

The Complete Martial Artist: Training in Multiple Arts

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Is there any one “perfect” martial art? I do not think so. That is why so many martial arts have survived and developed. The fact is no martial art is better or worse than another, just different. One solution to finding the perfect art may be for a student to train in more than one martial art. This would allow the student to find techniques and philosophies that compliment what he/she feels is the correct way for them. Since each student is different, different parts of an art will be more easily understood and applied. That is the reason the “Do,” the way or path, is important. It is what will allow the student to find the proper “Do” for their way of life.

Compliment

Two martial art that make an interesting training combination is (Song Moo Kwan) Taekwondo and (Seidokan) Aikido. “Hard” arts – those that use strikes – and “Soft” arts – those that blend with attacks to use takedowns and joint locks – appear to have nothing that can bind them together for effective training. This is untrue even though their methods of dealing with conflicts are different.

Aikido has a concept called “unbendable arm.” This is the naturally straight arm, without the elbow locked, that allows great resistance to incoming energy such as a grab or a strike. Unbendable arm plays a major role in Aikido movements including Ukemi, the art of breakfalls & rolling, and the techniques themselves. However, this concept is not exclusive to Aikido. The arm position of a Taekwondo “Low” or “Down” block and “High” or “Rising” block are variations of this concept.

Technique similarities are more visible in the concepts and principles of the art but still may not be recognized. Taekwondo students are told to “circle” their opponents when fighting/sparring, while Aikido students hear “get off the line” to indicate that you should not stay in a place that may cause you to be hit or grabbed and to make yourself less vulnerable to an attack. Although it is not always necessary, Aikido students are taught to make physical contact, in order to determine how much energy the attacker is using and where it is directed. Taekwondo students do the same thing as they read their opponents eyes and body movements to help them understand how much energy is being used and where it may strike. In both cases, the opponent can be caused to overextend themselves and become off-balanced. This “taking the posture” (Aikido) creates an “opening” (Taekwondo) for applying a technique, be it a takedown or throw (Aikido) or a kick or punch (Taekwondo). Lastly, the opponent is given “a place to fall” (Aikido) which prevents a counterattack or the ability to even attack again. Whichever art is used, conflict is de-escalated as quickly as possible to prevent or minimize injury to yourself, your attacker and any by-standers.

Taekwondo students learn quickly that they need to have the proper distance between themselves and their attacker to prevent being kicked. This is “miai” (Japanese for distancing) and it makes footwork very important. The student must develop the ability to move into their striking range and then retreat from their opponent’s range quickly to escape being hit. This movement and use of space is called “range of effectiveness” in Aikido. It allows the student to create openings that will take control of the situation away from the attacker. Range of Effectiveness is the main reason Aikido techniques may use irimi (entering). Irimi allows the student to get close enough to an attacker to become effective with whatever

technique is chosen. Both of these concepts can be seen when a Taekwondo student spars/fights with an opponent.

Not only are there technical similarities but the arts have a common pattern for the development of the individual. This development is completed in stages that include self-protection, technical, ego separation and the loss of self. Each stage may be described as...

- Self-protection is the first thing that a new student learns. This varies according to the art being learned. Taekwondo teaches how to keep covered to prevent being injured by using arms and legs, while Aikido teaches ukemi.
- The next stage of development is learning the technical aspects of the art being studied. This development leads to growth in the student's confidence, courage, and esteem.
- The growth during the previous stage leads the student to wonder if what they have learned will be effective when dealing with conflict. Often this curiosity leads them into encounter or conflict in which their skills can be tested. After they overcome the desire to actually fight, they seem able to remove the ego from their training and growth. This leads to greater personal growth and more compassion in resolving conflicts.
- The next stage of development is the loss of "self." This is a very important stage since it is directly related to understanding the "Way." Whether or not this is the last stage of development is debatable, but I plan to continue training in order to find out.

