

**Champion Youth Adult Class**

# **THE BENEFITS OF MARTIAL ARTS**

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

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## Preface

I have been involved in the martial arts on and off since 1975. I grew up in a small town in southern Minnesota and that's where I was first introduced to style of karate called Kei Chu Ru. I can't quite remember the proper spelling.

Right out of high school, I went to work for my father in his cabinet shop. I was quite and somewhat shy around certain people. Because of this one of the men that worked for my father suggested that I join him one night at the karate class that he attended. He never said it to me directly but I think that he and my dad thought that some karate lessons might give my confidence a boost. I fell in love with the art right away and went to class three times a week for about one year. My instructor moved away and the school was shut down.

About a year later, I joined a Tae Kwon Do class at the YMCA during the time I was an architectural drafting student in Mankato, Minnesota. I took the class once a week and practiced at home. The class had little structure and I do not remember learning anything new but still I enjoyed going. After about four or five months, again the class was terminated.

After two years without any karate, I had my first introduction to Kenpo back in my hometown. Again, the classes were not very structured, and after about three or four months I left to join a new Tae Kwon Do school that had just opened. The Kenpo class folded, I think because of poor enrollment. At this point, I had never been any higher in rank than 3<sup>rd</sup> degree white belt.

The next school I switched to was finally well structured and disciplined. I went to class every Thursday night and worked very hard at home five to six nights a week for three years. I advanced to 1<sup>st</sup> degree black belt and held that rank for six months when a job change took me to another city.

I went about three years of again no karate. Any attempt to join another school in the big city proved financially out of reach.

Then came my second encounter with Kenpo. I enrolled my two children in the champion youth program. For a little while my involvement was as a spectator and motivator for my kids. Not long after, I became a student myself. This time, for the first time, I was exposed to a well-formatted way to learn karate. The depth of knowledge made all previous schools pale in comparison. I believe that my hard work in those other styles paid off in

terms of improving my basics and giving me a good foundation on which to build my Kenpo skills.

The years I had spent studying martial arts has helped me to realize and experience many of the benefits that it has to offer. I feel that the martial arts benefits go beyond the ability to defend ones self and that is why I have choose the topic of benefits as the topic of my thesis.

Why should someone study martial arts? In addition, what benefits can be obtained?

## PHYSICAL BENEFITS

The lack of physical exercise is detrimental to your health. It is determined that 250,000 Americans die prematurely each year due to lack of physical exercise. The Surgeon General report compares sedentary living with smoking a pack of cigarettes a day.

Here are some more statistics I have found. 34 percent of the American population is overweight. Only 8 percent of Americans are getting the amount of exercise recommended for minimal health benefits. Next to smoking, weight related conditions are the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest cause of death in the USA. I'm sure I could go on but I think you get the point.

It would seem that America is full of TV watching couch potatoes yet TV infomercials selling exercise equipment and diet plans abound. Many of them selling quick fixes like the ones that claim that by taking their pills you can shed pounds while you sleep. You don't even have to work up a sweat.

There are many kinds of ways to become and stay fit. Sports, running and weight lifting are popular. So why choose a martial art?

The physical benefits karate is one of the first things I noticed and one of the main reasons I wish to continue.

As a youth I lifted weights and ran. For the most part I was in great shape. What I have discovered by practicing karate is that I may not have the endurance I had as a distance runner or the muscle tone of an avid weight trainer I seem to have a more well rounded, overall fitness. Karate is a multifaceted form of exercise.

Learning and practicing the basics, techniques and forms force you to exercise! Using every part of your body, your muscles and joints are worked and kept flexible. As with weight lifting, you can achieve good muscle tone and body strength through body movement and muscle tension. As with running, you can achieve endurance, cardiovascular improvement and better your lung capacity by practicing your basics, techniques and forms over and over with vigor.

I noticed results right from the beginning of my training. While I was engrossed in working on my basics, practicing my blocks, punches, strikes and kicks over and over something was happening. I was having so much fun that before I knew it 30 to 60 minutes had passed by and I would be covered in sweat. Never had I had so much fun working out.

In Kenpo the more you learn the more you are forced to practice. Each time you test for belt rank advancement you must demonstrate your form, set and techniques for that level.

You must you must be proficient at the forms, sets and techniques from your previous ranks. Workouts then must become more frequent and lengthier. It is through these workouts as the practitioner pushes him or herself. As they strive to improve their skills they will develop a healthier more fit body. This will result in balancing blood pressure and circulation. It can also lower cholesterol levels. Let's take a closer look.

