

***Leadership, Endeavor, Direction and Purpose  
from an Instructors point of view***

**1<sup>st</sup> Degree Black Belt Thesis**

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## **I. A Prelude on Style: Tradition / Street / Sport**

Today's martial artist has a wide range of lifestyles to choose from. The distinctions between these choices are more blurred than clear, more transient than stable and allow any martial artist a wide variety of experiences. Nevertheless, the primary identity of a martial artist is still the driving force behind how those experiences are interpreted and how they may enhance or define the person as a martial artist.

There are those individuals who view martial arts as a path to "street" superiority. This approach more often allows those individuals who already have an affinity for street fighting to indulge themselves than to train the average novice for street survival. These schools tend to be easy to recognize and often stand out in the community. Such schools are rarely suited for your regular families who seek a new hobby or enrichment for their children.

The sport-style schools are more difficult to recognize. They tend to resemble schools of tradition but with a zeal or excitement for competition. However, it is the obsession with competition, the focus on scoring strategies, the preoccupation with the next tournament opportunity that defines the school and its purpose. Of course, sport in the classic sense is intended as a substitute for, if not a safe parallel of, genuine battle. Wars are fought every Sunday between our favorite football teams. Tennis, baseball, basketball and more, all find warriors seeking to make victims of the losers. Since traditional-style schools do enter tournaments and sport-style schools study the fundamentals of the Art, the distinction is easily lost. Still, the primary interests of the school may make the difference. American Kenpo Karate teaches two forms of strategies, "free-style" sport competition and "street" self defense.

For purposes of this paper, traditional-styles are those that focus on the Art for its own sake. For some this may be an artificial distinction but martial arts has and still does exist independent of competition. Certainly furthered over the past 2000 years by the real need for fighting skills, martial arts became an institution, an Art form, far beyond the simple need for self-defense. A life as a sports competitor is not for everyone. Not everyone can be the toughest person on the block ready to fight anyone on the street, if you want that life, train for the UFC or MMA. It is the notion that virtually anyone can enjoy a life as a martial artist that helps to define the traditional-styles as the basis for this paper.

## II. Introduction

This paper discusses a variety of issues and events in the operation of a traditional-style school, responsibilities of leadership and the role of the Head Instructor. While there are obviously countless variations on the "traditional" theme, this paper discusses the lifestyle and operational issues of one such scenario.

It is hoped that those considering beginning training in martial arts might learn about the issues discussed herein. And, those working in similar school environments might borrow from this text those ideas they find useful. Even students hoping to one day own and operate their own school can read this paper and learn about some of the many facets of school operation, teaching and training responsibilities. Although, I do not technically own a school of my own yet, I do run a private club and operating as your typical commercial school. I have done tons of research to be able to back my findings.

There is of course the physical space. For me, it so happens to be my garage converted into a martial arts school. It's the facility itself though that requires a proper setup and maintenance. While the toughest among us may well handle the mountains, the fields, the alleys and streets, the average person training today expects and indeed needs a school with minimal elements of comfort and service. This paper discusses a variety of standard facilities common among today's traditional schools as well as some of the more progressive features today's aggressive and sophisticated martial artists are beginning to demand.

Running a martial arts school is certainly a business – if you're renting or leasing, the rent must be paid or there will be no school. These issues can sometimes interfere with the more ideal and noble aspects of quality in the Art. People in America have unfortunately grown to expect the quick path. They need to be entertained, rewarded, motivated and too often tend to drift from endeavor to endeavor with little commitment to a long-term course. And, people today are too often distracted by the common, everyday disruption of life's continuity and thus lose sight of their goals. The impact of such issues on the business of running a school is discussed.

While a school is certainly a business, its primary purpose is to teach. Beginners enter the program and presumably advance through higher levels of learning and expertise. This paper will discuss in particular important issues in the early stages where beginners establish those fundamentals that will carry them to the higher goals of proficiency and knowledge. There has been much written on the development of technical skills. Indeed, the fundamentals of such training are discussed in this paper. However, martial arts training are often thought to yield much more than mere skills. Life as a martial artist has been thought to provide one with special insights for living better. In fact, the virtues of wisdom, insight, knowledge, aptitude, not to mention the more common notions of discipline, confidence, honor and respect all are traditionally associated with life as a martial artist. It is with this more transcendental, philosophical and abstract side of martial arts that this paper begins.

