

A Biblical Perspective of Karate and the Martial Arts

By Rebecca S. May

- *What are the martial arts?*
- *What is the history of karate?*
- *What does the Bible say about karate and the martial arts?*
- *Is it a sin to practice karate?*

There are many popular martial arts which are being practiced in the United States today such as kung fu, judo, jujitsu, ninjitsu, aikido, sumo, and tai kuan do; but the most popular both in this country and throughout the world is karate. In karate as well as all martial arts, “the combination of physical and mental discipline can develop intuitive judgment and understanding so as to perceive those things which cannot be seen” (A&E Special: “The Martial Arts,” February 1, 1998).

History

Most, if not all, martial arts originated in the East, either in Japan (jujitsu), China (kung fu), Korea (ty kuan do [pronounced *doe*]), or Okinawa (the birth place of karate do [pronounced *doe*]). The art of kung fu was brought to Okinawa by the Chinese. In 1609 when Japan conquered the island and outlawed weapons, karate, which means “empty hand,” was developed. Karate, therefore, began as a secret art crafted and practiced underground, in forests or on beaches. The most important figure in the history of karate is Zen Master and Buddhist Monk Bodhidharma who “synthesized karate techniques and yoga meditation in order to unite mind, spirit, and body” (Media Spotlight: “Martial Arts & the Christian,” 1985). The Japanese invasion of Okinawa was significant also in influencing the spiritual and philosophical aspects of karate by introducing their national religion of Taoism.

Martial arts reached the U.S. in the mid-1800s with Chinese immigration. They did not become popular, however, until the mid-1900s when martial artists such as Bruce Lee, Chuck Norris, and Stephen Segal brought it to television and motion pictures. Today more than 5 million Americans practice some form of martial arts, including many young children who became attracted to the arts through cartoons such as Power Rangers and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and movies like The Karate Kid.

Philosophy

Philosophy is an integrated part of the martial arts. Many Christians are participating in various martial arts like karate, thinking that it is just another sport or a form of physical exercise. “Although physical in their outward expression, all the Oriental martial arts have at their root a philosophy antithetical to Christianity” (Media Spotlight: “Martial Arts & the Christian”).

The basic philosophy of martial arts is the idea of “do” [pronounced *doe*] which means *way* or *path*. According to Reverend Kensho Furuya, martial artist and author, “do has the positive meaning of your training in your own martial arts discipline to not only become skillful in the art and become strong enough to defeat your opponent but also to become a better person physically and spiritually and to develop oneself as a complete enlightened person” (A&E Special: “The Martial Arts”).

The enlightenment, which Reverend Kensho referred to, originated with Hinduism and is carried on through Buddhism. It is the state of realizing the deity which resides in you and it is achieved through personal oneness with the universe. This is also called nirvana.

Once on the path (do [pronounced *doe*]), it is possible to find your internal energy whereby you can achieve oneness with the universe (nirvana) and achieve salvation, that is, become a god (enlightenment) through *zen*. “This mental discipline largely based on Zen Buddhism gave warriors a framework in which they could face life and death fearlessly. Such ultimate wisdom

was considered enlightenment” (A&E Special: “The Martial Arts”). The word *zen* means meditation. Meditation, or emptying the mind, is not only the philosophical principle upon which karate was developed, it’s critical to its success. “If you practice martial arts diligently, you will come to know zen” (Earl Hartman, President: North American Kyudo Federation).

“Always more vital to karate than technique or strength is the spiritual element that lets you move and act with complete freedom... Karate is Zen - so says Master Oyama and many other karate masters. Zen is a school of Buddhism that has been called the Religion of Immediate Reality. The aim of zen is to awaken the student to his true self and thus bring about a high degree of self knowledge through inward meditation. Zen students seek peace of mind through an enlightened awakening of an intuitive wisdom which they feel is dormant now in all people. Zen meditation tries to achieve "no mindedness" which may be acquired by concentration and special breathing exercises which are taught to advanced karate students. Karate when combined with Zen meditation can appreciably assist the student's quest for peace of mind and equanimity in the face of conflict and tension” (Media Spotlight: “Martial Arts & the Christian”).

Parallel with the Buddhist concept of zen is the Taoist belief in ch’i: the channel throughout a person’s body through which their life force flows. “The concept of ch’i (air, breath) is related to yin/yang. Ch’i is the cosmic energy or breath that is given proportionately to every man. The lifelong task is to nurture this energy and to strengthen it. The martial arts were greatly influenced by the Taoist concept of ch’i. The expert in the martial arts is able to harness the cosmic energy of ch’i and deprive or empty his or her opponent of the same” (“Dictionary of Cults, Sects, Religions, and the Occult,” Mather and Nichols, Zondervan, page 271). Getting in touch with your life force or inner energy requires a balance of yin and yang.

