

The 16 Tips
to Help You
Choose a
Martial Arts Program



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16 Tips for Choosing a Martial Arts Program

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Tip 1 - Who are the Classes for?



The first step is answering the above question. This can help you determine what you or your child is hoping to achieve and the benefits that you or your child are looking for in a martial arts program to help you achieve your goals.

This is an important step because many martial arts schools specialize in one area and maybe not another. For example, if you are a person that is over 60 years old, you would not want to go to a Judo or MMA school because these schools are more geared toward competition and younger athletes.

Tip 2 - Why do you or your child want to do Martial Arts?

Once you know what you want to achieve and some of the benefits that you want from a Martial Arts program, the next step is to determine why you think the Martial Arts can help you or your child achieve those goals.

For children: is this something that you want them to do or did they express an interest in it because of friends, TV, or movies. You as a parent probably have already determined what your child needs (i.e. discipline). However, if it is your child that express an interest, you want to ask them questions and determine the real reasons they might want to do martial arts. Are they getting picked on in school? Have the neighborhood kids bullied them? Or is it because of a movie?

For you: determine exactly what you want to gain from a program. Adults have a variety of reasons they want to take martial arts that are determined by age and physical limitations (such as injuries). However, anyone can learn martial arts, if they choose the right program to fit their needs.

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Tip 3 - Some of the many Benefits of Martial Arts:

Children

- Discipline
- Concentration
- Conditioning
- Goal Setting
- Commitment
- Bully Busting
- Self-esteem
- Leadership
- Confidence
- Weight Control

Adults

- Conditioning
- Muscle Tone
- Flexibility
- Discipline
- Self-defense
- Relaxation
- Stress Relief
- Confidence
- Leadership
- Weight Control
- Improved Health



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Tip 4 - Types of Martial Arts

Now how do you determine what type of martial arts is going to meet your goals. There are several types of martial arts that can be easily broken down into four categories or methods based on the country of origin. These are:



- 1. Chinese Kung Fu** – The Chinese form of martial arts that has a variety of styles and methods. Chinese martial arts is the granddaddy of all the other martial arts because all other martial arts developed from Kung Fu is some form or another. The first recorded history of Kung Fu is typically attributed to the Shaolin Temple, though it was practiced before that. What makes the temple unique is that it catalogues the various styles and brought Kung Fu to an all-new level of perfection.

Kung Fu is characterized by circular techniques and using the opponents force against them to defeat an opponent. Kung Fu is a complete method of martial arts from your typical punching and kicking to Groundfighting. Most methods of Kung Fu are based on different animals such as the Crane, Snake, Tiger, Leopard, Dragon, Mantis and Eagle. Kung Fu typically uses long-arm techniques and smooth hip action to generate power.

- 2. Chinese Tai Chi** – Tai Chi is an actual martial art that can be used for self-defense. However, it is not offensive. In other words, someone has to attack you first to be effective. When they do, you then redirect that attack away from you to unbalance them and use their attacking force against them.

Tai Chi today is used for the many health benefits it provides. Tai Chi is practiced with slow, relaxed, and rhythmic movements that relieve stress and promote relaxation. These low-impact movements are great for older individuals (regardless of health issues) to improve flexibility, muscle tone, and overall health. It has been found that Tai Chi is more beneficial than physical therapy for many individuals.



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Tai Chi is taught at many places. However, you need to be aware of unqualified instructors. Many instructors of Tai Chi learn from a video or a quick online program. This is not Tai Chi and only a qualified instructor with years of experience can properly teach the Tai Chi so you can get the most benefits that Tai Chi has to offer.

- 3. Okinawan Karate** (the word karate actually means china hand) – is based on some of the techniques of Kung Fu. Okinawan karate developed from Chinese Kung Fu in the 1600's. Chinese businessmen that traveled to Okinawan would share some of their knowledge with their counterparts. Later, some of these Okinawans would travel to China to the Southern Shaolin temple to improve their techniques and skills.

