

Training and Testing the Middle Aged Martial Artist

by David Guccione Canton ZDK



I was asked by a family member about taking martial arts. They mentioned a specific school and wanted my opinion. That request prompts me to write a this article.

Obvious to those who know me, I highly recommend practicing a martial art. My practice has enhanced my life in many ways, some that I am probably not even aware of. I am aware of the following :

The greatest benefit of the martial arts is in the attitude which it engenders in the practitioner. The dedicated student exhibits, even unconsciously, an attitude of relaxed confidence in dealing with people. That is the least of it. Someone dear to me once said that no one would “mess” with me because of my “aura.” My confidence is unconsciously projected in the way I hold myself, my walk, my gaze. When you approach people without fear, people sense that. It also enables one to portray intense fierceness when needed. If you have ever been afraid to walk up onto someone’s porch because there is a fierce little dog who lets you know he will tear your leg off, you can appreciate the value of fierceness. There is no price to put on this characteristic. Knowing that you cannot be intimidated and in fact can, if you choose, intimidate those who would harm you, is invaluable. It colors one’s total approach to life.

My college students report that after a semester of training, their grades improve. I often tell my students that karate is in the mind. Practicing the MA requires intense concentration. By that I mean that the mind must control even minute movements of the body to accomplish the goal (more about the goal later). This level of control is more difficult than most people think. Most beginners think they can’t chew gum and walk at the same time after the first few lessons. With practice mental control arrives and with that eventually comes a deep awareness of your body’s abilities and, it must be said, disabilities. We all have them. College students also report that exams are not as tough. They have learned to relax under pressure. You are at your optimum performance when you are relaxed. Once again, this is a priceless benefit.

I believe that MA are the best physical exercise there is. Some readers may challenge that statement. Here is my reasoning. The best exercise is the exercise you will do because you enjoy it. MA are interesting and ever challenging. Perfection of

movement is a very elusive goal which you may periodically reach but then lose again. Much like hitting that perfect golf or tennis shot. MA exercise the whole body, top to bottom, literally. MA can be performed very slowly and gently and thus can be done even if the practitioner is injured or aged. MA can be performed aerobically and explosively. MA can be performed alone. No team, equipment, gymnasium or partner is needed but all can be used if present. The health benefits are obvious.

I can give you some very general knowledge about MA. They can be divided along various lines.

Imagine a continuum, a line, from very soft, circular arts to very linear, hard arts. Tai chi is perhaps the softest art, performed usually only for health and mental focus, although there are some combative forms of tai chi. On the other end of this line would be the current rage, Mixed MA, which is strictly for Ultimate Fighters octagon combat. Also there are the combative weapons styles, such as Philippino knife style and Japanese kendo and iado, sword art. Some MA have very little spiritual, zen, emphasis such as jiu jitsu while others have a heavy dose such as Japanese iado.

There are hundreds of MA. So which MA is best? That which achieves your personal goal. You must first decide what your primary goal is: self-defense, flexibility, health, muscular strength, toughness or just fun. Not every art emphasizes every goal. If you want to learn to defend yourself, very slow moving Tai Chi would be a poor choice. If you are a bit older, have a few injuries and lack flexibility, Penjat Silat or Capoeira are not for you. So in order to find the art which appeals to you, you must learn something about the MA. You can do this by reading about them, by discussing them with practitioners and by viewing and trying various MA. There are MA encyclopedia which discuss the characteristics of each art. Most MA schools will let you watch a couple classes and even take one for no charge. In fact I advise to avoid those which will not let you at least watch a couple classes. The internet, especially Youtube, offers short videos of various styles.

It is also important to remember that while a particular art may theoretically, on paper, emphasize a certain aspect, the instructor ultimately determines what is emphasized. Once instructor may emphasize the sport and competition aspects of a style while another of the same style may have an emphasis on self-defense. You should watch a class and observe the following:

Instructor style - militaristic, rigid or gentle and friendly. A healthy balance is appropriate. Realize that all MA require discipline and you don't get that if the class is overly relaxed. On the other hand if the class is run like a military boot camp, enjoyment by the students will wane. If the instructor or assistants are trying to

impress or show how tough they are, they are going to use your body to do that. You might want to avoid it. Watch the Karate Kid, first movie and note the style of the Cobra instructor vis a vis Mr. Myagi's avuncular approach. Some schools become cults in which the instructors demand near divine obeisance. There is one I know of which requires its lower ranks to prepare and serve meals for the black belts.