“This concept of paired opposites is the bipolar forces of the universe (light/darkness; good/evil; male/female; outward/inward; sun/moon; fire/water; etc.). These forces continually react to one another causing flux, balance, and imbalance in the universe” (“Dictionary of Cults, Sects, Religions, and the Occult,” page 326). Balance, for example, in Ninjitsu: the way of stealth, lies in the forces of nature; earth, water, fire, and wind. The art of Aikido also teaches that you don’t need to overcome your opponent, “you simply blend with his power” (Reverend Kensho Furuya). As Cary Yosiomizobe, a martial arts instructor, says, “when you move, you don’t just move your body, you move your energy. Aikido, like all martial arts, is not about winning the fight, it’s about conquering the inner self” (A&E Special: “The Martial Arts”). Ch’i is the vital internal energy which, when brought into balance (yin/yang), allows you to do superhuman feats without harm.

Spiritually

There are a lot of problems spiritually with the history, philosophy, and practice of karate and all forms of the martial arts. It was created, passed down, and taught by Buddhists and Taoists, followers of a pagan and religious idolatry. The basis of both religions is a pantheistic world view which sees life as cyclical, not created. Other differences include:

The martial arts say God is all matter and/or phenomena in the universe.

Christianity says God is a real, personal and sovereign Being (1 Chronicles 29:11).

The martial arts emphasize the inactivity of the mind and the passivity of their followers.

Christianity emphasizes a full and active mind continually pursuing obedience (Joshua 1:8-9).

The martial arts say salvation is something which can and must be accomplished through each person by “attuning oneself to the rhythm of the universe ...” (“Dictionary of Cults, Sects, Religions, and the Occult,” p. 271).

Christianity says salvation is something which must, is, and can only be accomplished by God through His Son Jesus Christ (Romans 5:8).

The Bible makes no specific reference to karate. It does, as you can see, have a lot to say concerning the philosophies which are promoted and practiced, **without exception**, in all forms of the martial arts.

Karate is an eastern art. Whether you chose to participate in it for exercise or as a way toward enlightenment, you are participating in something which is purely eastern, in thought and practice. Isaiah recognized God’s disapproval of such practices when he said, *For Thou hast abandoned Thy people, the house of Jacob, Because they are filled with influences from the east...* (Isaiah 2:6a). This eastern philosophy has not only influenced the church today, it has infiltrated it. Through the deception of self-defense and inner peace believers have been taken captive. Yet Paul warns, *See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary*

principles of the world, rather than according to Christ. For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority... (Colossians 2:8-10).

Having revealed the philosophical deception which lies in karate we are commanded in Ephesians 5:7-10 *to not be partakers with them; for you were formerly darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth), trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. For enlightenment comes from nothing earthly or nothing within ourselves but from God, so that we who believe might know, the surpassing greatness of His power ... which He brought about in Christ (Ephesians 1:18-21).* We should, therefore, avoid this false teaching and encourage one another in the same way Paul warns his disciple saying, *O Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you, avoiding worldly and empty chatter and the opposing arguments of what is falsely called knowledge - which some have professed and thus gone astray from the faith (1 Timothy 6:20-21).*

With reference to the beliefs and practices of karate and all forms of the martial arts the Bible gives both a warning and a command. *... for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience... And do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead even expose them ... (Ephesians 5:6, 11).* And finally, remember, *The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul; The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple. The precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes. The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; The judgments of the LORD are true; they are righteous altogether (Psalm 19:7-9).*

Questions and Answers

Q: *What are the martial arts?*

A: They are a form of fighting which combines physical techniques or movements with a pantheistic religious philosophy.

Q: *What is the history of karate?*

A: Karate comes from the East, deeply rooted in the pantheistic religions of [Buddhism](#) and Taoism. In its western form, it combines many physical aspects of all forms of the martial arts.

Q: *What does the Bible say about karate and the martial arts?*

A: The Bible does not specifically address karate or the martial arts, but it does warn us to avoid eastern philosophies and the pursuit of enlightenment apart from the one true God revealed in the Bible.

Q: *Is it a sin to practice karate?*

A: You must decide for yourself (2 Corinthians 5:10) whether practicing karate is sin. Just remember, God abandoned His people because they were filled with influences from the East (Isaiah 2:6). You may only be asking for the same if you do as the house of Jacob did.