

Christianity, Zen and the Martial Arts

Zen and the Martial Arts

In the beginning of the movie *Enter the Dragon* Bruce Lee admonishes his young disciple to feel, not think! He wants to see “emotional content,” not anger, in developing his practice. Technique is like a finger pointing a way to the moon, but we must not focus on the finger or we will miss the heavenly glory. Lee sends his pupil away after several slaps on the head, convinced he has mastered the lesson.



This scene illustrates the close connection between the martial arts and Zen Buddhism. Lee’s lesson was entirely Zen in approach. Its object was the perfection of a kick technique with enthusiasm; a mere mechanical performance was insufficient. The student must feel his art as well as accurately execute it. This means the technique should be as natural and unconscious as breathing. It must become second nature. On the other hand, Lee’s object lesson was not really about kicking but feeling as a means to enlightenment or nirvana, a state of realization that the self does not exist.

But does practicing the martial arts mean we must also adopt Zen Buddhist practice as well? Can we separate the martial arts from Zen practice and belief and embrace a Christian approach? In order to do this we must first distinguish the goal of Zen from the martial arts and then see how the martial arts may be practiced from a Christian perspective.

Zen believes that words cannot adequately convey meaning. They

are only the sign posts on a map and not the destination, or the finger pointing to the moon but not the moon itself. Zen relies on flashes of insight connected to feelings or intuition. Zen adopts the Taoist view in world religions asserting that "he that knows does not speak and he that speaks does not know." This means that the truth or enlightenment they are seeking cannot be expressed in words. It cannot be found in a book such as the Bible in Christianity, the Koran in Islam, or the Torah in Judaism, or even the sutras found in other forms of Buddhism, but must be experienced. They have little place for theory, but stress action and encounter with the practical world. Buddha mind transmits only to Buddha mind. They do not just talk about Nirvana but viscerally pursue it.

Zen means a way of meditation, a method for attaining enlightenment, not gradually as in other sects of Buddhism, but suddenly through shock and illogic. Zen practitioners are the shock troops of Buddhism. Zen monks are known for their acts of irreverence by burning Buddhist scriptures or defacing statues of Buddha, all designed to demonstrate their protest against theoretical learning. Truth is found in ordinary life and the practical as illustrated by the movie the *Karate Kid* whose main protagonist must sand the floor or paint the fence and wax the car before he can learn to throw a punch. Karate was not something that could be learned from a book.

Zen in America

In their practicality Zen adherents are not unlike Americans, which explains Zen's popularity in the United States as part of the counter-culture movement of the 1960s. Americans do not like theory, metaphysics, and laborious arguments, but are practical, to the point; action oriented, not cerebral. Americans are pithy in their word usage and prefer axioms and pearls of wisdom succinctly stated as opposed to the long winded arguments of scholars and professors.

Zen relies on dialectical thinking or paradox to frustrate traditional logic in order to shock its followers into realization. Zen uses the *koan*, an insoluble riddle that can only be understood through persistent contemplation and application to one's life. For example, a famous koan asks, "what is the sound of one hand clapping?" The smart-alecky response of snapping your fingers together like Bart Simpson will earn you a smack on the head or a rap with a bamboo stick from the master and a seat at the back of the class.

Zen does not emphasize detachment from life, as earlier Buddhism did, but the embrace of life. People learn not by retreat but through immersion. There is no sacred and secular distinction as in traditional religions, a point a monk may prove by burning a statue of the Buddha and declaring, "there are no holy images."[{1}](#)

The koan is learned by intuition and cannot be articulated in words. Koans are not meant to have strict logical answers you can verbalize, but only understand for yourself in meditation. Pointing to a flag waving in a monastery, the monk says, "What is moving, the flag or the wind?" The answer is neither; the mind is moving.[{2}](#)

Zen appealed to soldiers in Japan and was adopted by the military creed known as Bushido where it was mixed with the martial arts around AD 1300.[{3}](#) It is this Japanese version that is most familiar to Americans. However, Zen originates with the Indian sage Bodhidharma who brought the message that cannot be spoken to China in AD 520.[{4}](#) In Zen we see a clear connection between Taoism, the ancient Chinese religion, and Hinduism. Both believe in a similar view of God as ultimate reality or the impersonal principle of the universe. In popular culture we know this as "the force" from *Star Wars*, the active energy of the universe that animates all things. In theological studies we call this pantheism or the belief that all things are God.

Separating Zen and the Martial Arts

Legendary history says Bodhidharma brought the martial arts with him in the spread of Zen across China, but modern scholarship notes that the martial arts were practiced in China prior to the coming of Bodhidharma.[{5}](#) The founders of the famous Shaolin monastery were probably military men who retired to monastic life in AD 497, and most monks came from the general population where the martial arts were already practiced before the spread of Buddhism. Monasteries were sources of wealth in ancient China and required defending. The martial arts scholar Donn Draeger also notes that the martial arts were established in Japan prior to the acceptance of Buddhism, and the joining of these two practices represents a modern innovation.[{6}](#) These historical facts lead to the conclusion that the martial arts were practiced centuries before the arrival of Zen.

The martial arts or fighting arts have a long and diverse history in ancient China, India, and Greece that certainly precedes Zen or the founding of Shaolin and long predates the Samurai by thousands of years. These arts include hand to hand fighting, wrestling, boxing, and weapons use such as sword fighting and even gladiatorial combat training.

There is certainly a synthesis created between Zen and the martial arts in Shaolin and later in the Code of the Samurai, but the fighting arts of all kinds precede Zen. Historically speaking there is no intrinsic connection between Zen and the martial arts. People practiced these arts before Zen and will continue to practice them without Zen today.

Also, philosophically speaking there is no necessary connection between Zen and the martial arts. Zen is a method to achieve enlightenment through shock and illogic that awakens followers into the realization of unity of essence with ultimate reality, which means emptying and loss of self. The martial arts, on the other hand, were developed for the

practical reason of self-defense, sport and warfare.

Given the austerity, paradox, practicality, and composure of Zen disciples in the face of death, the warrior appears naturally attracted to it as a philosophy. Draeger points out that Zen contributed to the fighting technique of the Samurai by helping him empty his mind of all distractions and prepare him for the rigors of military life. It enabled him to transcend mere physical technique.[\[7\]](#) However, there is nothing intrinsic to either system that makes their practice necessary to each other, any more than fencing and the fighting techniques of the knights of the Middle Ages must involve Christianity. Zen's contribution to the martial arts is a convenience or incidental and not a philosophical necessity. This means the two can be logically and practically separated without harm or inconsistency to either system. It is possible to engage in martial arts without eastern religious philosophy. What Christians are responsible for, is to find martial arts instructors who teach the techniques without the Zen aspect.

Christianity and Zen

A basic principle of apologetics is finding the common ground between two different systems. This includes similar things such as beliefs and morals. This allows for a conversation and friendship to develop. Do not underestimate the power of friendship and empathy. In the final analysis we are not about winning arguments, or breaking bones for that matter, but winning people, individuals whom God loves; the hardest hearts can be softened by a little kindness and understanding.

