

Buddhism in the Martial Arts

By [Dean Walsh](#) and Kephira B

The spiritual aspects of the martial arts grew as the need to protect oneself in the war-torn East diminished. This allowed the arts' religious roots to begin to play a more important role. Today, when students speak of the spiritual nature of the martial arts, very often they are referring to the arts' ties to Buddhism, a religion founded in India in the sixth century B.C. It teaches that right living, right thinking, and self-denial will enable the soul to reach Nirvana, a divine state of release from earthly and bodily pain, sorrow, and desire.

Tied to Buddhism is an offshoot sect known as Zen. It differs from other Buddhist sects in that it seeks enlightenment through introspection and intuition. Its early masters were monks who had become disenchanted by the materialism within Buddhism.

Early Zen masters and the martial artists who tried to follow Zen teachings did not believe that they were training the mind to conform to arbitrary patterns imposed on them by someone else. Rather, they wanted to develop their natural ability to respond to a situation by instinct alone—a concept still very much a part of the martial arts.

Coinciding with the spiritual concepts of Buddhism and Zen are the concepts of simple, basic living. The martial arts emphasis on continuous repetition of basic moves reflects this tie to these spiritual concepts. Indeed, just as religious leaders chant prayers over and over, martial arts students repeat simple moves again and again.

Also tied to the spiritual concept of simple living is the absence of extraneous paraphernalia in a martial arts school. Certainly, the surroundings inside most schools can be characterized as stark. The walls are often painted white and the floor is bare or covered with a large mat. Very often the only wall hangings are a picture of the style's founder and a list of rules.

Adding to the spirituality of the martial arts is the influence of yoga, which was brought from India to China during the fifth and sixth centuries by Zen Buddhist monks and nuns, who also brought with them Indian fist-fighting techniques similar to modern karate. The influences of yoga are still seen in the martial arts breathing techniques and the focus on the inner self.

The prominent role that meditation plays in the martial arts also serves to strengthen the spirituality of the sport. Though meditation has many spiritual connotations, not all of them pertain to every martial arts student. Meditating is a very personal exercise, one that differs for each person doing it. Therefore, there is no right or wrong way to do it. When you feel yourself getting frustrated that you're not meditating correctly or that you can't achieve the peace of mind you think you should, remember this saying attributed to an English abbot, "Meditate as you can, not as you can't." It is a powerful reminder that if you're comfortable meditating and you get something out of it, then you're probably doing it right.

When I meditate with the class, I simply try to erase all thoughts, until my mind is a blank. With my eyes closed, I concentrate until all I "see" is darkness, concentrating the whole time on my breathing. As air is pulled in through my rib cage expands, then up to exit through my mouth. Though not a very deep form of meditation, it relaxes and refreshes me so I can concentrate on class.

Spirit can also be interpreted in an emotional sense, as being in good spirits. Certainly, much has been written about the chemical effects of exercise on the state of a person's mind. Lots of exercise results in high levels of the natural feel-good chemical endorphin. I've often thought that the best part of my martial arts workout was the drive home when I would experience that natural high that comes after your body has been stretched and pushed and the toxins stored up inside you have been sweated out.

How would you interpret the spiritual side of the martial arts? Maybe you feel strongly about finding a school that will allow you to explore this side of the martial arts. Or maybe you're not interested in this aspect. But it is yet another feature to note when choosing schools and observing classes.

But even if you never give the spiritual side of the martial arts a second thought during your training, it won't matter. Just be aware that there is a spiritual side present, and that you can draw on that spiritual strength when physically you feel drained. Mind over matter really does apply in the martial arts. But, again, remember that the spiritual nature of the martial arts is exactly what you make of it.

Dean Walsh is the webmaster of SpiritualArticleDirectory.com where this article was first published, and also writes for various martial arts websites such as this MMA Training blog

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