

One of the secrets to longevity in martial arts is understanding how the will and the intention are developed by martial arts training and how the focus of training shifts as we age. Most martial arts emphasize repetitive training of the basics, particularly in the earlier stages of training. At this stage the focus is on conditioning and developmental exercises, stance training, posture holding, footwork, basic blocks and strikes, throws and locks, and break falls. This training not only toughens and tempers the body, making it more powerful and less susceptible to injury, but also strengthens the will. Through strengthening of the will, one trains the body to go past its normal limits. It is this stage that develops the "kung-fu" of one's art, the foundation that will later allow one to attain the maximum result with the minimum effort.

In the Chinese martial arts it is understood that while strengthening the will you must also develop the yi (mind/intention). In the internal arts the yi is developed through meditation, standing post exercises (zhan zhuang) and qi gong practice.

Many external arts also have versions of these practices. By balancing the development of the body and the will with the mind/intention, the results of one's training are maximized and the possibility of injury reduced. As a practitioner of traditional Chinese medicine I have noticed that many martial arts students quit training within the first few years because they push the body too hard, too quickly without also training the mind/intention.

Traditionally as one grows older greater emphasis should be placed on cultivating the mind and spirit. This means training intelligently with proper understanding of the importance of the mind/intention in controlling movement and generating power. At 40 or 50, trying to train as hard as you did when you were 20 often leads to diminishing returns or worse — a chronic injury that forces you to discontinue training. For example, I have treated numerous practi-

tioners of aikido, jiu-jitsu and aikijitsu who continued to take hundreds of high-speed falls in a single training session well into their 40s and 50s. For these individuals, continuing to use the will to attain the same mental "high" they received from hard training when they were younger caused them to sustain chronic injuries that compromised their health and interfered with their training.

During my own experience as a kajukenbo instructor, I encountered a similar attitude. Many older students, rather than focusing on the subtle points of technique and learning to do more with less effort, just wanted to go out and blast away at each other. In some cases this led to crippling injuries. In a sense, rather than growing in the art they were just treading water.

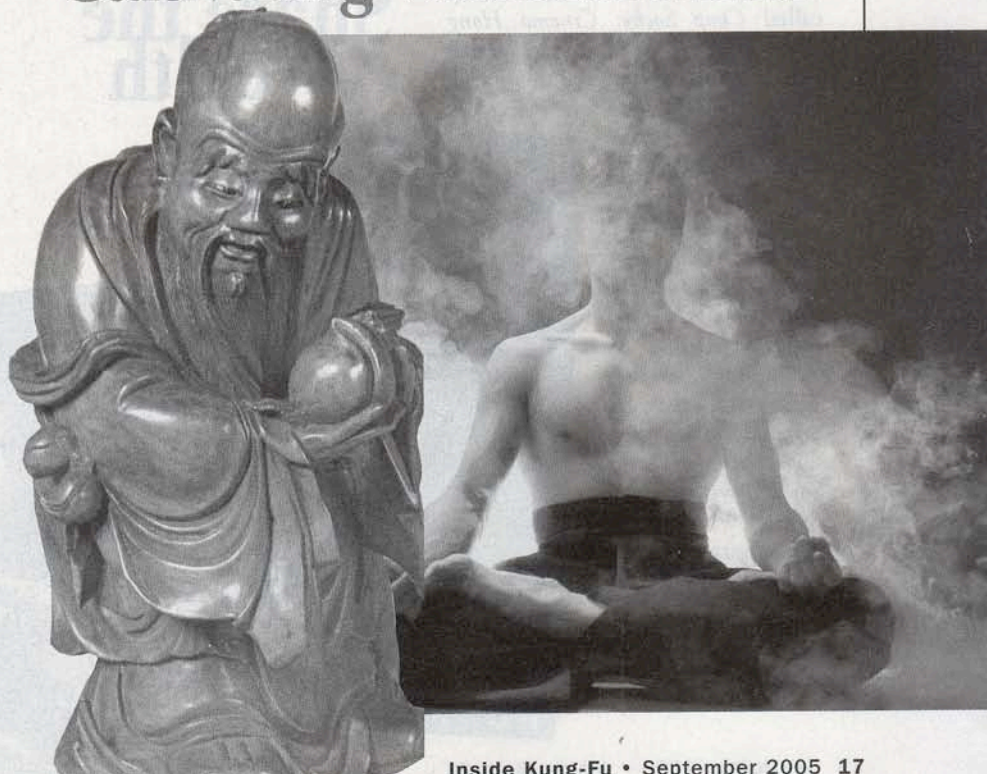
In the Chinese martial arts, extreme flexibility and arduous training regimens are generally practiced when one is young. These methods are sometimes known as "virgin boy kung-fu," because they are usually practiced before puberty or before

one is married or involved in a physical relationship. Taken out of the cultural context, it means that for centuries in China there has been a recognition that this kind of training is best done before one's energies are divided between the demands of work, raising a family, and training. Every thought, action and movement is to some degree a manifestation of our vital energy. This means that to regularly train and compete at a peak level we must not be overextended in our commitments and activities.

Least anyone think that I am saying you cannot train hard after 40, there are countless examples of practitioners both past and present who practiced high-level martial arts into their 80s and even into their 90s. You can still train hard, but you probably will not be training the same way you did when you were 20. And this is as it should be. Look to the elder masters in your art to see how their training changed as they grew older and you will understand how to train for a lifetime. ☯

*Tom Bisio writes a monthly column for Inside Kung-Fu.*

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