There may be many points of contact between Christianity and Zen such as love, truth, realism, and even paradox, but the one I find most interesting is individualism. Both beliefs place a strong emphasis on individuality and respect for individual dignity in terms of self-discipline and self-

defense, a common ground where both Christians and Zen Buddhists alike share their interests in the martial arts. And we must make it clear that the martial arts are not the sole province of Zen teachers. Christians and Zen Buddhists simply have a common interest in these techniques for the purpose of self-growth, exercise, and sport. One need not be either a Buddhist or Christian to perform the martial arts, but both may use them for their own purposes.

The second principle of apologetics is to define the differences between the two systems and seek for the resolution in Christ. There are many differences between Zen and Christianity. Zen is a faith that seeks enlightenment through self-realization that there is no self. Christianity does not pursue enlightenment, but salvation. Buddhism believes that the individual self is an illusion, but Christianity believes the self is very real and very sinful. Christianity seeks to reconcile the self to a personal God through Jesus Christ. Christianity does seek to empty the old sinful self and replace it with a new self made in the image of Christ. This is not accomplished through works or meditation or following the Eightfold Path, but strictly by faith.

Buddhists do not believe in a personal all powerful God, but an impersonal force. Christians believe in a personal creator God who stands outside of the created world, making reconciliation impossible in terms of human effort. Buddhism stresses the importance of human works, discipline and right attitude and actions to achieve Nirvana. Christianity says salvation is impossible unless God saves us. Buddhism wants to empty the mind and escape the world of change. Christianity wants to save the world for the glory of God and fill the mind with his word.

"The Buddha" means "one who is awakened," which suggests that his title is self-earned and self-appointed. All that the Buddha accomplished has come from "within," from his own

abilities and merit.

“The Christ” means “the chosen one,” which suggests that his title was given to him and not earned. It comes from grace and from “without” or “outside” of him. One man leads to a system of works and the other to a system of grace. This point should never be confused.

Christianity and the Martial Arts

The primary problem for Christians in approaching the martial arts is violence. The martial arts are fighting techniques that can be used for several purposes: the most obvious is self-defense, then exercise, and finally sport.

We approach these techniques with the same Christian principle that we use in our approach to any other subject: we are free in Christ! Paul declares that we are saved in Christ and the world is ours. “For all things belong to you, whether . . . the world or life or death or things present or things to come: all things belong to you and you belong to Christ; and Christ belongs to God” (1 Cor. 3:21-23). This means we use the gifts and talents at our disposal not for self-glorification but for the glory of God. Remember the first principle of Christian love: “Love the LORD your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength” (Matt. 22: 37). Practice the martial arts with a commitment that reflects love for God. “We do all things for the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). Let the two greatest commandments guide your behavior: love God and your neighbor as yourself.

These principles do include self-defense. It is not unloving to defend yourself or an innocent person from an unjust attack. Self-defense has been an accepted point in Christian theology for centuries. This principle has been part of “just war thinking” and simply means Christians are justified under certain conditions to defend themselves and innocent people

against aggressive parties who will take advantage of them. In fact, not to defend ourselves or the innocent through inaction when we are capable of intervening to stop or prevent assault is equally considered as wrong as the assault itself.

The martial arts present a much more suitable and even peaceful alternative to self-defense than say a handgun, whose ease of use can be lethal. In the martial arts one has the advantage of training and discipline that act as a hedge to immature and reckless behavior. It takes years to learn these skills and with it one is taught self-control, discipline, and values, especially the value of human life.

What is completely unacceptable is the idea of training remorseless killing machines, like the sensei from the *Karate Kid* movie who taught his pupils to crush their opponents and "show no mercy." Such a view will only lead to your own destruction. For it is not without reason that Jesus said, "Those who live by the sword will die by the sword" (Matt. 26:52). But, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy" (Matt. 5: 7). Mercy is the hallmark of the Christian. We learn in order to serve, just as Jesus said, "The Son of Man has not come to destroy life but to save it" (Luke 9:56). Those pursuing martial arts should use their skills in the service of life to achieve discipline and protection and to offer themselves as role models of dignity and responsibility to the younger generation.

Notes

1. John Lewis, *Religions of the World Made Simple*, rev. ed., (New York: Doubleday, 1968), 49.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., 50.
4. Houston Smith, *The World's Religions: Our Great Wisdom Traditions* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 128.

5. Salvatore Canzonieri, "History of Chinese Martial Arts: Jin Dynasty to the Period of Disunity." *Han Wei Wushu* (February-March 1998), 3 (9); Ibid., "The Emergence of the Chinese Martial Arts." *Han Wei Wushu* (23).

6. Donn F. Draeger, *Modern Bujutsu and Budo* (New York: Weatherhill, 1974), 128.

7. Donn Draeger and Robert W. Smith, *Comprehensive Asian Fighting Arts* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, LTD, 1980), 95.

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Martial Arts and Just War Theory

Dr. Lawrence Terlizzese examines a Christian view of martial arts in view of the Just War Tradition.

When I was first asked to speak about Christianity and the [Martial Arts](#) I was a little skeptical that a Christian can practice Martial Arts in good conscience. The popular objections immediately came to mind: "Aren't the Martial Arts steeped in Zen Buddhist practice?" And, "Should a Christian really participate in something as violent as karate?" Christians commonly object to Martial Arts for such reasons, even vilifying them as something as bad as witchcraft.

Upon reflection, I realized that the practice of Martial Arts naturally corresponds to something I have thought long and hard about: Just War Tradition. A central principal of both Just War thinking and the Martial Arts is personal self-defense. Just War doctrine states that if a Christian is unjustly attacked or sees an innocent third party under attack

and has the ability to either prevent the abuse or intervene, that he or she should do so. What's more, to fail to render such aid makes one equally culpable in the crime. In other words, inaction and apathy in the face of injustice is just as wrong as the injustice itself.

Just War thinking is usually applied to the relationships between governments and states in times of war. It helps Christians and societies decide if a war is morally acceptable or not and whether it is worthy of their participation. But there is no logical reason to prevent Christians from applying this principle at a personal level. After all, the police cannot possibly be available always and everywhere; we are sometimes forced to protect ourselves.

The Violence Objection

As Americans we naturally think that self-defense means owning a handgun. We live in a gun culture that accepts firearms as a God-given right protected by Law. Christians generally have no objections to gun ownership even though the potential for disaster is obvious. But when it comes to a safer alternative to guns, such as the Martial Arts, practitioners are met with a flurry of protests as if they are embracing some foreign religion. Now, to clear the air, I am entirely in favor of the Second Amendment right to bear arms. I am simply suggesting that those individuals who choose to practice the Martial Arts as a means of self-defense have chosen a safer alternative to gun ownership. (I assume that the discipline replaces gun ownership for them. From observation, gun owners and Martial Arts participants are generally not the same people.)

Guns are so easy to use that the potential for abuse and misuse is frightening and lethal. The Martial Arts, however, requires training, discipline and values related to peace and human dignity. One is taught self-control and respect for life that must accompany any notion of self-defense. Students are taught not to kill but rather to apply only the force

necessary for a given situation.

