

## No Art is Self-defense

In fact, any martial art can be taught as self-defense and, at the same time, there is no single art that can truly be called self-defense.

Most of us entered the martial arts because we wanted to be able to defend ourselves. A few of us wanted a sport, physical fitness, or to indulge in a quasi-philosophical Asian cultural activity, but even those latter among us expected to experience and retain some self-defense attributes of the art. It is difficult, therefore, for a guy like me, with over 50 years in *budo*, to say something so extreme as “no single art can truly be called self-defense”, so let me sort this out.

Since each martial art has its emphasis and since a practitioner may need self-defense techniques with that emphasis, any martial art can, in the right circumstance, be used successfully as self-defense. But to actually *be* self-defense is another thing. I am being semantically nit-picking here to make a point. Just as any martial art is *a* martial art, but no martial art can be *the* martial arts, in the same way, any martial art *can be used as* self-defense, but no martial art can *be* self-defense. The field is far too broad for any art, or even several arts in combination, to claim it can teach all of what can be taught, i.e. all of what may be needed in every self-defense circumstance. We all inherently know this and that is why so many senior martial artists have become multiple martial artists—in order to broaden the variety of techniques at their fingertips (or at their palmheels, elbowtips, toetips, kneetips, etc).

But it seems counterintuitive and even unfair to imply that no art is self-defense, doesn't it? Forgive my Clintonian semantics, but it all depends on what your definition of “is” is. If Goju-ryu, for example, *is* self-defense, we are implying an equivalency. Because two different things cannot both equal the same thing, we must therefore say that Small Circle Jiu-jitsu cannot *be* self-defense because, after all, it is not Goju-ryu. If we mean, on the other hand, that Goju can *be employed* as self-defense, then great! This does not exclude Small Circle JJ from that use. When we say that my martial art *is* self-defense, we almost always mean the latter, but unconsciously we may have tricked ourselves into believing the former.

Because we are studying a martial art that can be employed as self-defense in *some* circumstances, we unconsciously believe that its techniques will suffice as self-defense in *every* circumstance. This, of course, is a false assumption. I remember a hockey game in which Derek Sanderson of the Bruins decided to enforce his point of view on an opposing player who had a karate black belt. The poor black belt did not stand a chance. In fact, he did not stand for long. Sanderson was a seasoned scrapper on the ice. The black belt player had never tried any of his supposedly well-trained techniques on skates. In what art would anyone expect to defend himself while wearing ice skates and hockey pads?

Because no art is self-defense and because we cannot train in every possible aspect of self-defense no matter how many arts we study, the best we are able to do is study as many aspects of self-defense as we can without taking away from the study of our principle art.

Then, and this is the most important point, we should be modest about what we are able to do, avoid situations in which we may have to do it, and hope that a self-defense situation never demands that we modify what we do in order to just “skate” by.