artist's reason for having started and practiced his art may change over time. Other motivations may eventually overshadow an individual's initial reasons for having started the practice. In order to fully grasp the philosophical and spiritual aspects contained within the martial arts, one could evolve to appreciate and practice them. Some few come initially to the martial arts specifically to learn those aspects.

All of the martial arts that I am familiar with have underlying philosophical and spiritual structures; if not clearly stated they are covertly implied. The arts that are most overtly spiritual and focused on the higher levels of personal development are the Japanese arts of Shintaido and Aikido. Tai Chi Chuan and the other Chinese internal systems are often considered to be in this category; however in the case of these martial arts the focus seems to be more dependant upon the intent of the instructor. This also holds true in the majority of the harder or external styles (Karate, Taekwondo) of martial arts, spirituality is implied rather than stressed.

As an individual begins to read the literature, it becomes clear that the spirit of the martial arts is taught through the techniques of that art. In the case of Shintaido and Aikido the techniques are said to express love, compassion, and acceptance for all of mankind. As the individual practices the many effective and often deadly fighting techniques found in the various arts it is often difficult to associate those same techniques as an extension of the expression of love and compassion. However, as the individual

becomes immersed in practice, one begins to detect a certain flow which occurs in the energy within the person and between the interacting individuals.

The basic philosophical intent of the martial arts is to harmonize with this flow through the practice of the technique. As we begin to move in a natural harmony, we discover that on some energy level all things are connected. By flowing in harmony with this universal energy we discover that we can achieve almost anything without conflict. When we lose this flow and our energy is no longer in harmony with the universal energy, interaction with the universe becomes much more difficult. Flow may be taught through confrontational or cooperative exercises. The lessons that these exercises are meant to convey are that the student should learn to recognize the harmony of the universe and learn to flow or blend with its harmonious energy. The student eventually learns to live in harmony with nature and flow with the universal energy.

Even though the martial arts have been a part of American culture for several decades there is still unfamiliarity with the overall concept of the martial arts as a spiritual practice. Martial arts have a unique standing in that they appear to be an excellent vehicle for Peak Experiences and a method for spiritual development. The goal of this thesis is to demonstrate that long-time practitioners encounter various peak experiences which lend to their spiritual development. To support this view I have conducted detailed interviews with a variety of martial arts practitioners as well as providing a detailed questionnaire to many more.

### **Patterns of Exceptional Experiences**

Controversy quickly arises when attempting to discuss any type of Peak, Exceptional or Mystical experience in relation to the practice of marital arts. Some individuals readily

accept such experiences as a common, naturally occurring part of their practice. These events become so commonplace as to eventually become second nature and thus lose their “luster.”

Then there are those individuals who when approached, become extremely defensive and very adamant that the martial arts are not a vehicle to develop or encourage such experiences. This group does not deny that the experiences may occur; their comments are along the lines of “I don’t believe in such things.” As adamant as they appear to be in denying any type of extraordinary experience these individuals practice many energy cultivation exercises and meditations; they also will spend a great deal of time discussing the esoteric aspects of their particular martial art. It is interesting that sometimes groups such as these will seriously teach weekly classes on using the I-Ching as a divination tool. Their actions appear to contradict their stated beliefs.

Through various anecdotal accounts, oral traditions, and some few written documents, small amounts of evidence have accumulated to indicate that there are patterns of Peak, Exceptional and even Mystical experiences that have occurred in the martial arts. At least in two cases these experiences led to the creation of particular martial arts styles; their stated purpose is to develop the spiritual character of their students through technical practice. The two styles referred to are Shintaido and Aikido. Other systems, although not developed for the express purpose of developing spirituality, do concern themselves with spiritual development and many recount peak, exceptional, or mystical experiences regarding their founders.

In an effort to provide the reader with a few examples without risking becoming redundant, the researcher offers the following accounts of what may be termed as peak, exceptional, or mystical experiences.

Miyagi Chojun was the founder of Goju Ryu karate and had been the personal disciple of Kanryo Higaonna. After having met Kanryo Higaonna, at the age of around 14, Miyagi Chojun decided to devote his life to the improvement and enhancement of karate (at this time karate was called Naha-Te in his district). Miyagi Chojun spent thirteen years with his teacher until Kanryo Higaonna passed away. Miyagi Chojun was a determined individual who displayed a strong will of character and he excelled in his studies. He could be seen practicing daily even in the harsh elements. Included in his practice were various exercises meant to develop his senses as well as his body. As told by Morio Higaonna to Goju – Ryu students at an association seminar (personal communication, 1992), Miyagi Chojun wished to improve on the martial arts. One method he used was to create new forms (kata). Many of these forms were developed through instructions that Miyagi Chojun received in his dreams. Miyagi Chojun must have intuitively recognized that his subconscious mind through an exceptional event was providing him with the information that he needed at that time.

Some combative arts make use of mudra. Mudras are strange and sometimes intricate hand gestures that have been derived from esoteric Buddhism and possibly other religious sects. These gestures are supposed to enable the practitioner to generate spiritual power and focus which can then be manifested, in some way, externally. These mudra may have roots dating back to prehistoric shamanistic rites in Asia. The use of mudra is more

commonly found in the “old” combative arts although it can still be found in some kung fu and Ninpo styles.

There are sometimes various odd movements existing in certain forms (kata) that cannot be logically explained as pertaining to a particular fighting technique. These seemingly needless hand gestures can be explained in the concept of the mudra. Contained in this odd pass of the fingers or palm is a secret sign intended to ward off evil spirits and then direct that force at the attacker.

Another mudra that is commonly ascribed to ninjutsu are the nine hand signs used in conjunction with nine words of power that are used to generate spiritual strength for the practitioner. The two hands weave a series of nine gestures while nine words, derived from Sanskrit, are uttered.

There are martial artists that firmly believe in mudra. Particular rituals are performed prior to battle to gain strength, and other rituals used to heal people suffering from various ailments. Some mudra are supposed to initiate the ability in the practitioner to sense other people’s thoughts, peer into the future, have a sixth sense of their surroundings or provide them with the ability to influence people mentally and verbally. Old stories abound along these lines of unexplainable powers wielded by martial arts masters in the Orient. Some martial art students in today’s society believe that their teachers possess these abilities and that they are at least in part attributed to practicing mudra.

Occasionally there will be accounts written by founders of certain arts or the students of the founder of a system of martial art that will reveal peak, exceptional or mystical events experienced by that individual. Among these accounts some of the best and most

widely known involve the founder of Aikido, Ueshiba Morihei. These events have been reproduced in a great many publications written by Ueshiba's students.

Already an accomplished martial artist, Ueshiba became a follower of the Oomoto religion. The head of this religion requested that Ueshiba accompany him to Mongolia as his personal bodyguard. The journey across China to Mongolia was long and abounded with many dangers. Where there were roads they were in horrible shape, each new territory contained a warlord who had to be negotiated with for passage and the party was frequently attacked by bandits. It was on one of these occasions that Ueshiba claimed to have developed the ability to see the intentions of others. He said that he could see a stream of blue light emitted from the barrel of the gun just prior to the trigger being pulled. This gave him the ability to sidestep the bullet.

On another occasion, which is the event that led to the founding of Aikido, Ueshiba reported that he had an intense mystical experience. The story goes that Ueshiba had just finished a duel where he had soundly and somewhat brutally defeated his opponent. Ueshiba retired to his garden to wash and rest. All of a sudden Ueshiba began to tremble uncontrollably. A ray of pure white light streamed down from heaven. His body was engulfed in a golden mist which washed away his pettiness; he then realized that he was the Universe and that the heart of Budo was not contention but rather love. This is a love that fosters and protects all things. This is the event that is credited to have led to the founding of Aikido.

The founding of the marital art Shintaido was based on a similar event. This event was experienced by the founder of Shintaido Hiroyuki Aoki and published in his book *Shintaido* (1992).

Aoki had studied with what was considered some of the best martial artists in Japan. He joined others to form a small group that included some of the highest ranking artists of that time, to engage in serious and rigorous training to test their physical and psychological limits. Aoki stated in his book that “we discovered many effective methods to liberate our consciousness, purify our souls and at the same time develop our bodies” (1992).

