

inding inner peace through martial arts

► This experience will change me forever.

By **JOHANNA BLACKMAN**
For the Monitor

I stood still, my arms held up so that my hands were at a level with my head, one on either side of my face. I wore a large, square pad firmly attached to each hand and what I imagine was a skeptical expression firmly attached to my face.

Less than a foot away from me stood my partner, gloved fists raised,

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face contorted in a look of extreme concentration. She prepared for the first punch. I posed, waiting nervously.

Out shot her fist. Her glove connected with my pad and my arm flew backward behind my head. My partner relaxed. "Good," she smiled. I laughed, knowing my part in the per-

formance had been anything but good, and waited for some constructive criticism. It came.

"You might want to hold the pads a little firmer," my partner kindly suggested. I heartily agreed.

I was at Paul Averill's Martial Arts Academy, taking my first shot at kickboxing. Class had been under

way for less than 15 minutes, and I was already being urged to stretch the barriers of my comfort zone. I had certainly been more than a little nervous when I heard the instructions: "Stand still and hold the pads up firmly, giving a little each time you receive a punch."

"Yeah, sure," I thought, preparing myself for some pain.

To my surprise, I didn't get hurt. What's more, I soon mastered the task of holding pads for my partner, and stood tall and strong, proudly

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deflecting punch after punch.

I surprised myself again when we switched roles and I Velcroed on an impressive pair of gloves. The instructor demonstrated the proper way to stand and the correct way to start, execute and finish each punch. Then it was my turn.

I am not a violent person. I can't even kill an ant without feeling absolutely horrible. Yet, here I was, about to aim punches at another human being. Granted, she was well equipped to receive whatever I might have to offer, having strapped a pad onto each hand. But still, I crouched, struggling to imitate the instructor as closely as possible. I prepared. I punched.

My partner didn't even flinch.

I punched again, harder this time. I began to move in what I like to think was a sinuous circle around my partner, punching all the while. My confidence grew with each hit. It actually felt good.

My reward came at the end of the drill when my partner lowered her pads and said, "Excellent. You have a really good punch!"

What a surprise. The girl who can't kill ants has a really good punch. Who would have guessed?

As the class progressed I found myself continuously pushed to try things I wouldn't normally attempt. With each successive challenge, I found my hesitation shrinking considerably. I could do it! I could do anything! Or at least I could try.

This growth in self-esteem and self-confidence is something that Paul Averill stresses in his theory for teaching martial arts. "It's not so much about learning all these techniques as it is about self-discovery, finding what your limits are and then breaking them. It's about continuously growing."

This theory of self-growth through learning and practicing fighting skills is reflected in the history of the martial arts. No one is exactly sure when or where martial arts date back to, but there is evidence of cultures beginning to use the fighting arts as a means of self-improvement as early as 2000 B.C.

The ancient Greeks were reportedly the first culture to study the effects of martial arts training on the individual. They sought to improve themselves through practicing different techniques. Fighting ceased to be simply about beating the other person.

However, the Greeks continued to be very ambitious when it came to defeating their opponents, and indeed the entire ancient world. As the Greeks conquered civilization after civilization under the leadership of Alexander the Great, they spread their tradition of martial arts throughout the land. These

traditions took root in the many different cultures of the time and through the influence of each unique culture came the more than 1,500 different forms of martial arts we see today.

In recent years, martial arts have enjoyed a considerable increase in popularity. While some of this increase is due to the many films in which martial arts are depicted, and not always with the best of accuracy, there are other, better reasons why so many people are enrolling in martial arts classes.

The benefits of practicing martial arts are numerous. Along with improved health comes better focus, control and discipline. Averill counts this discipline that is so extensively involved in the martial arts as one of the top benefits. "It's one of the few places you can come to today and hear, 'Yes, sir, yes, ma'am,' and it's considered positive."

This statement strongly reminded me of a Tae Kwon Do class I visited recently. From the moment I stepped into that studio, I knew I was witnessing something special. This feeling did not come from the white costumes and smooth moves as much as it came from the atmosphere of strong respect. The students all bowed deeply to the teacher when called up to perform a series of moves. They all shouted, "Yes sir!" when receiving any sort of command. The fact that some of the students were definitely older than the instructor did not matter. They bowed out of respect for this man who had mastered a special form of art and was now sharing it with others. It struck me how seldom we take the time in our society today to pay that kind of respect.

All other benefits aside, the sense of self and inner peace that one receives makes practicing martial arts highly recommendable. "It's like a form of meditation," I would continuously hear someone say. I would nod politely, all the while wondering how meditation could be compared with something like fighting. That was before I took a class.

As I progressed through first punching and then kicking exercises, I came to understand what all those enthusiasts had been gushing about.

You have to concentrate hard, really hard. As you become more adept at the art, you begin to execute moves without thinking. This absence of thought is known as "muga" and leads to a feeling of meditation.

My strongest experience of this feeling came with a particular drill in which my partner would take steps in different directions, each time thrusting out a pad. I was supposed to figure out which way he intended to lunge, and then be ready to follow him and meet the extended pad with a good punch. As I squatted,

eyes focused on his figure, trying to read his body language and predict which way he was going to move before he actually took a step, everything around me faded. The students standing watching, the music playing softly in the background, two girls laughing and chatting in a corner, all these things disappeared. My worries over an upcoming exam, my nervousness about making it to a rehearsal in time after class, even my sheer exhaustion from the stress of the week, all these things left me. I felt like I was standing in a world of my own where my partner and I formed the only existing living beings and reading and following his movements formed the only existing challenge.

He swayed lightly, trying to outwit me. I swayed with him. He stepped to one side, darted to another. I followed, somewhat awkwardly, punching as I went. When the drill ended I returned back to Earth after having floated away on some cloud of intense concentration. It felt terrific.

The whole class felt terrific. It left me with a feeling of triumph, of self-worth and of humility. Humility from the knowledge that I had just spent an hour practicing fighting skills that are similar to those practiced thousands of years ago and, as a result, had received some of the same benefits the Greeks, Shaolin monks and Indian royalty received in that distant past. I felt awe and reverence for an art form that has survived for such an impressive period of time. At the same time, I could understand why martial arts have survived through the strain of changing and developing societies and cultures. They are invaluable, as a way of defense, as a way of physical development, as a way of becoming one with the forces around you and as a way of developing a strong sense of self-worth.

I definitely encourage you to treat yourself to a dose of martial arts. Because of the hundreds of different existing forms, martial arts really has something to offer for nearly everyone, regardless of age, physical ability and personality. And martial arts schools are not difficult to find. While I highly recommend Averill's Martial Arts Academy as a school that represents only the best in martial arts, there are many other institutes that offer classes statewide.

Many of these schools offer the option of one monthly payment that allows you to visit as many classes a week as you are able.

I hope you will give martial arts a try, and that your experience practicing the ancient ways of fighting will fill you with as much surprise and awe as it did both myself and the Greek warriors 4,000 years ago.