

## Study Martial Arts—Grow Closer to God

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Going on three years, I have been practicing Tae Kwon Do at Challenge Martial Arts. In that time, I have found a tighter connection to God. What is it about doing the daily work of martial arts and the development of the school with my wife that has acted to enhance my connection to God?

I am Steve Fritsche, the husband of a martial artist and father to another. My wife, Heather, holds a third degree rank in Tae Kwon Do and first degree rank in Tang Soo Do. She is an instructor running her own school. For the last three years, we have lived and breathed martial arts.

In this essay, I will demonstrate that my martial arts study is bringing forth and promoting various habits which act together to draw me closer to God. I am not unique. This does not only apply to me. I will illustrate how studying martial arts can draw you closer to God as well.

Martial arts was a peripheral part of my life for many years. In 2008, we started my daughter, Emlyn, in Tae Kwon Do at Victory Martial Arts, a school in San Antonio, Texas. The Victory franchise had been around for several years but had recently opened the school near us. We decided to enroll Emlyn as she truly needed to learn to work hard, to be more bulletproof and to build confidence in herself. The Victory school called themselves a "school of life." This had resonance with us, and we felt that Emlyn would really benefit by gaining life skills as well as physical skills. She gained a lot more from the martial arts training than I expected, though, and it was during her training that she decided to receive baptism. I thought that the connections she made at church and her home school education had made the difference, and I am sure that all played a role. But I believe there is more to it, and her martial arts study may be it.

It was not long afterwards that Heather decided to enroll as well. She felt like it might be nice to train alongside Emlyn to help her and to just do it with her. Heather and Emlyn got closer to each other during this time no doubt through their training together.

Once Heather had enrolled at Victory Martial Arts, there was no additional cost for me to join. But I was busy with work, home, church ministry, and much more stuff than I could handle. So I rejected the notion outright. I had studied Ishen Ryu, an Okinawan Karate style, for a few months when I was in

college and had enjoyed it, but being busy with schoolwork and employment, I failed to see the value in training considering all the competing priorities.

After almost nine years of training, Heather had achieved third degree Blackbelt and was in her final training preparing to test for fourth degree when she started teaching martial arts to patients in a women's recovery facility. She provided weekly classes for any of the women there who were interested. Naturally, I was supportive of my wife and assisted. I wore my Ishen Ryu blue belt which was only 8<sup>th</sup> kyu. Since we were volunteers, we were permitted to present the material as we saw fit, and Heather developed a 12-week course with character lessons derived from the Holy Bible.

Religious content in martial arts curricula was not a new idea. In fact, the early martial arts embedded religion in the practice because having highly skilled killers walking around in public without a strong moral compass would be a bad idea. Even the early martial arts schools in America taught some of the basic religion from the East such as Shinto and Buddhism. However, these religions were not well received in the West, and much of the religious content was simply excised from the curriculum. The character lessons remained, for the most part, but were simply unsupported with any religious content. So Heather adding the religion into her curriculum to support the character lessons was very natural, a good fit. And the women at the facility loved learning the character lessons...some, for the first time in their lives. We saw tremendous growth in some of the women there.

In 2016, we came to Nikiski, Alaska and began to plan the opening of a new martial arts school here. Heather expanded her curriculum with the goal of growing Blackbelts in Tae Kwon Do...and in life! Of course, with my background in karate and also having lived through Heather's and Emlyn's journey to blackbelt and how it had affected them so positively, I supported the project wholeheartedly and in May 2017 eagerly began training techniques and forms as we were finishing the build of the studio.

Throughout all the years prior to running our own studio in Nikiski, my relationship with God was lackluster at best. Oh, I worshipped God. I served God as best I knew how. But what I found training with other students here at Challenge Martial Arts (CMA) over these three years has been so much more profound than just learning techniques and forms. Martial Arts has a wide variety of aspects: physical, mental, emotional, spiritual and social. Individually, these are all good pursuits. Together, however, they add up to so much more. In fact, all of these elements have worked in sync to draw me closer to God, even more so with the religious overtones built into the curriculum.