All of the martial art that I have seen contain these developmental stages, but very few teach and promote them. All martial arts are just different paths to ascend the same mountain. The only real differences are in the way these developmental stages are shown to the student and how much time is spent in developing them. Taekwondo uses five tenets to help in the development of the student. They are issues that should be of primary importance and at the base of everything the student does inside or outside the dojang (Korean for Training Hall). They should play a part in every decision made and every action taken. These five tenets are integrity, courtesy, perseverance, self-control and indomitable spirit. Only when a student accepts these concepts and actively uses them will there be any mastery of Taekwondo (or any other art for that matter). While Taekwondo states these concepts so that they have specific definitions for internal and external development, Aikido principles are often more difficult to understand. The meaning of the principles of Aikido are left up to the student to discover, because they will slightly differ from one student to another. The Aikido principle of "True Victory is Victory Over Oneself" is found in the Taekwondo tenets but it is stated differently. Aikido principles are worded vaguely which causes the student to continually ask themselves what it means. This constant questioning leads the student to look inside, at themselves, to find the how and what the principle means to them. This enlightenment, with luck, can be carried out of the dojo (Japanese for Training Hall) and used in the everyday world. No matter which set of

principles you choose to learn from or which path you take, you will end up at the top of the same mountain.

Contrast

Other than the obvious differences in techniques between hard and soft arts, there are also some subtle contrasts. One is the method of dealing with physical conflicts. Taekwondo uses strong striking techniques in an effective combination to cause pain or injury to an attacker. This requires that the defender be prepared for the possibility of causing serious injury to someone and be able to live with it. Since striking techniques are usually done without holding onto the attacker, injuries can be caused from the attacker falling on or against something after being stunned by a strike – if not already injured by the strike itself. Aikido uses the contrasting method of a joint lock and takedown or combination of the two. What this method offers is the physical control of the attacker while dealing with their attack. The attacker can be “thrown” with enough energy to stun, but in addition the fall can be controlled as to where and how hard. This can prevent the attacker from being hurt beyond what the defending person is willing to deal with. Through the law enforcement education I received I heard several stories of officers who had taken a life or caused great bodily harm. The question remained in their minds as to whether these injuries were accidental or required for self-defense.

Blending (Aikido) allows the student to accept (mentally understanding that they are being attacked but without emotionally judging it) the energy (attack) in such a way that they can take control of the situation. Blends are used to get to a technique that can end the conflict with a minimal amount of energy (force) needed. This also prevents more energy from entering in the conflict. Taekwondo can meet this opposing energy with a block, usually intended to be so powerful that it zaps the energy from the attacker, and finished with a counter attack to end the conflict.¹

Since Aikido techniques make use of the attacker’s energy and movement, they often take less energy to apply. This can be an important factor when dealing with multiple attackers. Most Taekwondo students will tell you that it takes a lot of energy to spar/fight for any length of time. Punching and kicking takes a lot of muscular strength and power to execute properly and effectively. This energy can be drained quickly enough without having multiple attackers to deal with.

Multiple attackers are always a difficult and dangerous situation. The use of striking techniques may not be as effective dealing with multiple attackers. After being struck by a kick or punch, an attacker may fall, stagger away or just stand there. Since there is no control physically over him, it is difficult to predict where he may end up. Will he be in your way, blocking your route, or out of the way but where you might trip on him? This

¹ This can be effective but can add energy to the conflict and may lead it out of control. The compromise of a blend to get to the counterattack may work but personality will determine which method is used for purely self-defense purposes.

type of defensive strategy does not really allow you to take advantage of using attacker number one to block another attacker or give you an escape route. Aikido may have a greater success rate in dealing with multiple attackers by employing techniques that cause the attacker to be off balance. When the attacker is off balance, he can be led into a more strategic place and possibly used as a shield or as a weapon to knock another attacker down.