During one of the early morning practices Aoki describes how all those present “entered a perfectly calm world” (1992). Each individual simultaneously pointed their practice swords skyward. The practitioners began swaying as if the entire episode had been prearranged and choreographed. Their bodies became transparent eventually disappearing into the night while what appeared to be a green mist covered the ground.

Aoki intuitively realized that this was the revelation that he had been seeking. Over time this mystical experience gave birth to Aoki’s expressive martial art and spiritual practice of Shintaido.

Events such as those described demonstrate that there are patterns of exceptional experiences believed to exist in at least some martial arts. Even though the practice of these arts are not intended to replicate those particular experiences the goal of Aikido and Shintaido and possibly other arts is to develop a person in such a way as to help them realize their own physical, mental and spiritual potential.

### **Related Research**

Despite the liberal use of spiritually related terminology found in the titles of numerous martial arts books and articles there are actually few publications that deal



directly with the spiritual side of the martial arts. Many of these sources imply the spiritual aspect involved in martial arts practices, but do not outline or detail the achievement of this particular type of spirituality as it pertains to the individuals' life perception.

Since there has been little academic research conducted in the area of martial arts spirituality and peak experiences information will need to be sought in popular mainline literature. An example of such literature would be *Path Notes of an American Ninja Master* by Glen Morris (1993). Dr. Morris gives many accounts of peak experiences and touches upon the spiritual aspects of his practice. The information provided within this literature is mostly anecdotal and therefore very subjective in its presentation. This is not to imply that anecdotal information is not valid. Since peak experiences and spirituality varies from each individual's personal perspective the interpretation of the event is very valid.

Morris delves into the esoteric aspects of the martial arts as he views them. He candidly shares his particular spiritual beliefs and personal experiences. He discusses and describes seeing auras around individuals during practice, receiving and sending Chi energy and how sex plays a part in spirituality. Morris delves into and relates his particular tradition to the disciplines of Taoism, Chi Kung and yoga. A great deal of emphasis is placed on awakening the Kundalini energy. Kundalini is a subtle energy that resides at the base of a person's spine. Kundalini is a Sanskrit word, which means serpent power. It refers to the power of the Self, the pure life force energy, which is dormant, until it begins to awaken and infuse the higher levels of consciousness.

In his book *Shadow Strategies of an American Ninja Master* (1992) Morris continues with his thoughts regarding the martial arts and some of its more esoteric aspects. He relays various anecdotes of his experiences and the experiences of those around him. The book is full of his interpretations of both Asian and Occidental philosophy and how it relates to the martial arts.

Interlaced throughout *Shadow Strategies of an American Ninja Master* are references to Tantric, Taoist and Shamanistic practices and how they relate to his interpretation of the martial arts. His belief is that these practices are cross-cultural and scientifically replicable. He delves into his thoughts on meditation and his insights in exploring the inner workings of the mind, body, and spirit in relation to the martial arts.

After having seen a documentary film highlighting a mysterious man with seemingly pyrokinetic abilities Kostas Danaos became determined to track this individual down. The mystery man started fires by intently focusing his Chi energy into a small concentrated sphere. This quest of numerous adventures is detailed in his book *The Magus of Java: Teachings of an Authentic Taoist Immortal* (2000). Danaos seeks out, finds, and is finally accepted as a disciple by this Chinese internal arts master.

Danaos presents the reader with the concept of working with yin and yang (Chi) energy as a way to extend the powers of the mind beyond the limitations of the body. Among the incredible feats possible through this type of training are abilities such as levitation, telepathy, pyrokinesis, and telekinesis.

Although this book is written as nonfiction, some of the claims are so phenomenal that it brings Danaos' credibility into question. The metaphysical, spiritual, and healing aspects of the Chinese art of Nei Kung are all embraced and explored. Danaos continues

this exploration into the internal arts with his book *Nei Kung: The Secret Teachings of the Warrior Sages* (2002). Internal martial arts are considered to be systems that place more emphasis on developing the body's energy components than on developing the body's musculature.

In the context of this research project it is not important if the content of the above two books are accurate and true. Some of the information may very well have been exaggerated or even fabricated entirely. However his books are built around a set of common beliefs generally held within the martial arts and internal arts community to a greater or lesser degree. These books are important in that they demonstrate that individuals are seeking something more in the martial arts than merely a means of physical exercise or self-defense. They also demonstrate that there is a general belief and some evidence that the practice of martial arts can produce some type of extraordinary experience. Danaos' writings suggest that these experiences lead an individual to explore spirituality more deeply.

*The Zen Way to the Martial Arts* (1982), written by Taisen Deshimaru, provides the reader with some interesting mind training experiences and explores why the mind, body, and spirit must merge together to reach perfection within the martial arts. Using the genre of an interesting combination of short stories, interviews, and anecdotes this book explores the link between Zen and the martial arts. Deshimaru provides the reader with a framework to begin Zen meditation and eventually produce spontaneous thinking actions in the martial arts.

Deshimaru recognizes that the present trend of the martial arts has drifted away from the spirit of Budo toward sports and competition. Where sports reflect a distorted vision

of life, following the path of Bushido (Warrior Way) integrates reality with life's struggles. Deshimaru states, "In the spirit of Zen and Budo everyday life becomes the contest." (1982). This book attempts to demonstrate the true essence of Zen in relation to the martial arts where the emphasis is on life and living in contrast to competitive sports which emphasize competition and winning.

Martial art training, at least in the traditional sense, develops the whole person. It strengthens Ki (internal energy), destroys the ego (or attempts to teach the person how to control the ego), and moves the practitioner beyond his dualistic nature. An individual's dualistic nature is seen as consisting of separate bodies, one physical and the other spiritual. Consciousness is developed with a focus on the inner self.

Donn Draeger was a military officer who stayed in Japan after completing his tour of duty there with the U. S. Marine Corps. Draeger completely immersed himself in Japanese culture. Some of his Oriental peers commented that he had become more Japanese than some of the native Japanese.

Draeger was a research historian, lecturer and an expert in several Asian martial arts. He is the author and coauthor of several books on the martial disciplines. Draeger was the first author to take an in-depth as well as a brutally honest look at the history and development of the Japanese martial disciplines; a three volume set beginning with the volume *Classical Bujutsu*, continuing with the next volume *Classical Budo*, and ending with the volume titled *Modern Bujutsu & Budo* (1996).

All three volumes are excellent, tediously researched studies. Volume three in particular deals with the changes that have occurred through the modernization of the classical arts. It is proposed that as the martial arts modernized and athletic competition

became the focus of practice, the arts transitioned and drifted away from their spiritual foundations.

However the spiritual underpinnings still remain. The foundation is more solid in some arts than in others. In still others there appears to be a concentrated effort to reestablish, grow and emphasize the original spiritual links.

Draeger expresses his particular view of spirituality in the martial arts and which religious practices may have had an influence on the Japanese disciplines. Zen in particular is most often prominently associated with the martial arts practiced in Japan.

Continuing on with the theme of Zen in relation to the Japanese martial arts an interested party would come to find what has become classic and required reading on that topic. This classic is *Zen in the Art of Archery* which was first published in 1953.

Eugen Herrigel traveled to Japan where he then spent his next six years studying archery and flower-arranging. He relays how he practiced every day, struggling to overcome his internal obstacles. Herrigel faced the challenge of subduing or losing the “self” in order to allow the arrow to find the target without using effort. On one level this book is very much about human psychology. It presents the idea of the archer, the arrow and the target becoming “one” through practice which leads to effortless effort.

Overcoming these internal barriers addresses the universal spiritual concept of focusing on the inner person and not the external goal. The lesson offered in this publication can be applied to numerous situations.

Trevor Leggett is one of the most senior non-Japanese judoists in the world; he began his study of that discipline in 1930. Over the years Leggett has written extensively on the

martial arts. *The Spirit of Budo* (1998) is a collection of essays about the martial arts and various other aspects of traditional Japanese culture.

In this book of essays Leggett covers several broad themes including that of Budo and its relationship to learning and life. Leggett discusses different methods of learning and how one or two comments or events at just the right moment can completely change an individual's perception of life. He discusses at some length what he considers to be Budo's most important percepts. Various intangible aspects of the martial arts are explored (Leggett, 1998).

### **Outline of Study**

In order to understand the martial arts as a spiritual practice, Chapter 2 will briefly examine martial arts history.