### **III. Philosophy of Martial Arts**

Martial arts training is often thought to yield much more than mere skills. Many have attempted to describe a "philosophical" foundation in terms of aesthetic values and virtues that one acquires or attains through training with proper instruction. These ideas may be more of an education or knowledge which both aids and assists the study of martial arts as well as what one acquires through that study.

It is not so much an elaborate, reasoned doctrine or philosophy in the classic sense of the word but rather a view of martial arts as a means to an improved life. In that sense martial arts has sometimes been described as a path toward wisdom (an understanding of life, an ideal) and is described below as a series of stages through which one progresses. The three stages are not mutually exclusive and would be somewhat interrelated. It is not generally expected that one can reach the ideal; only that one pursues increasingly higher levels toward that goal.

#### ***1. Psychological: This is how one views oneself.***

One must have discipline, control, and confidence. These principles or virtues help to lay the foundation on which knowledge may be built and wisdom may grow. They provide the means through which learning can occur. Training involves the body, the mind, and, most important, the interaction of the two. Perfection of such interaction is the goal of much sweat and frustration over an entire lifetime.

There are many reasons why individuals study martial arts. The motivations are as varied as the people who train. Yet, all martial artists have certain things in common. Each must contend with their own limitations. Each must renew their waning interests and motivation. Each must endure the pain and stress on the body. Each must study and seek understanding of the subtleties of movement and technique and even physics and geometry that inevitably affect the learning and application of technique.

All aspects of character - fortitude, resilience, stamina, courage and more serve to facilitate the study of martial arts and are in turn strengthened, forged and honed in the process. Who we are as people, mentally, psychologically, establishes our identity as martial artists.

#### ***2. Sociological: This is one's view of others and one's relationship with them.***

A good martial arts school provides a "family" of many persons working together. Although one spends a great deal of time and work on oneself, there is nevertheless a common goal. Many persons from many different backgrounds all work together toward a single objective. As members of this unified family, we must interact with each other and therefore constantly encounter each other's difficulties and frustrations. Consequently, we are always sharing good times and contending with difficult times. We learn to depend on and to help others at the same time. We improve our ability to establish and maintain relationships in society through deeper understandings of ourselves and of what it takes to work together.

Schools today have many options to adopt different identities. Schools can sequester themselves into a dojo or studio "without windows" and train in privacy and solitude. There are notions among some schools that this approach protects them and keeps them safe from the

contamination of alternate or incompatible styles. This occurs at so-called lower levels, individual, small-community schools with relatively lower-ranking instructors, as well as at higher levels, often under the direction of a high ranking instructor who believes that they provide everything in martial arts that the students need.

However, these notions often do the students an injustice. There is a larger community and being part of that community is an important part of being a martial artist. The integrity of a school or art can still be protected against undue influences from the renegade or unworthy stylists. More likely, students gain pride in their own systems and schools when they see how they fit into the bigger picture. They gain pride in themselves when they see themselves as part of that whole.

Supporting martial arts is a responsibility of today's black belts. A black belt is not a highly skilled individual who lives and works in a vacuum - a void of privacy and isolation. A black belt should be a leader, a teacher, a pilot that steers the way for others toward their goals. It is a more noble goal of martial arts that black belts become providers of the art for others to learn and follow in their example.

Today, martial arts is for the common man: men, women and children of everyday life. We don't have the average man training for membership in elite fighting forces or as soldiers of fortune. Today's martial artists develop skills and advance their knowledge and ultimately enter higher levels of responsibility as instructors, teachers and leaders of others. This requires and demands that students participate in the larger community of martial artists - the society as a whole. We are not alone and must learn to adapt to life with the greater community. This does not mean that we must be subject to or subordinate to that community. But, certainly we can learn from that which is learnable and influence that which needs us. Such intelligent interaction is beneficial to all and students must see themselves as part of that whole.

### *3. Cosmological: Viewing oneself in relation to one's own existence and with life in general.*

This must not be thought of as pertaining to astronomy or physical things (and certainly has nothing to do with astrology). It is simply that, as an extension of the sociological views expressed above, we are not alone - there are many things with which we coexist. The point is that we must expand our view of our world, our lives, and the concept of life itself. What is the BIG picture and where does mankind fit in? One should endeavor to discover one's true self. This is a very difficult concept to grasp for some; but, through contemplation and meditation, one should be able to gain insight into these areas.

These three sections, as a unified whole, may seem very complex and difficult to work toward - and it is. Through self-improvement, study and endeavor, one may progress toward such a goal. My system, American Kenpo Karate provides the means for training with attention to these notions; you just have to realize it.