Observe the instructor's knowledge and ability - Hard to judge for a beginner but try to learn their background, how long they have been practicing, where they learned their art, how they got promoted. Assuming your goal is self defense, try to determine if they have ever been employed where they have been in physical confrontations, such as law enforcement, military, bouncer. If their experience is solely based on karate tournaments or schooling, they may not know realistic techniques. You must realize that there are no standards such as for a doctor or college professor. Right now you can buy a black belt and hang a sign out and start your own MA school with no background or training and there are those out there.

MA schools can be very profitable and if the owner is supporting him/herself and a family, the profit motive may engender reluctance to tell students that they are not performing well, that they did not meet the standards and cannot yet advance to the next rank. I once observed a test for 4th kyu, a middle rank, below black belt. Given that information, you would expect the students to generate some effort and demonstrate middle level skills. The test lasted 7 minutes, no one broke a sweat and if one flubbed, they did it over again until they got it right. Everyone passed. And all 20 students had paid about \$50 to take the test. If the school has a lot of students in a class with one instructor, you can be sure the profit motive is preeminent. If no one ever fails a test, that school is strictly a money pit and the students are being fooled into thinking they have learned. There are professional schools which develop high quality students. To find one, you must investigate.

Observe school emphasis - Does its emphasis match your goal? Some schools do nothing but prepare for karate tournaments. This is fun and certainly builds courage and self-esteem. However tournament sparring is not self defense in spite of what the Karate Kid movies portray. In a real fight you would get your ass thoroughly kicked if you tried tournament fighting because tournaments, even the vaunted UFC Octagon, has rules; real fights don't. Is the school one dimensional? Does it spend most or all of its time on only one of the four major physical elements of the MA: basics, kata or forms, self defense, sparring. That may be ok if that meets your goal but don't be deluded into thinking that sparring or flashy, modern tournament kata will make you good at self defense. If you want to learn something about the spiritual side of the MA, you probably won't get that from your school if all it teaches is self defense, such as krav maga. This next may sound strange but determine if the school actually spends your time on MA, especially for kids' classes. If much of class time is spent in

stretching and calisthenics, that is time not devoted to MA. In my dojo all warm-up involves MA. The only pure exercise in class is five minutes of stomach exercises at the end. Students who want to do more exercise are encouraged to come early to the dojo and perform that on their own.

Cost - Be careful here. Money does not equate to skill. I remember being told about a school's one year, black belt guarantee for \$6000. That is nonsense. I can sell you a black belt for \$10 but that does not mean you even know how to tie it. This means that rank or belt color does not equate to skill either. If you are seriously trying to find a school, compare prices in the area. Colleges often have the best deal either as a registered class or a club. For a commercial school look for the expected as well as the hidden costs: cost of training (how many times a week), uniform, other equipment, cost to test, cost of school activities which may be mandatory

(tournaments, seminars, workshops). Find out before you sign any contract. Do not sign any long term contract until you have been in the classes long enough to determine if their style is your style, if you are getting what you want out of the MA. How many students are in a class? Students need some individual attention to correct mistakes. If there are a large number of students with one instructor, individual attention will be at a premium.

Well that's enough of an overview. I have been practicing for 27 years as of this writing and intend to continue to do so as long as I am able. As I age I may have to turn to the more gentle aspects but there are 80 year old instructors and I intend to be one.

In summary educate yourself to determine which MA might fulfill your goals. Determine if you are compatible with the teaching style and personality of the instructors. Determine if the instructor actually teaches what is advertised. Compare costs in your area and avoid contracts until you are committed to that school.

Visit our website at <https://dojos.com/canton-zdk>. Contact me any time for specifics at guccione@canton.edu.

Dave Guccione