In an effort to understand certain aspects important to various energy cultivation practices of the martial arts Chapter 3 will briefly explore the concept of Chi energy.

Chapter 4 will begin to look at the relationship between spirituality and the martial arts. This chapter will include individual interviews with martial arts practitioners from various disciplines. Peak experiences and their relationship to the individual's approach to practicing the martial arts is examined. This data will seek to show how peak experiences manifest into the desire to seek the spiritual through martial arts practice.

Finally Chapter 5 will be devoted to an analysis of the collected data. In this chapter conclusions will be discussed and a determination will be made as to whether the study data supported the proposed study statement.

## Chapter 2

### Brief History of Martial Arts

This brief history is a general presentation and not meant to be a definitive study of the origin of the martial arts. Since there is no one agreed upon resource this presentation is compiled from several sources that seem to be in general agreement.

Martial arts history is shrouded in myth and mystery. Eastern cultures affiliated legitimacy with the antiquity of the lineage. Many times, the ancient lineage would include a mythical hero of some sort who imposed secret knowledge unto the founder of a particular art. The more distant in the past a practitioner could claim the origin of his particular system, the more prestigious would be the standing of his system.

This brief history is a general presentation and not meant to be a definitive study of the origin of the martial arts. Since there is no one agreed upon resource this presentation is compiled from several sources that seem to be in general agreement.

For the purpose of this history martial art is defined as a “combat science.” It can be a set of movements used for offensive or defensive purposes. It can also be a set of movements or a method used to promote health. Also martial arts can be a method of promoting spiritual development.

Combat science probably began evolving in ancient times. This can be evidenced by ancient murals and sculptures depicting fighting poses from Egypt, India, and Babylon dating as far back as 5,000 years. Martial arts, as they are recognized today, probably did evolve into an organized system of offensive and defensive skills until they began to

develop in China or India where both Buddhism and Taoism played a major role in their development (Morris, 1993).

China is considered to have one of the most warring histories of any nation in existence due in part to China being one of the earliest civilizations. Through countless wars and battles, techniques were discovered and developed to be passed down from generation to generation. With the development of organized armies and then weapons, many different formalized schools of martial arts were created and flourished in China's different dynasties and societies. Hundreds of dynasties rose and fell as massive battles pitted one ruler's armies against another. During these different dynasties martial arts may have flourished among the people, such as in the Ming Dynasty (1368 - 1644 A.D.) or it may have been suppressed by the rulers out of fear of uprising, such as was done in the Ching Dynasty (1644 A.D - 1911A.D.). Some of the earliest records show that a form of martial arts (a type of throwing art) dates back to as early as 2600 B.C. (Tomio, 1994).

It was during such difficult times that many martial artists became famous for their skills. These skills were honed in the defense of their property and province against invading warlords and roaming bandits. Men and women alike rose out of the general population to resist these bandits and warlords, eventually achieving an almost mythical hero status. Sadly fame and respect among the common people could lead to persecution by a fearful government.

Although the earliest form of Chinese martial arts can be traced back to around 2600 B.C., some schools, because of popular martial arts mythology, date the Chinese martial arts to only around the year 540 A.D. (Tomio, 1994). A popular story begins with a Buddhist monk named Buddhidarhma who was invited from India to teach Buddhism to



the monks at the Shaolin Temple. Buddhidarhma was revered as a great spiritual leader by the Chinese Buddhists. Many believe that Buddhidarhma brought the martial arts from India with him, which he then taught to the monks at the Shaolin Temple.

Buddhidarhma, after being dismissed by the emperor Liang Wu withdrew to the Shaolin Temple. He found the monks there to be very weak and sickly due to their lack of exercise. The teacher found that many of his student monks could not endure or stay awake long enough to practice even the most basic of Buddhist meditation practices.

Tradition states that Buddhidarhma secluded himself in a cave for nine years practicing “wall staring” meditation to attain his personal enlightenment. Some stories relate that he even cut off his eyelids so that he would not sleep. When he had emerged from the cave he had written two books. These books are suggested by some to be modified forms of Indian yoga practice designed to increase Chi circulation and build strength.

Buddhidarhma introduced these exercises to the monks at the temple in order that they might develop their physical and mental strength thus helping them to be able to follow the strenuous path toward enlightenment. It is believed that the exercises were based on the 18 main animals in Indo-Chinese iconography and is said to have eventually evolved over time within the temple walls to become the famous martial arts of the Shaolin.

Eventually these practices migrated to other Buddhist temples (Tomio, 1994).

China during this period in history was in constant turmoil. Armies were constantly being formed and disbanded either through defeat or victory. Often the defeated generals and ranking officers were branded as enemies of the state. It is believed that these defeated officers as well as other soldiers, disillusioned with the horrors of war, sought

refuge in various monasteries. The Shaolin Temple, being very isolated, seemed to be a popular destination.

As expatriated soldiers, and perhaps, contemplating an overthrow of the victorious regime, they continued to practice the various forms of martial exercise they had learned in the military. At this time, travel to villages to collect alms and between temples was very perilous for the monks. Chinese monks being, very practical, immediately recognized the benefit of such training to protect themselves from wild beasts and bandits. Eventually these martial exercises were absorbed into the Shaolin curriculum and the monks became very proficient martial artists.

The Shaolin Temple, as well as other temples, was a haven for the study of Buddhism, martial arts, and other activities. Activities such as music, philosophy, calligraphy, and medicine were practiced at the temple to assist monks in achieving enlightenment. The temples were not places to become a martial arts master, but rather it were places to follow the Buddhist lifestyle. The martial arts being taught at the Shaolin Temple became famous and respected throughout China and the surrounding countries; however the main focus was always Buddhism. All the activities practiced at the temple were designed to help an individual achieve enlightenment.

From China the martial arts eventually disseminated to other nearby countries such as Korea, Okinawa, and Japan. Exact dates are not known and there is some controversy as to what went where first. It is believed that as the various monks, both Buddhist and Taoist, traveled, they took with them and taught their respective martial arts. As interest grew, individuals from the various countries traveled to China with the hope of perfecting

their skills, eventually returning to teach what they had learned while changing it just enough to be more conducive to their particular culture.

Evidence suggests that some form of martial art was first carried from China to Japan around 490 A.D. (Morris, 1996). Many Japanese contest this and maintain that their martial arts were a gift from the gods. Since this presentation is not meant to provide an exact chronological history the expansion of the martial arts into Japan will be reviewed later in this history.

The difficulty with any ancient history of the martial arts is that many practitioners both old and new like to keep the origins of their system a mystery. This practice lends their art somewhat of a mystical air, drawing students who hope to learn some ancient secret. With that said, in ancient times there were valid reasons for keeping martial arts systems secret. At various periods, governments fearing overthrow would ban the study of combative science and persecute any known practitioners. Then there was also the practical matter of not wanting an opponent to know or develop a defense to particular methods taught in that system. This is demonstrated somewhat in the popular history associated with the Okinawa martial arts.

It is commonly believed that Okinawa (Ryuku Islands) was, for the most part, rather isolated up until the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Contact with Japan and then China, the introduction of the smelting of iron, and the beginning of Buddhist monks traveling to the islands created a cultural revolution. In the 11<sup>th</sup> century, lasting for several hundred years, conflict between several local chieftains eventually led to the establishment of three separate kingdoms under the rule of the most powerful chieftains on Okinawa (Morris, 1996).

Initially Okinawa was made up mainly of farmers and fishermen. Because it is centrally located in relation to many other countries and was also relatively poor in resources, trade became a strong focus for the inhabitants; especially trade with China. This created the opportunity for the development of other professions, most importantly that of sailor and trader. History demonstrates that this trade environment between Okinawa and both Japan and China also allowed for a strong element of cultural exchange including the introductions of martial arts systems. In addition to the Buddhist monks representatives from other countries may have traveled to Okinawa bringing with them various styles of martial arts. Okinawa became a mixing pot of the many different cultures.

As Okinawa prospered and trade with other countries increased, the development of combat science became increasingly important. The lucrative trade which flourished in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries attracted pirates to the region who preyed on trading vessels. Preservation required the development of some method to defend against the vicious attacks at sea.

Martial arts systems in Okinawa took on a particular flavor of their own. Divisions could be seen that indicated strong Shaolin influences, which was associated with the Buddhist temple, or strong Taoist influences.