One of the ironies of war states that the defender may become more powerful than the aggressor. This principle was clearly demonstrated in World War II when the Allies routed the Axis powers. At this point, if the defending party does not possess a system of values that imposes limited action out of respect for human life, then the defender becomes the aggressor by virtue of his advantage of power. Only a notion of justice tempered with mercy will prevent the just party from slipping into injustice and excessive aggression.

At the personal level, it is very difficult to achieve limited action that seeks to apply only the necessary force when it comes to using firearms. For example, various schools of Martial Arts often teach restraint in kicking or punching, using only enough force to defend oneself. Bullets cannot be recalled and their results are almost always fatal or horribly injurious. On the other hand, Martial Arts techniques like karate are inherently limited in their effects—despite violence-filled popular Kung Fu movies. They are designed to apply only the force necessary to achieve the goal of self-defense without killing or permanently disabling the opponent. Kicks, chops and blocks will always prove less fatal or damaging than shooting someone at point blank range. The use of force is never ideal or welcome, but if given the choice between karate or a .357 magnum for self-defense, the former clearly comes closer to Christian notions of justice and mercy than the latter.

The Eastern Mysticism Objection

The second objection, that the Martial Arts are *necessarily* tied to Eastern mysticism and thus that any Christian practicing these Arts is betraying Christianity, is much easier to answer. The common misconception is that Bodhidharma, the founder of Zen, brought the Martial Arts from India to China in the Sixth Century AD with the spread of Zen

Buddhism. Later, the practice spread to Japan. It is certainly true that the East has created a synthesis between the Martial Arts and mystical philosophy, but this creation represents a fairly modern innovation, especially in Japan with the rise of the Samurai warrior around 1300 AD. This is the most prominent symbol of the Martial Arts in the American mind. These Arts were practiced for millennia before the arrival of Zen in China or Japan and go as far back as 2000 BC in Mesopotamia. Historically speaking, there is no necessary connection between Zen and the Martial Arts.

Philosophically speaking, there is no necessary connection between Zen and the Martial Arts, either. Zen philosophy teaches a way of meditation or a means of achieving enlightenment focused on the practical and tangible world as opposed to the spoken or written word. That is, it doesn't rely on sacred texts or traditional reason, but rather on intuitive experience. Zen adherents prefer practice and encounter with reality rather than simply talking about it. Since the Martial Arts are also very practical and physical, this makes Zen attractive to many Martial Artists, but this represents an incidental connection, not a logically necessary one. The connection between the two practices is a convenience. One no more has to be a Buddhist to practice the Martial Arts than one has to be a Christian to be an American. Simply put, just because Zen appeals to many Martial Artists doesn't mean the two go together essentially. One can do just fine without the other, and that's where Christians can reconcile doing Martial Arts with their faith.

However, the notion of Chi ["chee"], or life-force, in the Martial Arts presents a serious obstacle to many Christians. This underlying idea states that one must align his or her Chi in order to be an effective practitioner. Since Chi clearly represents a pantheist philosophy, a suitable Christian-theist substitute should replace it. Chi is really nothing more than right attitude, enthusiasm and concentration; it signifies the

power of the focused mind rather than a mystical supernatural energy we can draw from. As in all sports and disciplines of any kind, one must focus the mind. This is no different for the Martial Artist than for the marksman who must aim at a target or a ball player who must kick or hit a ball. The body follows the mind.

As Christians legitimately concerned with the compromise of faith with Eastern mysticism or a violent culture, a conceptual union of Just War thinking and the Martial Arts creates an excellent theological and practical tool to reconcile both currents in American society. So, if after considering this perspective your conscience is clear, enjoy the Martial Arts for the sport, discipline and art form that they can be.

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Martial Arts

The Origins and Popularity of the Martial Arts

Gliding across the Pacific, the Asian martial arts have become part of the mainstream of American culture. Today there are an estimated two to three million practitioners in the United States, 40 percent of which are children between the ages of 7 and 14.^{[\[1\]](#)} The martial arts industry generates annual revenue topping the \$1 billion mark.

Why this rise in popularity? For one thing, people today are interested in and more willing to accept Eastern ideas. What was once considered “foreign” is now embraced as old, and thus

“tried and true.” Advocates extol the physical benefits and self-discipline that result from its practices. Movies further popularize martial arts with films such as *Enter the Dragon*, *Rush Hour*, and the Oscar winning *Crouching Tiger-Hidden Dragon*. The rise in crime also has people seeking to learn ways to protect themselves and their loved ones.

There are few written records regarding the origin of martial arts. These are interwoven with myths or verbal traditions that make it difficult to accurately trace the record. Archaeological evidence indicates that the martial arts may have begun as early as 2000 BC in the Fertile Crescent.[\[2\]](#) From there it traveled eastward to India and China.

The father of the Asian martial arts according to the most popular tradition is an Indian Buddhist Monk named Bodhidharma who arrived in China in the late fifth century A.D. Settling in a monastery in the Songshan Mountains located in the Kingdom of Wei, he developed a series of mind-body exercises designed to improve the health of the monks and assist them in meditation. Based on the movements of different real and mythological animals and incorporating concepts from Taoism and Zen Buddhism, Bodhidharma taught a style of combat known as Shao-lin gung fu. Gradually, Shao-lin gung fu migrated from the temples to the Chinese populace. It was adapted and refined as it spread across the country and eventually, to the world.

Martial arts have been very popular among Christians. Scot Conway, founder of the Christian Martial Arts Foundation, estimates between 50 and 70 percent of American martial artists – and roughly 20 percent of all instructors – consider themselves Christians.[\[3\]](#) But other Christians argue that the philosophy of Asian martial arts is wholly incompatible with biblical teaching. They point to the origin of Eastern mysticism as reason for Christians to avoid any level of participation. Still others say Jesus’ exhortation to “turn the other cheek” shows that using force is wrong.

How should a discerning Christian respond? Can we participate in the martial arts and be consistent with our biblical convictions?

Differences in the Martial Arts

Should Christians participate in the martial arts? In order to make an informed decision, it is helpful to recognize that there are two basic categories for martial arts. It is important to note that the division is not rigid; in some cases, values from one type may be blended or subtly integrated into the other. But for simplicity and clarity, we will use the two main groups.

One type, called “internal” or “soft” martial art, focuses on inner spiritual development, balance, form, and mental awareness. This soft art emphasizes two principles – that the mind dictates action and that the opponent’s own force is used to defeat him or her.^{4} Students are taught Taoist and Buddhist philosophical principles such as the “chi” force and the “yin and yang” concept. Through breath control, soft art practitioners seek to “collect, cultivate, and store” this chi force which is located in the body. Some believe they can use the chi force to strike down opponents from a distance. Examples of internal or soft martial arts include the Chinese Tai-chi Chuan and the Japanese Aikido.

