

## The Kick of Karate

What do 10 million Americans see in the martial arts? Everything they need to block, punch, and kick their way through the day.

by Natalie Engler

photographs by Leslie Flores

from [Fast Company](#) issue 3, page 142

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When I tell people I'm a black belt in Karate, most look at me as if I'm nuts. They can't believe I spend \$85 a month and three nights a week to do battle in one of those sweaty, stuffy, frill-free schools. Others chop the air and emit the high-pitched wail made famous by Bruce Lee. After six years of this I just shake my head.

Karate is not about feisty little tumbler superheroes who always prevail against the bad guys. Karate is about balance. Part physical, part spiritual, it offers a way for hyperstressed, hyperactive, hyperachievers to find a peaceful, powerful center.

Mike McCue is the 28-year-old founder and CEO of Paper Software, Inc., which creates products for virtual reality on the Internet. A black sash, he's studied Closed Crane Kung-fu since 1985. "Starting up a business is like being in a long sparring match. You get hit, you get surprised. Kung-fu has trained me to keep going. You learn more, practice more, work harder. You keep your eye on the goal."

The martial arts have as many dimensions as they have students. And there are 10 million people practicing the martial arts in this country -- last year 1.5 million new participants signed up for classes.

What they'll find depends on what they're looking for. For many, of course, Karate and the other martial arts build self-defense skills. For others, the study of Karate is a way to focus mentally, to clear your mind of the daily round of endless meetings, political skirmishes, and do-or-die deadlines. In any martial art, mental toughness is everything. Because once you're out on that floor, there's no turning back.

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### Afternoon, Day One: Walnut Creek, California

My kids ask me if I can do a spinning back kick," says Greg Schultz, 45, a financial adviser and a fourth-degree black belt. "I tell them they've been watching too many Steven Seagal pictures -- that's just Hollywood Karate."

I've traveled from Boston to see how Karate is taught at JKA Karate of California, a San Francisco dojo ( school ). Greg is one of the dojo's top students. He's also the head of two money management firms, Retirement Planning, Inc. and Asset Allocation Advisors, Inc. in Walnut Creek. Greg is one of several businesspeople I know who, year in and year out, devote their Monday, Wednesday, and Friday nights to training in Karate.

Greg took up Karate in the fall of 1970, when he was a student at the University of California at Santa Cruz. Karate was exotic, and that was good enough reason to try it. But it wasn't until he left school for a year, at age 21, that he got hooked. He was waiting tables in Maui when a friend told him about the Hawaii Karate Association. There he discovered the discipline and structure that was missing from his beach-bum existence. It wasn't a spiritual thing, he insists. "Karate was just fun."

Karate is still fun. But it's different. "It's more of a personal quest," he says. "It has less and less to do with other people and more and more to do with me. I'm ultimately trying to test and push and improve myself. It's no longer a question of: 'Can I kick faster than the other guy?' The question now is: 'Can I kick faster?' Period."

I ask if he's learned anything from Karate that he's applied to his business life.

Recently, he replies, the top six students took the school's sensei (teacher), Kenichi Haramoto, out for his 53rd birthday. Beer and sake were flowing. So were the stories.

"I don't think Sensei fully appreciates the character building he's done for us. So we tried to convey some examples beyond the superficial elements of technique and conditioning. When it was my turn to speak I told them about my business philosophy, which I call the Haramoto approach to business. It's very simple. When you attack, you resolve never to retreat. Sensei has this focus of purpose where it's clear that if he's coming at you he won't take a step back. It really screws up your opponent's counterattack. It becomes a battle of wills.

"It's all tied together," he continues, "particularly in business, where you face a lot of obstacles and it consumes all your energy and you rarely have a clear path. You need to be really focused and have a resolve that cannot be shaken loose."

He pauses and leans back in his chair. "Maybe I'd have the same discipline even if I hadn't trained in Karate. But I doubt it. I believe it's made a huge difference."

### **Evening, Day One: JKA Karate Dojo, San Francisco**

"Line up!" snaps sensei Kenichi Haramoto. We scramble to the back of the room and stand shoulder to shoulder. Greg Schultz, the highest-ranking student, heads the line.

"Seizaaaaaan!" Greg shouts, leading the bow-in ceremony that begins each class. We kneel on the wooden floor. "Mokusuuu!" he commands. We close our eyes and concentrate on our breathing. I try to adjust to the unfamiliar surroundings: the first floor of the Japanese Cultural and Community Center of Northern California in Japantown, where JKA Karate holds its classes. But the hum of a fan distracts me. "Mokuso Yame!"

We open our eyes after 30 seconds. Still kneeling, we bow to Sensei. He bows to us. We're ready to begin.