Japan in around 1592 began a massive conquest of neighboring countries. A bloody war ensued with the Koreans and Chinese putting up a great resistance. Eventually Japan invaded Okinawa. Okinawan rulers pledged an allegiance to the much more powerful country; the Okinawans and Chinese remained allied and continued to exchange martial arts knowledge (Morris, 1996).

As the Japanese hold tightened, they placed a ban on all weapons and on the study of the martial arts. There were severe punishments for any individual who did not comply. Martial arts increased prolifically, but had to go underground; they practiced in secrecy, meeting in remote places or temples late at night or just before dawn. For this reason written documentation is nonexistent. Any knowledge was passed on in oral form. Eventually as tensions eased somewhat, Okinawan martial arts were again accepted publicly and eventually made their way to Japan. In Japan they were well accepted and eventually embraced as being their own. Modern martial arts migrated from Okinawa to Japan in the 1900s. But we know that formalized martial arts had already been in that country for centuries (Draeger, 1996).

Japanese mythology teaches that the Japanese people are descended from the gods. Because of these early held beliefs there are numerous colorful stories of how particular martial arts were passed down from various gods or emperors (who were viewed as living gods on earth).

During the Tang Dynasty (A.D. 618 - 907) there were many Chinese military and religious leaders who fled to Japan in an attempt to avoid oppression in their homeland or to find opportunities in a new country. The Taoist and Buddhist warrior monks brought with them various martial and mental systems which were later learned, developed and refined (to fit the Japanese culture) by the families who accepted and intermarried with them. Many of the newcomers migrated to isolated areas of Japan where they could continue to practice their religious beliefs without fear of persecution. Being from a much admired country, China, the Japanese people believed they possessed a sophisticated

knowledge of philosophies and warrior strategies that had been developed over the centuries in China (Tomio, 1994).

One of the spiritual influences was that of Shinto. Some believe that Shinto developed with a strong Taoist influence. Shinto can be expressed as “the way of god.” It implies a feeling for sacred or charismatic force, rather than a being. The very early Japanese regarded their entire world such as the rivers, mountains, lakes, wind and trees to have their own energy and spirit. Shinto is similar in many ways to Taoist shamanic practices.

Another spiritual method that was associated with the martial arts was Shugendo. The Shugendo method of spiritual self-discovery consisted of subjecting oneself to the harsh weather and terrain of the area in an attempt to extract strength from the environment itself. Practitioners would stand beneath freezing waterfalls, hang over cliffs and expose themselves to various dangerous activities in an effort to overcome fear and assume the powers of nature.

Many of the traditional martial arts are practiced in the context of following several important rituals. These rituals serve to define that particular art and to reinforce the beliefs and traditions of the martial art practitioner. The rituals may be performed at the opening and closing of each practice. Some rituals may take place at other times during practice. The ritual keeps the student firmly rooted in their practice.

Some ritual establishes and reinforces the essential spiritual elements of the art for the practitioner at every practice. An example can be found in the bowing at the start of class and bowing at the completion of class. The bow is an expression of respect for the teacher, fellow students and the lineage (ancestors) of the art.

Ritual may reinforce essential spiritual elements of certain martial arts. It may also serve to define the time and space that is appropriate to transmit the fundamental lessons of the art. Lessons may include philosophical concepts of how all things exist in a state of oneness in the universe and that there is a harmony or flow in this existence which is taught through the practice of very dangerous and highly effective combat techniques. By clearly defining the period of practice the importance of both the philosophical and technical lessons are emphasized.

It is believed by some martial arts scholars, such as Tomio, Morris and Gleason, that warrior monks from the Shaolin Temple also may have migrated to Japan at this time. Many of the Shaolin monks were expatriated military people seeking to find escape from war and persecution.

As these monks became integrated into their respective communities, it is believed that along with their spiritual beliefs they shared their martial arts knowledge. Providing an area lord with such practical and useful knowledge would ensure his acceptance and support of their temple.

This scenario was repeated in country after country; in places such as Korea, Viet Nam and other parts of Asia. Migrating monks carried with them their martial arts skills as well as their particular spiritual teachings. Without a high refinement of those martial arts skills it would have been impossible for the monks to have made these highly dangerous travels.

The key point of this brief history of the combative arts is that there was a period when the martial arts became an integral part of some Eastern religions. As time passed, the martial arts may have separated from the monasteries and formalized religions yet in

almost all cases the traditional martial arts have maintained a connection to the pursuit of spiritual growth in one form or another.



## Chapter 3

### Chi

It is almost impossible to discuss the martial arts, especially the more esoteric aspects of the martial arts, without including the concept of Chi (Qi, Ki) in that discussion. In martial arts circles there is still a great deal of confusion involving the concept of Chi.

To some degree the confusion arises because the Asian concept of Chi is not easily translated into Western language or thought. There are several ways to write and pronounce the word Chi. Each method conveys a particular concept. Along with the variations in writing and pronunciation the ideogram can be profession specific. As an example, in the Chinese language, in the martial art BaQuaZhang the term “palm” can refer to the arm from the shoulder to the tips of the fingers or to the entire body.

Chi has been defined as vital energy, breath energy, air energy, living essence and a person’s life force. Chi can be thought of as all of the above or none of the above. In his book *Encounters with Qi: Exploring Chinese Medicine* Eisenberg states, “It is that which differentiates life from death, inanimate from animate. To live is to have Qi in every part of your body. To die is to be a body without Qi” (Eisenberg, 1995). Even though Chi is considered as the fundamental element of life, most individuals are completely unaware of its existence. The Chinese believe that Chi energy is perfectly balanced and only becomes noticeable when it gets out of balance, which causes disease of some type.

Those individuals who sense and manipulate Chi describe it as a type of electrical energy that flows through the body. When this energy becomes blocked or out of balance the individual becomes ill until the balance is restored. Chi flow takes place through a

series of channels referred to as meridians, which connect all parts of the body.

Thousands of years ago Chinese health practitioners described and mapped these meridians. A blockage or disruption in any of these meridians will result in an improper flow of Chi and stagnation of Chi in that meridian.

The theory of Chi dates back to the ancient period of warring states in Chinese history. It is extensively written about in *The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine*. Various ancient physicians contributed to this document at the time of its writing somewhere between 2700 and 2600 B.C. and it remains required reading for doctors of traditional Chinese medicine.

Many believe that Chinese Taoists originally described Chi energy as well as various methods to manipulate and control it (Eisenberg, 1995). Scholars began to experiment with the manipulation and control of Chi energy not long after the theoretical basis of Chi energy was established and disseminated throughout society. Eventually this experimentation produced Chi exercises, ways to enhance and develop Chi.

Millions of Chinese as well as people from all over the world take part in exercises that have been designed to enhance the flow of Chi through the various meridians of the body. Thousands of years of research went into the development of these exercises, utilizing the slow process of individuals observing how certain exercises affected the Chi circulation and the person's health. Resulting from these observations there was an attempt made to develop specific exercises to improve Chi circulation. From these attempts many forms of Chi Kung (work) were developed. Many of these exercises serve as a basis for the martial arts.

Chi Kung (Qi Gong) loosely translated means vital or breath energy work or manipulation. So Chi Kung means the cultivation of the energy within a person's body with the goal of increasing and controlling the energy's circulation. The practice of Chi Kung is designed to develop the ability to manipulate Chi within the body. The methods used are physical training, breathing exercises and meditation.

Meditation is the most difficult method to master and is the key to being able to manipulate the flow of Chi. Chi Kung and Internal martial arts masters claim the ability to control their Chi energy they are able to move it to different parts of their body and even to extend it beyond the physical boundaries of their body. These claims have prompted several scientific investigations of Chi energy and Chi Kung by the Shanghai Institute of Traditional Chinese Medicine as well as several universities in the United States. Ken Cohen (1997) in his seminars relays the story of a study that he participated in at a prominent American university.

The episode that Ken Cohen relates is that over a period of time several internal martial artists and Chi Kung practitioners participated in a study of Chi manipulation. The participants were asked to sit or stand facing a large square copper plate. The plate was connected to various electrical devices that were capable of recording any changes in voltage or current that might occur. Each participant was then requested to direct their Chi energy toward the copper plate. According to Cohen some of the practitioners were able to generate as much as 240 volts of electricity across the copper plate. To put this very large sounding number into a better perspective it was my understanding that the voltage registered was a sharp spike and not any kind of a sustained output.