### **Weight loss and body fat reduction**

The body regulates weight by using this simple equation. Calories consumed versus calories metabolized. The daily amount of calories stored and burned will determine a gain or loss of body fat which will affect body weight. Daily Kenpo workouts will cause the muscles to metabolize or burn ingested food that is stored in different areas of the body. The result will be weight loss and control.

### **Diabetes regulation**

The aerobic exercise that comes with regular Kenpo workouts can help control diabetes by regulating excessive blood sugar.

### **Cholesterol Regulation**

Routine workouts of one hour per day, five days a week can increase the level of high density lipoproteins (HDL) up to ten percent. It is estimated that a 10 percent increase of HDL in the body can decrease the risk for coronary problems by 50 percent.

### **Cardiovascular adaptations**

The lowering of high blood pressure is a primary health benefit. A moderate to vigorous workout of 30 minutes or more at least three times a week will bring about a healthier heart. An increase of plasma volume and a stronger heart muscle more efficiently pumping blood will result. An increase of the bloods oxygen carrying capacity along with thicker and more elastic arterial tissue and decreased blockage within the arteries are also a benefit.

### **Tendon and ligament adaptation**

A very noticeable byproduct of routine Kenpo workouts is flexible muscles and joints. The martial arts in general are an excellent way to increase strength in the stressed soft tissue. In karate all moving parts of the body are used to their maximum creating increased flexibility, coordination, agility, and dexterity. To me the pre workout stretching exercises are a very important part of training. I truly believe that I survived a car accident in the summer of 2001 with a minimum of injuries due in part to my martial arts training.

### **Muscular improvement**

As mentioned previously a Kenpo practitioner will see the benefits of stronger more flexible muscles throughout the body. He or she will also see improvement in balance and agility. Speed, power and endurance will increase too. Muscles will experience an increase of aerobic enzymes and anaerobic enzymes which leads to endurance. Muscles will have increased capillary density which improves blood flow allowing oxygen to reach the muscles more efficiently. Exercise through a martial arts workout will improve muscle cells and fibers creating more strength.

Training also will affect the nerves and nerve pathways. In other words muscles do what they do, because the nervous system has been conditioned to perform certain repetitive movements. In order for a martial artist to move with great speed it is not just through increased strength. The nervous response must be conditioned by the muscle memory through repeated movements. Blocks, punches, kicks and strikes must be practiced over and over.

### **Indirect health benefits**

A well conditioned martial artist will no doubt feel better and want to take better care of himself. They may find the desire to quit smoking and eat more nutritious foods and beverages. Both changes in lifestyle would lead to the reduced risk of cancer.

## **BENEFITS TO THE MIND**

It may not be as noticeable as the physical side of the martial arts but an improvement of the mind is another important benefit.

My search for information on this topic has led me to believe that most of these benefits are more long term than short term. In other words taking just a few lessons most likely will not have a profound affect on a person mentally. It may take years before one might notice an improvement.

### **Concentration**

In terms of mental benefits, improved concentration is at the top of the list. In Kenpo your concentration is challenged through learning, developing and then improving basic moves, self defense techniques, sets and forms. In the classroom every time you are taught something new you must devote all of your focus on what the instructor is showing you.

With basic moves you must listen carefully to their explanation so that you will understand how to perform them properly. You must concentrate of every movement of you body.

With self defense techniques again your thoughts have to be fixed on the instructor as he or she explains the series of basic moves that make up a self defense technique. Many techniques are quite sophisticated with hands, arms, feet and legs performing different tasks all at once. Your mind is forced to concentrate as you learn each move. You must also learn to mentally visualize the actions and reactions of the imaginary attacker if you practice by yourself.

With forms your concentration I really put to the test. Some forms can be quite lengthy challenging your focus on the series of movements that make up the form. You must maintain that focus throughout the duration of the form. Each movement from stances to blocks, strikes and kicks must be executed in your best form down to the smallest detail. One move flows into the next requiring timing and control. All of this will not be done properly without good concentration.

In a self defense situation a Kenpo student is taught the concepts of black dot focus and white dot focus. With this concept the student is told to visualize a target as a black dot on a white background. The dot represents the target you will strike and the white background represents awareness of your entire surroundings. As execute a strike to a target on your opponent you must concentrate your energy towards that target to make your strike effective. However, if you loose sight of everything else you may find yourself in trouble. Total combat awareness means that you must be able to stay alert to the rest of your opponent's body movements and also your surroundings. Those who fail to do this and put all of their focus on their strike and its target are using white dot focus. They could find themselves in a loosing situation.



