

Reasons Why

Not that long ago, the martial arts existed primarily for combative purposes. Hence the term “martial.” Nowadays, if one practices a martial art solely for self defense or competitive reasons, the deeper meaning and any lasting benefits will continue to elude him. Yes, the values of self discipline, self control, and perseverance are admirable effects of consistent training—as are the qualities of honesty and respect. But even with those benefits, some deeper reasons may be missing. To discover some of those reasons why we train, we must look at our deepest needs.

We all need companionship and purpose. We all crave freedom and love. And while these basic human needs may be fulfilled in other locations and environments (we hope our homes and among our friends), the true dojang provides an environment where we can grow in our deepest ways. Such growth does not occur only through sweat and diligence. It occurs most dramatically through the recognition of our vulnerabilities and our dependence upon others.

In this current society, we tend to admire the independent one—the person who makes a “success” of life without anyone else’s help. But when we ignore our dependence upon others, we ignore our deepest needs. The dojang gives us potentially fruitful opportunities to interact on meaningful levels by fostering lasting friendships that are built upon trust and mutual respect. We know that all true friendships are built upon honesty and humility—a willingness of the partners to be vulnerable and trusting.

The martial artist strives to overcome individual fears. The best dojangs have as a root a quality group of seniors who do not intimidate their juniors; instead they encourage and challenge their juniors patiently and selflessly. Such seniors do not try to look better than the juniors but in most instances allow their juniors freedom in their sparring and free reign with their questioning. In order to be such a senior, a student must have practiced long enough to understand his own personal vulnerabilities and many general human weaknesses. In a true sense, the best seniors know where the pitfalls are—on a personal and human level—and are humble enough to admit their own shortcomings and their dependence upon others. We must remind ourselves that the genuine master does not glorify himself but depends upon and cares honestly for his students.

It is by recognizing personal weakness—physical, emotional, and mental—that we come to build strength. And paradoxically, by being vulnerable we often are strong. Such strength has as a core the willingness to share, to extend ourselves to those around us, to ask for help, and to admit that we need others in order to grow ourselves. We do not need others in order that we may measure ourselves against them; we need others to teach us about ourselves and to remind us of our deepest need to connect with them. Ultimately, as these trust-filled relationships develop, so will the inspiration and the natural encouragement to improve one’s technique and one’s character.