

MARTIAL ARTS IN MODERN CULTURE

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Today, martial arts are all around us. They're in the movies with action films that star big actors like Jackie Chan and Jet Li. They're on television in action packed shows like 24 and Alias. They're even in video games like Tekken and Soul Caliber. How is it that such an old, eastern concept as martial arts was absorbed into such a modern and western culture? This process of absorption did not only change the content of our media and entertainment, but changed the way our society views martial arts, as well.

As long as people in the world have fought each other, there have been martial arts. Different styles and techniques were created all over the world when anyone needed to physically defend themselves from a threat. Karate, Tae Kwon Do, Aikido, Judo, and Jujutsu are all good examples of martial arts. However, it wasn't until after World War II that the martial arts spread to the rest of the world. This is because creating a global society became so important at this time in history. Cultures mixed and as part of this, the martial arts traveled to North America.

The allure of martial arts to those who see them for the first time is the amazing dramatic motions that are involved. Seeing martial arts for the first time is like seeing a new and beautiful dance. Also, it gives the feeling that humans have the potential to be very powerful. In the movies, lone fighters are shown facing a group of twenty other men and winning. They're shown facing men with guns and being able to dodge bullets and defeat their adversary. This is why martial arts movies were and are so popular, in the U.S. especially. Stars like Bruce Lee had abilities that were marveled by all. His movies, such as "Enter the Dragon" and "Fist of Fury", were instant hits and are considered classics today.

But as martial arts gained popularity, people only focused on the physical aspects of them. The mental aspects of martial arts were ignored and forgotten. People today treat martial arts as solely a sport. Tournaments are held all the time in which the strongest and best fighter wins. But no attention is drawn to the fact that those fighters had to excel mentally to excel physically. For example, in martial arts you learn to be aware of every part of your body. You know exactly where and in what position every limb on your body should be. You also learn focus and concentration. Without these, you would never be able to maintain your balance. Action film stars like Jet Li spend hours training to be as good as they are. They develop both their mental and physical awareness. But spectators are blind to the underlying mental aspect of martial arts.

Because of the way martial arts are viewed in our society today, I choose not to tell people that I take Tae Kwon Do. People tend to think that because you take a martial art, you like to fight people. This is not the case. Martial arts are useful when you have to defend yourself, not because it's fun to beat other people up. Many people in our culture, especially adolescents, have an urge to want to fight you if they learn that you know Karate, Tae Kwon Do, or whatever martial art you happen to be a practitioner of. They say they want to see if you can really fight and they taunt you to try and get you to do so. They do this because they have the wrong idea of what learning a martial art is all about. It isn't what you see on television.

On television, heroes and villains go around fighting whomever they see. Because it is more entertaining to see the fancy movements of martial arts, the movies and television portray characters fighting as frequently as possible. If the character only fought as a last resort to defending themselves, like they would in a realistic situation, the

show would be boring. The problem is that viewers don't understand that they are seeing is not reality. They think that fighting everyone all the time is what martial arts is really about.

It is difficult for westerners to understand the purpose of martial arts. They ask questions like, "How are you supposed to defend yourself from bullets with just some blocks and kicks?" Some modern martial artist might say it's possible, but they'd be mistaken. Many modern martial artists aren't as experienced as they should be and they overestimate their abilities. This is because modern martial arts have been turned into a business. The goal of many American schools is to put as many children through their learning system as fast as they can. The result is eleven-year-olds with black belts who have only been taking a martial art for two years. Their ability, compared to a black belt from an eastern country where the styles developed, would be laughable. They are greatly inexperienced and overly confident of their abilities. My fear is that, these young black belts will find themselves in a situation in which they will mistakenly believe they can defend themselves with their martial arts skills. The sad result is that they will end up being hurt.

When it comes to dodging bullets, martial arts cannot help. Martial arts are only as strong as the fragile human body. That's why their purpose is not only to teach you how to defend yourself. Martial arts help you learn to avoid even getting into situations in which you could be harmed. But more importantly, they help you attain a mindset that allows you to be successful when confronted with any obstacle of daily life. Whether your are at work, at school, at home, or just out in the world, martial arts prepares you to focus your mind and your body to complete any task.

To me, martial arts has been much less about learning to defend myself than it has been about learning the extent of my abilities in any area. But it has also been like a second family to me. The good environment of our school has made it easy to be physically active while also learning about my inner strengths and weaknesses. I know that receiving my black belt will not bring an end to my learning experience. In fact, it will in some ways be a new beginning. I expect to learn even more than I have during these ten years that I've been practicing the martial arts, now that I will have received a black belt. I feel that the black belt not only represents a higher rank, but a doorway to a new view of life and an opportunity to excel beyond expectation.

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