We spread out across the back of the room and face Sensei Haramoto. A traditional instructor, he speaks few words. Instead he demonstrates each move. Then he counts, as do all Karate instructors, in Japanese.

He throws a double-kick combination. "Ichi!...Ni!...San!" In an explosion of white we follow him, kicking out with one leg, then the other, as we lunge across the floor. We react to the count and kick at an imaginary opponent.

"Shi," he continues. "Goh!...Mawat-te!" We turn, executing a downward block. "Ichi!" he begins again. "Ni...no extra motion, no extra motion," he says, instructing us to keep the moves clean. Everyone stops as Sensei steps into a deep front stance and shows us how our kicks are supposed to look. A 53-year-old knee-surgery survivor, he more closely resembles a 35-year-old dancer as he gracefully extends one leg and then the other.

Sensei is teaching us kihon, combinations of basic punching, blocking, and kicking techniques. Through hundreds of repetitions, we are systematically training our arms and legs to control a surprise attacker.

We practice a half-dozen additional combinations. We drill at sparring. Then come kata, or forms, the most graceful part of Karate. We face a side wall covered with calligraphy scrolls and move through sequences of punches, kicks, strikes, and blocks. Some slow, some explosive, they're choreographed to defend against multiple attackers. Resembling powerful dance routines, they develop strength and improve reflexes. The discipline required might even help perfect character.

After three sets of four katas, we form a circle around the hall's periphery. Everyone squats. Greg counts while we do 30 leg lifts. Each person then takes a turn counting off an exercise: 30 push-ups, 30 counts of hip twisting, 30 counts of leg extensions. The class started 90 minutes ago. I'm ready to collapse. After 15 sets, the count returns to Greg.

I get up, thankful that I've made it through the class. Huh? Everyone else is still squatting. Greg begins the entire series again. After 15 additional sets, I'm totally spent.

We bow, meditate, and recite the five principles of Karate: "Seek perfection of character; be faithful; endeavor; respect others; refrain from violent behavior."

At last, the class is over. Until tomorrow.

## **Evening, Day Two: JKA Karate Dojo**

I walk to the center of the floor and face Greg Schultz. We bow and begin. Elbows in, knees bent, we watch each other warily for a few moments -- each waiting for the other to pounce. My pulse is racing. I get up on my toes and bounce nervously. It's my first time sparring with him. I don't know what to expect.

Greg is calm. Focused. His brown eyes observe my every move. Watching. Waiting.

Finally my patience gives out. "Eeeiii!" I shout as I lunge forward, concentrating all my energy into the sound. I explode off my right leg, aiming my left fist at his neck. Aha! I think I've got him. Dead wrong. He steps to the side and taps my fist away. In a flash he nails me in the solar plexus with a front snap-kick. My stomach muscles contract instinctively but there's no pain. He held back. A millimeter farther and the kick would've knocked me into next week.

After 20 years of training, Greg's control is masterful. But now I've learned something: he waits for his opponent to make the first move. As in business and life itself, in Karate you're at your most vulnerable when you attack.

Next time, I'll remember.

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## White Collar, Black Belt

Some first-step exercises for putting Aikido tactics into practice.

**From:** [Issue 03](#) | June 1996 | Page 146 | **By:** Natalie Engler

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Aikido teaches you not to resist force, but to harness it -- a technique that can prove invaluable in dealing with change, maintaining a positive attitude, and connecting with other people. "Aikido helps people refocus and regain their balance," says Richard Strozzi Heckler, a fifth-degree black belt. Heckler, cofounder of Tamilpias Aikido and Rancho Strozzi Institute in Petaluma, California, has initiated managers at [AT&T](#), [Cargill](#), [American Express](#), and [Bankers Trust](#) in the way of Aikido. "By working with your body as well as your mind, you can learn how to better manage your reactions to stress and conflict."

Here, then, are some first-step exercises for putting Aikido tactics into practice:

**The Challenge:** Overcoming anxiety

**The Solution:** Go with the flow

**The Exercise:** You and a partner face each other. Your partner moves to strike you in the face or stomach. (Go slow.) Concentrate on staying calm, exhale, and step aside at the last possible moment, placing your body at a right angle to your partner's. Now you're in a better position to defend yourself.

"People who haven't done this before tense up or try to grab the other person's arm," says Brad Barbeau, director of the Leadership Exploration and Development Institute at the [University of Chicago School of Business](#). "Learning how to step aside and let the attack pass is the first step toward confronting fear and staying calm."

**Coordinates:** Barbeau [brad.barbeau@gsb.uchicago.edu](mailto:brad.barbeau@gsb.uchicago.edu), an organizational development consultant, held a conflict-resolution workshop using Aikido techniques at First Chicago Bank.

