Train for Life

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In their book Martial Arts Mind & Body, Claudio Ledwab and Roxanne Standerfer describe the martial arts as “the original mind and body experience.” Historically, they argue, kicking, punching and other self-defense techniques were just a vehicle for learning to integrate mind and body. In essence, the arts evolved as a path to personal development, not principally as a technique-driven means to teach people how to fight, they say.

It makes sense to teach people how to defend themselves, but research shows that most people seek out martial arts training for the same reasons they do other sports: health and social benefits, and skill development. More than in other sports, participants in the martial arts tend to rate character development, perseverance, and mental and physical health as important reasons for training.

Some people who want to learn self-defense are seeking the confidence and inner security that comes from knowing they can do it. The late Ed Parker, founder of American Kenpo, said, “It is not danger that causes us to be afraid; it is the fear of danger.” Self-defense students often want to know that they can perform under pressure and that they will respond to peril with courage and sound judgment. That’s a character skill that can come in handy in a variety of situations, not just personal attacks.

The martial arts are filled with skills and lessons that can enhance your general well-being and help you perform better in many areas of life. Have you ever set a goal to attain a particular rank, then made a plan and followed it through? Have you persisted in sparring or training when you were tired and just wanted to rest? Have you found yourself frustrated with an instructor or training partner, then taken a deep breath, put your emotions aside and continued working? Many of the demands and challenges you face in the dojo require the same skills as the challenges you face at work, in the classroom or in social interactions. The lessons you learn in martial arts training can teach you much about life.

Rodney King, founder and director of Crazy Monkey Defense, believes in using the martial arts not just for fighting, but also as a vehicle to help his clients face challenges more effectively and achieve their potential. King recently developed a program called Martial Arts Life to span the gap between martial arts teacher and life-skills consultant. At the heart of it lies what he calls the GAME approach. It involves grounding the client’s existing strengths,
developing attitudes that build resilience and facilitate peak performance, and boosting the client's motivation to prepare and execute a personal plan for success.

Does the integration of self-defense and life skills signal a new trend in martial arts training? I don't know. Rather than representing something new, maybe it's a matter of the arts returning to their conceptual origins.

Consider the journey of Jigoro Kano, the man who created judo in the 19th century. As a frail and slight teenager who was teased and bullied, Kano often wound up on the losing end of scuffles. He resolved to learn jujutsu to defend himself. While evolving as a student and teacher—assimilating elements from existing arts until he eventually created his own—he insisted that judo was not only a martial art but also "a principle applicable to all aspects of human existence." He said that the ultimate goal of training should be to "perfect oneself and contribute something to the world."

Through his own training, he learned to use the martial arts as a metaphor and a vehicle for personal development and social consciousness.

In the modern era, numerous studies in psychology and sports science have shown that lessons learned in the martial arts can apply to life. Among the physical benefits—aside from fitness—are improved body image and enhanced self-confidence. Research has also found improvements in self-esteem, autonomy, and positive response to challenges. All these changes may contribute to a sense of well-being.

Research into martial arts training has consistently found positive benefits with respect to self-regulation. Psychologist Roy Baumeister defines self-regulation as "the process by which the self alters its own responses, including thoughts, emotions, and behaviors." That concept is one of the most important psychological processes in human development. It's the foundation for our performance in nearly everything we do. It's the mechanism by which we think, feel, and engage in the right things at the right time. Self-regulation also drives self-discipline, which many psychological studies have found to be perhaps the single most important ingredient in determining success—more than self-esteem or even pure intellect. And martial arts can help us develop this.

At the end of your next training session, try this exercise in reflective learning: First, write some notes to yourself about what you learned that day. Feel free to include observations on technique and strategy, but make sure you reflect on what you learned about yourself and how you performed. Then think through some nontraining situations in which you could apply those lessons—maybe to improve your mood, perform better or navigate a particular relationship. Use your martial arts training not just to feel confident or to defend yourself but also to learn to succeed in life. You'll quickly gain an appreciation for all that the martial arts have to offer.

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