#### **IV. Concerns for Training Beginners**

The beginner is the most precarious and fragile person in the school. Beginners are quick to judge and usually apprehensive. They don't really know what they've signed up for, what's expected of them or where they fit in. They joined because they saw something they liked and thought "wow, I want to learn how to do that". They want to be accepted and to do their best. But, they don't really know how the school works or what they'll have to do, let alone how they fit into the study of martial arts. They have made a financial investment and a personal commitment, often on a whim or as a result of long held notion that they've always wanted to try it. Yet, the beginner is the future of the school. Black belts, highly trained, skilled and devoted as they may be, began as White belts and could easily have been lost. White belts need to be nurtured and provided with positive reinforcement and yet taught with the proper principles and fundamentals. For a tree to grow strong it must be planted and cultivated properly.

Children seem to have the usual fears of being in a new situation and depend a lot on the acceptance of their peers. It's important to make children feel accepted and reassure them that they are doing things correctly. Their positive experience is vitally important and will set the stage for the future. Very young children can be a problem in that standardized programs of rank advancement typically do not accommodate rewards and recognition of younger students. The alternative is to advance the very young to high rank levels not befitting their age.

For example, a seven year old as a black belt is not a proper solution to the problem of rewarding or motivating a young martial artist. On the other hand, advancing children too slowly can cause them to lose interest and get bored. Accepting very young children into martial arts schools is a very "American" thing to do as parents seek enrichment opportunities for their children. Parents then seek the quickest, shortest, cheapest path to the highest ranks possible for their children. The catch-22 of providing young children with real martial arts training with rewarding advancement opportunities can be exacerbated by the impatience of parents.

Older children or very young adults - adolescent teenagers - are often the most enthusiastic of all students. They're young and learn quickly. Their bodies are relatively strong and flexible and present little encumbrance to technique. These young students can grow to become highly skilled and powerful adults. Nevertheless, their early training is critical. Young males may often have little or no control and seek violence over finesse and grace or precision. Young females often behave silly or overly shy. Young people need positive role models; a place to belong; guidance; leadership and structure with discipline.

Adults on the other hand are often the most apprehensive as new students more so than the children. No one wants to look ridiculous or awkward and adults may be more conservative and cautious about this than their younger counterparts. Children are maybe more used to this and are regularly corrected, controlled and supervised by adults. Adults, on the other hand, may not be as used to the role of beginner and being subject to supervision, correction and the other aspects of learning new things. Adults need to be treated with respect and they too need structure.

## V. Being Technical with Technique

All students, adult and children alike, need material structured into learnable and doable, yet challenging tasks. Regardless of style or program, technical material requires an understanding of detail. One approach to understanding detail and mastery of technique is to approach basics in terms of isolated concepts and principles. That is, a given technique can be broken down and analyzed in terms of its component parts and taught in terms of these components. Students then learn new material beginning with the concepts that make up technique.

For example, a simple round-house kicking technique is not so much a singular thing as it is a composite of parts that come together. Opening with a pivotal motion forward with the upper body, the nature of the pivot itself, the weight shifting, supporting leg and foot angles, the raising and "cocking" of the leg, the angle of attack, etc., etc., all amount to components of the maneuver. Virtually any technique can be broken down into such components and taught on that basis.

Teaching in this fashion involves using "isolated" or singular, separated steps of the technique learned independently, but in series or in a packaged fashion. The effect or relative importance and impact of each isolated component on the overall technique is studied and understood.

Of course, the course of learning must progress through these components or isolated parts to a consolidated whole. That is, study of the isolated components is not the end but a means to a fuller, more complete realization of the technique. While advanced students might move through this process faster and achieve higher levels of interpretation, beginners benefit greatly from this approach. It establishes an effective approach to future student and practice.

Training in martial arts involves more than expanding the capabilities of the body or conditioning its natural talents. It involves more than strategy and application of technique. The study of technique itself, to reach an understanding of each maneuver, is a primary if not a first concern. Beginners focus more exclusively on the quantitative aspects of performance. Indeed, true performance or effective application implies something greater and beginners often have little hint as to what upper levels demand. Attention to detail sets the standard and methodology for study but, somehow, style and performance are more than the sum of the parts and require a qualitative excellence.

This constitutes multiple levels of knowledge at which a technique might be learned. The isolated parts might be considered a beginning and a perfected composite, consolidated and unified whole might be the ultimate goal. Progress toward such an ideal goal is a respectable objective of any program of martial arts study. While the end goal of a program is often the focus of instructors, a proper beginning designed to build the right foundation is no less important and affects everything that follows.

