

Martial Arts as a Treatment for Autism

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My interest in the martial arts began back in 1983 while I was attending the community college in Urbana, Illinois. I was talking to a very attractive young girl who just so happened to mention she had a green belt in Karate. My mind filed that away, but never forgot. At the time, I knew there was something wrong with me, yet I didn't know what it was. (It would be several years before I found out.) Instinctively I wondered, though, if the solution to this "problem" was to be found somewhere in the martial arts.

Skip ahead to late 1995. Three significant things happen. Power Rangers bombard our lives, I become very good friends with two black belts, Toni Flowers is about to get a black belt, and I find I have something I had never had before. Something called "money." Again, instinctively, I knew it was time. Thomas wanted, no, needed to explore the martial arts. He felt the Moodo JungShin [Martial Arts Spirit] on the wind and was compelled to follow wherever it led.

Where it led was to a disaster at first. Once I switched schools, things began to change. I began attending the Oriental Martial Arts College, run by 8th Dan [Degree] Black Belt Joon Pyo Choi. He is a Grand Master of TaeKwonDo and 1988 Olympic coach who brought home 11 medals. He is a tiny man. At first it looks like anyone could take him. One changed one's mind when one looks into his eyes. His eyes burn with a flame of power I have rarely, if ever, seen before. He is both the gentlest and toughest man I have ever met. Over time, I have become very proud to be able to call him my friend.

I was asked why I wanted to take courses. I replied, "I want to be the first person with autism to carry the rank of a black belt in the martial arts." This has since become a serious goal of mine. Whether a person with autism can achieve this goal or not remains to be seen. It also depends on who you ask. The professionals will tell you it can't be done, the advocates will encourage you to go all the way. I intend to go all the way, until wheels fall off and burn. (If you know of anyone with autism who has done it, please let me know. I'd be interested.) I was also hoping that the martial arts would help me deal with the constant low-intensity pain that constantly pervades my body.

The first day I had class I was a little late. (Try figuring out how to tie that belt. It takes time to learn.) I walked in and class had already begun. There was a female instructor leading the class. As I walked into the locker room, she saw me and smiled through the window. It was a beautiful smile. "Definitely someone worth getting to know," I thought. Ironically, these words would be echoed to me

verbatim by Master Choi two months later. Debbie introduced herself and I think there must be something almost magical about the Noon of the Moodoin. [Eyes of the Martial Artist.] Debbie was completely transparent. Everything you ever wanted or needed to know about her was in her eyes. She had confidence, strength, incredible beauty, compassion, talent, and just a hint of sadness that must have come from her past at some point.

Then we got down to business and I set about learning the forms. (This was after getting permission to wear special martial arts shoes and pressure bracelets in the do-jang. The shoes were to keep my feet like feeling I was walking on fire and the bracelets were to tell me where my arms (and the rest of my body) were in space.) Classes always begin and end with Moog-Nyum. [Meditation.] I had heard demonic things about meditation, but my fears were soon laid to rest. The object is to breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth, concentrating on nothing but your breathing. This would produce Moo-Shim. [Empty Mind.] As a person with autism, I found this difficult and thus modified my meditation to a form the ancient Ninja used, having studied ninjutsu extensively. It was much easier and more relaxing for me and achieved the same results.

My body had no idea what it was doing that first day. I felt like a total neophyte in front of all who knew the forms so well. I learned later it was not so much learning the form, it was practicing the form once you learned it. This is the key to TaeKwonDo.

It began to get easier after time, and I went from a white belt to a yellow belt after just 14 classes. At that point things got harder for me again. Hard enough to the point where I considered leaving. Then somewhere along the line soon after I was awarded the yellow belt, I increased my dosage of Klonopin from 1.5 mg. a day to 4 mg. a day. The results were dramatic. I slept better. I was more focused in class, the low-intensity pain, while still there, was decreased, and I was actually able to remove the pressure bracelets. (The instructors never liked the pressure bracelets.)

I have learned many things since taking these classes. Both about life and about autism. I believe I have a much better grasp of the reality of vestibular and proprioceptive difficulties people with autism face. This will serve to make me a much better advocate. I better understand the intense pain that both myself and my brothers and sisters go through on a daily basis just to stay alive.

For those who have read *Soon Will Come The Light*, I have also learned what really happened between myself and Princess Gwendolyn 13 years ago. She gave me a wonderful gift. She showed me something that I already had inside me but was totally unaware of. I believe now that every person with autism has these things in abundance, far more than the general population. Yet they are at the same time severely lacking in them because they are so unaware that they are there. These things are evident to anyone who knows a child (or adult) with

autism, but oblivious to the person himself. They are courage, inner strength, and the ability and potential to be at peace with yourself. All those years ago Gwendolyn showed me where these things were inside me, and the martial arts is only just now teaching me the true value of what it means to possess these qualities.

Finally, I have learned something that the majority of people spend their entire lives searching to learn. I have learned the meaning of life.

The purpose of life is self improvement. I have come to truly believe this. The recent birth of my sister's daughter has shown me that if you are not being born, you are dying. While we are improving ourselves, we are living while we are dying. If we are not improving ourselves, we are dying without purpose. Improvement can come in many ways. Through the martial arts, through nutrition and exercise, through a college education, through raising a family, through reading a good book or even a simple article. (By reading this article, you have improved. The extent to which you have improved is not important. What is important is that you have gained knowledge (or knowledge of an opinion) you did not possess before.)

The other purpose of life is to help others improve. (This especially applies to the more spiritual among you.) All parents of children with disabilities do this on a daily basis. Some more than others. They are doing what they were put on this earth to do. By helping each other improve, we ultimately improve ourselves.

At the time you read this, I will be a blue belt. When you see me keynote in July, I am hoping to be a green belt. The martial arts has added a tremendous sense of balance to my life, giving me the occasional (and very much needed) break from advocacy. Between these two things, I find a sense of belonging, peace, happiness and (most of all) purpose I have never known before.