Eisenberg writes of the Shanghai Institute research laboratory using an oscilloscope to test for Chi energy. The oscilloscope was said to have registered little bleeps of energy. The implication was that Chi existed as a physical force (Eisenberg, 1995).

Kirlian photography has been used to try and determine if Chi does exist. There have been many photographs published on the internet and in some martial art journals of the energy shell that exists around an individual before and after practicing Chi exercises. The photographs display a thicker and brighter energy field following the execution of the Chi exercises.

The scientific soundness of this research may be questioned by some. It can be asked; Does Chi, the principle of vital energy as accepted in Chinese medical theory and by many martial artists have a physical reality that Western science can accept and recognize?

Although Chi is a physical reality in Chinese philosophy and traditional Chinese medicine from a Western scientific point of view the existence of Chi is yet to be proven. Chi may have some comparison in Western physics to what is referred to as bioelectromagnetic energy.

It is not the objective of this paper to prove the existence of Chi or its factuality in modern Western science. In Eastern cultures and martial arts circles Chi is a readily accepted phenomenon. The concept of Chi energy exerts a profound influence in both circles.

From a martial arts perspective Chi energy is derived from three sources. The first source of Chi energy is referred to as Original Chi. This is the energy that was transmitted to the individual at conception that was received from both parents and is

inherent to the individual. This energy cannot be replenished. It is believed that this energy slowly diminishes over the course of our lives. Original Chi forms the basic patterns of our being.

The second source of Chi energy is that which is obtained from the foods we eat and drink. This energy is referred to as Nutritional Chi. Nutritional Chi is constantly being replenished and is influenced by the quality of our food. Chi energy theory concentrates on avoiding high fat foods and focuses on vegetables.

The third and final source of Chi energy is that which we absorb through the air and is referred to as Air Chi. This type of Chi is replenished with each breath. Air Chi is the source of Chi that is the easiest to manipulate. This energy is manipulated and enhanced through the martial arts, meditation, and various other exercises. Years of practice are required to develop and train this particular Chi energy. This practice involves the achievement of a highly developed meditative state for the practitioner to be able to control the energy.

In order to understand some martial arts, in particular the internal martial arts, a person must have a fairly clear understanding of the concept of vital breath or Chi energy. There are many martial art styles that promote a daily regime for the development of Chi energy, however a greater emphasis on Chi development is found in internal systems. These systems seem to place a greater importance on the honing of the nervous system to enhance Chi flow for increased health and its utilization in combative situations.

Meditation is used in conjunction with deep breathing to enhance Chi development. Sometimes this type of deep breathing is referred to as spiritual breathing. The mind is then used to direct the Chi to flow along certain meridians. As the individual begins the

process of Chi cultivation it is important to locate a place which is light, well ventilated and is lacking in disturbances. The mind must be relaxed and cleared, concentration is on calming the mind and body, and then eventually the breath is controlled.

In order to reach this meditative state the individual must loosen their grip on the material world. The looser this grip becomes the more the subconscious mind will become attuned to the universal Chi. Emptying the mind allows the meridians to become open receptors for the enormous universal Chi energy. It is said that the individual rediscovers how a child breathes and recaptures their childhood consciousness of true wonder, innocence and curiosity.

There are literally thousands of methods for Chi development. One of the more propagated methods used by internal martial artists to develop their Chi energy begins as the individual uses a quiet standing posture, standing comfortably with the feet separated about shoulder width apart. It is very important to keep the spine straight. The ankles, hips, back, shoulders and head need to be properly aligned in order for the Chi to circulate properly. The individual should feel as if suspended by a string emanating from the crown of the head. Attention is focused on breathing to the point of excluding all other distractions. The breath is not forced; rather the inhalation and exhalation is soothing and spontaneous. Eventually breathing will become more composed and controlled. After several weeks of practice the breathing will begin to sink below the navel. When the person can easily expand and contract the Tan Tien, an area approximately three inches below the navel, a very important first step has been accomplished. The process of low level breathing is what produces Chi similar to how an oven's heat is generated. This is often referred to as starting the fire.

The basis of Taoist breathing as used in martial arts Chi development is that during inhalation the tan tien contracts; during exhalation it expands. Assisted by the mind's manipulation and maneuvering of the Chi, the tan tien serves as a pump to move it throughout the body. The mind then gently pushes the Chi energy through a narrow passage into the groin area. Force is never used it is always more of a gentle coaxing. When this step has been accomplished the individual is ready to move on to the next step.

This next step involves guiding or pulling the Chi energy up along the spine. Here instructors vary on how many steps to take up the spine some use three, others five or more. Basically the Chi is willed from one center to the next until it reaches the crown of the head. The Chi energy then continues over the crown of the head, down the middle of the face and down through the body until it once again reaches the tan tien. The Chi makes one revolution around this path during one complete respiration, completing one revolution of this circuit is described as having completed one microcosmic orbit.

Many martial artists believe that this Chi circulation is an esoteric skill. When mastered, the body becomes open to and then permeated with spiritual energy. Being filled with this energy provides the martial artist with a protective barrier from physical damage and medical diseases.

Development of Chi energy is a method of renewing a sense of oneness with the natural forces of the universe and allowing this spiritual energy to freely flow through the physical body.

## Chapter 4

### Research Results

#### **Research Background**

In pursuing the research for this subject individuals were contacted either by written request accompanied with a questionnaire or by a personal request for an interview. In all, 45 questionnaires were mailed to current practitioners of the martial arts and four formal interviews were conducted using the questionnaire as a guide. Two of the formal interviews were conducted over the telephone while two were conducted face to face. During the course of this research another four informal interviews took place. In total there was an attempt to contact 53 current or past practitioners of the martial arts. Because the researcher is a martial artist with many years of practice, I was generally considered as a peer or a knowledgeable outsider.

A distinction is being made between a formal interview and an informal interview even though they both explored the same subject area. The formal interviews were done early in the study and adhered strictly to the questions on the questionnaire. The informal interview used the questionnaire as a loose guide. If the discussion revealed another avenue or topic that was worth exploring further, the conversation was guided in that direction. The informal interview proved to be the most fruitful. When the participant was free to go off into different directions the interview was more relaxed and the information shared was more rewarding. The informal interviews lasted hours. With one individual emails went back and forth for days afterward.



Being a participant in any martial arts activity presents certain risks. However, due to the nature of this research the risks were minimal. As explained at the outset, participation in any exercise or activity was solely my responsibility. No other individual was requested to take part in any activity by me.

A great deal of time and effort was exerted to recruit participants for this study. I shared background information with prospective participants that would not normally be shared in an attempt to initiate participation. The response was very disappointing. Even after expanding the criteria to include shorter term martial artists the response was less than spectacular. In the end only ten completed questionnaires were returned and eight interviews were conducted, totaling a final response of eighteen participants.

In an effort to protect the anonymity of the interviewee, the styles practiced by the individual, the individual's rank or other specific data concerning the individual will not be given. Even though the entire martial arts community is quite vast, some of the interviewees could be easily identified by exposing such information.

Interviews took place in training halls, public, and private venues. Every attempt was made to find a location, whether it was a home, restaurant, or park, in which the individual would be relaxed and comfortable. A few interviews were conducted by telephone because the travel distance was prohibitive. Even though interviewing was the preferred method, due to time constraints several questionnaires were mailed to participants for completion.

Gathering information for this study proved to be much more of a challenge than was first anticipated. Several individuals declined to be interviewed; the reason most often cited for declining was their inability to find the time necessary. Not surprisingly, there

were individuals who declined to be interviewed because of discomfort with the subject matter of the interview. While this may seem anomalous within the martial art culture it is not surprising. Many reputable martial arts instructors stress the technical aspects of the arts. Students are encouraged to pursue other aspects of the martial arts on an individual basis; the instructor, at best, may give a nudge or provide some type of guidance to keep the student on the correct path. Some of these very capable individuals become extremely uncomfortable when inquiries encompass the more esoteric aspects of the martial sciences.

A mentor suggested that a “spiritual connection” would be required with the individual in order to conduct an effective interview. Establishing a rapport of this magnitude requires a great deal of patience and time. It is even more challenging when the researcher and subject are complete strangers to one another. This challenge can be further compounded by the inherent need to jealously protect the “secrets” of a particular style from someone outside of that particular system or school.

