

What is Self-defense?

I would strongly suggest balancing one's training between detail and application, but the ratio of each is ultimately up to the sensei and the student himself.

Neither a teacher nor a student can know how to balance his training between aggressive power and intuitive application and finesse-ful, detailed technique without first envisioning the situation for which he is training.

I have made this point in numerous articles and sections of my books, but it is worth making again since it seems to be regularly forgotten or ignored. Martial artists train for many reasons, one of them self-protection, but not all situations in which one protects oneself are similar. Hand-to-hand combat on a battlefield is not a bar fight. A bar fight is not a single assault. And even a single assault can range anywhere from a life-or-death situation to one which is meant merely to intimidate or embarrass.

Deadly force is acceptable during times of war or when one's life is threatened, but an arresting police officer escalates to dangerous blows only when he is forcefully resisted, and even then he can seldom justify killing an unarmed assailant. A bouncer, doing his job during a drunken bar brawl, may be constrained to using little more than arresting tactics. A child wrestling down a bully might settle for a verbal submission.

Even if we assume that we are not young enough to be asking for "Uncle!" in a schoolyard (which, at any rate, went out of fashion around 1980), how we choose to train reflects the situation in which we expect to be applying our training. Bouncers and police would be wise to study aiki in order to effect control of an opponent without harming him. Those citizens whose neighborhoods are in close proximity to rowdy bars might prefer karate in order to block strikes and return them if necessary. Military men would probably prefer the fast and hard sort of karate, too, but not if they are carrying a 50-plus-pound pack—most hard and fast karate demands fast and large movement obviously hampered by military gear.

In fact, there are so many contingencies in considering a personal protection situation that one can only choose a general stylistic preference at the expense of incompleteness. If his chosen art addresses his assumed situation about 95% of the time, maybe he can rest easy. But if he expects to find himself in more than one type of situation, he would be well advised to become familiar with more than one martial art.

I started martial arts with judo. Knowing it did not address most self-defense situations (save in the advanced kata that were seldom taught), I added aiki-ju-jutsu, Ueshiba Aikido, and then Shotokan, and became familiar with other arts in the process. Judo allowed me access to ground grappling, foot sweeps, and body throws. Aiki taught me escapes, locks, ground

immobilizations, and throws that used either locks or off-balancing without over-committing my body. Karate gave me blocks, strikes, punches, and kicks.

But what if the guy had a knife? Wouldn't I be better off knowing how to use a stick or a knife? Oh, let me study Escrima, too. What if he had a staff? Shouldn't I also study Okinawan Kobudo? The challenges to full preparedness can go on for quite a while. In fact, any art can be taught as self-defense and, at the same time, there is no single art that can truly be called self-defense.

More on this subject next time.