The second category of martial arts is called the “external” or “hard” art. This type teaches that physical reactions precede mental reaction. It also promotes the idea that an opponent’s force should be met with an equal but opposite force. While the hard martial art system also uses breath control like the soft arts, the emphasis is on developing strength and quickness through the use of straight and linear body motions.^{5} The hard arts include certain forms of Chinese kung fu, and Shao Lin boxing. The Japanese arts were adapted from Chinese kung fu. The hard arts include Ju-jitsu, Judo, Karate, Ninjitsu, and Kendo. The Korean martial arts

include Tae Kwon Do and Tang Soo Do.

While there are religious concepts in the martial arts, few schools would qualify as religious movements, and few seek to meet the religious needs of the student. However, a little exposure to Eastern mysticism may lead to greater involvement in the future. So as a general rule, Christians should avoid the internal or soft martial arts because of the concentration on the teachings of Eastern religions and philosophies. Several schools even utilize the occult techniques of meditation and altering consciousness. External or hard martial arts, on the other hand, concentrate primarily on physical training. These physical lessons usually do not conflict with our biblical convictions.

Before joining a dojo or martial arts gym, one needs to know the worldview of the instructor. Even some hard martial arts teachers incorporate Eastern ideas and occult practices into their styles. Look for instructors who teach the physical movements but exclude the Eastern ideas.

Eastern Concepts in the Martial Arts

Since martial arts are traditionally based on the Eastern philosophies of Taoism and Zen Buddhism, several key concepts can be prominent in the classes. Let's look at three of them.

The concept of "chi" or "ki" is central in some martial arts. Chi is believed to be the impersonal life energy that flows throughout the universe and pulses through the human body. By harnessing the chi in individuals, martial artists believe they can perform at higher levels of ability or can release chi power resulting in devastating effects. Chi is controlled through specialized breathing techniques, gymnastics, and meditation.

Another common martial arts teaching is the Taoist (pronounced "dow-ist") concept of yin and yang, that nature consists of

conflicting elements which function in perfect balance to one another. As mankind should live in harmony with the Tao, so the martial artist must strike hard with firmness at times, but at other times accept the energy of the opponent, then reroute the energy, causing the opponent to defeat himself. This redirection allows a relatively gentle resolution, and brings one into harmony with the opponent and the flow of nature.

A Christian must also avoid the practice of Eastern meditation. The goal of this type of meditation is to empty one's mind, alter one's consciousness, or unite with the impersonal divine. Scott Shaw writes, "Meditation is a sacred process. It is the method used by the spiritual warrior to calm the mind and to connect the body and mind with the infinite."[\[6\]](#) This greater awareness supposedly enables the martial artist to increase his or her performance. In many schools, the combined use of Eastern meditation and the chi are essential to mastering the art. (Not all martial arts use meditation for this purpose. Some use it to focus on the lesson or task at hand such as picturing the action in your mind before physically carrying it out.)

But the mysticism of Taoism and Buddhism is not compatible with Christianity; neither is Eastern meditation the same as biblical meditation. The Bible does not teach altering our consciousness or emptying our minds. Instead, the goal of Scriptural meditation is to *fill* our minds with God's Word. (Psalm 1:2) Another danger of Eastern meditation is that it can open our minds to the occult, a practice the Bible prohibits. The Bible does not teach the Eastern idea of chi, that there is an impersonal life energy of the universe within us. Rather, the Bible says that each individual has an eternal soul that will either go to heaven or to hell based on whether or not they have a relationship with Christ.

Self Defense or Turn the Other Cheek?

Besides concerns about the role of Eastern religion in the martial arts, some people think martial arts encourages violence. Martial arts teach fighting, and so are contrary to the Bible's instructions about pacifism. Is there ever a time when Christians can use force?

Christian pacifists believe it is always wrong to injure another person. Many interpret Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:38-48, where he states, "Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also . . .", to mean never use violence. This is exemplified in the life of Christ who suffered silently and did not retaliate while enduring torture even unto death.

Despite these arguments, the proper interpretation of the Matthew 5 passage does not teach pacifism. In Jewish culture, to be struck or slapped on the cheek was an insult (2 Corinthians 11:20). Jesus was teaching that when a disciple is insulted for being a follower of Christ, the disciple should not retaliate with force. However, being insulted is a very different situation from being attacked by a mugger or your wife being attacked by a rapist.

In the Gospels, Christ did not resist violent attacks because of His unique mission to be the sacrifice for our sins. However, in the Old Testament, the preincarnate Christ judged wicked nations with the sword. (Judges 6:11-16). Not only did He smite His enemies, He aided Israel in being an instrument of judgment as well. Revelation predicts the glorified Christ coming to judge the nations with a sword. Also in the New Testament, Jesus and His disciples did not teach military leaders to withdraw from the military (e.g., Matthew 8:8-13, Luke 3:14). In Romans 13, Paul writes that the government has the right to "bear the sword." In other words, a righteous government can use capital punishment when an offender is worthy of death.

Therefore, complete pacifism is not the spirit of Christian teaching. In fact, the most loving thing to do when a friend or family member is attacked by a harmful foe is to risk one's life and use force to restrain the enemy. If a man is attacking a child, or a woman is being raped, it would be morally wrong not to sacrifice your life and restrain the assailant even with deadly force if necessary.

The Bible allows a Christian to use self-defense and force when confronted with a criminal act. Force may not be used for revenge or out of unjust anger. Christians who engage in the martial arts should have a clear understanding of this. The use of martial arts must be for self-defense and protecting loved ones from acts of evil. One should never use their fighting system to instigate combat or seek revenge.

Should Christians Participate in the Martial Arts?

To summarize what I have covered so far, I believe that the physical aspect of martial arts can be separated from the Eastern religious and philosophical teachings. Also, I believe the Bible teaches us that there is a time when we are called to use force, even deadly force to halt acts of evil.

Here are some practical guidelines if one is deciding to participate in the martial arts or if one is selecting a school. First, a person should check his or her motives. One should not engage in martial arts if one's motives include becoming a tough guy, showing off, or gaining revenge. Parents should make it clear to their children that the martial arts are never to be used for affectation or for instigating conflicts. Unworthy motives are detrimental to one's walk with the Lord and witness to others. Positive reasons include physical conditioning, discipline, and self-defense. Develop parameters for limiting the use of force. One of the fruits of the Spirit is self-control. Force is used in defensive

purposes only.

Generally speaking, Christians should avoid the soft or internal form of martial arts because they tend to emphasize Eastern philosophical and religious ideas. External or hard martial arts emphasize the physical training. However, it would be wise to be on guard because many instructors of external martial arts may incorporate Eastern mysticism in to their system. Also, one should be careful to avoid the possibility of being enticed to learn about Eastern spirituality as they advance.

Find out the worldview of the instructor. The role of religion in the martial arts depends mostly on the instructor, so choosing a proper instructor is the most important factor. Some instructors claim to teach the physical aspect only. However, as students advance, instructors begin to incorporate Eastern religious ideas to help students attain a higher level of performance. Observe advanced classes to see if they incorporate Eastern practices. There is also helpful information through Christian organizations such as Karate for Christ and the Christian Martial Arts Foundation.