Keeping in mind the obstacles that would be encountered I expected that the study sample would ultimately prove to be smaller than desired. Had I been able to devote more time to the study or if the information could have been retrieved over a period of years I feel confident that the number of participants and sample size would have been far larger.

Of the subjects contacted to complete the questionnaire or participate in an interview a disproportionate amount were male. This does reflect the general ratio of men to women in regard to long term practitioners. Practitioners of the martial arts seem to be overwhelmingly male especially when the focus is on long - term practice, although there are a small percentage of very dedicated women.

As the study progressed, an attempt was made to expand the research to include more participants. The sample group was expanded to include several individuals who own schools or participate in more of a sport - oriented martial art. The initial contact for all of these individuals was through the questionnaire. Questionnaires were distributed to students selected by the schools' instructor and when collected returned by that instructor.

The group of long - term practitioners had a range of 25 years to 50 years of practice. The sport - oriented martial arts group had as little as three years to as much as 10 years experience.

The individuals that composed the short term practitioner group were predominately composed of individuals who practice what is considered "hard" style martial arts within the martial arts community. Examples of hard styles of martial arts would be karate and TaeKwonDo.

Martial art rankings varied greatly once the sport group was added. The ranks ranged from 9<sup>th</sup> degree black belt to 1<sup>st</sup> degree black belt. There were also participants from arts that do not use any type of ranking system.

Religious backgrounds varied greatly among the participants. There was not a predominate religion indicated. Most of the subjects did indicate that their religious upbringing was in the Protestant faith.

The majority of long - term practitioners who were raised in a particular faith responded that they had not carried that faith over to their current religious practice. One respondent described that he had tried everything from Catholicism to Satanism. Some subjects responded "None" when asked about current religious practice. These

individuals had investigated and drew from numerous religious and philosophical traditions, including Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism.

People who responded “None” to the question regarding current religious practice do actually have “religious” beliefs and practices. It is simply that their current ideology does not presently correspond with any of the popular religious categories. Many of these individuals expressed a belief in a divine energy or presence.

When participants were queried about their reasons for starting martial arts practice, a number of different reasons were given, none of which had anything to do with spirituality. The reasons given for starting the martial arts broke down into a few general categories: self-defense, exercise, a general interest in the martial arts, and having watched movies or someone demonstrating.

I had expected that spirituality and philosophy would not initially have been a primary reason that people were attracted to the martial sciences. I suspect that many of the respondents initially were not even aware of the philosophical and spiritual side of the martial arts.

Participants were asked if their reasons for practicing the martial arts had changed since they started. As expected, the response from the long - term practitioners contrasted greatly from the short - term sport practitioners. Those that I have termed sport practitioners still held their primary view for having started training. The reasons still centered on exercise, social interaction, and self-defense some expressed a change in interest to tournament competition. In contrast the long - term practitioners expressed a greater interest in aspects related to “higher” martial arts. There was a change to the

desire to develop one's inner spirit or self through the technical practice of the martial arts.

Some participants seemed to encounter difficulty giving specific tangible expression to how their reasons for practice had changed. The most common expression was that of self-improvement. Each of the answers indicated that continued study would make the individual a "better" person, which could be interpreted as spiritual growth.

When speaking with the subjects I soon discovered that there were as many interpretations of spirituality as there were participants. It seems that at some time in our lives we all search for a definitive explanation of spirituality. Generally seekers will initially turn to religion for those answers. If satisfactory explanations are not coming some will turn to alternative sources for those answers or they may just stop seeking an answer altogether.

In his book *Beyond Religion* David Elkins addresses how an individual might define spirituality (1998). Elkins makes this rather daunting task even more difficult by attempting to define the concept in a nonreligious manner.

As was witnessed in most of the interviews for this study the majority of individuals related the concept of spirituality as being, in some way, connected with religion. Although Elkins makes an excellent case that religion does not maintain sole proprietary possession of these concepts, for most of us, that relationship still exists. Cultural conditioning may add an interesting influential element.

Spirituality, according to Elkins (1998), is a part of the nonmaterial world. A dualism of material and nonmaterial realities must exist in order for the phenomena of spirituality to exist. There are some that would make the argument that there is only one true reality.

Rather than there being two separate dimensions (dualism) there is only a division within this one reality. Spiritual pursuit is the effort to lift the veil and bring unity to our existence. Elkins says spirituality "... is a way of being and experiencing that comes about through awareness of a transcendent dimension and that is characterized by certain identifiable values ..." (1998).

The majority of participants in this study would seem to agree, at least in part, with Elkins' definition. Spirituality appears to be the pursuit of the divine or spirit and is developed within us. An individual comes to know the spiritual on an intuitive level; this connection or spiritual evolution can be strengthened and nurtured through various spiritual practices. These practices can vary from person to person. For some of the individuals interviewed this divine connection is developed through the arduous training provided by the martial arts.

There was a distinct contrast between answers received from short - term practitioners when compared to long - term practitioners on the matter of their art relating to spiritual practice. Short - term and sport practitioners recognized no relationship existing between their art and spiritual practice. In contrast the long - term practitioners regarded their martial arts study as having a relationship to their spiritual practice.

For those who answered in the affirmative that there were practices they performed regularly in their art for spiritual development the most common reply was meditation. Many felt that the very practice of the art promoted spiritual development. Other responses included such things as a particular set of Chi Kung exercises and a period of prayer time.

Interestingly, every respondent believed that it is possible to know the intentions of others, particularly in combat. Some qualified this ability to the experience of an individual. Others believed that martial artists developed this as an intuitive ability.

Reactions and comments varied widely in response to if the participant had ever had any phenomenal, exceptional, or mystical experiences while practicing the martial arts. In general the short - term students' reply was no. One such reply was followed by a lecture about Satanism and the need for me to seek salvation in some local church. However, responses from long - term practitioners seemed to indicate that they had all had "experiences," but some individuals were hesitant to use the terminology of phenomenal, exceptional, or mystical. Since this study was centered on these events I would like to share some of these experiences in the next few paragraphs. It is regrettable that the emotion and passion with which some of these stories were presented cannot be duplicated through the written word.

Common to martial arts are episodes of time distortion. Practicing hours can pass in what seems like minutes; No one would consider something such as this to be out of the ordinary. Many martial artists report this type of phenomena when practicing, especially when practicing form. Interestingly, some martial artists have experienced episodes where from their perception, they move at a hyper fast rate of speed.

One instructor described an episode that involved his flow sparring with five of his students. Each student would take a turn in the center of the mat, when told to begin the remaining five would simultaneously begin attacking the person in the center.

When the instructor took center mat he described that his entire perception instantly changed. He became totally relaxed, the training hall became brighter and somehow

“clearer.” His attackers became somewhat fuzzy, while at the same time more “crisp” and appeared to move in slow motion. It seemed to the instructor that his body knew where it had to be and was instantly at that spot. He felt like he was moving at “super speed.”

Following the training session as they sat around the mat several of his students commented on his incredible speed. He was told that he seemed to disappear from one spot and almost instantaneously reappear at another spot half the mat away.

Shifts in consciousness are a common occurrence among many long - term practitioners of the martial arts. Stories were shared of consciousness shifts after having practiced forms for several hours. Comments such as “everything became more focused,” “I felt as if I became one with the Universe,” and “it was a high that lasted for hours” are not uncommon descriptions of this shift. The experience is very satisfying leaving the desire to want to repeat it again and again.

Martial artists speak of being in the flow when sparring, executing forms or doing drills. The “flow” state is indicative of a change in consciousness a time when everything naturally and correctly falls into place. The state usually vanishes once the drill, sparring or form is finished, but on rare occasions it will persist for a period of time.

People have mentioned that after having practiced martial arts for a period of years they have acquired the ability to see, feel or smell auras or energy. Individuals have stated that they are able to see a shell of light encasing the human body. They have stated that an observable change takes place in the aura when sparring or meditating. It is also possible for them to tell if someone is sick. One respondent stated, “I seem to have the ability to smell when someone is sick,” or about to get sick.



Some individuals refer to the energy field that surrounds the body as an aura others as Chi. Many martial arts have developed practices for the sole purpose of developing or refining the Chi energy.

