

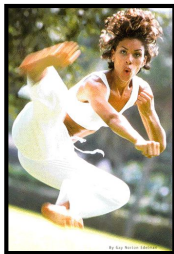
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THE UNEXPECTED GIFTS OF KARATE



Can learning to punch and kick bring you closer to your true self— even to God? It's a secret the Shaolin monks knew fourteen hundred years ago. And it's changing lives today.

security in knowing how to protect yourself. I used to pray to be shielded from all hurt. Later I came to understand that my higher power has given me the capacity to create my own life, and to protect and defend it. When I hone self-defense techniques, I am becoming God's hands in my own life.

Karate by design develops inner strength, above and beyond an average workout. You take a choreographed practice punch or a fall in karate class and you survive. You take a shot outside the dojo (of criticism, at work, say) and you're more resilient. A model of toughness has been patterned in your mind. "After taking hundreds of falls and surviving, you become like a superhero," explains Jerry L. Beasley, Ph.D., associate professor of physical and health education at Radford University and an accomplished martial artist. There is a dimension to that strength that's beyond the confidence you gain from other types of exercise, says Beasley. Because karate necessarily involves a victor and a vanquished, the dynamic is unique. "You present yourself as a target freely to a potentially lethal blow," he says. "This demonstrates trust."

Karate makes you face your shadows. The tears I shed easily on were from fear — of the fierce side of my God-given nature. I remember asking my first Sensei about anger. "Is it good to being it?" "No," he said sharply. "Anger has no part in karate. But," he added,

"Passion is good." Until that moment, I hadn't thought of them as different. That lesson learned. I was less afraid.

Karate blows you right by the Western mind-body schism. When I am lost to the moment, when I totally submit myself to the drills, I am most out of my ego. I feel one with myself, with my body, and with my God. In my old school, this oneness happened most often through sparring. (In the new one, sparring doesn't happen until you reach an intermediate level.) There are no half measures there. If you lose your concentration, you lose your chance to get off your best punch, kick, or block. "On the mat the students' attitude must be what is known as the state of *wuwei*, that is, an absence of feeling that 'I am doing it,'" says Chuck Norris, martial artist and actor, in *The Secret Power Within: Zen Solutions to Real Problems* (Little Brown, 1996).

This doesn't happen right away. It happens only after you've practiced a move over and over until it's installed in your cells, and your muscles remember it without your conscious mind engaging. Just the other day I was practicing a three-part self-defense move. My partner — playing my attacker — lunged for me. And I reacted without thinking. It was a sublime moment of *wuwei*. It's that state of union of mind, body, and spirit that, it seems to me, makes me closest to my true self, and thus, closest to God.

It may sound paradoxical — even offensive — to say

that I draw closer to God by learning to fight. But knowing violent moves makes me ever more peaceful and peaceable. Stronger. More dignified. Karate is something I learn to do so I don't have to do it. "By the time you've reached black belt you've vanquished thousands of imaginary opponents," says Dr. Beasley. "You can walk away from conflict. You've already proved yourself."

Sensei Jason Hoffman, a third-degree black belt and owner of my school, tells of a time a guy — a big guy — threatened him outside the dojo. Hoffman, who weighs in at about 125, replied: "You think I'm afraid of you because you're bigger than me?" That was the end of the potential fight. "He knew I knew something," says Hoffman.

"I came to karate to face my fears. First I learned to defend myself. Then I had to decide, 'Am I worth defending?'"

And whatever it was, he didn't want to tangle with it." Beasley even says he finds that out of the pseudo-violence comes a deeper compassion. "Over a period of time, visualizing yourself being violent to another person, you take on that person's pain. And you become less likely to strike out at others."

Karate discipline can be intimidating. There are prescriptions for everything from how to greet each other to how to leave the mat. There are rituals — you bow entering and leaving the dojo. You begin each class with a meditation. When you pair off for tandem exercises, you bow to each other before you begin. At my dojo, we greet each other with a strong "Osu!" (a respectful greeting with no direct English translation).

At first I thought I'd hate all those rules. But this is not the principal's office. This is a solid, efficient protocol to bring order and dignity to the hour we'll spend together. I submit to it voluntarily, as (on a good day!) I submit to God's will. I bow to Sensei Hoffman because I admire and respect him not only as a martial artist but as a person (of course, those two things truly are one). I bow to fellow students to honor them — and myself. It's a cleansing act.

Karate training is like no other learning I've ever done. It not only requires you to build on what you know, instead of memorizing and regurgitating, it comes with a powerful philosophy that, as a white belt (I started over at my new school) I'm only beginning to understand. Sensei Hoffman often delivers an inspiring homily as we stretch

at the end of class. The messages are simple: Just when you feel ready to give up, focus on your goals, whatever they might be — a stronger physique, relief of stress, more knowledge. One time, when our responses to his directives were lackluster — we're supposed to yell "Os, Sensei!" each time — he talked about how this is necessary to keep us focused.

But his most vivid messages come from his example. I have never seen him angry. I have never seen him lose his temper or his patience. He always conducts himself with dignity and cordiality. And he is truly humble — always open, as much student as teacher. Best of all, he smiles — a lot. My karate, at its best, is joyful. It's rich and invigorating and holistic.

And karate brings love into your life. Yes, love. "I came to karate to face my fears," says Terry Grewen, a fellow student who achieved black belt last year. "It led me to a spiritual path. First I learned to defend myself. Then I had to decide, 'Am I worth defending?' I kept showing up, especially when I felt like it the least, and I got my answer. And the answer is love." The opposite of fear is not absence of fear, but love. Faith. God as you understand God.

Does every karate student see it this way? Of course not. There are as many ways of experiencing karate as there are students. Karate, says Sensei Hoffman, is the great leveler. "When you walk out onto the mat, you are all equal as people. Ultimately, it's not how fast you are or about how high you can kick, it's about who you are, it's about being fully yourself." ♦

Guy Norton Eddman wrote about working with a spiritual director in the Winter 2001 issue of *SOUL*. A senior editor at *McCall's* magazine, she has a husband and three sons, and lives and studies karate in New Jersey.

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