

WHY ARE THERE SO MANY DIFFERENT MARTIAL ARTS STYLES/SYSTEMS? WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THEM?

The development of the first "martial art" is often attributed to a Buddhist monk from India named Bodhidharma (Daruma in Japanese), who also developed Zen Buddhism, some 2500 years ago. Bodhidharma traveled to China in the 6th century B.C., thus spreading his philosophy and martial arts from India to China. Martial arts began to flourish, and by 1600 A.D., they had spread across China, much of Asia and into Okinawa. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, martial arts began to gain popularity in Europe, North and South America, and across much of the world.

So, although many modern martial arts differ in certain ways, they are all cousins and no system or style is "better than" any other. The most notable difference between various martial arts is that motion and behavior often reflects the culture of the country in which the art was developed. Most martial arts focus on certain types of movements: for example, judo is a throwing art; karate is a striking art; kobudo is a weapons art; aikido deals primarily with bone and joint locking; Brazilian ju jitsu is a grappling art; Systema and Krav Maga are military arts; Capoeira is a striking art whose movements are hidden in dance-like steps that are occasionally reminiscent of 1980s break dancing, etc. The various systems, styles, and strains of martial arts are almost infinite in variety. Often, schools and instructors put their own spin on an established style, occasionally combining styles or systems, creating new and varied styles and strains. Martial arts can be thought of as an organic, living thing; it must grow, adapt, and change in order to thrive.

HOW DO I KNOW WHICH ART IS RIGHT FOR ME?

Take trial classes in several different arts and see which one suits you best. You might want to start by eliminating certain arts - for example, if throwing and falling does not appeal to you, avoid judo; if punching and kicking doesn't interest you, avoid karate and kung fu, etc. However, most people who haven't trained in the past have misconceptions about most martial arts. Don't ever think, "I could never do that. . ." until you've actually tried it!

More important than choosing a specific art is choosing a good school. If you limit yourself by deciding that you are only interested in Hun-gar kung fu, for example, you are less likely to find a school at which you will be happy. Keep an open mind, and remember that it is often better to seek out a school where you will be happy, training with teachers and students whom you like, than it is to seek out a school that offers a specific style or system.

Remember, very few schools are representative of an entire style or system. A chief instructor will run his school how he sees fit, and this may not be indicative of all schools of that particular style. Avoid preconceptions, generalizations, and prejudice regarding arts or styles. There are both good and bad schools in every art, style, and system out there.

I'VE VISITED A FEW OTHER SCHOOLS, AND AM LOOKING FOR THE PERFECT DOJO. WHAT ARE SOME OF THE QUESTIONS I SHOULD ASK OF THE INSTRUCTORS?

Finding the perfect school is very important, and is always based on your own needs & preferences. For example, if you're looking for a school that focuses on martial arts as a sport, a school that features row upon row of trophies and awards will appeal to you; if you're looking for a more traditional school that downplays competition, trophies and awards will be a turn-off.

Here are a few of the questions you should ask (and responses you should get!) when looking for the right school:

- How long has the chief instructor(s) been training?

The chief instructor of a school should have at LEAST 20 active years in training. 15 years is on the low end but might be okay in some cases. Less than 15 years is too little. Remember, ACTIVE training is different from inactive training. "I started training in 1973" doesn't necessarily mean "I've been training non-stop since 1973."

- What is the chief instructor's lineage?

The chief instructor should be able to trace his or her lineage back to a legitimate style or system. "My teacher learned everything from a video," or "My teacher's teacher studied under some guy in Chinatown" are not the answers you want.

- Does your school require contracts or long-term commitments? Are there any other hidden join-up fees?

Many schools want you to sign a 6-month contract, or to commit to a certain number of months or years of training. There are often other "start-up" fees or other hidden costs. Use your common sense. Anything that sounds unreasonable probably is. Do not believe anyone who tells you that "all karate schools" require contracts or exorbitant join-up fees, tournament fees, mat fees, organization membership fees, etc.

- How often can I train?

You should be able to train at least 3 - 4 times per week, if not more. You might want to be wary of schools that require you to train only on specific nights, only with other students of similar rank, or of schools that try to manipulate your training in other ways. Look for a school that accommodates you. There should be choices and options available.

- How often does a student test? What are the testing fees? How long would it take me to get a black belt?

