



Flying side-kick demonstration by Tasha Kim at the International Festival in Houston, Texas, April 1992

Martial Arts Poison

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Tae Kwon Do, Kung Fu, Karate -- these are familiar and appealing words to young boys and girls. Such styles are known collectively as martial arts (in Oriental terms, as either **Mu-Do**, "martial way," or **Mu-Sul**, "martial technique").

Many people are not familiar with the crucial distinction between these two ideas, but an understanding of the theories is essential if one is to benefit from martial arts and avoid harm.

Simply speaking, **sul** refers to an orientation on just the physical techniques of kicking, punching, blocking; **do** refers to a pursuit mentally and physically united to achieve higher purposes than simply acquisition of physical skills.

"Instead of choosing a training hall by comparing tuition prices and convenience of location, be most concerned with the qualifications, teaching methods, personal style, and life values of the teacher who will be influencing the students."

Many people believe martial arts training is helpful in building one's character. This is especially important for growing boys and girls -- to build their characters, and give them self-defense skills for life. Parents often want to send their children to martial arts schools, for they have heard of the benefits of traditional training.

But all too often, the negative consequences of poor martial arts teaching appear, and very quickly -- injuries in the dojang; development of radical, trouble-making attitudes; declining grades; fighting; discipline problems in school. When children turn out to be aggressive, parents regret sending them to the dojang. But the problem is not martial arts, but poor instruction and improper values (such as emphasizing competition and fighting).

So, parents may think the dojang is a source of such troubles, but the children still are drawn to martial arts training because of consistent exposure to movies and TV -- that constant advertising for martial arts schools. Parents may not think martial arts training is good for children, yet the children still nurture powerful and glamorous images they are getting through the media. This can also set the stage for discord and strife in the home and family.

As a lifelong martial arts instructor, I know that while traditional training can bring many benefits, it is also a double-edged sword.

When abused or misunderstood, or when seen as a way to power and control, martial arts can bring harm and regret to the unfortunate practitioner. Undoubtedly, martial arts training has strong potential physical and mental influence -- for both good

and evil -- on students. The mental influence does not come from movements but from an individual instructor.

This is why it is critical that any student (or the parents of any student) must consider carefully, above all else, what kind of individual one would study with for mental and spiritual guidance and influence.

A tournament, sport, and sparring-oriented instructor will teach values such as aggression, dominance, and mental focus on one thing above all else: winning the match and taking home the trophy. To achieve the mental strength and focus required to triumph above all competitors is a great achievement of athletics. But pursuit of this goal and these values can rarely come without scorning development of humility, patience, respect, and sincerity. Those contrary, aggressive traits do not have to be spoken aloud for their influence to be felt in students' lives.

Unfortunately, although martial art movements do not develop aggressive personality traits, some organizations' consistent over-emphasis on competition has resulted in a negative, harmful spiritual environment in martial arts dojangs.

The instructor interested in assisting students become better human beings, build their characters, develop self-esteem, confidence, sincerity, humility and responsibility is not likely to have trophies lining the front windows of his school. In a traditional class, the visitor is much more likely to see emphasis on formality, etiquette, non-violent behavior, full control of techniques, forms of old Grandmasters, student cleaning of the dojang, and a Training Hall Oath.

Instruction which only teaches the physical, technical side of martial arts, in order to fight and win tournament trophies, will turn out violent people with troublemaker attitudes. Traditional values and a scientific teaching method will shepherd students' bodies, while instilling virtues of sincere attitude, confidence, self-esteem, and modesty. Such traditional training will produce a mentally and physically balanced person. A scientific teaching method entails (among other things) proper breathing, rhythm, dynamic balance, and movements which are studied and refined to allow the maximization of speed and power without causing either sudden or progressive injury to the body.

Through this kind of studied, refined training style one can achieve a better physical condition with minimum risk of injury. Some 10 basic principles of movement, if followed, allow one to train and enjoy the positive benefits of martial arts with little risk of negative consequences.

The important goal is to find the right teacher. The teaching method, and the personal life values of one's instructor -- not

the particular martial arts style he or she teaches -- determine the quality of the learning experience.

Unnatural or harsh body motion, repeated over time, will result in damage to the knees, hamstrings, and lower back. Undue emphasis on sparring puts fingers, toes, knees, eyes, teeth and noses at risk. Natural motion and breathing can be briefly disregarded when students are young and energetic; but such bad habits have a cumulative effect, and will inevitably damage their health and vitality.,

Some symptoms of this kind of mistraining include: back and knee problems, pulled muscles, hernias, ulcers, and digestive problems. Instead of relieving stress and building vitality, bad training methods yield the opposite results; they will build stress and destroy the health of the practitioner. In this way, martial arts training under faulty instructors can become poison.

I advise prospective students and parents to do this: Instead of choosing a training hall by comparing tuition prices and convenience of location, be most concerned with the qualifications, teaching methods, personal style, and life values of the martial arts teacher who will be influencing the students.

The choice of a martial arts instructor should be far more important than deciding on a daycare center or baby-sitter (and those are important decisions). The potential benefit or harm derived from the dojang is even greater than a negligent or non-nurturing daycare environment. Surely the extra mental and physical well-being one will gain is worth an extra \$10 per month, or five miles more of driving.

Martial arts training is like taking medicine. Follow the doctor's guidelines on how to take it, how much, how often, and enjoy good health. Ignore the doctor's instructions, go to an unqualified doctor, take too much medicine or the wrong kind, follow self-destructive patterns, and one's life can be shortened -- or ended.