As is the case with so many popular concepts such as Chi many individuals will sometimes overstate their actual ability in or understanding of the concept. Chi energy is an elusive concept for most Westerners. Even among Asians interviewed there were numerous opinions and definitions. Opinions range from Chi being something that does not exist to Chi being the energy that generates the very fabric that operates the universe. Having gained notoriety over the years, Chi development exercises have become a central part of the curriculum of many martial arts schools. An often - told story relating to Chi is that if it is mastered, it can be projected by the master to control, harm, or heal the person it is directed toward.

A participant relates that he was invited to a seminar that involved the practice of standing Chi Kung. The individual instructing was reported to be very accomplished in his art. Participants in the class were required to stand in various postures for extended periods of time, which put a good deal of strain on the leg and back muscles. During one of the brief lecture interludes this individual squatted to relieve some of the muscle strain. The seminar instructor in the middle of his lecture and without missing a beat or raising his voice glanced over at this person and uttered the single word “stand.” The rest of the participants, who were standing, seemed not to even notice. To this individual the single word “stand” boomed. Involuntarily the individual literally leapt from a squatted position to a very rigid standing position. The reaction was so forceful and quick that the individual jumped several inches into the air.

When the instructor was asked about the incident at the end of the seminar his reply was “You were getting lazy so I used my Chi to make you stand.” He explained that he had put his Chi into his voice and then directed it toward the student.

A similar event took place with another participant of this study. This individual is a practicing internal style martial artist. While conducting a self-defense and pushing - hands class, this individual reported that he felt his Chi connect with and overwhelm the Chi of his partner. He discovered that he could exert his influence over his partner even when his partner was several feet away. He was able to execute throws and techniques without touching his opponent. It was as if he were manipulating a rag doll from a distance. This individual did try to explain the event as being something that might only be possible with a long - time student where some type of rapport already existed. Several attempts to replicate the event have proved unsuccessful.

An internal martial arts student discussed how his instructor teaches a special method of Chi Kung. At the completion of training the student is instructed in a method of circulating Chi through the microcosmic orbit at “light speed.” The martial artist was very skeptical of the claims of his new instructor. He had been practicing various arts for many years and no one had yet demonstrated any Chi abilities. The student requested a demonstration of the “light speed” circulation.

His instructor had him sit back to back with another student. They were both instructed to perform the microcosmic circulation. After a time the other student remarked how strong his Chi circulation felt; while the first student experienced no sensation and became even more skeptical. Then the instructor took the student’s place sitting at his back.

The instructor told this individual that he would not apprise him of the moment that he would speed up his Chi, but he should be able to tell a difference. They sat there in silence for a few moments and this person smugly began to think “ah just another blowhard fake.” Suddenly he felt as if a bucket of hot water had been poured over his body. He tells that the sensation was very pleasant, invigorating and lasted for hours afterwards.

Some people feel an emotional release that sometimes occurs in conjunction with martial arts practice.

Occasionally during practice or shortly following practice certain individuals may be overwhelmed with emotion. One individual related how during a standing Chi Kung practice they were filled with an overwhelming joy. Tears of joy streamed down their cheeks. Uncontrollably they sobbed and laughed simultaneously. It was several minutes before they could regain their composure.

Not every extraordinary or emotional experience turns out to be pleasant. A young adult student after two or three years of practice in a martial arts school sought the help of a well known internal martial arts instructor. She explained that she was suffering from severe headaches, hallucinations, and paranoia. Rather than gaining confidence from practice this person’s self-esteem had deteriorated. This student sought help from friends and a therapist. Nothing seemed to help. The student was confused and frightened.

The instructor recognized the problems being the result of improper Chi Kung practice. The energy was rising and accumulating at a blockage in the head. The amassing of energy in the head was creating the hallucinations and paranoia. The

instructor immediately taught the student exercises to balance the energy. He stated that conditions such as these had been known to cause madness.

Another participant in this study speaking on an esoteric note shared; once I started to cry while having a shower after just having done a half-hour of standing qigong and I suddenly realized in a profound way that I no longer wanted to do martial arts just to learn how to hurt people. That magical moment eventually faded but that desire stayed with me.

It would appear from that description a certain image of spirituality may have been redefined for the individual. The martial arts became a vehicle to find peace and calmness. It had progressed beyond a purely physical method of combat.

The influence that the various phenomenal, exceptional, and mystical experiences had varied greatly from individual to individual. Many wanted very much to repeat the experience, but most stated that they did not change their practice in a way that would focus on recreating the event. They came to realize that such episodes sometimes happened to some people. For some, it was a natural progression to be experienced and then they were to move on.

Discussing whether martial arts practice had become a way for the individual to grow spiritually or grow closer to the divine proved to be a difficult issue to explore. Over the years, as with most of us, viewpoints changed. It proved to be extremely difficult to relate those changes to one aspect of an individual's life. As one individual pointed out "Martial arts has become an integral part of who I am." This seems to be a general feeling shared by all individuals who practice the martial arts over a long period of time.

There were some individuals who had personal practices who would consistently experience exceptional or peak events. They all declined to share these practices with the researcher. The reasons varied; some kept these practices strictly for their students; others have businesses centered on teaching those practices. The general advice to gain more from the martial arts was to include more meditation and Chi Kung exercises in with the practice of physical techniques.

I was presented with one interesting opportunity. A group of martial artists from a particular school was conducting a guided meditation session that I was invited to attend. The individual who invited me had been known to have “channeled” personalities from his past lives at these meditation sessions. I enthusiastically accepted the invitation.

On the appointed evening I arrived at a private home where the meditation session was to occur. The group was small consisting of only six individuals. After a short time of introductions and small talk the session began.

The group was led into a very relaxing meditation. The group was mentally guided to a beach where we were to finish constructing the image to our various desires. While in the meditation, on occasion, one of the other participant’s head would pop up through the sand look around and then disappear. I thought this was odd since at no time was I thinking of that individual. After what seemed like only a few minutes the meditation was ended.

Smiling faces greeted me as everyone slowly opened their eyes. When asked about how the meditation went I replied, “Fine but someone’s head kept popping up through the sand.” The group laughed and proceeded to inform me that this individual liked to “visit” other people’s meditations. I was somewhat skeptical until this particular

individual began to describe the privately - constructed scene in complete and accurate detail. This individual explained that he is only able to do it with people he feels comfortable being around and when in close proximity to that person. He related that this “skill” came after having learned the discipline of the martial arts where he learned how to clear his mind and also after he began participating in their weekly meditation sessions. It would appear that discipline and relaxation contributed to this individual’s unique “skill.” Also, there was an openness and willingness to share within the group that was very supportive. Being open to others may have prepared the way for others being open to this person and the group.

## **Summary**

Classifying the subjects into different groups helped to develop an efficient means for the analysis of the various strains of thoughts and beliefs within the martial arts. The two groups were long - term practitioners and short - term or sport - oriented practitioners. This grouping clearly demonstrates how different, even contradictory, opinions and beliefs can be regarding the martial arts.

The group that was classified as short - term practitioners related any pursuit of matters spiritual to their particular religious practice. Martial arts were viewed solely as a means of physical activity. The activity may fall into several categories such as exercise, self-defense, or social. However, practice was still considered to remain within the physical realm.

Any type of phenomenal, exceptional, or mystical experiences within the context of practicing the martial arts was nonexistent within this particular group. The closest thing

to a peak experience was an emotional high that was experienced when a competitive match was won.

In contrast most of those in the group classified as long - term practitioners acknowledged some type of a relationship between their practice of the martial arts and their perspective of spirituality. There was one exception in this group; an individual classifying themselves as a born - again Christian was very emphatic when drawing a separation between spirituality and the martial arts.

From the perspective of the second group, practicing the martial sciences had become such an integral part of their life, of who they actually are, that it is impossible to separate that part from any aspect of their life. They approach all aspects of their daily life with a martial artist's perspective. Individuals in this group seemed to approach spirituality on a very personal level that may or may not be related to organized religion. At some point spirituality became an individual quest which is contributed to by the study of the martial arts. Just as the martial arts becomes internalized so does one's spiritual pursuits.