Okinawan karate is a mixture of what we would call hard and soft. In other words, some of the moves are done with some circles for blocking and typically followed by stiff-striking with short-arm techniques that utilizes the quick snap of the hips. Some popular Okinawan styles are Isshin-ryu, Goju-ryu, and Shorin-ryu.

- 4. Japanese Karate** – developed in the 1900's when a popular Okinawan teacher, Gichen Funakoshi traveled to Japan to teach Okinawan karate. However, when he got there he soon discovered that the Japanese mentality was different then the Okinawans. So he modified the style by removing most of the circular techniques and replacing them with stiff robot-like blocks and strikes. This fit the Japanese mentality better and he soon opened up a small school called Shoto Kan (Kan means hall or building). Shoto (which means pine tree) was Gichen Funakoshi's pen name he used for writing. Eventually the style became known as Shotokan.

Shotokan is typically a hard robotic type of style with emphasis on hand techniques and kicks that are kept to the middle part of the body and lower. The routines or forms are the same as were taught in Okinawa, except for the execution of the techniques... as stated above. There are other methods of karate in Japan, but this one is the most popular.

- 5. Korean Karate** – developed from Shotokan karate. The Japanese occupied Korea until after WW 2, so many Shotokan schools were in Korea. However, after WW 2, the Koreans won their independence and wanted nothing to do with the Japanese. Therefore, they renamed Shotokan to Tae Kwon Do. Later, because of politics, another branch developed called Tang Soo Do.



The Korean martial arts were then modified from the original Shotokan style. The basic change that was incorporated into the Korean karate styles were high kicks. They also added many more jumping kicks. Though these kicks were not practical in a self-defense situation, they were flashy and help improve conditioning and flexibility. So the basic Korean

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martial arts are characterized with stiff robotic strikes and blocks (like Shotokan) and high kicks.

There are many, many other methods of martial arts. However, these are the most popular ones that are practiced today.

Then what the Heck is MMA?

This is a question that needs to be answered. MMA stands for Mixed Martial Arts and that's exactly what it is. A mixture of various martial arts styles put together. There is no cohesiveness to MMA. In other words, you might learn a little of one type of technique and a little of another type of technique. The problem with this is that you really are not learning a martial art nor are you really perfecting any techniques based on a method of training.



MMA was around for years. Many Korean, Japanese and Okinawan arts discovered a lack of techniques involved with their style. This was especially true when they observed Kung Fu. So they would film Kung Fu practitioners at tournament or watch the moves and weapons and try to imitate, change or add to their styles. There is nothing wrong with this. However, the techniques that they were trying to add might not be compatible with their style or method of training. That then makes these techniques less effective.

They also started making up techniques for competitions. Again, losing the actual style's overall flavor and effectiveness. Eventually, because so many of the "Karate" schools were doing this, it became known as MMA... and eventually morphed into just a sport.

Unless you're attracted to this type of competition, I personally would recommend finding a system or method as listed above to perfect and work toward a goal. That way you have something tangible and a method that has been tried and perfected over hundreds of years.

Tip 5 - Types of Schools

Now you would think that once you understand some of the different methods or styles of martial arts, that you would have a good understanding of what type of school you might want to look for based on the above criteria. However, now you must decide what your overall goal is and which schools might meet that criteria.

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System or Style Schools

These schools stick with their traditions and methods. Very little has changed over the years and they usually have a hierarchy of teachers and students from a Grandmaster down to the White belts. They preserve the method of the techniques and teach you how to use their method.

These schools have a traditional outlook. They have rituals that they follow from ancient traditions such as bowing, terminology, testing, routines (choreographed movements), weapons, and a progressive ranking system.

Self-Defense

These type of schools usually do not teach a cohesive system and are mostly geared toward just self-defense. However, there are several different types of self-defense: tradition based or systematic based on the type of attacks.

