

# Would that really work?

by NEEL TUMMALA

**WOULD that really work?"** That's a question that martial arts instructors, at least American martial arts instructors, will hear more times than they can count. Beyond simple curiosity, there is a reason why this is such a common question. It has to do with the role of martial arts in American culture. But while it's easy to dismiss this concern with practicality as an American obsession, it does raise some interesting questions about how, or even if, martial arts should evolve.

Martial arts in America can be divided into two broad groups. Arts that have long pedigrees in

American culture, such as boxing, tend to be practiced as sport. Once an art is practiced in this context, the goal shifts away from the cultural values associated with the art and towards competitive effectiveness.

While there are sacrifices in terms of culture and history, there are benefits in terms of evolution. Techniques can be honed and improved.

The curriculum can be refined. The other group consists of arts that were imported within the last 40 years. Our exposure to arts like karate, kung fu, or capoeira first came through movies that were exaggerated, to put it mildly.

After watching enough people flip 18 times through the air before kicking their opponent squarely in the face, we began to ask the familiar question; "...would that really work?"

Martial arts instructors have always had to answer that question from new students. But, for the most part, they have avoided the sorts of pressures that we associate with combat sports.

Even the prevalence of martial arts tournaments hasn't essentially changed this dynamic. But that distinction between arts like tae kwon do and arts like boxing may be crumbling.

The rise of mixed martial arts as a popular sport has raised questions about how to synthesize



different arts to make them more practical and effective.

This is significant because it is clearly having an impact on the traditional martial arts community. Schools that once specialized in karate or hapkido now feel the need to offer mixed martial arts classes, often as a business decision. The rarity of any form of silat in America has ensured that silat has thus far avoided this pressure. But when these other schools have to answer the question of whether a technique would really work, they have to answer another question; "...are we failing in our primary mission?"

We have always considered the goals of traditional martial arts (self defense and transmitting cultural values) to be consistent. But are they? In order to effec-

tively teach self-defense, do martial arts need to continually revisit and refine their techniques? And if so, will they compromise their cultural integrity? If one concedes, as I do, that evolution is necessary for any art, then there appear to be different models that

we can use.

If we consider the techniques to be an important part of an art's identity and legacy, we can practice a policy of addition. We can add to our core curriculum with peripheral techniques developed by enterprising



instructors or adapted from other arts. Hopefully this allows us to find an appropriate balance between our two primary goals. The downside, of course, is that over time this can make a curriculum unwieldy.

Alternately, we can use a model of substitution. New techniques will naturally replace old ones over time. This emphasizes the self-defense goals of an art over its history. Either way, the keys are an open mind, official recognition of the need for evolution, and the willingness to consider where arts may be lacking.

The alternative is to treat arts as static. That is not necessarily a bad thing. This allows us to respect traditions and preserve its cultural history. Of course, in the interest of honesty, when a student asks; "...would that really work?", sometimes we just need to answer; "No".