## **VI. Advancing Through the Ranks**

Why have ranks at all? Obviously, the value of what is learned and the progress made by individuals in skill and knowledge make colors of belts seem trivial in comparison. Yet, rank advancements in today's schools provide a structured approach to presenting material. Too, the tradition of such rank progression provides a meaningful label on the successes and accomplishments of advancement and accomplishment.

There are many models of belt/rank progression. While colors may vary from system to system there is a commonly accepted progression. That is, there will be colors that represent several beginner ranks usually starting with White and progressing through combinations of Yellow or Orange. Intermediate levels follow usually with some variation of Purples and Blues. Green, Brown or Black usually indicates advanced ranks. Of course, there are many variations of colors and progressions and it is a common practice to denote variation in levels by including stripes on some belts.

Yet, with all the variability in today's systems, one color seems universal: Black Belt is the obvious indicator of expertise. Maintaining the Black Belt as an indicator of the highest skill, knowledge and honor is a critical thing that indicates significant individual achievement and should never be compromised for frivolous, economic or political reasons.

There is a history of rank and belt color that even the average person in modern society is familiar with. Almost everyone knows that Black Belt is the indicator of expertise. Even movies further the mystique associated with this rank. It is this air of mystery - the notion that becoming such an expert is a secret and special thing - that draws many to begin their studies in martial arts. It is certain that, without such mystery and sense of power associated with being an expert in martial arts, many people would never come to study or continue in the martial arts.

It is important to take care with the notions of beginners. Either the mystique must be maintained or carefully replaced with more real and valued goals. Such issues greatly affect the motivation and interests of all students.

## VII. Facility Setup & Maintenance

In America, we live in a modern society and students typically expect certain standards of comfort and convenience. There have been those who trained in mountainous terrain or in snow, or parking lots, or alleys or other rough and Spartan environments. But today's martial artist has more options and greater expectations. While there are numerous features now designed to enhance any studio, they are expensive and there are numerous enhancements that can be arranged or setup cheaply.

For building structures, one such structure important in a studio is seating. Simple benches can be built easily using nothing more than 2x4's, boards, etc. and be designed to fit as needed. Another structure in a training hall might be railings. That is, a simple fence-like railing can be an important addition to the physical space for separating spectators from students or student lounge or holding areas from actual training space. Obviously, simple 2x4's could be used for constructing such a railing.

A common training tool is a hand-held kicking target. Although they're not very costly, a little can mount up if purchasing a large quantity. A no-cost alternative is simple sheets of cardboard cut into rectangles. The sheets are held in a similar fashion to high-tech kicking targets and have a similar flexibility. Of course, the cardboard sheets breakdown and must be trashed but the longevity is surprising.

More modern features very useful today are water-filled punching bags that provide a more realistic and accommodating feel. Other workout bags are mounted on water- or sand-filled bases that are portable and sit on the floor. That is, they do not require the traditional ceiling chain for mounting and can be moved anywhere in the training area.

There are many important training aids available today but one of the most important is the training floor itself. Some prefer a wooden floor; some prefer carpet. Most school use the foam pads for training areas that provide a durable, safe and effective surface for techniques, forms, sparring and more. Our main school uses modularized units that fit or lock together to form a solid floor. These floors are not cheap.

As stated above, separating the training floor from access by non-students is important. A more formal entrance area, if possible, can be beneficial to segregate the training floor. If a wall is not available a simple railing might suffice. Students need changing rooms. While bathroom facilities are not always necessary or possible in the changing rooms themselves, it is still necessary to provide rooms for both genders. Holding areas, a lounge or a lobby are all important or useful for non-participants (parents, visitors, etc.). Administrators need office space - a place to deal with all sorts of paperwork and business as well as privacy for consulting with parents and students. If space allows, black belts can be separated from lower ranking students. A black belt room or separate changing room might be a good idea. It can also be important for a chief instructor to have a separate office and changing area from students. The front office for greeting visitors, dealing with passers-by and open business is often not useful for more intimate issues with parents or consultation. A separate office for privacy, away from the training area and the public, is a very useful component of a modern school. In any case, attention to detail will make any school more user-friendly and professional.

## VIII. Conducting Rank Exams

Obviously, the nature of a rank exam is extremely unique to the instructor and styles being learned. Instructors test according to their priorities. While every school might be unique there are some ideas that might be considered by any instructor for any program.

It can be important for parents and students both to understand what the rules or criteria are for participation in a rank progression exam. Whether the standards are subjective in the mind of the instructor or objectively posted for all to see, students and parents will be interested in knowing how they are progressing toward their goals.