The Christian life involves caring for the nurture and growth of our mind, spirit, and our body which is the temple of the Holy Spirit. I have benefited greatly from my time in the martial arts. It has provided me great exercise, discipline, and opportunities to witness for Christ. There were times in my life when I had to use force to restrain hostile persons or protect loved ones. I believe that the martial arts can be beneficial to Christians who are informed and mature.

Notes

1. Glenn Rifkin, "The Black Belts of the Screen Are Filling the Dojos," *The New York Times*, 16 February 1992, 10.

2. Howard Reid and Michael Croucher, *The Way of the Warrior*, (Woodstock, NY.: Overlook Press, 1983), 16-17.
3. Erwin Castro, B.J. Oropeza, and Ron Rhodes, "Enter the Dragon? Wrestling with the Martial Arts Phenomenon Part I," Christian Research Institute, <http://www.equip.org/free/dm066.htm>, 2.
4. Reid and Croucher, *The Way of the Warrior*, 229.
5. Ibid., 61 & 227.

6. Scott Shaw, *The Warrior is Silent* (Rochester, VT.: Inner Traditions International, 1998), 53.

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3. _____. "Enter the Dragon? Wrestling with the Martial Arts Phenomenon Part II" *Christian Research Institute*. <http://www.equip.org/free/DM067.htm>

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See Also:

["Martial Arts and Just War Theory"](#)

Martial Arts – A Christian View

Dr. Zukeran looks at the popular activity of marital arts from a biblical worldview perspective. He determines that Christians may safely participate in martial arts as long as they distance themselves from the Eastern philosophical ideas associated with most forms of martial arts.

The Origins and Popularity of the Martial Arts

Gliding across the Pacific, the Asian martial arts have become part of the mainstream of American culture. Today there are an estimated two to three million practitioners in the United States, 40 percent of which are children between the ages of 7 and 14.^{1} The martial arts industry generates annual revenue topping the \$1 billion mark.

Why this rise in popularity? For one thing, people today are interested in and more willing to accept Eastern ideas. What

was once considered “foreign” is now embraced as old, and thus “tried and true.” Advocates extol the physical benefits and self-discipline that result from its practices. Movies further popularize martial arts with films such as *Enter the Dragon*, *Rush Hour*, and the Oscar winning *Crouching Tiger-Hidden Dragon*. The rise in crime also has people seeking to learn ways to protect themselves and their loved ones.

There are few written records regarding the origin of martial arts. These are interwoven with myths or verbal traditions that make it difficult to accurately trace the record. Archaeological evidence indicates that the martial arts may have begun as early as 2000 BC in the Fertile Crescent.[{2}](#) From there it traveled eastward to India and China.

The father of the Asian martial arts according to the most popular tradition is an Indian Buddhist Monk named Bodhidharma who arrived in China in the late fifth century A.D. Settling in a monastery in the Songshan Mountains located in the Kingdom of Wei, he developed a series of mind-body exercises designed to improve the health of the monks and assist them in meditation. Based on the movements of different real and mythological animals and incorporating concepts from Taoism and Zen Buddhism, Bodhidharma taught a style of combat known as Shao-lin gung fu. Gradually, Shao-lin gung fu migrated from the temples to the Chinese populace. It was adapted and refined as it spread across the country and eventually, to the world.

Martial arts have been very popular among Christians. Scot Conway, founder of the Christian Martial Arts Foundation, estimates between 50 and 70 percent of American martial artists – and roughly 20 percent of all instructors – consider themselves Christians.[{3}](#) But other Christians argue that the philosophy of Asian martial arts is wholly incompatible with biblical teaching. They point to the origin of Eastern mysticism as reason for Christians to avoid any level of participation. Still others say Jesus’ exhortation to “turn

the other cheek” shows that using force is wrong.

How should a discerning Christian respond? Can we participate in the martial arts and be consistent with our biblical convictions?

Differences in the Martial Arts

Should Christians participate in the martial arts? In order to make an informed decision, it is helpful to recognize that there are two basic categories for martial arts. It is important to note that the division is not rigid; in some cases, values from one type may be blended or subtly integrated into the other. But for simplicity and clarity, we will use the two main groups.

One type, called “internal” or “soft” martial art, focuses on inner spiritual development, balance, form, and mental awareness. This soft art emphasizes two principles – that the mind dictates action and that the opponent’s own force is used to defeat him or her.[{4}](#) Students are taught Taoist and Buddhist philosophical principles such as the “chi” force and the “yin and yang” concept. Through breath control, soft art practitioners seek to “collect, cultivate, and store” this chi force which is located in the body. Some believe they can use the chi force to strike down opponents from a distance. Examples of internal or soft martial arts include the Chinese Tai-chi Chuan and the Japanese Aikido.

The second category of martial arts is called the “external” or “hard” art. This type teaches that physical reactions precede mental reaction. It also promotes the idea that an opponent’s force should be met with an equal but opposite force. While the hard martial art system also uses breath control like the soft arts, the emphasis is on developing strength and quickness through the use of straight and linear body motions.[{5}](#) The hard arts include certain forms of Chinese kung fu, and Shao Lin boxing. The Japanese arts were

adapted from Chinese kung fu. The hard arts include Ju-jitsu, Judo, Karate, Ninjitsu, and Kendo. The Korean martial arts include Tae Kwon Do and Tang Soo Do.

While there are religious concepts in the martial arts, few schools would qualify as religious movements, and few seek to meet the religious needs of the student. However, a little exposure to Eastern mysticism may lead to greater involvement in the future. So as a general rule, Christians should avoid the internal or soft martial arts because of the concentration on the teachings of Eastern religions and philosophies. Several schools even utilize the occult techniques of meditation and altering consciousness. External or hard martial arts, on the other hand, concentrate primarily on physical training. These physical lessons usually do not conflict with our biblical convictions.

Before joining a dojo or martial arts gym, one needs to know the worldview of the instructor. Even some hard martial arts teachers incorporate Eastern ideas and occult practices into their styles. Look for instructors who teach the physical movements but exclude the Eastern ideas.

Eastern Concepts in the Martial Arts

Since martial arts are traditionally based on the Eastern philosophies of Taoism and Zen Buddhism, several key concepts can be prominent in the classes. Let's look at three of them.

The concept of "chi" or "ki" is central in some martial arts. Chi is believed to be the impersonal life energy that flows throughout the universe and pulses through the human body. By harnessing the chi in individuals, martial artists believe they can perform at higher levels of ability or can release chi power resulting in devastating effects. Chi is controlled through specialized breathing techniques, gymnastics, and meditation.

Another common martial arts teaching is the Taoist (pronounced "dow-ist") concept of yin and yang, that nature consists of conflicting elements which function in perfect balance to one another. As mankind should live in harmony with the Tao, so the martial artist must strike hard with firmness at times, but at other times accept the energy of the opponent, then reroute the energy, causing the opponent to defeat himself. This redirection allows a relatively gentle resolution, and brings one into harmony with the opponent and the flow of nature.

