

# FAQ: A Gaijin's Guide to Choosing a Martial Art

The purpose of this article is; to assist those who would like to pursue a martial art in selecting the best school, style, and instructor for themselves. This article will be structured as an extended FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions.) We'll begin with an "about the author" I don't do this out of ego, or to show you how great I am. I start with it to prove a point; whenever researching anything, be it an internet article, a book, or a 1000+ year old scroll, it's a good idea to know who wrote it. Remember that *everyone* can lie, even me.

## About the Author

My name is Brian Fine. I am NOT a *master* martial artist. I have NOT been training for decades. I am NOT a famous scholar or sociologist. I am a martial artist. I've been training since 2002, 1 year in another art and the last 4 in Bujinkan Budo Taijutsu. I don't consider myself exceptionally "good" at my art, more average actually. I hold the position of "Dojo Cho" or director of the school, my primary responsibility is assisting new and prospective students with our martial art. As a result of my experiences with people just beginning a martial art, I'm compiling this article based on the questions I've been asked, and the people I've met. Any and all mistakes are my own.

## Martial Art Styles

### What is the "best" martial art style?

This is one of the most common questions asked by non-martial artists. I've found that it's a really loaded question to answer, here's why: Any martial artist will insist that the martial art they are practicing is the most complete, effective, and overall best martial art there is. That's just human nature, if they believe there is something "better" out there then they would be doing that instead wouldn't they? The "best" martial art for me may not be the "best" martial art for you.

### How do I choose the best style for me?

Start by asking yourself why you're interested in a martial art. Common answers include: self defense, self discipline, get into shape/lose weight, enlightenment, and to deal with some type of physical problem (bully etc.) These are by no means the only answers, and it's likely that in the course of training your reason will change.

For the purpose of this FAQ I'll define 3 ***broad*** categories of martial arts: Sport, Meditative, and Combat. It would be impossible to categorize all of the worlds martial arts, such a list would be exhaustive and probably inaccurate (nobody can practice the 400+ martial arts of the world.) Many arts will fall into 2 or more of the above groupings. Instead I'll describe a definition of each and let you decide where a given style should fall.

## What is a sport art?

A sport art is any style whose primary goal is competition. These arts are used in tournaments, the competitors win trophies and medals, some are even Olympic events. Examples are: Boxing, Fencing, judo, Tae Kwon Do, and Wrestling. For reference purposes I got this list from the official Olympic website

[http://www.olympic.org/uk/sports/programme/index\\_uk.asp?SportCode=BX](http://www.olympic.org/uk/sports/programme/index_uk.asp?SportCode=BX).

Saying that a martial art style is a “sport” has a tendency to offend its practitioners. So to clarify: for our purposes, a sport art is a competitive style with rules designed to protect competitors (examples of common rules are: no kicking below the belt, no eye gouging, no small joint manipulation) I am NOT saying that these styles would be ineffective in a “real” fight situation, just that they’re designed for competition.

## Why choose a sport art?

Most sport arts make for great athletic abilities, so if you’re looking to get into shape or lose weight, sport arts are a great choice. Keeping in mind that sport arts are still martial arts the techniques learned will be useful for self defense as well. Many styles have a demanding training regime that builds a great deal of self discipline. I also feel that Sport arts are the best choice for children; it builds self discipline and gives a sense of accomplishment, the other categories of martial arts don’t cater as well to the needs of children.

Another great thing about the sport arts is that they are common. There are millions of practitioners of these arts worldwide, therefore schools that teach these styles are easy to come by. There is plenty of healthy competition between the schools making a decent (financial) deal easier to find. Also if you don’t like the first instructor you meet, just find another.

