

Choosing a Martial Art for Self-Defense Purposes

So, you've decided to learn self-defense, and have chosen to find a martial art to practice instead of simply taking a weekend self-defense course. Looking in the phone book, you find listing upon listing of martial arts schools, all purporting to teach self-defense. How do you choose which school, which martial art?

First, before you run off to join a class, think very carefully about what your primary goal is: self-defense. It makes a difference in terms of what kind of class, instructor, and martial art you end up with. Your art choice will be different than someone who wants to practice the martial arts for competition, health, or fitness

There are a number of excellent martial arts out there, and a number of excellent instructors teaching in different ways within those martial arts. However, what we are talking about here is training in the martial arts for **self-defense purposes**, which is a very specialized thing—and not all martial arts have strengths in this area. If nothing else, not all martial arts have *immediate* strengths in this area—and if someone wants to learn a martial art for self-defense, they need to start learning self-defense from the very beginning. Just as importantly, not all instructors have strengths in this area of teaching.

Now, in general, all martial arts will help you prepare to defend yourself, at least indirectly—you will be in better shape, have more flexibility, be more able to withstand punishment, and have more control over your body. These are all good things. However, playing football, tennis, or soccer will do much the same for you. A martial art should do more than this. For a martial art to be a good self-defense art it needs to do several things:

- It must directly teach you simple, efficient, effective ways of dealing with common attacks.
- It needs to keep you abreast of the common ways people get attacked, and the common weapons and situations that people might be confronted with.
- It needs to teach you when to react, when not to react, when to attempt to de-escalate, and when de-escalation techniques aren't going to work. Additionally, the instructor should discuss the legal aspects of self-defense, including such concepts as "reasonable force" and an attacker's "threat, means, and access" with regards to the ability to physically respond to attacks.
- Since most people who wish to learn self-defense will not necessarily stay in the martial art for years and years, the art should immediately start teaching basic self-defense in the first few weeks of class. If an instructor is going to



advertise a class as a self-defense course, then students should start learning self-defense immediately, as opposed to waiting to add the self-defense curriculum until the student is "firmly grounded in the basics" about 2 years down the line.

- *Most importantly*, it needs to teach you the correct mindset to stand up for yourself, be in control of yourself, and to have the self-confidence to know you are worth defending—which will then allow you to do so. A good self-defense class will deal with the mental side as much as the physical side.

When attempting to find a martial art that teaches self-defense, there are a number of things to look for. Each martial art is different, and moreover, each instructor teaches differently. Taekwondo at one school might be completely different than Taekwondo at another, Karate at one gym very different from Karate elsewhere. You'll need to go observe some classes, preferably in more than one art. Watch the class, and think about what you are seeing.



Are people practicing practical self-defense? Are they practicing reactions to common self-defense situations? Or are they doing rote forms, practicing flying spin kicks, or using archaic weapons that you could never carry on the street? Remember, your point here is *self-defense*—you are not looking for instructions on how to use a halberd. If the art teaches that as well, fine, but that is not the primary goal of your search. Similarly, while occasionally forms (kata) deal with real-life situations, most do not do so in a realistic way. The question really is are the forms used to perfect techniques for self-defense, or are the forms supposedly the self-defense practice itself?

Are the lower belts practicing simple, efficient ways to deal with attackers? Or is it just the higher belts who are working on self-defense? Yes, all beginners need to work on basics—however, you should *also* see them working on self-defense techniques. After all, if you join, that is where you are going to be—and you will be there to learn to defend yourself.

Is the instructor teaching a mindset in addition to the moves? Can you see the instructor making sure the students are understanding that they aren't learning to beat up people, they are learning to stop people from hurting *them*—and that it is all right to do whatever is necessary to accomplish that? Are the students being shown that they are people who have worth, and thus are worth defending? That they have a right to make their own choices, and a right to defend those choices?

Lastly, does the martial art (and the instructor) teach self-defense reactions in a way that makes sense to you? Meaning, the way that particular martial art reacts to an attack—does that fit the way your mind works? Do the reactions make intuitive sense to you, in

the style in which they work? Does it fit the physical limitations of your body?
Example: a very tiny person might become very good at judo—but will be at a large disadvantage with respect to self-defense with only a year's practice. Size can (and does) make a difference.

An important note here: If an art doesn't match any of the above criteria, that does not mean anything with respect to whether it is a viable art or not. When you are looking for strict immediate self-defense, you are looking for a small sub-set of what the martial arts are about. Some arts are simply better for immediate self-defense, particularly if you are someone who isn't going to stay a practitioner for years—just someone who wants to pick up the basics. Does this make them better martial arts? Not at all. What it means is that they are structured differently, in terms of learning techniques. For other arts, that self-defense knowledge just takes longer. And since you are looking for an art *for immediate self-defense purposes*, that isn't the choice you want to take. Observe classes in several arts. Look for one where self-defense is being practiced—mind and body. Pick one where you can learn from the instructor. Practice, practice, practice.

For more information, you are invited to visit the Nebraska Hapkido Association web site at **hapkido.4t.com**.

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