Tradition based methods are harder to learn and perfect and many times they do not cover specific attacks. Many of these types of schools use a Kata (series of moves from their tradition) to teach self-defense. This is usually based on other people attacking you using the same system or style.

Systematic methods teach a specific attack and how to handle that common street attack. This method is much easier to learn. However, you usually lose the method that the traditional based systems cover: proper technique and power development. Unless you understand these two (proper technique and power development), your techniques will be less effective than they should be.

Ideally, you want a method that combines the two together... tradition and systematic. That way you can learn the proper techniques and a systematic approach to self-defense. Only Kung Fu offers this type of training. The reason? It is based on actual combat and was taught to the soldiers in ancient China for hand-to-hand combat. During their training they first work on the power and proper techniques, and then practiced against actual opponents.



Fighting & Tournaments

These types of schools concentrate on what we call tournament or point sparring. Students travel to various events and compete against other schools in several types of divisions: forms (choreographed movements), point sparring (coming close, but not striking their opponent, they receive a point with typically 3 points to win a match), and weapons of all different types.

There is nothing wrong with competition if that's what you or your child are looking for in a martial arts program. However, they have a tendency to leave out many of the

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other aspects such as self-defense, etc. One type of school that we talked about previously is MMA. They deal exclusively with competition, and train their clients that way. This is usually fine for younger students under 30, but definitely not for anyone over 30.

Kickboxing

This is not really a martial art. Kickboxing is a basic exercise program that uses the martial arts techniques, punches, and kicks for an overall exercise program. You'll notice one of the things missing from the previous sentence. You guessed it... blocking. All you do is punching and kicking and never learn or practice the proper way to block. Most defensive situations start with a block, so you'd be out of luck in that department.



There's nothing wrong with that, if that's what you want... an exercise program. However, one thing to look out for, many of these facilities do not have highly trained martial artists teaching the classes. Many times the coaches are trained to run classes in a few weeks. They cannot offer corrections to improve speed or power of the techniques because they haven't trained long enough to learn these aspects of the techniques. In addition, there are a very limited number of techniques that you will do.

These are the major variations of martial arts schools and their focus. Naturally, there are offshoots of these. Ideally, you might want to consider a school that focuses on several categories, rather than one to give yourself more options. I would recommend the following:

- Traditional aspects, but reworked for today's lifestyle. It should be easy to remember the curriculum, but challenging enough so you continue to improve and do not get bored.
- Classes should be separated by age.
- The school should have a comprehensive self-defense program incorporated into their regular curriculum.
- Kickboxing (Sparring) should also be incorporated into the regular curriculum.

Why do I offer these pointers to you? Simple. Because unless you want to focus on just one aspect as mentioned above, you want a well-rounded program that provides you with the best skills, exercise and understanding of martial arts in general.

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Tip 6 - Traveling Distance

People travel across the city for quality gymnastics, ballet, music, and golf instruction: be prepared to do the same for martial arts. Once you start with the school next door, it is almost impossible to move to another facility if you discover problems (Instructional/Financial etc.), and you or your child might have already bonded with the instructors or the style. Most schools are reluctant to take students from other schools, especially if they are from the same style or system.



The best thing to do is decided how far you are willing to drive a few days a week for classes. For some people it might make sense to drive 45 to 60 minutes. However, a majority of people would rather keep their traveling distance to within 15 miles or so.

The next step would then be to determine the best martial arts school within that driving range that meet your goals and other criteria as listed above.

Tip 7 - Visiting

After making a list of the schools in your traveling area, the next step is to go online and check each school's web site. Some of the things to look for at the web site:

- Do they provide information about their programs?
- Is there written material and/or videos showing you what they do?
- Does the site look like it is just sales oriented? Usually marked with long pages and little information.
- Do they offer a Trial Program, Free Visit, etc.?
- Are they easy to contact to answer your questions?
- Do they have an easy way for you to get more information mailed to you?