It depends on the art, but adult students should not be tested more than 2 - 3 times per year in the beginning, and 1 - 2 times per year as they progress into the higher kyu-level ranks. Youth students might test 4 - 6 times per year, depending on the art, but this should also taper off as the student progresses. Avoid schools that test you on a monthly

or bi-monthly basis. Testing for stripes or patches in between belt ranks is also often a way for schools to make a quick buck. Be careful.

Testing fees should be within reason. Most schools have a sliding scale for testing fees: in other words, it costs less to test for a lower rank. Again, use common sense when you ask about testing fees. No kyu-level rank test (below black belt) should cost more than \$100. Black belt testing is often more expensive, because the rank candidate often receives a much nicer (more expensive) belt, and a bigger (often framed or plaqued) certificate, which costs the school more to produce. Still, avoid schools that charge \$500 - \$1000 or more for a black belt. Amounts such as these are ludicrous.

In most styles, it takes an adult 4 - 6 years to progress from beginner to 1st degree black belt if he or she trains consistently. Any length of time longer than 6 years to 1st degree black belt is too long in my opinion, and any length of time less than 4 years is too short. Many schools offer a "youth" black belt or probationary black belt to students under the age of 13, 15 or 16. Remember that this rank is NOT the same as an adult black belt, and thus is often attained within 3 years of training. Also of vital importance for the martial arts novice is the realization that the rank of black belt (1st degree black belt) is the rank of an advanced beginner. It is the equivalent of a pre-schooler having learned his ABCs. Having a black belt in a martial art (1st degree) does NOT, contrary to what the movies would have you believe, mean that you are in any way a "master." It takes approximately 5 years to earn a black belt, and most students then continue to train for another 20, 30, 40, even 50 or 60 years beyond that (assuming they start at a young enough age!); put into perspective, you can see that the black belt marks the beginning, and not the end, of a student's training.

- Does the chief instructor (and other instructors) still train him- or herself?

It is also of vital importance that a school's instructors are also (first and foremost) students themselves. A good teacher is someone who is not afraid to put on a white belt in front of his class and learn something new. He or she should be perceived as a martial arts student FIRST and an instructor second. Make sure your teacher still trains - he or she should be participating in classes, sweating alongside you, and not merely standing up front and watching you do all the hard work. Ask what your teacher is doing to expand his or her curriculum. How is he or she seeking further knowledge? Does he or she train in a second or third art in order to supplement the school's primary system?

- Trust your instincts.

Look at the school itself. Is it clean? Do you get a positive vibe? What is the atmosphere like? Is it brightly lit? What are the instructors and other students like? Are they friendly? Does the teacher seem to you like someone you want to spend time with, or does he or she come across like a used car salesman or angry Army sergeant? Does he seem arrogant or humble? If you feel bullied or threatened in any way, you should choose another school.

- Most importantly, NEVER feel "stupid" or afraid to ask the "wrong" questions. Instructors are there to help you out and in some cases, watching an instructor's reaction to a question you feel might be "stupid" reveals a lot about the instructor's behavior and philosophy.

CAN I WATCH A CLASS? CAN I TRY A FREE CLASS?

Not only can you, but we insist upon it! In your search for the right martial arts school, this is one of the first questions you should ask the instructor. If the answer you get is "no," then say thank you and be on your way. All of our classes are open to the public, and all new students are required to take a free class or two before deciding whether or not they want to become a member of the school.

DO I HAVE TO BE PHYSICALLY FIT IN ORDER TO LEARN MARTIAL ARTS?

No. You do not need to be in shape to begin training. You do not need to be young or thin. No one has the skills of Bruce Lee or Jackie Chan when he or she enters a dojo for the first time. It is important to remember that everyone you see on the floor - regardless of current rank or skill level (including your highest-ranking instructors!) - started out as a white belt with absolutely no martial arts abilities or skills.

The beauty of martial arts training, as opposed to team sports for example, is that everyone trains at his or her own pace. If you are injured or handicapped in some way, in most cases you can modify your training to suit your needs. You will be encouraged in a positive way, but will never be pushed beyond your capabilities. Never feel reluctant to begin martial arts training due to lack of physical fitness; try a class or two and surprise yourself!

Call or e-mail one of the instructors if you have concerns about a specific problem.

HOW OFTEN DO STUDENTS TEST FOR RANK?