A Christian must also avoid the practice of Eastern meditation. The goal of this type of meditation is to empty one's mind, alter one's consciousness, or unite with the impersonal divine. Scott Shaw writes, "Meditation is a sacred process. It is the method used by the spiritual warrior to calm the mind and to connect the body and mind with the infinite."[\[6\]](#) This greater awareness supposedly enables the martial artist to increase his or her performance. In many schools, the combined use of Eastern meditation and the chi are essential to mastering the art. (Not all martial arts use meditation for this purpose. Some use it to focus on the lesson or task at hand such as picturing the action in your mind before physically carrying it out.)

But the mysticism of Taoism and Buddhism is not compatible with Christianity; neither is Eastern meditation the same as biblical meditation. The Bible does not teach altering our consciousness or emptying our minds. Instead, the goal of Scriptural meditation is to *fill* our minds with God's Word. (Psalm 1:2) Another danger of Eastern meditation is that it can open our minds to the occult, a practice the Bible prohibits. The Bible does not teach the Eastern idea of chi, that there is an impersonal life energy of the universe within us. Rather, the Bible says that each individual has an eternal soul that will either go to heaven or to hell based on whether or not they have a relationship with Christ.

Self Defense or Turn the Other Cheek?

Besides concerns about the role of Eastern religion in the martial arts, some people think martial arts encourages violence. Martial arts teach fighting, and so are contrary to the Bible's instructions about pacifism. Is there ever a time when Christians can use force?

Christian pacifists believe it is always wrong to injure another person. Many interpret Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:38-48, where he states, "Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also . . .", to mean never use violence. This is exemplified in the life of Christ who suffered silently and did not retaliate while enduring torture even unto death.

Despite these arguments, the proper interpretation of the Matthew 5 passage does not teach pacifism. In Jewish culture, to be struck or slapped on the cheek was an insult (2 Corinthians 11:20). Jesus was teaching that when a disciple is insulted for being a follower of Christ, the disciple should not retaliate with force. However, being insulted is a very different situation from being attacked by a mugger or your wife being attacked by a rapist.

In the Gospels, Christ did not resist violent attacks because of His unique mission to be the sacrifice for our sins. However, in the Old Testament, the preincarnate Christ judged wicked nations with the sword. (Judges 6:11-16). Not only did He smite His enemies, He aided Israel in being an instrument of judgment as well. Revelation predicts the glorified Christ coming to judge the nations with a sword. Also in the New Testament, Jesus and His disciples did not teach military leaders to withdraw from the military (e.g., Matthew 8:8-13, Luke 3:14). In Romans 13, Paul writes that the government has the right to "bear the sword." In other words, a righteous government can use capital punishment when an offender is worthy of death.

Therefore, complete pacifism is not the spirit of Christian teaching. In fact, the most loving thing to do when a friend or family member is attacked by a harmful foe is to risk one's life and use force to restrain the enemy. If a man is attacking a child, or a woman is being raped, it would be morally wrong not to sacrifice your life and restrain the assailant even with deadly force if necessary.

The Bible allows a Christian to use self-defense and force when confronted with a criminal act. Force may not be used for revenge or out of unjust anger. Christians who engage in the martial arts should have a clear understanding of this. The use of martial arts must be for self-defense and protecting loved ones from acts of evil. One should never use their fighting system to instigate combat or seek revenge.

Should Christians Participate in the Martial Arts?

To summarize what I have covered so far, I believe that the physical aspect of martial arts can be separated from the Eastern religious and philosophical teachings. Also, I believe the Bible teaches us that there is a time when we are called to use force, even deadly force to halt acts of evil.

Here are some practical guidelines if one is deciding to participate in the martial arts or if one is selecting a school. First, a person should check his or her motives. One should not engage in martial arts if one's motives include becoming a tough guy, showing off, or gaining revenge. Parents should make it clear to their children that the martial arts are never to be used for affectation or for instigating conflicts. Unworthy motives are detrimental to one's walk with the Lord and witness to others. Positive reasons include physical conditioning, discipline, and self-defense. Develop parameters for limiting the use of force. One of the fruits of the Spirit is self-control. Force is used in defensive

purposes only.

Generally speaking, Christians should avoid the soft or internal form of martial arts because they tend to emphasize Eastern philosophical and religious ideas. External or hard martial arts emphasize the physical training. However, it would be wise to be on guard because many instructors of external martial arts may incorporate Eastern mysticism in to their system. Also, one should be careful to avoid the possibility of being enticed to learn about Eastern spirituality as they advance.

Find out the worldview of the instructor. The role of religion in the martial arts depends mostly on the instructor, so choosing a proper instructor is the most important factor. Some instructors claim to teach the physical aspect only. However, as students advance, instructors begin to incorporate Eastern religious ideas to help students attain a higher level of performance. Observe advanced classes to see if they incorporate Eastern practices. There is also helpful information through Christian organizations such as Karate for Christ and the Christian Martial Arts Foundation.

The Christian life involves caring for the nurture and growth of our mind, spirit, and our body which is the temple of the Holy Spirit. I have benefited greatly from my time in the martial arts. It has provided me great exercise, discipline, and opportunities to witness for Christ. There were times in my life when I had to use force to restrain hostile persons or protect loved ones. I believe that the martial arts can be beneficial to Christians who are informed and mature.

Notes

1. Glenn Rifkin, "The Black Belts of the Screen Are Filling the Dojos," *The New York Times*, 16 February 1992, 10.

2. Howard Reid and Michael Croucher, *The Way of the Warrior*, (Woodstock, NY.: Overlook Press, 1983), 16-17.
3. Erwin Castro, B.J. Oropeza, and Ron Rhodes, "Enter the Dragon? Wrestling with the Martial Arts Phenomenon Part I," Christian Research Institute, <http://www.equip.org/free/dm066.htm>, 2.
4. Reid and Croucher, *The Way of the Warrior*, 229.
5. Ibid., 61 & 227.
6. Scott Shaw, *The Warrior is Silent* (Rochester, VT.: Inner Traditions International, 1998), 53.

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1. "Should a Christian Practice the Martial Arts?" *Christian Research Institute*. <http://www.equip.org/free/DM065.htm>
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See Also:

["Martial Arts and Just War Theory"](#)

"Is it OK for a Christian to Practice Yoga?"

I read your email response to the question ["Is it OK for a Christian to train in martial arts?"](#) and have a question of my own on a related subject.

For several years I have had fairly severe back problems, and was advised by a physiotherapist friend (who is a Christian), to consider taking up Yoga as it might help. My father expressed concerns about this, as he felt that it was a direct path to eastern religions. For the same reason I was never allowed to train in martial arts when I was a teenager. Several other friends of mine also feel that Yoga is decidedly 'non-kosher.'

My own view is the same as that expressed in your article—that martial arts and the like do contain dangerous elements for the Christian, as they are linked to eastern philosophies. However, I feel that it is possible to participate in such

activities, as long as one uses them for physical training rather than for a spiritual purpose, and remains aware of the possible dangers.

