

A Guide to Finding "Right" School For You

Wherever you may live, from the West coast to the East coast, open the yellow pages or do an internet search looking for martial arts schools in your area and chances are you will find several, if not 50-100 potential martial arts schools of varying styles and disciplines. This common occurrence leaves most people who are looking for the benefits that come from good martial arts training wondering "How do I find the right school for me?"

Relax. While it is probably even more important than it seems, it may not be as difficult as it initially seems. Below you will find some general information and important questions that will assist you, wherever you may live and whatever you are looking for, in the critical process of finding the right school and training program for you. We have prepared this document in a printable format so that it may be used as a reference when you contact schools. We will cover the most important considerations: Style, Instructors, Facilities and Costs. Please enjoy, and feel free to contact us if you have any questions.

The right style

The first question most people come to is "**What style, art, or discipline is best?**"

There is really only one truthful answer to that question: "**The one that gives you what you need.**"

In many respects, the system or style you are learning is *less important* than who you are learning from. As this is the case, we will spend less time on finding the right style and more time on finding the right instructor and school. Instructors make more difference than styles. Within any particular style or system, different schools and instructors will tend to teach the same information differently. Every individual instructor will both emphasize different things and communicate with their own style. We will discuss more on the importance of the instructor later. Perhaps what is most important regarding style, is to identify what type of training you would like for yourself or your family. Most systems of martial arts fall into 3 very broad categories:

Striking Arts -

Karate, Tae Kwon Do and Kung Fu are examples of striking arts. Striking arts primarily rely on the development power through strikes with the hands and feet, as well as other areas of the body, to successfully deter attackers and defend oneself. While grabs and holds may be included, they generally play a lesser role in the training.

Grappling Arts -

Judo, Jujitsu and Submission Wrestling are examples of grappling arts. Grappling arts primarily bypass the striking ranges of fighting and focus on very close range fighting techniques. Strikes generally play a much smaller role in favor of emphasizing grabs, holds and often submissions. Certain grappling arts may even eschew strikes all together.

Internal Arts -

Tai Chi, Qigong, and Ba Ghua are examples of internal arts. Internal arts place a greater emphasis on minutia that is often subtle and difficult to see externally. Posture, breathing, and the control of specific muscles all play an important role in most internal arts. The gentle approach of most internal arts can allow for people of all fitness levels to participate, while the elevated sensitivity to personal control and refinement can easily provide for a lifetime of continual improvement.

Traditional Martial Arts vs. Freestyle / Eclectic Martial Arts

Freestyle or eclectic martial arts on the other hand are either a combination of several traditional martial arts or a martial art designed around a particular purpose. It is interesting to note that many of today's traditional martial arts began as the freestyle or eclectic arts of their day.

1000's of Martial Arts Styles

There are literally thousands of martial arts styles being taught today. Every area in the world has developed their own approach to self defense and spawned countless derivative martial arts. Most martial arts styles will fall into one of the very simple classifications above, although many will walk the line and participate in multiple categories. The above descriptions are not meant to be comprehensive. The information above is just a simple framework to help you clarify your decision making process. In many ways, unless you are looking to continue specific instruction in a specific art, it can be more beneficial to determine if you are looking for a striking art, a grappling art, an internal art, or some combination thereof. Whatever type of training you decide you would like to explore, there are many different styles in each type of training that would work for you.

Once you know the general direction you want to go, you can then focus on the specifics.

- 1) Know the type of training you are after.
- 2) Set about finding the right instructor for you.

Now let's focus on finding the school and instructor that is right for you.

The right instructor and school

There are many, many good instructors of martial arts, all of which take a personal stake in bettering the communities they live in and the families they come in contact with. And as in any field of endeavor, there are also individuals and companies whose practices and behaviors do not reflect the ideals that people turn to martial arts for.

Below are some thoughts to help you determine if any particular school or individual is appropriate to your needs.

the instructor

This is the individual, male or female, who will be interacting with you on a regular basis. Good martial arts training can be such a rewarding pursuit that it becomes a large or ongoing part of many people's lives and it is especially important that you are comfortable with the instructor. Most of us are pretty good judges of character when we allow ourselves to be. The following questions may give you some helpful insight.

Are you comfortable with the instructor? Can you see yourself asking the instructor for what you need? Does the instructor communicate in a way that is easy for you to understand? Do they clarify martial arts or mystify martial arts?

Your comfort level with the individual instructor is important, as you will want to be comfortable communicating if any special needs or situations arise. Some instructors spend more time mystifying, shrouding martial arts in mystery and secrets, than they do clarifying. Any competent instructor will be able to speak and address questions with clear answers that help you to understand. If your questions are met with mystery, or deferred with "I can't tell you that until after you have been training for a while"... You may want to ask yourself some serious questions about training there.

Is the instructor interested in you and what your needs are? Do they take the time to find out about your goals?

A competent and ethical instructor will want to know about you and your goals to determine if they can truly offer you what you need. An instructor who blindly insists on the superiority of their program without learning your interests is likely placing their interest ahead of your own. Meet the instructor and use your own judgment.

longevity

Longevity is not the sole determiner of a school's merit because every great school and every great company must start sometime.