Let's step back a moment. Who is God with whom we might want to have a close relationship? Well, God is the Creator of everything. He made Heaven and Earth. He made us to worship and love Him. He gave us free will to choose to love Him. Our lifestyle of doing things contrary to what God wants us to do drives a wedge between Him and us and damages our relationship with Him. In His Word, the Holy Bible, we learn that a relationship with Him is very rewarding. I don't believe that we fully understand what is so rewarding about a relationship with someone who is hard to see, hard to perceive in our everyday lives, and seems to exist only to discipline us. This is much like how we see our parents when we are young. They are corrective, restrictive, and sometimes seem overbearing. Then, later in life, we see that they were teaching us how to be safe, happy and productive, and we cherish the relationship with them. In that same way, as we mature spiritually, we begin to yearn for such a relationship with God.

Building a relationship with God is surprisingly challenging. In my experience, developing and maintaining a relationship takes purposeful establishment of habits. I know of nine particular habits that I believe really help drive the process of growing to long for a relationship with God.

The first habit is to be thankful a lot and often. Studies show that being thankful opens us to satisfaction. Jesus gave thanks a lot, a good example. At CMA, we develop the habit by routinely giving

thanks to each other when we exchange compliments, helpful hints or physical items. Being thankful is exercised frequently. For me, being thankful has been a habit throughout my adult life, but through the discipline of expressing thanks to each other so routinely, I found myself giving a little bow and a “thank you” to people in the general public. Usually, I got strange looks for it, but inside, it actually felt really good.

The second practice that helps us build a relationship with God is true humility. This helps us to be open to someone being greater than ourselves but also helps us to understand our value in God’s eyes. At CMA, we learn about true humility and distinguish it from false humility, we learn about our personal value as we make accomplishments and also help others to do the same, and we learn to accept that there are others who are above us in many ways. For me, to have teenagers kick me in the head while sparring often reminded me that I was vulnerable, and when I got the rare head shot on someone taller or challenging to spar with, I would feel that understanding of who I was and that I am capable of things and, thus, have worth. As a child of God, I know that He wants us to fully know our worth.

A third habit that brings us closer to God and is especially helpful, is studying God’s Word. God has such great messages for us, and when we truly get the message, we feel a stronger connection to Him. At CMA, we read scriptures and commit them to memory to earn our blue stripes for testing. This is a unique opportunity to find explicit application in phrases handed to us by God Himself. For me, I marveled at how appropriate God is in His Word. He has great messages for me. At CMA, we also study essays that included scriptures from the Bible written about the components of good character that help us meditate on the Word of God, and the discussions that we have bring different perspectives from other students. The more we learn about God through His Word, the closer we come to Him.

Another very important habit is serving others. Service to others is part of doing what God wants to be done, and as His servant, we understand Him and His will more clearly. I started out on the project of

building the studio with Heather as a service to God. Our intent was to bring God's Word to the community. From the first moment that we decided to do it, the service to God has been foremost in my mind. Also, in our studies at CMA, we serve each other routinely as part of every class. And we promote service by tying projects outside CMA to earning achievement stars. These are embroidered stars that we wear on our uniforms as visual reminders that we have been exercising the character components that CMA teaches, and we must collect certain numbers of stars to be eligible to take various promotion tests. Personally, I had been asked to teach lessons at my church on song leading, and I had been resistant. I know that service is an integral part of doing God's will here on earth, and I came to understand through my service requirements that what I am capable of doing to serve, I need to do. This is God's desire, and it serves His purpose.

Another habit is a biggie...Prayer. When we pray, we are expressing ourselves to God. When praying, we need to listen to what God has for us to know. Although we do not spend time in corporate prayer at CMA, we do take some of the meditation time to word a prayer. I found this habit to be very helpful in connecting my experience with God directly by communicating with Him. Through prayer, I am opening myself to His messages to me. And, through that openness, I can see more clearly that His message is also revealed in the practice of the character components that we learn.

