

## MARTIAL ARTS FOR DISABLED PEOPLE

It is a little known fact that martial arts is suitable for anyone. The main reason for this is the abundance of martial arts movies and competitions that in reality bear little resemblance to true martial arts but are rather more akin to gymnastics. This is re-enforced by the spate of documentaries, allegedly portraying the true martial arts of different countries and grand masters.

The reality is that proper martial arts are one of the best forms of exercise that a person can undertake as it provides core benefits such as increased strength and stability, improved confidence and self esteem, the ability to defend oneself if needed, and good overall health and fitness. If one studies the history of the accepted founders of modern day martial arts, a surprising fact will be found: the majority of these founders were introduced to martial arts because of the disabilities they had as children, ranging from a lack of good health to learning disabilities and other varied illnesses that could eventually lead to some form of disability. Gichin Funakoshi, for example, the founder of the Shotokan style of Karate who introduced Karate to Japan in the 1920's, was such a person. His parents insisted that he learned martial arts in an attempt to improve his failing health. He lived indeed well into his 90's, something that would have been thought impossible when he was a young boy.

I myself did not take up martial arts until I was 42 years old, when I was finding that my health and general well being was fast diminishing. I am far from being a gymnastic type practitioner, yet I continue to train each day, teach several classes per week and attend courses throughout the year both as a student and an instructor in the UK and overseas. There are few other sport disciplines that can be learned at such a late stage in life and that a person can continue to actively enjoy until they die. I have also come across some amazing disabled people, who not only participate in martial arts, but use their disability to their full advantage. I remember one class I attended with my instructor where a deaf girl wanted to learn Karate and was amazed at how fast she picked things up. The reason seemed to be her disability. She merely had to look and concentrate on what she saw and was able to copy it perfectly without the interference or distraction of outside sound. As far as I am aware, she continues to train where she now lives. Another person that springs to mind is someone I have trained with on several occasions and who, despite having one healthy arm and one made of steel tubing, used to be a very successful competitive fighter in his younger days. People used to say how brave he was, but anyone who was on the receiving end of that steel tubing wished that they too would be allowed to cover their arms with steel tubing. He never allowed his disability to hinder him in any way. He still trains and teaches to this day.

So let us accept the fact that true martial arts are suitable for everyone, regardless of age, gender or ability. By accepting this fact, we open up a whole new world of healthy exercise to anyone who is open to experience it for themselves. The first question we need to ask ourselves is whether we want to learn martial arts, and, if the answer is yes, then the next two questions are where and when?

Most instructors I know will gladly accept disabled practitioners into their clubs and won't feel the need to specifically mention that they welcome disabled students. Areas to look for martial arts clubs in your area are the usual places such as the Yellow Pages, local newspapers and the Internet. Unfortunately not all martial arts clubs are listed in these media or have web sites. The karate association I belong to. The Seijinkai Karate-Do Association, will be happy to help you find out if there is a club in your area you. Alternatively, you can go to our club listing, or, of course, you can contact me directly at <mailto:brian@rbkok.com>.