With this in mind, I have been attending Yoga classes for the past few months, and my back has never been better! It is a blessed relief to me to be able to move painlessly for once!! (At 24, I'm a little young to consider putting up with back problems for long!). I have been attending Iyengar yoga classes, which, so far, have not involved any spiritual content. The 'meditation', consists of lying down at the end of the class and feeling relaxed. I often use it as quiet time to meditate on Jesus!!

Some of my friends at church appear to think that just getting into a position may lead directly to demon possession. I feel that perhaps Yoga has been given a bad press, as it appears to me that the exercises themselves are rather separate from transcendental meditation and the like, which obviously go totally against what the bible teaches. Have I just been fortunate in finding a class that is not compromising my faith, or am I compromising myself without even realizing it? Obviously I don't wish to open myself to any spirits other than the Holy Spirit!

I would value any insight you might have on this topic.

Hi _____,

Thanks so much for writing! You ask a very important question about a very controversial subject. Indeed, you offer an interesting case study to which I want to reply rather carefully.

Let me first say that I am truly sorry to hear of your back problems. Since you have apparently found some genuine relief of these problems through the practice of yoga, what I have to say may be a little difficult to "digest." So if you're ready.

. . .

Until very recently, I would have entirely agreed with your own evaluation of yoga. I would have made precisely the same distinction which you made between the physical postures and breathing exercises of yoga (on the one hand) and the non-Christian philosophical and religious ideas (on the other). I still think this can often be a helpful and valid distinction in other areas (e.g. much of the martial arts), but I'm afraid I've become rather skeptical about its applicability to yoga. Please let me explain why.

The physical postures and breathing exercises in yoga are inseparably bound up with the philosophical and religious ideas. I realize this may initially sound absurd, but please hear me out. The discipline of yoga is, as a general rule, firmly grounded within a pantheistic worldview. Pantheism teaches that everything which exists is part of a unitary, all-encompassing divine reality. In short, pantheism teaches that all is "God." But in pantheism, "God" is not a personal being distinct from the world; rather "God" IS the world and the world IS "God."

But why is this important? According to the pantheistic philosophy of yoga, each one of us is also part of this all-encompassing divine reality known as "God" or Brahman. As Brad Scott, a former practitioner of yoga, has written in a recent article,

"...all creation to the Yoga-Vedantin is comprised of the substance of Brahman. Hence, yogis are pantheists... Brahman created the universe out of Itself, as a spider spins out a web" ("Exercise or Religious Practice? Yoga: What the Teacher Never Taught You in That Hatha Yoga Class." The Watchman Expositor: Vol. 18, No. 2, 2001, p. 7).

And since "God," or Brahman, is ultimately something non-physical, what we imagine to be our physical bodies are (according to yoga philosophy) merely just a crude layer of

mind. The physical postures and breathing exercises of yoga are actually intended to help move the mind in the direction of altered states of consciousness. The ultimate goal of yoga is “union” with “God” or occult enlightenment. Please allow me to support these statements with some authoritative quotations.

On the Watchman Expositor website there is a brief overview of yoga at <http://www.watchman.org/na/yoga.htm>. The author of this piece quotes from Swami Vishnudevananda, well known authority of Yoga, in his book, *The Complete Illustrated Book of Yoga*, as follows:

“..the aim of all yoga practice is to achieve truth wherein the individual soul identifies itself with the supreme soul of God.”

He also quotes from Swami Sivananda Radha, in a book on Hatha Yoga, as follows:

When most people in the West think of yoga, they think of yoga as a form of exercise. Too often... there are yoga teachers who teach asanas without an understanding of their real nature and purpose. Asanas are a devotional practice which like all spiritual practices, bring us to an understanding of the truth... Beyond this there also lies a mystical or spiritual meaning. Each asana creates a certain meditative state of mind, (p.xv; emphasis mine).

And again, from the same source:

Hatha Yoga plays an important part in the development of the human being... the body working in harmony with the mind, to bring the seeker into closer contact with the Higher Self, (Ibid, p.xvii).

Indeed, it is for this reason that the Yogi authority Gopi Krishna writes:

“All the systems of yoga...are designed to bring about those psychosomatic changes in the body which are essential for the metamorphosis of consciousness” (Quoted in John Ankerberg and John Weldon, Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs, Harvest House Publishers, 1996, p. 596).

And finally, John Ankerberg and John Weldon quote from Judith Lasater’s article, “Yoga: An Ancient Technique for Restoring Health”:

“One basic assumption of Yoga Sutras [a standard yoga text] is that the body and mind are part of one continuum of [divine] existence, the mind merely being more subtle than the body...It is believed that as the body and mind are brought into balance and health, the individual will be able to perceive his true [divine] nature” (597).

As you are probably already aware, the term “yoga” simply means “union.” And, as previously stated, the ultimate goal of yoga is “union” with “God,” one’s Higher Self, or Brahman. All the different “limbs” or stages of yoga, including the physical postures (asana) and breathing exercises (pranayama), are specially designed to prepare the practitioner for union with “God” and occult enlightenment.

In this regard, Ankerberg and Weldon also cite Feuerstein and Miller, two authorities on yoga, who contend that the postures of yoga (asana), as well as the breathing exercises (pranayama), are more than just physical exercises—they are psychosomatic (mind/body) exercises:

“...the control of the vital energy (prana) by way of breathing, like also asana, is not merely a physical exercise, but is accompanied by certain psychomental phenomena. In other words, all techniques falling under the heading of asana and pranayama...are psychosomatic exercises. This point, unfortunately, is little understood by Western

practitioners...” (600).

Interestingly, Brad Scott, the former yoga practitioner mentioned previously, who (by the way) studied yoga for seven years under Swami Shraddhananda of the Ramakrishna Order, provided me with a web address for The Iyengar Yoga Institute of San Francisco which you may want to take a look at. The address is: <http://www.iyisf.org/>. The state-accredited two year certificate program one can earn at this institute requires not only studies in anatomy and physiology, but in yoga philosophy as well. You may be interested in reading the following course descriptions taken from the website:

Philosophy

Yoga Sutras

2 units (required)

A study of classical yoga philosophy based upon a reading of Patanjali's Yoga Sutras. The aims, methods, and powers of yoga, as well as the nature of liberation, will be investigated.

Bhagavad Gita

2 units (required)

The Gita, as a practical handbook for yoga, will be studied and related to daily life. The different branches of yoga described in the Gita will be discussed and placed in context with other major Indian scriptures.

Physiology of Yoga

1 unit (Elective Course)

Yoga is a vitalistic science that views all of existence as supported by a force called prana. Yoga physiology describes how this vital force pervades and animates the physical body.

This course will lay the groundwork to help one begin to view themselves and the world around them from this vitalistic perspective.

It's important to keep in mind that this force called "prana," which supports all of existence, is ultimately the same force as "God." Thus, one does not escape pantheism even in a class on yoga physiology! As Ankerberg and Weldon write, "...prana, God, and occult energy are all one and the same. The one who practices yogic breathing (pranayama) is by definition attempting to manipulate occult ('divine') energy" (602).

