

## The Aging Student of the Martial Arts

“Why Do We Do It?”

by Stephen R. Donaldson

In “A Book of Five Rings,” Miyamoto Mushashi wrote, “He who is the master of one thing is the master of all things.”

I understand the concept. In the past twenty-five years, I’ve published nineteen books, which have won almost as many awards. Several of them have been international bestsellers. I’ve lectured to university audiences in Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom as well as in the United States. All of the generations of students who have followed Gichin Funakoshi *sensei* do not exceed the number of people who have read my books. As a writer, I think I can legitimately claim the stature of a master.

I mention this, not because it gives me any claim on the same stature in the martial arts--it does not--but because it shows that I’m well-acquainted with the *process* of mastery. I know from experience what that process requires, why it matters, and how it is carried out. In that sense, if in no other, I am “the master of all things.”

As it happens, I bring a number of impediments to my study of the martial arts. I’m fifty-six years old, and have only been training for fifteen of those years. For the twenty years before that, I mostly sat on my duff. For obvious reasons, so much prolonged inactivity cost me resources of strength, stamina, and flexibility which can never be regained.

In addition, I suffer from sleep apnea: I haven’t felt *rested* in thirty years. I have torn cartilage in my left knee, a floating bone chip in my right knee, arthritis

in my neck, and a slipped disc. Thanks to a long-undiagnosed case of chlamydia pneumonia, my immune system doesn't function well. I get migraine headaches, occasionally so severe that they border on seizures. And, as if all that weren't enough, I'm still in treatment for mercury poisoning, the legacy of extensive dental work in a third world country.

I mention all this simply to suggest that I'm *qualified* to discuss the particular issues which confront the aging student of the martial arts.

With that in mind:

The question I would like to try to answer here--certainly the question I'm asked most often by non-*karate-ka*--is this: Why do I stick with it? What do I get out of karate that makes it worthwhile? What do the martial arts offer the aging student?

It's a legitimate question. Not every student at my time of life has as many physical problems as I do. But we're all getting older. In one way or another, our bodies are not what they were. And the study of the martial arts is in its applications a physical process. We use our minds to train our bodies so that at need our bodies will react swiftly and effectively. Unfortunately, age inevitably diminishes our physical capacities.

Our tissues lose resilience. Our wounds heal more slowly. Our blood carries less oxygen. (It is well-documented that a man at fifty-five may be able to lift as much weight as he did at twenty-five, but will be simply unable to run as far or as fast as his younger self, no matter how diligently he has trained during the intervening years.) Our reflexes decline as our neurons transmit their messages less efficiently. Our ability to remember promptly and accurately declines as the sheer volume of experience and learning stored in our brains grows more cumbersome.

As a result, we move more slowly. We acquire more wounds--if for no other reason that because we get hit more often--and need more time to recover from them. Occasionally the wounds themselves become more severe as our training grows increasingly realistic. Indeed, if the underlying goal of the martial arts is to produce fighters whose bodies will react swiftly and effectively at need, that degree of attainment seems to grow ever more distant as we age.

To outsiders, at least, the study of the martial arts looks like an activity for young people.

I see two answers to the question, one physical, the other emotional.

Neither of which is that mastery is worth having for its own sake. I believe it is. But I also know from long and demanding experience that mastery is never attained by people whose goal is mastery. Mastery is by its very nature a process rather than a goal: in itself, it is essentially unattainable. In a manner of speaking, “you can’t get there from here.” Rather it can only be gained by a complete dedication to the process rather than to the goal. Put simply, we have to love what we’re doing, and do it because we love it, not because we want to gain some form of status or recognition. The demands of mastery leave no room for ego.

The physical answer is not readily apparent to outsiders, but over time it makes itself obvious to aging *karate-ka*: the study of the martial arts is good for our bodies. In any martial art, the body is the essential weapon; and any martial art which destroys its own weapons isn’t worth studying. Of course, a weapon may get damaged in battle: that is unavoidable. But in training the weapon should be preserved, honed, cared for, improved; made stronger. A body which has been correctly trained will simply perform better and last longer than one which has not.

For example, every orthopedist and chiropractor preaches the importance of a well-balanced spine. When a spine balances correctly upon the hips, as nature

intended, it flexes easily, provides for its own circulation, protects every structure in and around it, and promotes relaxation and fluid movement in all the muscles. A poorly-balanced spine, in contrast, compresses nerves, tendons, ligaments, and muscles, as well as its own tissues. Over time, this compression can produce ailments as diverse as arthritis, heartburn, liver dysfunction, shortness of breath, and anemia--to cite only those which I've experienced myself.

