

# Consumer Education Message

## Getting Ready to Pick a Martial Art School

by Dr. Joe Schaefer

In almost **40 years of teaching**, I have found that martial art training is one of the most transformative pursuits for adults and children alike. In the right environment, weak character is strengthened, integrity and honor are valued, and people of all abilities and backgrounds are supported in reaching their highest potential. This can happen within any style or system, whether the teacher holds a first-degree black belt or a tenth-degree black belt.

This guide will **not** tell you which style is best or which schools to avoid. Instead, it encourages you to trust your instincts when speaking with an instructor and to pay attention to how a school actually operates. If you sense that a school's primary goal is to secure your signature on a contract as quickly as possible, that should give you pause.

Fortunately, there are many excellent schools and dedicated teachers out there. Whether or not you ever choose to become a student at my school, I feel a responsibility to share this information. In searching for the right place to train, it is easy to fall into confusing or misleading sales structures, walk away from martial arts altogether, and miss out on what could be a deeply life-changing experience.

As both a parent and a consumer, I never want anyone to feel pressured, tricked, or taken advantage of. Martial arts should be different. With the right information, questionable practices become easy to recognize, and you can move forward confidently in choosing a school that truly supports your growth.

Once that clarity is in place, you can focus on what really matters: finding a great school and reaching your personal best.

---

## The Biggest Misconception: Price Shopping

It is nearly impossible to price shop accurately over the phone or by email alone. Most people who enroll in martial arts do so with the long-term goal of reaching black belt (or its equivalent), often without explicitly realizing it.

The challenge is that many modern, full-time schools do not allow students to reach advanced levels at the introductory prices they quote. Instead, additional programs, special clubs, or extended contracts are introduced later as “requirements” for continued progress.

**My advice:** insist on **one clear price, one program, and a transparent path to your goals** from the beginning.

---

## **The 7 Questions You Must Ask Before Taking Your Free Intro Lesson**

The following seven questions will help you approach your search as an informed and confident consumer. Any school with nothing to hide should be able to answer these questions clearly and without hesitation. Too often, unclear pricing and program structures persist simply because students feel uncomfortable asking.

---

### **1. What are the actual rates?**

If this cannot be answered directly, it is an early warning sign. Ask whether the quoted price will realistically allow you to reach your most advanced goals. Introductory pricing can be misleading if it does not reflect the long-term cost of training.

Ask directly how far this beginner pricing will actually take you within the curriculum.

---

### **2. What are the registration fees for joining?**

A modest registration fee can be reasonable. However, very large upfront fees (for example, more than \$100) may indicate that a school does not expect students to remain long-term. Heavy front-loaded fees often compensate for poor retention.

---

### **3. Are there any special clubs that require new contracts or higher prices?**

Some schools offer “Black Belt Clubs” or other special programs that require additional contracts or fees. While schools are free to structure their programs as they choose, they should be transparent about what future progression requires.

Training should not depend on joining secondary programs simply to continue advancing.

---

#### **4. How many testing fees will I have to pay to reach black belt?**

Testing fees are common, but there is no limit to how many belts or tests a school can create. Ask how often testing occurs and what the total cost is likely to be over time.

---

#### **5. Are tournaments required or encouraged?**

Tournaments can be valuable for some students, but if participation is required, this may signal a strong competitive focus. That distinction matters, especially for adults or families seeking personal development rather than competition.

---

#### **6. Can I get a 30-day trial and a money-back guarantee if I'm not satisfied?**

This should not be unusual. If an instructor truly believes in the value of their instruction, they should be willing to offer a trial period or refund if you are unhappy during the first month.

---

#### **7. Are contracts mandatory?**

This is one of the most common practices across the martial arts industry. You may find that many schools rely on contracts (my school does **not**). If an instructor avoids answering this question clearly, proceed with caution.

Avoidance often signals a prepared sales process designed to overcome contract objections. These conversations can be high-pressure and uncomfortable. While such tactics may be expected in some industries, they can feel like a disconnect when a discipline rooted in honor, integrity, and personal development is paired with aggressive sales methods.

---

## **Armed With Knowledge**

You are now equipped with questions that place you in control of your decision. At a minimum, you deserve to know exactly what you are receiving in exchange for your time, energy, and financial commitment.

The purpose of this guide is not to direct you toward any one school, but to give you insight into the industry so you can make a choice that feels clear and aligned.

Ultimately, only a visit and personal experience can tell you whether a school and instructor are right for you. Ask thoughtful questions, observe carefully, and trust your instincts.

— **8th-Degree Black Belt Master Joe Schaefer, PhD**

Owner, **Austin Kung Fu & Tai Chi**

[www.austinkungfu.com](http://www.austinkungfu.com)