After you checked out the sites and got the information you needed, you want to visit the school. This is usually done with some type of trial program. It can be a paid trial for a few lessons, free, or some other type of trial period where you can really see if this is what you're looking for.

Schedule this online or call the facility to make an appointment. Some schools will allow you to just visit and watch a class, but I recommend taking a few classes. Unless you've studied before, you probably will have very little information to make a decision about the school just from watching.

If you're watching an advanced class, you might be scared away because you think that you'll never be able to do that. The class might be geared toward something you have no interest in, or another type of program that they offer. For example, there's a huge difference between Kung Fu and Tai Chi. So if you wanted something more relaxing and slow-paced and were watching a Kung Fu class, you'd be a little confused.

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Tip 8 - The Facility

Just like any business, the way the facility looks and its cleanliness (or lack thereof) says something about the attitude and aptitude of the owner. A martial arts school doesn't have to look like a Starbucks, but it ought to be clean and organized. If a school doesn't look professional, chances are it isn't.



Tip 9 - The Equipment

Do they offer modern training equipment? Some different types



of equipment most schools have are heavy bags, large body bags, focus mitts, and forearm kicking bags. They should use these bags during their workouts because they enhance the techniques, provide a better workout, and improve conditioning. For self-defense these are invaluable. You must learn how to generate strength and power and this is a great way to do that.

One caveat. Make sure that the school has softer bags for your kids. Their bones are still forming and hitting objects that are too hard can damage their bones. Many schools have their kids break boards as part of tests. This could be very dangerous to their growing bones and hamper their formation.

Tip 10 - Staff & Instructors

Just like you would expect from any business, the staff of a martial arts school should be courteous, professional, and personable. They should treat you (and/or your child) like a paying customer. If you can go to a department store and get better service than you can at your local martial arts school, then spend your money at the department store.

Tip 11 - Martial Arts Instructors



Next you want to investigate the instructors. There are several criteria that you want to evaluate. Just like going to any other business, are the staff and instructors courteous and friendly? Do they make you feel comfortable?

Don't worry so much about degrees and certificates; there are no universal grading standards and no universally-recognized governing body in martial arts. What's important is:

- Who did this person learn from?
- How long did he or she study with this person?
- How long has he/she practiced this art?

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- Does the teacher have any experience as a teacher, or is he or she simply a skilled martial artist? Just like great football players can make bad coaches (and vice versa), great martial artists are not necessarily great teachers.

Too many schools now have black belts that have earned their belts in just a few years. Be very leery of these types of instructors. The other important question that you want to ask is who really teaches the classes. Many schools, even though they have a black belt on staff, might have an under black belt teaching the classes. Worse yet, many use a method of having white belts taught by Orange belts (the next belt up) and Orange belts taught by the next belt up.

Tip 12 - Age Groups

Classes should be divided by age groups. Naturally if you're an adult, you do not want to be in a class with a bunch of kids. And kids should be separated by age groups such as 4 to 5, 6 to 8, etc. Each of these age groups has different learning abilities physically, emotional, socially, and intellectually. The programs offered should be geared toward these different areas and age groups. The school should not have one program for all these different age groups. In other words, the techniques can be the same, but the way they are taught and introduced at the different age groups should be different.



Tip 13 - Class Sizes & Times and Length

Class sizes can be large or small. The important point to remember here is that the student to instructor ratio. I recommend to have one instructor for every ten students.

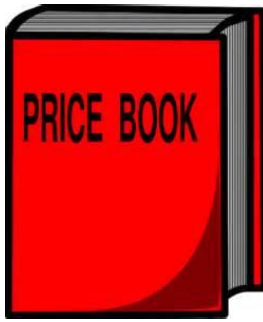
Many new students prefer to be part of a large training group, rather than a small class. However, the benefits of a smaller class should not be overlooked. In a smaller class, you will likely receive more individual attention from the instructor, and there is less of a chance of becoming "just a number." If you prefer private, one-on-one lessons with the chief instructor that can usually be arranged.