However, it is worthy to note: Statistically, a high percentage of all martial arts schools currently in the phone book or on the internet will not be in operation next year. Although a long history of operation does not guarantee quality of instruction, you do increase your odds.

facilities

Martial arts facilities come in all shapes and sizes and with varying types of equipment depending on the style. There are well run large schools and well run small schools. Size alone is not an indicator of quality. Look beyond the size and shape of the facility to the space itself.

Is the space kept clean and organized? Is the equipment being used kept in good repair?

If you look closely, it is usually easy to see if the school and space is well taken care of. A space usually reflects the occupants and is able to tell you certain things about the school.

class size and class make-up

The size of each class and the ratio of instructors to students is an important factor in determining the amount of attention each student will receive. In addition to noting the size of each class, notice the make-up (the range of ages and skill levels) of students in each class. Different ages learn differently and different ranks usually have different material to work on. Some range of variation in a class can be productive, but too large of a range usually dilutes the effectiveness of the class.

advanced or high ranking students

Most healthy (effective and professional) martial arts schools, unless they are a brand new school, will have a range of students that includes advanced ranks. If an established school has little or no students of advanced ranks, it may be an indication that students who develop familiarity with the school find some reason to leave.

healthy martial arts hierarchy

Most martial arts systems are organized around a hierarchal system. Balanced hierarchal systems are a necessary component of organization. However, there are both healthy and unhealthy hierarchies. Unhealthy hierarchies are noticeable in the attitudes and behaviors of higher ranking students and teachers. Attitudes of entitlement or superiority are warning signs and any instructor who insists on demonstrations of respect or reverence outside of the classroom is a sure sign of an imbalanced hierarchy. A healthy hierarchy utilizes guidelines as an aide in promoting and empowering individuals to have more influence over their own life and space. Healthy groups demonstrate respect and consideration at all levels of rank and involvement.

community and students

It is always helpful to look around and see what type of student body and community that a school attracts. Like the physical space, the social space will tend to reflect the values of those in charge. Ideally you will find a group of happy and healthy people whose company you could enjoy.

The school policies

Policies are the behavior and attitude of an organization. A closer look at the policies of a school will let you know a lot about the school and those in charge.

buy now, train later

“Can we try a class or pay for a class before we commit?”

It is probably wise to be wary of any school that asks you to commit time and money without allowing you to experience the training first. Most of us would not commit to years of car or home payments sight unseen and the very personal nature of martial arts instruction makes this point only more valid.

While not all schools will offer a complimentary lesson, most competent and professional schools should be able to offer a short term paid amount of instruction before asking for longer term commitments. It is only fair to both the school and the student to ensure an appropriate match.

how much does it *really* cost

Some schools have a variety of “hidden” fees built into the way they structure their programs. Depending on the structure, students may find themselves spending a lot more money than initially thought when simply considering the price of tuition.

“Do you have test or rank advancement fees?”

Fees are a part of training, and usually are modest amounts to cover the cost of the teacher’s time, the new belt and certificate costs.

“Do students here test or promote on a regular schedule?”

Scheduled advancement as opposed to merit based advancement may result in “a Black Belt in two years” but is unlikely to result in the level of skill one expects in a Black Belt.

“Are there rank based required purchases?”

While it may make sense to spread required safety equipment purchases over a span of ranks to allow a student to gradually acquire what they need, it is another matter entirely to require the purchase of unnecessary items as students advance. Check to see if additional or differently colored uniforms are required at different ranks. Ask about required equipment purchases as the student advances in belt ranks. By asking ahead of time you can develop a more complete picture of the costs involved in training at a particular school.

contracts

“Do you require contracts or long term agreements?”

While feelings and arguments abound on both sides of the issue of contracts or “term of service” agreements, most proponents of contracts are business owners looking to stabilize long term revenue. A student contract is viewed by lenders, landlords and accountants as the only real “valuable asset” to a school. There is an argument that a student in a long term contract is less likely to stop training over a short term frustration or set back. Anything that assists a student in overcoming short term obstacles in favor of long term goals is certainly a benefit to the student. Ask yourself whether you would like to be forced into a commitment, or whether you would like choose to commit yourself to your training. Whether or not you are comfortable with a term of service contract is for you to determine. Just be certain that you have the opportunity to find out if this is the school and instructor you would like a long term relationship with before you are forced to commit.

cancellation policy

It is always wise to know how to get out of anything you get in to. Different martial arts schools have different cancellation policies. Make sure you know how the school you are interested in operates.

That's all

Hopefully the information above gives you a good idea of what to look for and what questions might be helpful to ask. To be informed is to give yourself the power to make good decisions. Taking a little time now, at the beginning, to find a school and instructor that is right for you will pay huge dividends over the years. With a little clarity and a little time, you will be training in a fantastic school with a wonderful instructor and enjoying some of the many benefits that have drawn people to good martial arts training through the centuries.

We hope to see you as a new student of Shorin Kung Fu!

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