**The Challenge:** Dealing with the office bully

**The Solution:** "Blend" but don't break

**The Exercise:** Facing a partner, stand about two feet apart. Your partner reaches toward you like he's going to shake hands. He grabs your right wrist with his right hand and pushes hard. The natural tendency is to try and push back, which sets up a battle in which the strongest person wins.

Repeat the exercise. This time, as your partner applies force, take a half-step to the right and pivot clockwise. Your partner will push by you and his force will throw him off-

balance. As he stumbles past, put your left arm around his shoulder and step with him in the same direction.

"The physical act of doing the exercise is essential," says Donald Levine, a second-degree black belt in Aikido and the Peter Bo Ritzma professor of sociology at the [University of Chicago](#). "It helps you form habits for constructively dealing with aggressive attacks, whether verbal or physical."

**Coordinates:** Levine [dlok@midway.uchicago.edu](mailto:dlok@midway.uchicago.edu) teaches a course to undergraduates titled "Conflict Theory and Aikido."

**The Challenge:** Staying focused

**The Solution:** Get yourself centered

**The Exercise:** Stand next to a partner, facing in the same direction. Your partner reaches over, places his fingertips against your chest, and slowly increases pressure. As more force is applied, you'll lose your balance.

Repeat the exercise, only this time concentrate on your "center" -- the part of your body that's two-and-a-half inches below your navel. As the force increases, visualize the pressure moving down to your abdomen. With practice, you'll be surprised to see how much stronger and stabler you become.

"It's all about staying centered -- a psychological state that's physically verifiable," says Thomas Crum, a consultant who uses Aikido and meditation to help people at Georgia Pacific, [Ashland Chemical](#), and [McDonald's](#) improve their focus and concentration.

**Coordinates:** Crum ([aikiworks@aol.com](mailto:aikiworks@aol.com)) is president of Aiki Works Inc. of Aspen, CO.



## How to Start in the Martial Arts

Sort through the best-known martial arts -- and pick the path that's best for you.

**From:** [Issue 03](#) | June 1996 | Page 144 | **By:** Natalie Engler

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You're looking for a breathtaking workout, a physical path to spiritual growth, or no-holds-barred moves for dropping an attacker. But where to begin? With Jujutsu? T'ai Chi? Use this guide to sort through the best-known martial arts -- and pick the path that's best for you.

### Karate-Do

**Translation:** "The way of the empty hand."

**Origin:** In the 16th century the conquering Chinese banned weapons in Okinawa; the islanders learned Kung-fu style boxing as a means of defense. Karate was perfected in the 1920s by Funakoshi Gichin, an Okinawan schoolmaster.

**Big Picture:** Kicks and punches concentrate the greatest amount of energy into one spot. The Karate "chop" was first used by Okinawans to smash through the bamboo armor worn by invading Japanese.

**Best For:** People looking for a no-nonsense mental and physical workout.

**High:** Executing a perfectly synchronized team kata with two partners.

**Low:** Sparring against someone who's out of control.

**Beginner's Heads Up:** Newcomers spend many hours practicing basic techniques and drills before sparring.

**Competition:** Points are awarded for controlled techniques that lightly tap an opponent's vital point.

**Web Coordinates:** Cyber-Dojo WWW home page (<http://www.ryu.com/CyberDojo/>) includes an extensive list of recommended schools and a bulletin board for corresponding with Cyber-Dojo members in 20 countries.

## **Kung-fu**

**Translation:** Bruce Lee popularized the Cantonese term, Kung-fu, meaning "a man's effort."

**Origin:** In the 6th century Bodhidharma, a Buddhist monk, developed a series of 18 exercises combining motion and meditation and taught them to the ascetic monks of the Shaolin temple. Kung-fu grew out of these exercises, which proved devastating in combat.

**Big Picture:** A complicated martial art of some 400 styles developed from careful observations of animals fighting. The motions are fluid, even acrobatic.

**Best For:** People who are looking for a dancelike martial art, where technique counts for more than raw power.

**High:** Throwing a 360-degree rolling kick -- only Bruce Lee-types can do it.

**Low:** Maintaining a "horse stance" until your legs shake uncontrollably.

**Beginner's Heads Up:** A neophyte might feel silly at first because the moves require you to be simultaneously alert and relaxed -- a counterintuitive combination.

**Competition:** In sparring, score one point for a simple kick, three points for a throw.

**Web Coordinates:** Kung-fu, the home page: descriptions of different styles and a listing of schools in the U.S., Canada, and Europe.  
<http://www.uwm.edu/~porath/kung/kung.html>

## **Aikido**

**Translation:** "The way of harmonizing energy."

**Origin:** Aikido is rooted in the medieval art of Aiki-jujutsu, which was taught only to initiates loyal to the Minamoto clan. It was in a school founded by the clan's descendants that Ueshiba Morihei (1883-1969) learned the techniques from which he would later develop modern Aikido.

