

The Nature of Style

People entering karate for the first time, or looking about for a good school, are usually mystified by the myriad of martial arts styles. How is karate different from kung-fu or taekwondo or kempo? What is the relationship between the Chinese, Japanese and Korean martial arts? And, most vexing of all, which one is the “best”?

“Culture” has been defined as a unified and consistent set of solutions to the problems of life. Different cultures in different countries have evolved different sets of solutions; it is always interesting to travel through various countries seeing how they cope with the problems of social interaction, family life, education, morality, crime, economics and so on. Each set of solutions forms an integrated cultural system. Although individual aspects taken out of context may seem superior or inferior to the comparable solution in another culture, they are part of a unified whole which generally works pretty well as a system. So it is also with the martial arts; each style and system is an evolved set of solutions to the basic problems of hand-to-hand combat and self-defense. The techniques (*kihon*) of each system are internally compatible and stylistically coherent in terms of body movement, mechanics and philosophy. In other words, when techniques are applied in rapid sequence they work well together, flow from one to the next naturally, and utilize the same principles. This does not have to imply that one system is superior or inferior to another as long as it is capable of getting the job done. Consequently, the search for the “best” martial art to study is often the search for what is most compatible with each individual student's body style, movement style and thinking style.

Because individual preference and natural abilities vary so much, each practitioner of the martial arts throughout history has had to adapt techniques somewhat to fit him or her personally. Some martial arts masters with particular gifts have innovated new solutions to combat problems, or have creatively combined solutions from two or more established systems to create a new stylistic variation. In this way the martial arts have remained dynamic for centuries, spawning new styles and new variations continuously and testing them for effectiveness in actual combat. Such evolution has been the norm; whereas every system has traditional “roots,” not all systems are ancient, and some have been formally recognized and codified as recently as the early to mid-20th century.

The key factor in a good system of Asian martial arts is that it has maintained and perpetuated the time-tested traditional elements and has retained a vigorous combat effectiveness, while avoiding the introduction of poorly designed, ineffective or easy-to-counter techniques. It is also important that the supporting Oriental philosophies and medical knowledge have been preserved, so that technique is backed by rationality and confidence, and the practitioner's mental state develops in parallel to his physical skill.

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from [Essays on the Martial Arts](#)

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