

# Martial Arts Are Not Ennobling

---

by: Harvey Kurland

**G**ot your attention? Some of you may have a knee jerk reaction, of, “Of course martial art training makes one a better person.” But does it? There are claims that martial art training makes one a better, noble, spiritual, or ethical person. If you know of any research that demonstrates that idea I would like to see it. My premise is that the arts themselves are not ennobling. How they are taught is another story.

A doctor, professor, painter, martial artist, poet, actor, accountant, etc., can be a virtuous, good and honest person or they can be an evil, unethical, or bad person. More likely they are like most of us trying to live a good life, not always succeeding. Practicing an art, studying anything really, is an amoral activity. T'ai chi is an exercise. It may make you feel better, be less stressed and think more clearly, but it does not substitute for moral or ethical training or conscience. I know several very high-level t'ai chi ch'uan, karate, and kung-fu masters who I do not want to associate with, because they have an evil side to them, i.e. “bad vibes”. I prefer not to be around their “Energy”. If they, the epitome of the art, are not virtuous then how can the art make one virtuous?

Football was once said to develop character, but how many pro ball players are in jail right now? Is the idea that “the sport makes you a better person”, just an old saying that has no basis in fact? If it does not hold true for Western sports, then why should it be true for Asian martial arts where the idea is to learn to fight and, in the old days, kill?

“*I believe there is no relationship between being a martial artist and being a virtuous person.*”

I once read an article that extolled Miyamoto Musashi as a spiritual man. The author told of people praying at his shrine. Musashi was the ultimate tactician and swordsman of his culture. But the reality was that he was a sword fighter, a gunslinger of his time. He killed people for the reasons of ego or revenge. Is that noble, ethical or spiritual? Not for me.

I believe, until proven otherwise, that there is no relationship between doing an art form, being an excellent artist, scholar or athlete and character. I believe there is no relationship between being a martial artist and being a virtuous person. Training in how to fight, learning to hurt others on one hand, or to defend oneself on the other, does not necessarily instill moral lessons. Only moral training does. Many of the martial arts at one time had (or claimed to have) some kind of supplementary ethical/moral study or emphasis, but that was secondary to the physical training. They read religious texts, philosophical works, meditated, prayed and had spiritual counseling. There was also an expectation of correct moral behavior. There was a societal expectation for their behavior. To be a good and honest person one must strive to be a good and honest person.

Action is more important than intent. If you do good deeds, for whatever reason, you are doing “good”. If you do bad deeds but are thinking about or talking about being good, you are still doing evil. Your actions are important and determine who and what you are. If you lie about what you teach to fool students, try to mystify students, or just act in an unethical way, are you being an ennobling person? I have heard of masters who sexually harassed, abused or intimidate

“*Action is more important than intent. Your actions determine who and what you are.*”

“If martial art instructors are to claim the arts make students into better people, the teachers need to lead by example.”

their students and others. I have seen black belt competitors threaten judges at tournaments because they did not like their call, and none of the official did anything about it. Does that show the self-discipline we are told the arts produce? Teachers have told me gleefully about their black belts who go out looking for fights to beat people up. They like to try out their well-rehearsed techniques on the unsuspecting public. Is that ethical? There are teachers who use their students as punching bags (and the students pay for the honor?). If they want to get into a real fight they should

fight someone close to their skill, make it a fair fight.

Less of a problem, but a real common one is that some teachers misrepresent what they teach. For example a teacher I knew of many years ago claimed to be a master, but it turned out he was an advanced student and was only a few lessons ahead of his students. His students were learning real kung-fu technique, but they were training with essentially a green belt claiming to be a master, but who was really a master manipulator. Other teachers claim their style is a “Secret Ancient Method”, when it isn’t. (A “secret method” is just a marketing gimmick.)

Another common ploy in Kung Fu is that some teachers have their students hang on for years with the carrot on a stick concept of “I will teach you secrets if you stay long enough.” For example one teacher told his students they had to stay with him for 10 years before he would teach them pushing hands or sword. Maybe he had a valid reason, maybe the students were really

“A “secret method” is just a marketing gimmick.”

incredibly slow learners, but it sounds like the carrot on a stick idea to me. As most students can learn pushing hands after learning the basic form. There is no reason why a teacher cannot be honest about what his/her art is, and leave it at that. Are they scamming their students, or just boosting their own egos?

The shame is many people know of this type of thing going on and don't speak up about it. It is accepted, even tolerated by many real masters. Often those who speak out are considered the bad guys, which is a shame. If we want to raise the standard, first we need standards. Maybe there needs to be an ethical board to deal with martial art teachers. Possibly the major organizations can formalize ethical standards for their members to follow. If martial art instructors are to claim the arts make students into better people, the teachers need to live up to that expectation and lead by example. If they are not interested in ethical behavior then maybe it is time to stop making those claims?

*Harvey Kurland is an Exercise Physiologist and teacher of t'ai chi ch'uan, ch'i kung and pa-kua chang at the University of California Riverside and is certified (Sifu) by the Chinese Tai Chi Chuan Association. More information at [www.pe.net/~rvtaichi/](http://www.pe.net/~rvtaichi/)*

Copyright © 2000 AJA Newsletter. First published in the AJA Newsletter, Fall, 2000.

Reprinted by permission.

American Jujitsu Association

[www.AmericanJujitsuAssociation.org](http://www.AmericanJujitsuAssociation.org)