



3-2023

# Tyrannies Gave Rise to Martial Arts, but Enlightened Martial Philosophies Reveal a Better Way

Michael Andregg

University of Minnesota and University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota, [mmandregg@gmail.com](mailto:mmandregg@gmail.com)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [International and Area Studies Commons](#), [Political Science Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Andregg, Michael (2023) "Tyrannies Gave Rise to Martial Arts, but Enlightened Martial Philosophies Reveal a Better Way," *Comparative Civilizations Review*. Vol. 88: No. 88, Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol88/iss88/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Comparative Civilizations Review by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

## **Tyrannies Gave Rise to Martial Arts, but Enlightened Martial Philosophies Reveal a Better Way**

Michael Andregg

Retired professor, University of Minnesota and  
University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota  
mmandregg@gmail.com

### **Abstract**

Most of this brief review will be academic history, but one of the truisms of the martial arts is that it is never strictly “academic.” Words on paper cannot express some things at the heart of the art. Many of the most thoughtful masters of various schools have worried about how to cultivate students with the discipline and philosophical background to be “safe” for polite society. This is a similar problem for police departments and even armies. The best wish to train professionals in ways of being deadly, without empowering undisciplined people to harm innocents. Therefore, part of this paper will detail how that is done in real schools of martial arts, including aspects of the seven fundamentals of combat and how breaking boards can illustrate every one of those.

### **Introduction**

Human beings have studied how bodies can move from time immemorial. Some of those studies have focused on the disciplined development of various skills, like dance, acrobatics, yoga, and martial arts. Millennia of genocides, wars, and lesser atrocities have concentrated more attention on the latter than the former, although the former are more beautiful, and healthier by far.

Master practitioners of martial arts have often devoted considerable thought to ethics or other philosophies that should accompany their craft. This is especially important, because to teach lethal skills means arming people for life with deadly capabilities. So thoughtful teachers in particular have worried often about what their students might do with such skills once learned.

Martial arts are very intimate. We share techniques across schools and styles like professionals anywhere in any field, except that our instruction tends to be more personal, face to face, in arenas where failure brings pain quite predictably. So, the great traditions of Asian martial arts from China, Japan and Korea principally have merged with the lessons of ancient Greece and Rome, and transformed when encountering unusual families like the Gracies of Brazil, and morphed when encountering practical lessons learned by organized armed forces like the Marines, Spetsnaz and the IDF, merging into one great domain of skill that goes by many names.

## An Ultra-Brief History

In the beginning, people fought with sticks and stones, and even those tools were preceded by the hands and feet and teeth of our animal ancestors. Each development of weapons brought its own defensive responses, but the hands and feet and fangs never left us, nor the limbic neural systems so attuned to mortal combat of the ancient kinds. So, even modern killing technology is usually deployed by human beings with human feelings and elaborate, but human command systems.

Students of the many varieties of martial arts often cite the Shaolin Temple in China of about 500 CE as a birthplace, where warlords had banned civilians from owning weapons. It was probably brought to Shaolin by a Buddhist monk from India called Buddhahadra. Some say the Vedic discipline of yoga is actually an ancient root of the form of martial arts known today.

The Shaolin style of fighting is called *kung fu*. They emphasize what can be done for defense with only hands and feet. Gentle Buddhist Monks at Shaolin Temple studied arts of fighting for over 1100 years before a Chinese Emperor, K'ang Hsi, had the temple burned down by his army in 1674 CE.

From the beginning, rulers have worried about rebellions. That is appropriate. But, if wise, they also worried about how to control the armed forces they hired, trained, funded, equipped, and otherwise empowered to protect the state. More on that when we get to the United States Marine Corps.

Styles morphed and merged as they moved through Korea and Japan. In Japan, Bushido ethics began to emerge with the Samurai during the warring period between the Taira and Minamoto families from 1156 – 1185 CE. Bushido comes in many flavors, like schools of physical style and codes of ethics everywhere, but the basic idea is balancing duty to one's employer or sovereign with duty to others like the profession and 'the people.'

Three centuries later the Okinawan "Te" and Chinese Shaolin styles began to mix as part of trade between the two countries. Te style itself derived from a former Okinawan King, Sho Shin, who banned the carrying of arms in 1477, which also occurred in Japan in 1586.<sup>1</sup> Open hand fighting skills have often been promoted (without intention) by despotic rulers who outlawed weapons for ordinary citizens.