In preparing for rank test day, there will likely be a number of factors to be addressed. Student accounts, including any payment for the exam itself, should probably be paid in full before the day of the test. There may be paperwork and such paperwork should be completed and prepared well in advance of the test day itself especially in cases of large rank tests with numerous students.

The day of the test, if open to the public or families, may include a number of people that need to be accommodated. For example, additional seating may be required, possibly coffee or other refreshments. Too, an audience may need to be personally addressed by the Chief Instructor and words spoken appropriate to the group and event. Some thought should be given to this in advance.

There may be important guests that need special attention. Special accommodations may need to be setup in advance. Such guests may need to be recognized and seated in a particular location befitting their role and function in the exam.

Of course, equipment may need to be prepared for the rank exam. Whether its weapons, pads, floor mats, boards or other materials, - even if such things are normally available in the studio- it will be important to make sure they're available for test day. Any equipment to be provided by the students themselves should be made clear in plenty of time for students to prepare.

At the end of the test, students should be made aware or reminded of what to expect for the processing of their evaluation. Parents and students alike should be encouraged and feel good about the day (regardless of the results). Like a piano recital for music students or dress rehearsal for actors in a play, a rank exam is often the culmination of students' long hours, weeks and months of work. Their friends and families are likely interested in a demonstration of what they've learned. A rank exam can be the martial artist's "recital."

## **IX. Tournaments**

It can be a particular concern how and why students participate in tournament competition, represent their school, their instructor, their system and martial arts in general. A school and instructor can often be judged by how students behave and perform. A reputation of quality students rests in the hands of the students and is represented in the conduct of the students both in and out of competition.

There are many types of tournaments - many poor and few good ones. Tournaments can contain oddities in performance, errors in judging, time delays, inconsistent recognition and praise, and risk of being hurt. They can also include bad technique and inappropriate performance, biased and prejudicial judging, bad attitudes with embarrassing spectacles and unsportsman-like conduct, goals and objectives totally inconsistent with a school's goals and best interests.

As martial arts is more than competition and considering the risks involved, it is important to consider the question of why participate in tournaments at all. There are many goals and reasons why people participate in tournaments. Some reasons include the notion of winning or to test oneself both against an opponent and against ones personal standards.

Tournament participation should include self-reflection focused on improving technique, style and other performance objectives consistent with the standards of their system or style. It is up to the Chief or Head Instructor to set the tone for how tournament competition will be included in the program. It is not advisable for students to be free and unmonitored to participate on their own in any tournament of their choice. Tournament participation is a fundamental part of the learning in any program and should be directed by the Chief or Head Instructor to support and achieve the educational goals of the program.

## **X. Personal Study & Responsibilities for the Art**

As indicated at the end of the section the Chief or Head Instructor has the responsibility for the program they direct. There is little in terms of standardization in the martial arts world. Compared to higher education in the United States, martial arts is not "standardized" at all. For example, if one has a Bachelor's degree in Economics from the University of Texas, then that degree will be recognized at virtually any school in the U.S. as an equivalent or qualifying Bachelor's degree for continued, post-graduate study. To step into a martial arts school and announce that one holds the rank of Black Belt more than likely means virtually nothing in our society.

The point to this is not criticism but simply that what students learn is no more authentic, valid, reliable, sound and complete than the instructor directing the program. This creates a considerable responsibility for the director. Of course, teaching and learning martial arts is an "Art" rather than a science and as such cannot be easily structured into standardized measures. It requires the oversight and personal direction of a leader, an expert - someone of compassion, knowledge and wisdom - both about people and the art they are to learn.

As such, a Chief or Head Instructor must treat such responsibilities with respect. Study of technique, application, detail, etc., must be a continuous on-going thing. While age and other contingencies in life can occasionally interfere with a youthful physique, strength, flexibility and endurance, and an ideal performance may sometimes be beyond the reach of the best among us, the example of dedication to and the continued study and practice of martial arts must be set and maintained by the Instructor.

The only system available today that comes close to standardizing martial arts is Ed Parker's American Kenpo Karate. The world of Kenpo benefits from this and will surely outshine other martial arts in decades and centuries to come. There is no equivalent world-wide influence and standardization in any other martial art today, not even UFC or MMA. As martial arts is now for virtually anyone and will hopefully continue to be, the standardization of Kenpo provided by MAX Dojo will continue to spread both participation and quality world-wide...one way or another.....TRUE LINEAGE!