**Big Picture:** Practitioners are taught to tame aggression and harness the attacker's force. Throws are executed using wrist and arm locks. Aikido is based on the use of ki, the Japanese term for the life force.

**Best For:** Those seeking spiritual and physical well-being (meditation is integral to Aikido), and turn-the-other-cheek types who favor a defensive way of handling conflict.

**High:** Subduing two opponents by turning their energy against them.

**Low:** Sparring sessions when you can't get into the flow, and the attacks seem like, well, attacks.

**Beginner's Heads Up:** Everyone takes a turn being the attacker. Meaning? Get ready to get thrown.

**Competition:** Most organizations consider competitions to be antithetical to Aikido's philosophy. U.S. Aikido Federation, 413-586-7122.

**Web Coordinates:** Aikido Today Magazine home page: there are just a few highlights from the magazine -- and a list of hundreds of schools, books, and videos, plus a calendar of events. <http://key.cyberg8t.com/atm/index.html>

## **Taekwondo**

**Translation:** "The art of kicking and punching."

**Origin:** Its roots date to the T'ang Dynasty (618-906), when the kingdom of Silla's army borrowed Chinese "open-handed" fighting styles to compensate for a lack of weapons. It was declared South Korea's national pastime in 1954.

**Big Picture:** Distinguished by its powerful arsenal of kicks. Some jumping kicks, developed to knock a rider off a horse, reach 10 feet in the air.

**Best For:** Those seeking a physically demanding workout with lots of flamboyant legwork.



**High:** Executing a flying snap-kick that fractures four boards.

**Low:** Breaking your foot on said boards.

**Beginner's Heads Up:** Some clubs teach Taekwondo as a sport, leading to competitions. Others teach it as a traditional martial art, melding self-defense and Buddhist philosophy.

**Competition:** Three-minute rounds of full-contact sparring. Points are awarded for scoring a "trembling shock"-- a kick that stops an opponent's advance.

**Web Coordinates:** American Taekwondo Association: lists ATA-affiliated schools in California, Kansas, Minnesota, and South Carolina. To find schools in other states, e-mail Jay Kohl at the ATA ([dragon@aristotle.net](mailto:dragon@aristotle.net)).  
<http://www.geocities.com/Colosseum/2530/>

## Jujutsu

**Translation:** "The art of gaining victory by yielding." (Also "Jujitsu.")

**Origin Beginning:** in the 17th century some martial arts schools incorporated the principles of atemi, a way of hitting certain "pressure points" that are known to cause pain. This fighting style became known as jujutsu, practiced by both the Ninja and Samurai warrior clans.

**Big Picture:** A carefully thought-out system of throws, holds, and locks applied to the limbs and joints. Favoring balance and speed over strength, Jujutsu relies on atemi points and has few rules.

**Best For:** The flyweight who dreams of throwing a 300-pound bully to the mat.

**High:** Knocking someone down with a simple finger joint lock.

**Low:** Getting walloped in an atemi-waza (vital point), such as your temple.

**Beginner's Heads Up:** Jujutsu is arguably the most aggressive martial art. Everything is hands on, up close, and personal.

**Competition:** Sparring matches have it all -- kicks, punches, take downs, and submission holds.

**Web Coordinates:** The Danzan-Ryu Jujutsu home page: background on the history and techniques of the Danzan-Ryu style of Jujutsu, plus a calendar of events and a list of schools in 17 states. <http://www.radix.net/~danzan>

## T'ai Chi Ch'uan

**Translation:** "Supreme ultimate fist"; also "supreme axis," for the axis at the center of the yin-yang symbol.

**Origin:** Founded in the 12th century by Chang San-Feng, a Taoist monk who observed a snake and a crane fight to a stalemate. His realization: it's better to yield before an attacker than to meet force with force.

**Big Picture:** Consists of a slow-motion series of ritualized movements designed to balance yin and yang through the manipulation of chi -- the vital life force that's centered below the abdomen.

**Best For:** Combining meditation with a workout. Not for the adrenaline junkie. High The rush of chi.

**Low:** Getting tagged by your coworkers as a Taoist guru.

**Beginner's Heads Up:** While it's centuries old, T'ai Chi gets lumped together with New Age activities. Says one practitioner, "A lot of people think it's touchy-feely-self-revealy. It isn't."

**Competition:** In "push hands" one person tries to knock another off balance, using a minimum of force.

**Web Coordinates:** The School of T'ai Chi Ch'uan: best for its list of about 20 schools sanctioned by the New York-based T'ai Chi Ch'uan Inc.  
<http://www. Dover.net/~tomltaichi.html>



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