Significant schools, or styles today include Tai Kwan Do and Hapkido from Korea, Aikido, Judo and Karate from Japan, Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu invented by the Gracie family, and Krav Maga which is taught to Israeli Defense Forces today but was created by a Hungarian called Imi Lichtenfeld.

Krav Maga appears to be the least concerned of these with moral nuances, but among the best at combining more ancient arts of wrestling, boxing, and street fighting into deadly combinations. Aikido, created by Morihei Ueshiba in the 1920's and 30's (like Krav Maga), is among the best at cultivating moral foundations, and I highly recommend his "Art of Peace" to serious students and scholars.<sup>ii</sup> But Aikido is hard to learn, and much less brutal than the street fighting style of Krav Maga. So, the IDF and United States Navy Seals teach Krav Maga, while philosophers prefer Aikido.

We should not forget that ancient Greeks started their Olympics with wrestling, one of the most powerful forms of fighting as demonstrated by the Brazilian champions of the modern era. Remember, also, the Roman Colosseum, which opened in 72 CE. It served for three hundred years as a venue for displaying a diverse array of martial arts. The historic roots of fighting go much deeper than the schools we have cited in describing the evolution of formal styles. One question is often neglected. Why fight; when and how? There are certainly better and worse answers.

### **The MCMAP, the Tao Do, and Advice from an Ancient General**

Another modern example is an attempt to teach martial ethics to soldiers while they are learning effective technique. United States Marines study the forms described by the Marine Corps Martial Arts Program (MCMAP) adopted in 2001 CE. Teaching them when not to fight is also a priority.<sup>iii</sup>

Marines, as a category of human beings, are not notoriously known as ethics instructors. But everyone recognizes that Marines know how to fight, including the Spetsnaz special forces of Russia, the assassins of Mossad in Israel, and our own Navy Seals and Delta Force Commandos. Indeed, warriors all over our earth know about the skills of other warriors, including groups more secret than the Marines, Spetsnaz, Seals and Mossad, because teaching our replacements is a common duty, and one must know one's possible enemies.

The ancient Chinese General Sun Tzu had a lot to say about that 2500 years ago, and his words of wisdom deserve repeating often today.

Generally, in war the best policy is to take a state intact; to ruin it is inferior to this. To capture the enemy's army is better than to destroy it; to take intact a battalion, a company, or a five-man squad is better than to destroy them. For to win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill. (Book 3: 1-3)

He wrote later:

If not in the interests of the state, do not act. If you cannot succeed, do not use troops. If you are not in danger, do not fight. A sovereign cannot raise an army because he is enraged, nor can a general fight because he is resentful. For while an angered man may again be happy, and a resentful man again be pleased, a state that has perished cannot be restored, nor can the dead be brought back to life. Therefore, the enlightened ruler is prudent, and the good general is warned against rash action. Thus, the state is kept secure, and the army preserved. (Book 12: 17-19)

Sun Tzu's words have been republished for over 2500 years, long after the warlords he worked for were forgotten, because unlike most of his peers, Sun Tzu was wise as well as skilled.

Another item worth remembering is that any warrior's greatest weapon is the mind. The mind creates all other, lesser weapons, and only the mind can distinguish good from evil. That is especially important if ethics is an important consideration, as it should be.

### Logo of the United States Marine Corps Martial Arts Program<sup>iv</sup>



Tao Do is a synthesis of many things. The name is derived from the Chinese *Tao* and the Korean *Do*, so it translates into English as “the Way Way.” Like the military styles it is keenly aware of weapons. One training aid ends with the sentence: “Never forget than any 8-year-old with a gun can blow your life away.”

Like Aikido, Tao Do is also keenly aware of the importance of teaching young men why to *not* fight except under the most extreme, compelling circumstances. Young women can become excellent fighters too, yes. But women typically need more encouragement to hurt their attackers than the males who need to learn more restraint.

There are some common principles of “combat” that apply from sports competitions to general thermonuclear war. They are:

## Seven Fundamentals of Combat that Apply at Every Level

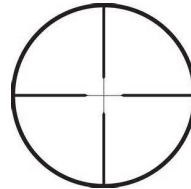
**STRENGTH**



*Speed*



**PRECISION**



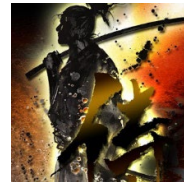
*Technique*



**Strategy**



**Fighting Spirit**



**Teamwork**



**Master them all, and No One\* can Defeat you! \*Except any 8-year-old with a gun.**

Breaking boards has been a common way to teach students how to break bones, and a single board can illustrate every one of these seven fundamentals of combat. This is best done by demonstration with real boards and bones, but I will do the best I can here with words.