Not coincidentally, as students of the martial arts we are adjured to keep our hips under us: to balance, not across, but rather on top of our center of gravity. This does much more than enable us to move and focus our mass quickly. It also allows us to relax our arms and torso, which we cannot do if we are using our muscles to hold an unbalanced body upright. And that in turn enables us to strike or block with far greater speed and accuracy.

However, our training does not stop there. In addition, we are urged to drop our shoulders, strengthen the platform of muscles between our shoulder-blades, and adjust the angle of our necks in order to hold our heads more upright. This helps us hit both harder and more rapidly. It also produces just what the doctor ordered: a well-balanced spine.

As it happens, I spent much of my childhood playing tennis and hiking with a backpack: balancing across my center of gravity rather than on it. Thirty years ago, I was in a car accident that gave me whiplash. Fifteen years ago, x-rays began to show arthritis in my neck. Ten years ago, it had become so severe that its flare-ups would cripple me for weeks at a time.

But since then I've learned what "keeping my hips under me" means. With effort--and help--I've learned how to identify what has gone wrong when my hips are not under me, and how to correct the problem. The result? Now I'm able to attend falling and grappling seminars--exercises which would have left me unable to move a few years ago--with only mild discomfort.

I could go on at some length, still drawing exclusively on my own experience. My point, however, remains constant. My study of the martial arts has increased the overall health of my spine, and of all its associated structures. It has certainly increased the quality of my life today. It may conceivably increase my longevity.

Why do I stick with it? I answer, Why would I not?

If the physical answer is not readily apparent to outsiders, the emotional one is just plain invisible to anyone who does not know us well. And, unlike the physical answer, it does not necessarily make itself obvious to any *karate-ka*, aging or otherwise. Sadly, we have all known martial artists who train for decades without understanding Funakoshi *sensei*'s dictum: "The ultimate aim of the art of karate lies not in victory or defeat, but in the perfection of the character of its participants."

How does karate conduce to "perfection of character"? By teaching us to master our fears. Consider this: in its barest essentials, every moment of every karate class--every moment of stretching, conditioning, basics, combinations, kata, sparring, weapons--is dedicated to the study of the occasion on which we might need to fight for our lives: the most terrifying circumstance we can imagine. If we do not succeed, we will die. Cease to exist. On the most instinctive levels, there can be no more primal or appalling nightmare. And karate teaches us to respond to that crisis in ways which are fundamentally counter-instinctive. We're in danger of our lives, terrified: our natural reactions are to freeze, to flee if we do not freeze, or to fight if we do not flee. And each of these reactions produces tremendous adrenaline, tremendous tension. The entire body swells and clenches. But karate teaches us that we cannot perform an effective punch or kick if *we do not relax*. In the ultimate crisis, we must do the least natural thing imaginable.

This, of course, is not easily done. On the surface, all the moments of a karate class are spent on activities like basics and kata. In their essentials, however, every one of those moments is dedicated to the training of an unnatural response to fear: to the development of precise, *relaxed* technique so familiar, and so deeply-ingrained, that it will remain available to us in the ultimate crisis.

In this way, through the constant repetitions of proper physical training, karate teaches us to step aside from our emotions. It does not make those emotions go away: rather it empowers us to act otherwise than our emotions dictate. In the most primary terms, it makes us the master of our fears.

Is this “perfection of character”? Not in itself. But the next step follows naturally. By teaching us to master our fears, the study of karate restores to us the power to choose our own actions in any situation, no matter how profoundly afraid we may feel. And if we *can* choose--this is Funakoshi *sensei*'s meaning--then we *must* choose. By its very nature, the power to choose conveys a moral obligation: to behave in consonance with our beliefs and convictions, regardless of the state of our emotions.

On another occasion, Funakoshi *sensei* advised his students, “If your hand goes forth, withhold your anger. If your anger goes forth, withhold your hand.” The point is the same.

Why do I stick with it? Why would I not? I've never been this *free* before: free to fight when I see the need; free to run away when I consider it appropriate; free to repay harshness with harshness today, and with gentleness tomorrow: free to be the kind of person I've wanted to be all along.