Again, in another section on the website, concerning the Iyengar approach to Hatha Yoga, we read the following:

"Yoga as taught by B.K.S. Iyengar emphasizes the integration of body, mind and spirit. The Iyengar approach to yoga is firmly based on the traditional eight limbs of yoga as expounded by Patanjali in his classic treatise, The Yoga Sutras. Iyengar yoga emphasizes the development of strength, stamina, flexibility and balance, as well as concentration (Dharana) and meditation (Dhyana)."

But what are these eight "limbs" on which the Iyengar approach is firmly based? John Ankerberg and John Weldon point out that the eight limbs of Patanjali's Yoga Sutras are "defined within the context of a basic Hindu worldview (reincarnation, karma, and moksha, or liberation) and intended to support and reinforce Hindu beliefs." (601). They go on to describe these eight limbs as follows:

- Yama (self-control, restraint, devotion to the gods [e.g., Krishna] or the final impersonal God [e.g., Brahman])
- Niyama (religious duties....)
- Asana (proper postures for yoga practices; these represent the first stage in the isolation of consciousness...)

- Pranayama (the control and directing of the breath and the alleged divine energy within the human body [prana] to promote health and spiritual [occult] consciousness and evolution)
- Pratyahara (sensory control or deprivation, i.e., withdrawal of the senses from attachment to external objects)
- Dharana (deeper concentration, or mind control)
- Dhyana (deep contemplation from occult meditation)
- Samadhi (occult enlightenment or “God [Brahman] realization” i.e., “union” of the “individual” with God).

In light of this, when we read on the IYISF website that “students at IYISF [Iyengar Yoga Institute of San Francisco] are encouraged to refine both their knowledge of asanas (poses) and pranayama (breathing)...The same precision of practice brings the serious student to the cutting edge of exploration in the field of mind-body interaction,” we now have a better idea of what’s being referred to.

Let me conclude this discussion with a brief word about “kundalini awakening.” This much-sought-after experience could potentially open the one who has it to occult influences. As you may already know, Kundalini is sometimes thought of as a Hindu goddess believed to lie coiled as a serpent at the base of the spine. Others, however, think of Kundalini simply as “coiled serpent power,” without necessarily identifying this power with a Hindu goddess (Brad Scott, personal e-mail). Either way, however, one of the primary purposes of yoga practice is to arouse Kundalini so that she/it travels up the spine toward her lover, Shiva, who is said to reside in the brain. Supposedly, as she/it travels up the spine she opens up the seven psychic centers (called chakras). Weldon and Ankerberg write:

“When the crown or top chakra is reached, the union of Shiva/Shakti occurs, supposedly leading the practitioner to

divine enlightenment and union with Brahman" (606).

This, of course, is identical with Patanjali's eighth limb, samadhi (although Brad Scott informed me in a personal e-mail that "The Shiva-Shakti mythology...was superimposed on yoga after Patanjali's time"). Since the yoga authority Hans Rieker claims that "Kundalini [is] the mainstay of ALL yoga practices," (Ankerberg/Weldon, 606, emphasis added) it is very important to point out that such an experience MAY place the practitioner under occult influences of a spiritual nature. For the Christian, firsthand accounts of this experience sometimes sound as if some sort of demonic influence may be involved. Mind you, I'm not saying that this is ALWAYS the case, but Weldon and Ankerberg write that many Hindu and Buddhist gurus, "when describing their spirit, or 'energy,' possession," often link it directly to "kundalini activity" (606). They go on to cite a leading guru, Swami Muktananda, as confessing that he was violently shaken by a spirit during kundalini arousal:

"A great deity in the form of my guru has spread all through me as chiti [energy] and was shaking me...when I sat for meditation, my whole body shook violently, just as if I were possessed by a god or a bad spirit" (610).

Weldon and Ankerberg conclude with this observation: "Because all yoga has the ability to arouse 'kundalini,' all yoga should be avoided" (610).

And for all of the reasons offered above, I cannot in good conscience recommend that a Christian practice yoga—even if they limit themselves only to the physical postures and breathing exercises. Having said this, I certainly hope you understand that I'm not trying to be insensitive to your particular situation. Indeed, I will grant that it's at least POSSIBLE that you could continue practicing yoga for many years without experiencing any of the destructive spiritual

effects which such a practice could potentially have. However, in the case of yoga, where it becomes quite difficult (if not impossible) to separate the non-Christian religious and philosophical ideas from the physical postures and breathing exercises, my own advice would be to very humbly recommend that you look for a different exercise program, one that would help relieve your back pain without potentially compromising your spiritual health as a Christian.

I hope this gives you some solid reasons for making an informed decision concerning ongoing yoga practice. I genuinely wish you all the best. If you would like more information, you may want to consider taking a look at Brad Scott's book, *Embraced by the Darkness: Exposing New Age Theology from the Inside Out* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1996). Although I have not yet personally read this book, I found his article on Yoga in the Watchman Expositor (Vol. 18, No. 2, 2001) to be extremely helpful in understanding the vast doctrinal differences between the philosophy of yoga and biblical Christianity. Another potentially valuable resource is John Weldon and John Ankerberg's, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1996).

Shalom,

Michael Gleghorn

“Is It OK for a Christian to Train in Martial Arts?”

I want to ask a question about a Christian's involvement with martial arts and how it relates to a Christian who has a career in law enforcement.

Christians are warned not to be involved with martial arts because they lead people into conversion of eastern religions. But many who train as police or as a security guard etc. may find it handy or essential and may have to train in martial arts whether they want to or not.

What should a Christian do who may be in this situation?

Thanks so much for your question. Interestingly, Pat Zukeran, one of my colleagues here at Probe trains in martial arts! He has written an article on this topic [entitled Martial Arts](#). We discussed this question together and came to a similar conclusion.

In our opinion, a distinction should be made between the physical training and exercise required in martial arts and the philosophical and religious ideas which may sometimes be associated with such training.

Paul does warn believers in Colossians 2:8, "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. Thus, one must be wary of some of the eastern philosophical and religious concepts which might be promoted in the martial arts. It is not wrong to know and understand these concepts, but you do not want to be taken captive and led away from Christ by them."

On the other hand, the sort of physical training required in the martial arts is doubtless a very good thing. It not only leads to such benefits as a stronger body, greater flexibility, faster reflexes, and greater dexterity, it also leads to increased confidence in one's ability to handle potentially dangerous situations. And all of these benefits can be of enormous value to those involved in law enforcement and security work. Indeed, such training may help save lives—not only of those who receive it, but also of those they

are attempting to apprehend.

Thus, my own view (and the view of my colleague) is this. There is nothing wrong with a Christian learning martial arts, especially for purposes of self-defense and increased effectiveness in law enforcement. As long as one is careful to separate the non-Christian philosophical and religious ideas from the actual physical training—rejecting the false ideas, but embracing the benefits of the physical training—there does not seem to be any harm in a Christian learning martial arts.

I hope this helps and I wish you all the best,

Michael Gleghorn
Probe Ministries