Martial arts include a wide range of practices from many Asian countries and religious traditions. They range from Chinese wushu (sometimes inaccurately called "kung fu") to Korean tae kwon do and a variety of Japanese arts: karate, aikido, kendo, iaido, naginata, and judo. Almost all martial arts are connected with some religious or spiritual belief system, although their origins also lie in the practical need that people had to defend themselves without weapons.

The popularity of martial arts in the West seems to wax and wane depending on the current crop of action films and television shows. Some have become more like Western sports, with competitions, rankings, and scoring systems, whereas the appeal of others is the way they combine physical training with a more traditional focus on social, philosophical, and spiritual development. Some, such as iaido, a Japanese martial art using swords, are practiced by a relatively few skilled people. Others, such as karate and tae kwon do, are popular with schoolchildren and with women for self-defense.

The ancient origins of martial arts are thought to lie in religious combat rituals, imitating the gods who were able, according to myth, to triumph without weapons. Early styles in Japan were associated with the Japanese religion Shintoism and with Mikkyo, an esoteric form of Buddhism, and some forms of Chinese wushu are categorized as Daoist/Buddhist. Many martial arts developed within the confines of temples, which were places of refuge during the troubled periods when martial arts tended to develop most quickly. The temple of Shaolin, in China, for example, became a sort of university where martial arts experts lived together, shared their knowledge, and trained their students.

One aspect of the development of modern "sport" forms of traditional martial arts is the desire to eliminate the spiritual or mystical elements. This transformation—sometimes referred to as "sportification"—is intended to make martial arts more like Western sports, in which competing and winning are the only goals. For example, the idea of chi or ki (universal energy or breath concentrated in a person's center) is basic to martial arts practice. This idea can be translated into physiological terms as the center of gravity, but in traditional practice ki is far more than a physical spot or force, and the ai in aikido can be translated as "harmony" or "love."

Self-mastery and self-knowledge are important goals in martial arts practice, and the student is guided in a variety of ways in personal development as well as physical training. The practice of zazen, the basic seated meditation of Zen Buddhism, has been incorporated into a number of modern martial arts because it can easily be used out of context, without any demand on the student for a particular religious affiliation.
The practice of martial arts contains a variety of ritual elements. In aikido, the dojo (practice room) includes an altar with a photograph of the founder, Ueshiba Morihei (1883–1969), a scroll with calligraphy, and fresh flowers. Students bow to their instructor, to the photograph, and to one another, and in many clubs clap two or four times at the beginning and end of the session. This clapping is a traditional way of warding off evil spirits.

Some gestures in naginata have no practical martial arts purpose but are instead intended to ward off evil spirits and direct their force to the attacker or to offer prayers to the dead.

In tae kwon do, a Korean martial art that is also an Olympic sport, sessions typically begin and end with a few minutes of meditation, a lecture on good conduct (rather like a sermon), and the recitation of an oath. Here is an example:

Tae Kwon Do Oath
I shall observe the tenets of tae kwon do.
I shall respect the instructors and seniors.
I shall never misuse tae kwon do.
I shall be a champion of freedom and justice.
I shall build a more peaceful world. (Christensen & Levinson 1996, 1006)

Even the clothing worn in martial arts connects them to their traditional religious roots. Unlike clothing in modern Western sports, which changes over time to provide greater protection or improved performance, most martial arts clothing is traditional, often beautiful, and may appear heavy and impractical. In a number of martial arts, for example, training is done in a cotton jacket and pants with a heavy divided skirt, the hakama, on top. The traditional clothing offers protection but might be said to be, at root, more like the traditional dress of the Amish than like that worn by competitive runners or rugby players.

Physical activities have often had strong religious significance—among the ancient Greeks, for example. The religious significance of traditional martial arts and their focus on mind-body interaction appeals to many participants and gives these forms of physical activity a depth and a complexity that provide both physical and mental benefits.

See also Sport and Ritual

Further Reading


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