

“INNER STRENGTH”

FOR LESSON

*Listening as
a Creative Act*

NARRATOR **Nsenga Knight**



KNIGHT I mean I think martial arts, it definitely seemed to me like — growing up, like a Black Muslim thing. Like, if — like, to not have a martial arts program in a Black Muslim — I just figured every mosque, every Black Muslim mosque had a martial arts program. I think because Muslims were like — we’re supposed to be tough, right? Like, I thought we were supposed to be tough, and, like, we definitely — You’re not supposed to think that you can mess with us. Like, you were not supposed to have anywhere in your psyche that, like, you can mess with us. So, the brothers are supposed to know how to do martial arts and the sisters too.

RUN TIME **5:58**

I think, you know, honestly, later — this was a few years ago — I did an art project called *Muhammad School of Language and Martial Arts*, and so it was kind of rooted in thinking about kind of like a mixture of, like, a Sister Clara Muhammad School, a martial arts school, all sort of run out of the same space. It was kind of like a prayer space that at one point could be a dojo, at one point could be a classroom, at one point could be, you know, a lecture space or something, right? And that’s how it was.

That’s how the communities kind of functioned to me. Like, they were almost, like, these time-sensitive spaces. Like, depending on the time, X, Y, Z could be happening. Because — because, like, at Masjid At-Taqwa, like, their martial arts classes were the **musalla** — like, they were in the mosque, so — It’s just kind of, like, depending on what time of day, you know, X, Y, Z could be happening.

MUSALLA
a prayer space in
a mosque.

And I — I think as a community that maybe was vulnerable or could be vulnerable and especially would be vulnerable if they didn’t know martial arts,

if they didn't know how to — Like, if we didn't know how to defend ourselves, then that was kind of a survival issue. But at the same time, I think, like when I did the art project, I did *Muhammad School of Language and Martial Arts*, I wanted — I was thinking about, like, how this sort of mind-body-spirit thing goes together, and, like, if you wanted to — to — people to think of themselves as strong, period — like, strong personally, strong mentally, strong physically.

And growing up, I always thought that Muslims, like, were pretty keen on health — like, really keen on eating well and, like, you know, definitely keen on eating well. I mean, other things, too, you know, and so the exercise thing as well, and so you kind of had to be that kind of person. And for us, I think maybe coming out of the Muslim community — kind of — Black Muslim community kind of coming out of a dynamic of, like — I don't want to say civil rights — but maybe kind of Black power — maybe you would call it Black empowerment, you know, era. It felt like being a group that, like, would not be targeted or that people would really think twice — people who are targeting you — was really important, you know?

And only later, I heard someone say to me and, like, sort of interpret, you know, that there's — there's this **hadith**, like — I think it's a hadith. It's a saying that a — a strong believer is better than, like, a thousand weak believers, you know? But, like, a weak believer is better than, like, not being a believer at all. And I, growing up, usually thought of that or at least I thought people — I might have just been the wrong — with the wrong interpretation that — I thought it was, like, in your faith. But this person was saying this in regards to your physicality. It's better to be a strong — a physically strong believer. That was really fascinating to me. I was like, “Oh, wow.” Like, “Why didn't — why didn't I ever think about it that way?” But it's like, yeah, to be like a physically strong believer, you know?

HADITH
sayings of
the prophet
Muhammad.

And — and — and later on, I also learned through my project the *Muhammad School of Language and Martial Arts* that — so I collaborated with a brother — an African American Muslim brother in Texas who — in Houston who had a — who has a dojo. And actually, he learned his martial arts style from a Chinese Muslim sensei where the Chinese Muslims, they have their own thing. And he was telling me because their thing was this whole thing — like, being a vulnerable community and being able to defend themselves. And it’s a way to build esteem — like, to build self-esteem in the community. Like, you — if you walk around and you feel like you can handle yourself out in the world, then you feel, you know, that at least that’s one thing you don’t have to, like, be concerned about or you feel like you can —

In that regard, then you feel like you can dress how you want to dress. You know, if you’re a man and you wear the bow tie or you wear the **thawb** or you wear the **kufi**, you could dress how you want to dress. If you’re a woman, you wear the **hijab**, you wear, you know, loose, long clothing or whatever, you could dress how you want to dress, and you’re not — And — and, like, you can walk with strength, like an inner strength that’s like fortified from all these different levels.

THAWB
an ankle-length gown usually worn by Muslim men.

KUFI
a round, rimless cap worn by Muslim men. Sometimes referred to as ‘prayer hats.’

HIJAB
a headscarf worn by Muslim women.

BIO Nsenga Knight was born in 1981 in East Flatbush. While she was growing up, her family attended mosques in nearby Bedford-Stuyvesant, including Masjid At-Taqwa and Masjid Abdul Muhsi Khalifah. As an adult, Knight became active in New York’s fine arts community, creating exhibitions and performances that explore various facets of her identity as a Black and Muslim woman in the United States. Her formal education includes a bachelor’s in fine arts from Howard University in Washington, D.C., and a master’s in fine arts from the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. Knight moved to Egypt in 2017.

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