

Building Self-Discipline Through Martial Arts

By [Craig Willits](#)

It's common for people to enroll themselves or their children in a traditional martial arts program to cultivate "self-discipline," although they often can't really articulate what they mean by that word. They just know self-discipline is a good thing, and training in martial arts is supposed to build it, so they enroll themselves (or their children) in classes. However, they don't really stop to think how the process of building self-discipline works.

On a basic level, the structured environment of a well-run traditional martial arts class encourages the development of such basic social skills as courtesy and self-control. While a student may be able to function in a class setting, however, mere exposure to the structured environment doesn't automatically result in self-discipline. That comes through internal motivation, which comes from cultivating such life skills as perseverance (refusing to quit), integrity (being realistic about areas that need improvement), and above all indomitable spirit.

What is indomitable spirit? These words are often used as an interpretive translation of the Korean words *baekjul boolgool*. This phrase represents a complex concept and doesn't easily translate into English. A good approximation is "to be fully committed to fulfilling one's personal vision."

To fulfill a vision, a student must set and achieve a progressive set of goals. Rank progression in the traditional martial arts, provided it is linked to meaningful standards, provides an excellent context for learning how to set and achieve goals. For example, many new students will set the goal of reaching first degree black belt. To reach first degree, they first must achieve a series of intermediate goals (a set of color belt ranks). When a student learns to set goals for progression in their training, the next logical step in their personal growth is to apply these goal-setting skills outside the studio: education and career, relationships with others, and community citizenship.

Students need to know how to set goals that will lead to personal improvement rather than frustration. Whether or not they relate to martial arts, useful goals should fit the following criteria:

1. **Specific:** A goal should state in detail what you hope to achieve. "I want to earn a black belt someday" and "I want to lose weight" are not specific; "I want to test for blue belt at the next rank testing" and "I want to lose five pounds by the end of next month" are specific.
2. **Motivating:** A goal should lead to something desirable, whether it's a new belt, or the loss of 20 pounds, the honor roll at school, or a promotion at work. If there's no benefit to a goal, you'll have no incentive to work to achieve it.
3. **Achievable:** Your goal must be within the realm of possibility. Reaching black belt in 36 months, or losing eight pounds in a month, is possible for most people. However, earning a black belt in 12 months -- or losing 50 pounds in a month -- is not.

4. Relevant: Your goal needs to fit within your overall vision. For example, if you want to be a martial arts instructor, your goals should focus on building your teaching skills. For weight loss, focus on diet and exercise.
5. Trackable: You should be able to measure your progress toward reaching your goal. A martial arts belt (or a scale for those trying to lose weight) provides instant feedback on progress.

Setting goals using this formula makes them easier to achieve and the process of achieving them more encouraging.

So where does self-discipline enter the equation? It takes effort to achieve any goal that is worth setting, and sometimes setbacks can be discouraging. When a person is committed to achieving their vision, regardless of how hard it is to attain, they build the internal motivation necessary to succeed, and the commitment to achieve their goals without being prodded by others. This forms the foundation of self-discipline.

If you are a martial artist reading this, challenge yourself to expand the self-discipline you are developing through your training by setting goals outside martial arts. Start by asking yourself the following questions:

- Over the next 30 days, what one thing can I do to improve my academic or job performance?
- Over the next 30 days, what one thing can I do to become a better family member or friend?
- Over the next 30 days, what one thing can I do to be a better citizen of my community?

If you are not a martial artist, and you want to build self-discipline, consider beginning training. Traditional martial arts concerns self-improvement as much as self defense. Look for a studio that encourages you to set a vision for your personal growth, and guide you to set goals to fulfill that vision. A studio that only cares about physical skill is only providing half the training it should. The total-person approach to training is your first step to self-discipline, and ultimately to personal success.

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* Tiny Tigers (Martial Arts Pre-Skill Program for Ages 4-6): Physical and Mental Agility, Focus, Awareness, Child Safety

* Martial Arts for Children (Ages 6-12): Better Grades, Self-Discipline, Respect, Enhanced Focus, Kids' Self Defense

* Martial Arts for Teens & Adults (Ages 13 and Up): Self-Discipline, Physical Fitness, Goal-Setting, Self Defense

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