Almost everyone in this group could relate some type of phenomenal, exceptional or mystical experience. The various types of experiences ranged broadly. The spectrum ranged from telepathy to clairvoyance to emotional release to a feeling of becoming one with the universe. Some conveyed the ability to see auras; others regularly saw ghosts and some transmitted Chi energy. None of those interviewed expressed an infatuation with pursuing these episodes just for the sake of the experience. In some cases the attitude regarding these events was almost casual.

It is clear from this study that some individuals do seek and find other ways of pursuing, practicing, and expressing their spirituality other than within organized

religion. For some individuals, martial arts serve as a method to focus those spiritual energies.

Not surprisingly there is a broad spectrum of views regarding the martial sciences. As discovered in the interviews and questionnaires, the view can range from purely martial to more philosophical. It is interesting that all these views can be harmoniously interwoven within the same activity and even the same training studio.



## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

This study focused on and sought to address two questions. The first question was, is there a common occurrence of some type of peak experience among long - time martial arts practitioners? The second question was more complex; If the practitioner has experienced some type of peak experience, has that influenced their perception of martial arts principles converging into a path of spiritual development?

In order to more fully understand how a system of combat could also be a form of spiritual practice, Chapter 2 examined the background of the martial arts. Chapter 3 presented a brief history of the martial arts. The history examined how the combat sciences may have developed within a temple framework. It also pointed out that for many years the martial arts retained close ties with various religious institutions. As time progressed and the martial arts separated from the temples, many religious customs and rituals remained within the traditional martial sciences.

It was examined how, at least in two cases, some martial arts developed with the explicit intention of being a method of spiritual development. Aikido and Shintaido view themselves as being dedicated to religious pursuits as well as martial arts practice. These arts recognized their practice as a means of spiritual development. Spiritual development is their ultimate goal.

Many of the traditional martial arts are practiced in the context of following several important rituals. These rituals serve to define that particular art and to reinforce the beliefs and traditions of the martial art practitioner. The rituals may be performed at the

opening and closing of each practice. Some rituals may take place at other times during practice. The ritual keeps the student firmly rooted in their practice.

Some ritual establishes and reinforces the essential spiritual elements of the art for the practitioner at every practice. An example can be found in the bowing at the start of class and bowing at the completion of class. The bow is an expression of respect for the teacher, fellow students and the lineage (ancestors) of the art.

Ritual may reinforce essential spiritual elements of certain martial arts. It may also serve to define the time and space that is appropriate to transmit the fundamental lessons of the art. Lessons may include philosophical concepts of how all things exist in a state of oneness in the universe and that there is a harmony or flow in this existence which is taught through the practice of very dangerous and highly effective combat techniques. By clearly defining the period of practice the importance of both the philosophical and technical lessons are emphasized.

Spirituality is a path of self-discovery. This in itself implies a journey of some type; a journey of learning about ourselves, our desires and our goals. To fully embrace this path of self-discovery it is necessary to explore all the aspects that combine to create the total human being. Those aspects are body, mind and spirit. The higher martial arts endeavor to train and create a balance between all three aspects. The ultimate journey for people is inward.

Martial arts are concerned with the idea of growing. The struggles faced in training are similar to the ones faced in life. Martial artists train not to learn to destroy others but rather to develop their human spirit. The struggles in training confront raw emotions directly, eventually forging and tempering their energy into a useful discipline. Openly

expressed frustrations are resolved and transformed. The individual develops a sense of internal strength, resolving insecurities, and creating a more balanced person.

The spiritual lessons found within the martial arts offer the student the power to transcend the ordinary world. Lessons of balance, flow, harmony, and oneness with the world present a paradigm to achieve the same with the universe and the divine.

This study found that, within this particular group, there was not what could be defined as organized spiritual practices within the arts studied. Rather there were spiritual aspects connected to particular practices of the martial arts.

Many individuals in the long - term group were involved in either actively or passively developing their own cosmologies and concepts of spirituality. More emphasis seemed to be placed on the Eastern traditions. Of course this could be viewed as reflecting their other interest of the Eastern martial art traditions.

This study illustrates that peak experiences are not uncommon in the martial arts. Abraham Maslow (1970) wrote fairly extensively on the subject of peak experiences, describing them as those moments during which individuals experience the highest levels of elation, harmony, and possibility. The range of experience can vary greatly in degree from a feeling of normal happiness to episodes of the mystical or supernatural.

Some regard the peak experience as representing a higher state of consciousness. These episodes can provide valid insights into life events or produce an optimal level of consciousness. For the martial artist the peak experience can constitute one of the most subjectively significant and therefore memorable events in their life.

It appears that peak experiences are associated with particular circumstances and do not generally occur at random. Personal transformation may be associated with their

occurrence which may have been initiated by behavior or particular goals. Objective validity as to the content of the experience may be suspect; however the significance is in the possibly profound subjective interpretation of the episode.

It could be argued that peak experiences share a certain universality and common characteristic. Whether in a religious or some other context they can invariably be spiritual in nature. Mystical states of consciousness serve as a foundation for religious and spiritual experiences.

It would appear that the martial arts contain the fundamental elements necessary to provide the catalyst for spiritual development. The martial arts stress focus, physical discipline, and controlling the ego. Most practitioners are open to new ideas and experiences. There is a natural curiosity that encourages exploration externally and internally. In this atmosphere, peak experiences could result in spiritual growth for an individual.

There was a uniform high rate of occurrence of phenomenal, exceptional, or even mystical experiences among the long - term practitioners. Only a few examples were given to illustrate the various types of experiences. Experiences ranged from being traumatic, frightening, shocking or disorienting, to blissful, beautiful, and enlightening.

Those who had experienced these types of episodes on many occasions took a very nonchalant approach to such events. The experiences were viewed as a natural occurrence that sometimes happened; they were not actively sought or contemplated if they did develop. Many of these individuals did seem to have an uncanny intuition about people and the environment around them.

Most of those who had several almost common occurrences of exceptional events in their lives appeared to be very centered or grounded. This could lead one to speculate that a series of such events could have a transformative affect on the individual on a subconscious level.

In light of this study there cannot be any direct correlation drawn between peak experiences that an individual may have undergone and how those experiences may have played a role in approaching the martial arts as a spiritual pursuit. Factors such as life changes, experience, and other developments may have played a much greater role. It would be extremely difficult to isolate life change to one particular category or event.

I believe the study did find that there was a high occurrence of peak experiences among long - term martial artists. It also revealed that the higher martial arts view spirituality as the entire consciousness being integrated the mind, body, spirit, and energy all move together as an integrated unity. Actions take place without thought from a state of “no mindedness.” The fully integrated martial artist moves with the flow of the universe, always reacting with spontaneous correct action in all aspects of life.

### **Future Research**

My research into this topic has sparked a deep interest for further investigation into the area of personal mastery. In speaking with the participants interviewed for this paper, I have been introduced to various methods of developing daily practices for personal edification, such as meditation (visualization), physical exercises, and breathing exercises (Chi kung). It may prove beneficial to explore more deeply the implications of these various methods for initiating and sustaining personal change, perhaps opening the

martial arts to further exploration of human potential. This study was an excellent beginning, but the topic bears further study.

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"This thesis examines spirituality in the Japanese martial art aikido, created in the 1940s in Japan by Ueshiba Morihei. He described aikido entirely in spiritual terms and claimed that it is an art of peace which leads religion to completion." Date uploaded. Knowledge by direct experience The body as instrument Transformation through affirmation The divine in the phenomenal The concept of ki. Among scholarship devoted specifically to spirituality in the martial arts, the most notable general study is Michael Maliszewski's panoramic survey, the result of ten years' research, of the relationship of the martial arts of nine countries, including Japan, to meditative-religious and spiritual traditions. This is a useful general overview of the extent of religious influences on the martial arts. Exceptional experiences and spirituality in the martial arts. Article. Willis F. Myers. View. Martial Arts in the American Educational Setting. Article. Feb 1979. Aikido is a nonviolent Japanese martial art dedicated to the study of self-defense and self-awareness. This article explores how aikido can help improve students' movement skills. (DF). Martial arts are codified systems and traditions of combat practiced for a number of reasons such as self-defense; military and law enforcement applications; competition; physical, mental, and spiritual development; entertainment; and the preservation of a nation's intangible cultural heritage. Although the term martial art has become associated with the fighting arts of East Asia, it originally referred to the combat systems of Europe as early as the 1550s. The term is derived from Latin and means