Some minimum amount of *strength* is obviously necessary to break a piece of lumber. We cut pine into 25 x 25 cm squares, 1.6 cm thick. But even an elephant could not break our standard board with his hip, because that would lack the speed, precision and other elements required. Our elephant could certainly push board holders through a wall but would not likely break the board that way.

Some minimal *speed* is also required. So, our students learn how to maximize the strength and speed their bodies can provide. The boards promote brisk learning by providing great pain whenever the boards do *not* break. Sometimes boards do not break, and we never forget that!

*Precision* is essential, so the first task in breaking boards is to analyze each particular board to determine its weakest point (mainly a function of the grain of the board). For a straight fist punch against our standard lumber, one can miss that weak point by maybe a centimeter and the board will still probably break. But miss by two centimeters and it probably will not break. When boards break, they absorb much of the force applied, but when they do not break much of that force rebounds into the hand. With straight fists the impact applies to the tip of one knuckle, so if the board does not break, there is a real chance that metacarpal will break instead.

*Technique* is essential to all three prior elements, strength, speed, and precision. There are at least six aspects of technique that apply to straight fist blows and most other blows. Therefore, good technique is essential to successful breaking of the boards instead of our own hand bones.

*Strategy* is harder to define, but in this case, it includes the fact that we determine exactly what kind of boards will be held, where and how. The boards are innocent victims of our strategy, unless our technique, precision, etc. fail, in which case the boards punish us for those failures.

*Fighting Spirit* is necessary, because the student's hand knows it is not hitting a piece of paper but rather a piece of commercial lumber that is really not very easy to break. It knows that this will hurt, even if the board breaks, but MUCH more if it does not. So, the hand (and mind's) tendency is to "flinch" or pull back from point of impact. That guarantees failure and more pain. So, a certain amount of fighting spirit is important to get the body to do as the mind desires.

Finally, without *Teamwork*, none of these boards will break. I need skilled, strong holders to hold the boards in precise positions. They need to learn techniques also, as well as strong shoulders, to hold that board as stiff as a brick wall when we hit it. Or we fail, and pain grows.

Demonstration is followed by specific lessons that students of the Tao Do must memorize before learning much about lethal techniques. These all come in the form of questions and answers. <sup>v</sup>

1. What must a Warrior always remember?  
Violence is the last resort of the incompetent.
2. What is Being a Warrior?  
To Be a Warrior is not to be a thing. Being a Warrior is a state of existence.
3. What is the essential difference between a Warrior and a fighter?  
Fighters love to fight. A Warrior avoids fighting except under the most extreme, compelling circumstances. To a Warrior, the use of violence is disgraceful; it is the third lowest form of failure.
4. Why must a Warrior make his peace with Death?  
All men live; all men die. It is in the manner of living, and of dying, that one finds relevance. A Warrior must make his peace with death early, so that fear of death can never compromise his service to the Tao.

## Conclusion

It has often been the case in human history that enlightened ones who fought with only hands and feet under strict moral codes were defeated by larger armies using bigger weapons funded by some warlord or politician worried about his power or expanding his wealth. Emperors always fall in the end also, but that is a larger story than we have space for here today. Civilization faces existential crises on at least two fronts today: Weapons of Mass Destruction, and the incremental destruction of the living system that supports us all. These lessons may help us all to survive.



**Endnotes**

- <sup>i</sup> Reid, Howard and Croucher, Michael. *The Way of the Warrior – The Paradox of the Martial Arts*. New York, NY: Overlook Press, 1983. Page 155.
- <sup>ii</sup> Ueshiba, Morihei. *The Art of Peace: Teachings of the Founder of Aikido*. Shambhala Publishing, 1992.
- <sup>iii</sup> Yi, Capt. Jamison, USMC. “MCMAP and the Warrior Ethos,” in *Military Review*, Nov.–Dec. 2004, pp. 17 – 24, from: <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/milreview/yi.pdf>.
- <sup>iv</sup> Description of the Marine Corps Martial Arts Program of 2001 in Wikipedia, from: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marine\\_Corps\\_Martial\\_Arts\\_Program](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marine_Corps_Martial_Arts_Program).
- <sup>v</sup> The Twelve Moral Lessons for Warriors of the Tao Do, in *On the Causes of War* by Andregg, M. (1997, last edition 2007) pp. 217-218, St. Paul, MN, USA: Ground Zero Minnesota. Only the four shortest are shown above.