The sixth habit that helps us build a relationship with God is to die to ourselves. We give up the pursuits of the flesh, our comfort, agenda and desires. This opens us to be better servants and to more often do what God wants. At CMA, we are often doing work that is difficult and painful, which helps us overcome the selfish considerations of wanting to minimize our own pain. We follow the lessons as planned by the instructor which are intentionally difficult and designed to push us past our breaking point. All the while, we are learning to be an encouragement to lower rank students who look up to the higher ranks. As I advanced in rank and abilities, I started to learn that it is encouraging and empowering to a younger student to see me persevering in the face of difficulty and adversity. My own comfort became less

important to me than it was for the lower rank students to see the example of hard work and perseverance being set by me.

A seventh habit is the transformation of our thoughts. Transforming our thoughts is much like dying to ourselves. I found that my own thought patterns shifted away from selfish thoughts and turned more to God and His agenda. My agenda became less important to me. I found that when we mold our minds to His likeness, we commune with Him. At CMA, the various practices of our studio are geared toward conditioning our thoughts to focus on something bigger than ourselves. We find the higher purpose in the discipline of our study. We lose the focus on selfish ambitions and see the bigger picture. Also, we practice meditating. I found that I gained a great deal of mindfulness from the practice. I could bring myself to be more aware of what goes on around me. Rather than just blundering haphazardly through life, I found I could use mindfulness to bring focus and clarity to every moment as often as I want. When I want to focus on my relationship with God, this mindfulness helps me to gain a level of clarity and focus.

One of the two remaining habits is also a huge one. This is a primary principle of Christianity, to repent of sin. Confession and repentance help us to renew our commitment to die to ourselves and to transform our thoughts. This is integral to the above and thus, to drawing closer to Him. At CMA, we are routinely reminded of our failures and shortcomings. At first, it is just frustrating to see myself repeating the same mistakes over and over. Eventually, we find that we have to purposefully turn from those mistakes and put them behind us. It doesn't mean that we won't make those same mistakes again, but we give ourselves grace and then, intentionally turn from those mistakes to achieve correctness. This habit translates well to turning away from the mistakes we make against God and brings us closer to Him.

The ninth habit, and I think the greatest of all, is love. This is, without a doubt, the essence of being close to God. He is Love. When we love, we are being Him to the world. We are shining His light in the darkness of this world. At CMA, we draw close to each other as we work hard, sharing tremendous adversities of working hard side by side, hitting and kicking while sparring with each other as partners and not adversaries. We help each other overcome problems with our techniques that, although small, make for big frustrations. And in those moments, we offer each other love, kindness and compassion. As we learn to love, we also draw close to God who IS Love.

Over these last three years, I have developed many of these habits. Outside the studio, I find that I employ them in the conduct of my life. In fact, recently I was invited to interview for a job position. As I prepared my mind for the interview, I considered my martial arts training and how that might make me a more attractive employee. I thought about service, true humility, being thankful, confessing my shortcomings. I thought about being mindful and focused so that I could feel the meaning of the interview questions and the attitudes of the interviewers in order to provide answers that truly expressed me and my thoughts so that the interviewers would understand who I am inside. I presented well and got the job offer. In the same way, now that I have the job, the process is really the same. I am mindful, build connections with my coworkers, serve them and apply God's Word to my behavior.

I am not made magically perfect through this process, but I have more understanding of who I am. I have a better understanding of God and how He wants to connect with me. He is in my thoughts frequently. His Word spurs me on. I feel Him watching out for me and providing a light that I may see the path He has laid out for me. I feel that relationship in my life.

I know that there are still habits that I want to develop more. I want to pray more. I want to be more repentant as I am still often falling short of what God expects of me. And, finally, the transformation of my thoughts to be like God's is a long, long process that I have barely begun. But I can see the path, and



I am continuing my training with the goal of complete transformation. Bringing together the physical, mental, emotional, spiritual and social aspect of the martial arts training will continue to build strong, positive habits that will draw me to God. I don't have to think about that in the moment. I train. I work hard. I try to be the hardest worker in the room. Through the effort comes the life for which I long, a life with God.