You should also check with the instructor about what time of day classes are offered, as well as their duration. Some schools offer 90-minute classes. However, fitting in with today's lifestyle this might be impractical... especially a few times a week. I never recommend this length of time for beginners. It takes time to get back into shape and improve strength and flexibility. After all, you wouldn't run a marathon if you haven't run for a few years.

Typically, classes should be about 30 to 45 minutes. Believe me, if you are taking a fast-paced class with a great instructor, you are going to have a fantastic workout. If you decided on a slower-paced workout such as Tai Chi, the same holds true. The postures, though gentle and slow, really work the muscles, so you want gradual progress.

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Tip 14 - Belts & Testing



Some martial arts instructors are in business simply to get your money and could care less about your progress in the art they teach. To discover if this is the case, ask the instructor about his belt ranking system. If he says you need to be proficient in a

certain number of basic movements, forms, sparring and self-defense techniques before he will promote you to a higher belt level, you are likely dealing with an honest teacher.

If, on the other hand, the instructor tells you that you will receive a new belt every two months, be wary. You should never move up in rank until you are ready and qualified to do so. A good instructor does not push students to move up in rank merely to receive a belt-testing fee.



This I put near programs and pricing because this kind of goes hand-in-hand with the next topic. Many schools will charge a lower fee per month and then make up the difference with testing fees. Testing fees usually start small at the lower belts usually around \$30 to \$35 per test. However, as you progress up the ladder, they raise the fees higher and higher. Many schools charge thousands of dollars just to take a black belt test.

Another area where they make up the difference is uniforms and equipment. As you progress through the different levels, they require different equipment and uniforms. This adds to your total cost that you pay per month. For example, a school can charge you \$100 per month and you think that is cheaper than the schools in the area. But once you add in testing fees, association fees and extra equipment at each belt, you could be paying well over \$200 a month. Keep your eyes open for this.

Tip 15 - Programs & Pricing

Here's a sticking point for a lot of schools. Some charge month-by-month. That's fine, but there is not any commitment on their part or yours. To make progress in anything requires only 2 things: desire and commitment. If you have the desire, then you must make some type of commitment.

I would stay away from this type of school. The reason is that it is hard today to try to pay the bills and rent without some type of financial arrangement with their clients. These schools go out of business quickly leaving you trying to find another school. It sounds appealing in the beginning because maybe you can go one month and pay and then take off a month and not

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pay. However, as mentioned above, you will not make any progress at all and might as well not even start a program.

Rarely do martial arts schools advertise their price of instruction in the phone book. Prices could be determined on a monthly basis, over several months, or by how often you train each week. In some cases, the price is negotiable depending on how many people will be taking classes with you (family package deals, for example). It is up to you to determine what you feel is a fair and manageable price for instruction. After some research, you will know who is asking too much.

What to look for is a variety of options to join a school. As I said previously, most schools usually do 6 to 12 month agreements, but some might rope you into a longer term like 36 months. Do not do these longer term agreements in the beginning. If you need a shorter period of time to evaluate a school, then just ask for a shorter term. I recommend at least try it for 3 months. You might pay a little more, but if it isn't for you, you're not locked in to a longer term.

Tip 16 - First Step

The first step once you decide on a school is to take a Trial Course. Call or go online to setup an appointment with the school for the Trial Course. Typically, many schools offer anywhere from a few lessons to several weeks. If they do not have a trial course, then steer clear and look for another facility. This is just like buying a car. If you went to the car dealer and they refused to let you take the car for a test drive, would you buy the car? Probably not. Take the school for a test ride.

About the Author

I've has been training in Kung Fu & Tai Chi for over 40 years. He has achieved a Master's degree in Northern Shaolin, White Dragon Fist, Northern Eagle Claw, Yang Tai Chi and Wu Tai Chi.

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