## Memory

There have been many studies on the effects of aerobic exercise such as karate and how it affects the memory. The results have been mixed.

Most indicate that moderate levels of exercise actually do improve a person's performance of memory and thinking tasks.

If anything Kenpo karate certainly will challenge the memory. It has 150 self defense techniques to memorize and many extensions to those techniques to also memorize. A student of Kenpo will also have to memorize several forms and sets if he or she wants to advance in rank. During class time and especially during a test for rank advancement the student will be asked to perform or teach any of the techniques.

## Depression, anxiety and stress

Studies show that the practice of martial arts leads to positive psychological changes in those involved. Long term involvement has shown positive effects on anxiety, aggression, hostility and self confidence. In addition it has shown changes in independence, self reliance and self esteem.

Clinical depression is one of the most common psychological problems in our country. The president's committee on mental health reports that one of every four Americans suffers depression at any given time. The physical exercise of Kenpo can be a useful tool in controlling depression.

During and after a vigorous workout the body releases endorphins. These chemicals are released by the brain and are the body's natural pain killers. The release of endorphins can create feelings of happiness, increase energy and better sleeping patterns. Low energy and poor sleep are common symptoms of depression.

Norepinephrine and serotonin are also chemicals found in the brain that are released during a workout. These chemicals play a major role in helping the brain control stress and anxiety.

The time spent during a workout or class is also time when you can forget your troubles. You can punch, kick and even yell which is a controlled way to release your aggressions. You can spend time with other people who have the same interests and enjoy working out, learning, and even teaching together. This will have positive effects on your mental well being. The confidence that comes from being physically fit and skilled in self defense is another benefit.

## **SPIRITUAL BENEFITS**

When many people think of the martial arts they often associate it with ancient mystical ways of the Far East. Historically these elements have interwoven themselves into the fabric of the martial arts. Buddhism has had a big influence on martial arts. There have been many myths and superstitions as well.

Quite simply put the spiritual benefits I choose to write about are things that I have discovered to be just plain good for the soul.

Beyond the physical and mental enhancing aspects of the martial arts there is a third benefit that a person can experience. The spiritual benefits which come with time and seasoning make up the triangle, the three elements that are often thought to make up a human being. A person who devotes themselves to the art can bring fulfillment to his life and to the lives of others. Many western sports tend to emphasize competition and winning, while Asian martial arts have traditionally emphasized self-knowledge, self improvement, and self control. Unlike western sports, martial arts usually involve philosophical and ethical lessons that can be applied to every day life. They can often have a high degree of ceremony and ritual. They not only emphasize the blending of body and mind, they also can have a meditative side as well.

The time and effort spent training and developing martial art skills should most defiantly lead to deeper self awareness. The practitioner will learn their strengths and weaknesses. You can learn to capitalize on your strengths and work to improve your weaknesses.

### **Self awareness**

Since Kenpo demands so much from your mind and body you really are in touch with your entire being. Whether it's working on forms or going through techniques, from day to day you can tell just how you are functioning. Some days you are focused and everything seems to fall into place, other times it seems you can't make anything work. Some days you have lots of energy and you can really push yourself, other days you have to force yourself to finish your workout.

### **Confidence**

Through this self awareness you can become confident in yourself by facing fears and proving to your self that you can over come them. You are always being presented with goals and challenges like learning new and sophisticated techniques and forms. Improved self confidence is developed by meeting the challenges and achieving the goals that are set. This is the positive side of the colored belt ranking system used by most martial arts. There is a good feeling that comes with accomplishment.

## Humility

As stated earlier your self awareness will also reveal your weaknesses. By understanding these weaknesses you can understand your vulnerability. Humility is acquired when you learn that no matter how much your skills improve you are still human. Humans obviously do have weaknesses. We do make mistakes and there is always a change that no matter how good you get, someone will come along who is better.

There is no place in the martial arts for egotism or arrogance. One should always be reminded that as you learn the vital target areas of the human body, the same striking points that will disable your opponent, you also have.

## Respect

Respect is at the very core of martial arts. It could be said that respect is the foundation of self-discipline.