## What is a meditative art?

A meditative art is a style whose primary concern is increasing self awareness, and awareness of the world we live in. These arts are generally unconcerned with visible “ranking” (belt colors, titles, etc.) and focus very much on “softness.” They use little or no strength, instead relying on “perfect” body alignment to deal with adversity. Many of these styles acknowledge (and make use of) an all encompassing energy called “chi” or “ki.” Examples of styles are: Tai Chi, and Qigong. I am not listing Yoga or any of its styles here because I don’t consider them “martial arts” (I’ve never seen Yoga used in a fight to any affect)

## Why choose a meditative art?

Meditative arts have been shown to reduce stress from the first day of training; Tai Chi is a very common choice for highly stressed business executives. Other mental benefits include: Increased concentration, Better memory, easier time falling asleep. Given enough time (around 10 years or so) these arts are lethal, I’ve met several experienced Tai Chi practitioners, I’m careful not to offend the “touchy feely gurus” they’re scary.

Possibly the only “down side” to meditative styles would be the amount of time it takes to make them effective for self defense purposes. Plan on taking at least 10 years to get enough of a grasp on the art to be able to defend yourself with it.

### **What is a Combat Art?**

To define a combat art I’m going to quote Jack Hoban, one of the oldest practitioners of Budo Taijutsu in the US.

“It occurred to me this year that there are (at least) four things that differentiate combatives from sport martial arts:

1. Losing is NOT an option!
2. Combat uses weapons—virtually always!
3. In combat, people play by their own rules—if any!
4. In combat, the mission almost always revolves, not around fighting for yourself, but around fighting for others—whether it is your country, your community, your family, or the guy next to you. In other words, warriorship.”

Combat arts have no competitions, if a combative art was used in a competition someone would be hurt, to “take away” techniques that hurt people for competition changes a combat art into a sport art. The primary goal of a combat art is to survive. Examples of combat arts are: Budo Taijutsu/Ninjutsu, Krav Magna, Silat, and (true) Shaolin Kung-fu.

### **Why choose a combat art?**

Combat arts are for those who wish to protect themselves, their loved ones, or their country (military and law enforcement). Most combat arts do not rely on strength or athletic ability, so (generally) the training won’t help you lose weight or build muscle. Combat arts usually teach “falling” or ukemi as part of the curriculum which is used to receive techniques and builds flexibility. Combat arts also teach “tactical awareness” I.E. being able to tell who is carrying a concealed weapon at a glance; this can be useful in business for “sizing up” clients etc. In the Bujinkan we like to say that we train to “become more fully realized human beings.” We put our training into our lives to improve ourselves holistically.

### **Every style I look at claims to be the “ultimate” combat art!?**

As soon as you begin researching “self defense” or “combat art” you’re going to notice that the marketing in this is simply out of control. If you’ve ever thought political debates could get heated, just try to tell a martial artist that you like some art besides theirs better. As a quick test I did a Google search on “combat art” and one of the first hits I had came up as follows:

## Women And Kids Trained To *Slaughter* Bigger Men In Just One Or Two Seconds!

This is the best - and certainly the *simplest* - training. You can learn devastating moves that will make you *invulnerable* against a larger opponent and learn them in just a **short afternoon** of watching \*\*\*\*'s training tapes. Look, the entire package is a lot longer, but the meat of what you'll learn... the stuff that's really going to make you a truly dangerous fighter... will only take you about ONE HOUR to learn.

Now, I've never seen the training in question...but I've also never seen ANY technique that can make you completely invulnerable against ANY opponent. Validity notwithstanding, everyone is going to claim to be able to turn you into an invincible killing machine in about as long as it takes you to write a check. The key is to research the style taught from *legitimate* sources at the end of this FAQ I'll list some of the sources that I've found useful in my own research. As far as internet sources go try Wikipedia:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_martial\\_arts](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_martial_arts)

And as you'll read later, interview the instructor yourself; decide if what they are teaching is right for you.

## Martial Art Schools

Okay so you've asked yourself why you want to train in the martial arts, you've lost many nights of sleep doing exhaustive research to find the style that's right for you. Now its time to find a school to learn it at.

**I want to train in X martial art style but there aren't any schools that teach it nearby what do I do?**

Unfortunately this is a common issue to run into. Without a place to train it will prove *extremely* difficult and costly to pursue a given style. The best route most of the time is to choose another style that has a more accessible training location.