Another contrast is that Aikido students may not **know** what true striking attacks look and feel like. Since Aikido does not use striking as a part of their technique,² there may be only a few opportunities to see a real strike. Aikido promotes that the “Uke” – person who takes ukemi³ - use real energy. This is essential to proper technique and makes the attack appear to have the intent to cause harm. This energy works well for wrist grabs and similar attacks but can contribute to poorly and improperly thrown striking attacks. If the student trains against striking techniques that are not delivered properly, he may not see the indicators of the strike when applied to a self-defense situation. This problem may arise when striking attacks are not completely understood. Taekwondo students will understand how striking techniques are done and how to defend against them because they will be using similar techniques themselves.

Difficulties

There are **always** problems when training in the martial arts. Today it is even becoming difficult to know if you have a qualified, let alone quality, instructor. There seem to be more and more scam instructors showing up all over. If you are not sure of an instructor, ask about his or her instructors and who is included in their lineage. All of these should be verifiable. Past this, once you have found an art that you like, find an instructor that will fit your personality. You should enjoy learning the art, so do it with someone you can get along with. (But finding the perfect art is a whole other problem!)

Problems will come from many directions. They can be physical (lack of flexibility can cause problems throwing some of the higher kicks in Taekwondo) or mental/emotional (dislike for being grabbed can hinder training in Aikido).

Some difficulties will be very minor, like not getting close enough for an Aikido technique to work well. Many people feel uncomfortable when techniques are done within hugging distance. This discomfort is compounded in those who have trained in a hard art and want to stay out of “kicking distance.” The most difficult problems to deal with are in the area of ego and domination. It can be very frustrating to work with someone who is unwilling to be anything but belligerent. Unnecessary injuries can occur and no one benefits from training. (Competition is not always helpful to find out what is truly effective.)

² Aikido use “atemi” which have been used as energy strikes. These could be replaced with true strikes, if desired.

³ Ukemi is the art of breakfalls & rolling.

The principles involved can be frustrating. Aikido states their principles in such a manner that the student needs to examine them and their applications to find out how they fit on an individual basis. Taekwondo uses a more direct version, telling the student what the important principles are through the five tenets (Taekwondo Jung Shin). This is more information that the student must study and interpret to fit into their lives correctly. Anyone can master techniques but they are worthless without the principles to help the student grow and develop.

Conclusion

So far you have read some surface information about what it has been like for me to have been training in Taekwondo and Aikido. But is there a perfect art? The perfect art is something that is out there for everyone who wants to spend the time and effort to find it. Which is the perfect art? It may be Taekwondo, Aikido, Kenpo, Goju-ryu, or any number of others that would fill the next dozen pages. I do not know how good Bruce Lee was because I never had the chance to know him but I do agree with his belief of taking what works and eliminating what does not work. This is the only way to find the perfect art. Unfortunately many people think that they can get this by reading books about different styles. This idea leaves out all of the principles that are contained in the art. People have a tendency to take the techniques from many arts for their "perfect art," but without the principles, the techniques are nothing. Other arts, when learned from the beginning, have similar principles which lead to the development of the whole person.

The perfect martial art will only be found by training and learning the ways of an established art then researching and studying other arts from their beginnings. Only after becoming well versed in the principles and techniques of one art can you move on to learn those of another system. You are the only one who can create the perfect martial art, but keep in mind it will only be perfect for you. You will have learned the principles that will help you develop personally and will have picked the techniques that work for you within your physical abilities. Master Hee Il Cho writes that as he has gotten older he has come to understand why some instructors did not practice certain techniques any more. Their personal development took them to a different place than when they were younger and their physical body was also changing. This is where they have found the perfect art.

The perfect art may take a lifetime to find. Each student has to decide for themselves where it will take them, if they go at all. Train hard and learn everything that you can from everyone you can. This will take you to the perfect art. There are no shortcuts. I have sometimes joked with my friends that once I master all that there is in Taekwondo and Aikido, I will start my own art - Aiki-kwondo. But I am afraid that I will never get that far... there is still so much to learn.