Just as martial artists should become humbled by the understanding of his own vulnerability he can also learn to respect how much damage his skills can do to another human being. The martial arts will help a person develop respect of self, others, and all living things.

There is also a two way street of respect that can be found in the classroom or throughout training.

As a student you are faced with many challenges and a lot of those who have gone before you and all of the hard work, successes and failures that they have gone through. As you progress you can certainly respect the newer, lower ranked students struggling to improve themselves because you can relate to them. At one time you were going through the same thing they are.

## Courtesy

One way of showing respect to others is through courtesy, another benefit. Courtesy toward others is something you will find in just about every good martial arts school. Generally a considerate and courteous student will have a more positive outlook.

Respect and courtesy are two traits that the martial artist is encouraged to take from the classroom and out into their everyday life. The martial artist does not only work on skills but also to be an honest member of society. This will make it easy to make friend and hard to make enemies.

## Self control

Self control or discipline is a great benefit. In the martial arts will develop this trait in not only the physical sense but in other ways as well. Physically the practitioner learns to control the way he uses his body. He must discipline himself to work out and show up to his classes. It takes a lot of discipline to achieve higher levels.

In the classroom the student is required to show courtesy and respect towards his instructor and fellow classmates. To do this he must exercise his discipline. As he practices his self defense techniques with his classmates he must control his moves so he does not injure them.

In his every day life outside of the class room the student is taught that his martial art skills are to be used for defense purposes only and as a last resort. He must be disciplined in not using his skill to show off of bully people.

Commitment is another form of discipline that is necessary for a person to learn if they intend to continue and grow and a martial artist

### **Social benefits**

It is possible that a person could reach some level of martial arts skill on their own by studying from the many books, training manuals, and videos that are available on the market today. That person would however miss out on some very important benefits that come with working out with other people.

Obviously one does not study the martial arts to defend himself from a punching bag or thin air. He studies to defend himself from another person or people. This to me makes the classroom setting a must. There he gets the benefit of all different sizes and abilities. He also can get feedback; critiquing and assistance from his class mates and a qualified instructor.

There however is some more to the classroom. Having a place to go where you can meet, and be with and make friends with people who have common interests and goals. To be able to experience this can be very life enhancing.

People need to feel accepted, to belong, and the martial arts class room will most certainly provide these things.

### **Goal setting**

Learning to set goals for personal growth is a trait that the martial artist can acquire as he or she strives to reach a higher belt rank. Most style of martial arts use a colored belt system to identify the various levels of achievement. This system gives the student a method of measuring progress and setting goals for advancement. Goal setting can be carried over to other areas in a person's life such as school or a career.

### Keeping the art alive

After some time spent as a student, the martial artist will be expected help out his fellow students and eventually teach. As an instructor the benefits and opportunities are wonderful. Leadership skills can be learned and developed. Being responsible for the growth of others will most definitely bring self growth. As an instructor a person can set an example to others. He or she will become a mentor and confidant too many others thus develop a very good since of self worth. He or she will find themselves becoming active in their community through their teaching and even prove themselves as a role model. They will have the opportunity to work with the youth of the community and have a chance to make the good citizens and leaders of the future.

## SELF DEFENSE

The world can unquestionably be a dangerous place. All a person has to do is watch the news on TV or read a news paper. A person's first defense is to make themselves aware of this fact. He or she should pay close attention to how and where danger happens.

In its origin the martial arts was developed as a way for weaponless people to defend themselves from aggressors.

Today the martial arts are still an effective way for people to protect themselves. To be able to react to different attack situations and to be able to escape bodily harm is a benefit that Kenpo provides and a good skill to have. In Kenpo as a person will learn to defend themselves from punches, kicks, grabs, hugs and holds, tackles, locks, chokes, and pushes. A person can also learn to defend knife, gun and club attacks. The Kenpo practitioner will learn to defend single or multiple attacks.

By studying Kenpo a person will learn many types of punches, strikes, kicks, counter grabs, they will learn joint manipulation and be shown how to put these basic movements into self defense techniques. These self defense techniques provide the Kenpo practitioner with ideas on how to defend themselves from the many attacks that they can encounter. There are well over 100 self defense techniques that can be learned through the Kenpo system. This will provide a person with an extensive knowledge of self defense.

Along the Kenpo moves the student also learns about the human anatomy and vital target areas of the body so that strikes are not wasted.

Through the study of the self defense techniques a person will learn out to end an attack quickly and efficiently, increasing his or her chance for escape and survival.

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