**Can I learn my style of choice from books and videos alone?**

No, you probably cannot. Books and DVDs are generally meant to be used as training aids by current practitioners of a given style. Without an instructor of some type to correct you; you'll likely develop bad habits or be unable to grasp fundamental principles. All that said; the book and video thing can get expensive fast.

## **I must learn X martial art style and I don't care what it takes! What should I do?**

Okay if you insist. I recommend finding the nearest "high level" instructor of the style, be they a few hours away or in another country; send them an email/letter (you may need it translated into their native language, so pay a translator.) Inform them of your intent and take their advice, they'll likely tell you to come to them for training, make the arrangements, save the money, and go. You'll need to try to get to your teacher once or twice a year. Supplement your training with books and videos. Get a training partner or two, make a training schedule and stick to it. The only way you'll ever improve is constant practice.

Training this way isn't impossible, just expensive and difficult, if you have the willpower for it, more power to you.

## **I've chosen my style(s) and there are several schools in the area, which one do I choose?**

All martial arts schools should offer you a free class, call or email to schedule one. This is a dual sided interview. On your end, it's a chance to see if the style is right for you, find out what their prices are, and see if you like the instructor and other students. For the school, they are interviewing you to see if you'll be a good student, or just a "trouble maker."

After your trial class ask yourself a few questions:

1. Did you have fun? If the answer is no, don't sign up.
2. Do you like the instructor(s)? This doesn't mean "Can the instructor kick everybody's a\*\*?" Do you like them as a person? If not, don't sign up.
3. Do you like the style? Yeah, you read all about it (well you should have) but did you *enjoy* training in it? If not, don't sign up.
4. Do you like the students? The other students will be your training partners, if you don't like them, or can't trust them someone may get hurt. So don't sign up.

## **How much should Martial Arts training cost? And what about a contract?**

Cost for training varies by style taught (of course) but as a general rule should cost about the same as a gym or health club in the same area. This is because from a business standpoint gyms and martial arts schools have similar overhead, rent on the space, utilities, and insurance for liability. Contracts are standard operating procedure; they help a school have steady income to pay the bills. Contracts are typically 6 months to a year. Just be very clear about what you're agreeing to before signing anything. I've seen a few options to "pre-pay for a black belt"; paying up front for 3 years of training with a significant discount, just be sure you intend to stick with it. Most martial arts school don't offer any kind of refund...ever.

Some styles of martial arts are very "popular" such as Brazilian Jujutsu, made famous in UFC (ultimate fighting championship) can and will ask a much higher price for training than comparable arts in the area.

## Can I offer to work at a school instead of paying tuition?

No. This question may seem outrageous to many readers, but you'd be surprised how often someone asks. Unfortunately the days where you could just show up at a temple and work your fingers to the bone to be allowed to live and train there have passed. From a school/instructor's point of view allowing someone to train on "work study" would be an unfair to the paying students, but also unfair to you; Martial arts are very much about balance, if you can't afford to train, your efforts would be better used to improve yourself professionally so that you could afford to train comfortably. (Who says "no" to more money?)

## Other general Martial Arts Questions

So, hopefully at this point you've been able to find a style, school, and instructor that's best for you. This section is meant to answer to miscellaneous questions about martial arts in general.

### What's with the title? What is a "gaijin?"

Gaijin is a Japanese word made up of two parts: 'Gai' meaning "foreign" or "outside" and 'Jin' meaning "person" So "Foreign Person" or "outsider." Traditionally used by the Japanese to describe non-Japanese. So in my title "gaijin" refers to persons "foreign to" or "outside" of the martial arts.

### All these styles seem to be Asian, are there any American or European styles?

Of course. You are probably already familiar with boxing, fencing and Greco-roman wrestling. In Europe martial arts weren't "passed" down as they were in the orient (different society). That said; if you do some research you'll find some groups who specialize in "armored combat", Viking combat styles, and even Jousting. As for "American" arts; there are Native American combative styles. I've been unable to find a "name" to call them by but they include archery, unarmed combat, and the use of small axes. Other US based arts have been primarily created and used by the armed forces specifically to accomplish their mission, research them by armed forces group (Marines, Delta force, Navy SEALs.)