This depends on the student's age and on the art. Adult karate students are eligible to test for rank twice per year up to the rank of 3rd kyu brown belt, and then only once per year to 2nd kyu, 1st kyu, and Shodan black belt. Youth karate students are eligible for rank 4 times per year initially, and then once every 6 months from 3rd kyu brown through Shodan-ho junior black belt. Kobudo students test every 3 - 4 months initially, tapering off to once every six months in the middle-kyu ranks, and once per year from brown belt through Shodan black belt. Ju jitsu students are eligible to test every several months initially, and once per year from 3rd kyu brown belt through Okuiri black belt. Lil' Dragons karate students (ages 4 - 6) test every 3 months.

DO I HAVE TO COMPETE IN TOURNAMENTS?

Karate students will attend an IN-SYSTEM "shiai" twice a year, during which time they will compete in kata (forms) and kumite (free sparring - 6th kyu and above only). The results of these competitions do NOT in any way affect a student's rank. You are NEVER required to win any type of tournament in order to progress in rank. Although attendance at these in-school

events is mandatory, we do NOT participate at all in any inter-school tournaments. Our school is very non-competitive, and we downplay the importance of competition. However, we do not prevent students from entering out-of-school competitions on their own if they choose to do so. Kobudo and ju jitsu students do not compete at all in tournaments.

WILL I BE REQUIRED TO BREAK BOARDS, CINDERBLOCKS, OR OTHER HARD OBJECTS?

Breaking is not a part of our karate curriculum. Children in the youth program may occasionally have the opportunity to try breaking plastic boards as a game; however, this is never required of any student and only will be done once in a great while. No student will ever break a wooden board, cinderblock, etc. Adult karate students will never participate in any breaking activity.

I'D LIKE MY CHILD TO BECOME INVOLVED IN THE MARTIAL ARTS, BUT I'M CONCERNED THAT HE WILL BECOME VIOLENT, OR THAT HE WILL BE TAUGHT THAT FIGHTING IS THE WAY TO SOLVE PROBLEMS.

At Mountain Stream Budo, all students are taught from the very beginning that they are learning martial arts in order to be able to avoid confrontations. They will learn how to fight so that they won't have to fight. The first rule of self defense is "Don't Be There," in other words, try to never find yourself in an environment in which a physical conflict is likely to occur. The importance of awareness, common sense, and minimizing risk factors is stressed above all else. In learning how to defend oneself in the martial arts, a student will gain the self confidence, self esteem, and discipline needed to avoid most potential physical confrontations, and will be taught to diffuse a physical conflict without the use of physical force. Students will learn that physical force is only to be used as a last resort in the most extreme of situations. While some people become involved in the martial arts primarily to learn self defense, it is important to remember that the martial arts are physical arts, much like dancing, acrobatics, yoga, etc. There is a huge difference between a martial art such as karate and a military science. Any martial arts school whose attitude is "learning martial arts will allow you to beat up the bully!" should be avoided at all costs.

I HAVE PRIOR TRAINING IN ANOTHER ART. WILL YOU HONOR MY FORMER RANK?

All students who come to our school will demonstrate humility by wearing a white belt initially. If your prior training was in a similar art, we will evaluate you and "place" you into our ranking system at an appropriate level. If your training was in a significantly different art, chances are that you will have to start over and learn our system from the bottom up. This is not in any way a penalty! All three of the chief instructors at Mountain Stream Budo have put on white belts after 15 or 20 years of karate training and started over in other styles in order to flesh out their training. You'll learn more with an empty cup than with a half-filled one!

All students with prior training, upon joining our school, will be required to wear the appropriate uniform and patch(es). The slotting and placement of students with prior training is done

according to the senseis' discretion. Like every other part of martial arts training, never compare yourself to others; the only person whom you need to be better than is yourself.

IS IT TRUE THAT SOMEONE WITH A BLACK BELT HAS TO REGISTER HIS BODY AS A DEADLY WEAPON?

No.

ANOTHER SCHOOL'S INSTRUCTOR TOLD ME THAT HE COULD TURN ME INTO THE ULTIMATE CHAMPION WARRIOR IN THREE MONTHS IF I LEARN HIS FOURTEEN SECRET TECHNIQUES. IS THIS POSSIBLE?

No.

Please e-mail info@MountainStreamBudo if you have any other questions! We will answer them via e-mail and if appropriate will add them to this FAQ page.