### I'm not comfortable with "bowing" do I have to?

You don't *have* to do anything. Most people are uncomfortable with the idea of a bow because they don't understand it. It is because of the culture, Europe has lots of space, people aren't crowded together so they don't place much value on personal space. Here in the US we place more value on personal space than Europe, we consider a hug a personal thing to be done between friends, and we shake hands. In Asia its very crowded people have no space, so they value what personal space they have above all else, so they bow.

Besides your practicing a Martial Art here...you don't let *anyone* touch you without permission, why make yourself vulnerable?

### **Will a martial art “go against” my religion?**

If you want it to, then it will. Martial Arts aren't inherently religious. Some have a philosophy that *can* be followed optionally such as the samurai bushido or Aikido's philosophy of pacifism. But they don't (usually) conflict with religious beliefs. Bring such questions to your instructor and let them explain it. Failing that, ask your religious advisor (priest etc.) for their viewpoint.

### **What about meditation and my religion?**

As stated above, you make it what it is. If you want to call meditation praying...go ahead. Meditation in sport and combat arts is generally optional. Its part of what is being taught in the meditative arts however...thus the name. Explain the problem to your instructor (or priest) and let them explain.

### **At the school I'm attending they call the head instructor “Master” I'm not comfortable with that, what should I do?**

Some schools do this (mine is not one of them) I would probably express my concern to the “master” and let them explain. If unsatisfied with the answer, simply find another school.

### **What should I call my Instructor?**

Inside your school you probably shouldn't be on a “first name” basis with the instructor. The title used will vary by style: most Japanese arts use “Sensei” (teacher), Chinese arts use “Sifu” (Brother or guide), In the Bujinkan we use “Shidoshi” (Instructor). Luckily we're blessed to be American; so “Sir” works fine.

### **How can I tell if my Instructor is “good” at the style being taught?**

This is a tough question...Let me begin by saying that a great martial artist is NOT necessarily a great teacher. Just because they say their ex Special Forces agent who has seen 4 million combat hours and never been scratched doesn't mean they can even explain a basic punch to a new student. During your trial class pay attention to how they interact with you and the other students, are they explaining principles in terms you can understand? Or are they telling you “its too high level for you?” Trust your feelings, it goes back to “do you like the instructor?” In martial arts it is necessary to place a great deal of trust in your instructor.

In my art you really only need to look at their spine, if their “good” (or even just okay) they'll keep their spine straight throughout an entire technique. This also goes for many other martial arts (most of the Japanese excluding judo, and many of the Chinese)

## Conclusion and Final Thoughts

Decide on a martial art based on your own life, not on the opinions of others. Choose a school based on the people, the money, and the location; It all has to work into your life naturally. Go into your art of choice with an open mind and an open heart. In the end it doesn't matter what style you choose, all true martial arts have the same goal: to help you become a more fully realized human being.

Useful Sources:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_martial\\_arts](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_martial_arts) - Wikipedia is a free online encyclopedia edited by its users. This link is to a huge list of martial arts organized by region. Each name is a link to a full description of an art and all the info you'll need to research it.

<http://koryu.com/> - the koryu are a group of "authentic" Japanese killing arts. This site validates many (not all) of the koryu and give resources on each. In reference to this article all arts listed on this site are combatives. The koryu does NOT deal with Bujinkan Budo Taijutsu or Ninjutsu as they do not fall under their definition of a "traditional samurai art"

<http://www.hopology.com/> - This organization deals with the study of human combative behavior and has articles pertaining to many martial arts. Reader beware, they are quite opinionated.

<http://www.winjutsu.com/> - This site has a listing of most of the Bujinkan Dojo in the US. They also have a store and event calendar.

<http://pittsburghbujinkan.com/> - The website for the dojo where I train.

Questions, comments or suggestions can be sent to [dojocho@pittsburghbujinkan.com](mailto:dojocho@pittsburghbujinkan.com) please put "gaijin guide" in the subject to avoid our spam filter.