

Sword and Spirit

The eNewsletter of Itten Dojo

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— Why Budo? —

Regardless of the times you live in, or the circumstances of your life, success largely depends on things you actually can control:

- **Building strong relationships in a community of achievement.**
- **Forging a disciplined and positive mindset.**
- **Enhancing your physical health and capabilities.**

These are exactly the things membership in a dojo provides.

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Life Hacks from the Martial Arts...

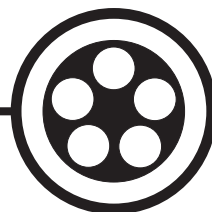
Myths of Self-defense

Many people seeking martial arts training cite gaining the ability to defend themselves as their primary motivation, while almost everyone seeking training includes “self-defense” capability somewhere in their list of goals. Persons training long-term typically come to recognize a wide range of benefits far exceeding in everyday utility the value of being able to fight and, for them, the ability to defend against an attack is almost a side-effect of their training. Those just starting out and seeking self-defense skills, however, face a bewildering sea of choices in types of arts and methodologies, choices that are further confused by the conflicting claims of different arts to be “the most effective self-defense known to man.” It’s also true that most inexperienced people focused on self-defense typically harbor serious misperceptions regarding the nature of violence and the types of threats one is realistically most likely to face. These misperceptions can result in persons seeking training to think marketing claims are actually evidence of effectiveness.

Let’s clear up some of the confusion right away: The most effective self-defense known to man is...not being there. After that, if a situation requires physical techniques of combat, all available options are less good. While all martial arts are not equal, virtually every traditional art or modern, unarmed fighting method has been used successfully to defend against an attack in some instance or another. And every art has also failed. The “best” art depends entirely upon the very specific circumstances and conditions in which it’s designed or intended to be used. Regardless of the art or method, physical skills are perishable without continuing training.

I rely heavily on the work of Marc MacYoung, Rory Miller, and their colleagues when addressing in my dojo aspects of self-defense beyond the physical, technical repertoire of the arts in which we train. Required reading for my senior students includes MacYoung’s *In the Name of Self-Defense* and Miller’s *Principles-Based Instruction for Self-Defense (And Maybe Life)*.

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Both books are highly recommended, and both are available in print and e-book formats. I keep the e-book versions on my phone for quick access, but have print versions to highlight or otherwise mark-up for detailed reference.

To facilitate this discussion, let's drop the term self-defense in favor of personal protection (which we'll define as the full range of physical and non-physical actions related to self-preservation) and personal combat (which we'll define as a circumstance in which an individual is forced to engage, physically, one or more assailants). MacYoung frequently makes the point that self-defense is a legal term, and Miller amplifies that thought, saying, "By claiming self-defense, you are confessing to a crime." Fighting is illegal. Harming another person is illegal. A claim of self-defense is saying, essentially, "Yes, I did harm that person, but my actions were justified because..."

We'll also make the distinction that consensual violence — two or more individuals agreeing to fight over some issue between them — will not be the focus of this essay. Our focus will be personal protection from an assault, a non-consensual, physical attack with injurious or potentially lethal consequences. According to Miller, credible personal protection training should include at least these elements: Ethical and Legal Aspects of Force;



Violence Dynamics; Avoidance, Escape and Evasion, De-escalation; Counter Assault; Breaking the Freeze; The Fight Itself; The Aftermath (which can include legal, medical, and/or psychological consequences). Some of these elements are physical, some are academic, and some are a combination of both. The complexity of the non-physical elements is why I insist my students study the works of the real experts in the field rather than pretend that I can adequately cover those elements during regular classes (let alone pretend that I am qualified to do so).

Not all aspects of martial arts training need to be strictly practical or realistic. Some things, especially when you're training for the long-term, might legitimately be done just for fun. The most important thing is to be able to distinguish between practical, fun, and outright fantasy — fantasy being when the purpose, utility, or applicability of an aspect of training is misrepresented, either intentionally or unintentionally, by the instructor. One very common fantasy is the notion that determination and technique will overcome all other factors.

In personal combat, pure luck always plays a huge role, as does physics. Skill and technique can mitigate but not eliminate the advantage of size and strength. The larger person, in addition to being able to generate greater force, can also absorb greater force. A man and woman of the same size and weight are still very unequally matched, due to greatly disparate muscular strength. While just about any martial art or form of training *can* be better than nothing, any training that promotes unrealistic concepts of violence and personal abilities and consequently fosters an unmerited or exaggerated sense of confidence — especially in women — is worse than nothing.

Arts that place heavy emphasis on free-sparring often claim to be the most realistic forms of training. To a degree that claim has merit, because it is critically important to experience physical contact and unscripted interaction with an opponent, but any form of sparring or grappling is only one aspect of training for personal protection. It's almost ludicrous to claim that competing against a "resisting opponent," in and of itself, in a controlled, sparring scenario, is the most effective preparation for personal combat.

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In an assault, the *defender* is the person “resisting,” and *no* form of sparring — especially in sport-based arts — allows the horrific acts someone assaulting with lethal intent might in reality employ. Or, for that matter, the actions that a defender might need to employ to survive the encounter. Truly “realistic” training is exceptionally high-risk, and entails very substantial injury rates, or even death rates, as can be seen by losses of military personnel during their routine training evolutions.

Martial arts are supposed to enhance your life, not make it painful to live life. It seems a bit insane for the average civilian to engage in any form of training that entails frequent and potentially serious injuries in preparation for a hypothetical fight that will likely never happen, and for which the skills trained could very well be of limited or no utility. Doubly insane, considering the fact that study of violence dynamics and other, primarily non-physical aspects of personal protection can greatly decrease the likelihood of ever actually needing the physical, combative skills. MacYoung notes, “The good news about recognizing violence dynamics is that the amount of conflict and stress in your everyday life will be greatly reduced.”

MacYoung further points out, “Most violence takes place when you’re angry, aggressive, or confident.” That insight translates to four simple rules:

- 1) Don’t do stupid things.
- 2) Don’t say stupid things.
- 3) Don’t go stupid places.
- 4) Don’t hang with stupid people.

By all means, train in martial arts. If your focus is personal protection, understand that topic is much more extensive than simply the physical techniques of personal combat. Do sufficient research to be able to assess, realistically, the purpose, strengths, and weaknesses of the art you’re considering. Nicklaus Suino, Director of the Japanese Martial Arts Center in Ann Arbor, Michigan, offers some great advice. “Choosing the right martial art style and the right dojo can be overwhelming. You can simplify it by asking three questions: Is it safe? Is it systematic? Is it supportive?”

Finding and enrolling in a dojo meeting those criteria will open a pathway to personal transformation that encompasses yet far exceeds self-defense. ☸

Robert Wolfe, chief instructor of Itten Dojo, began martial arts training in 1975 while attending Bucknell University, where he earned a degree in Japanese Studies. Mr. Wolfe has taught since 1985, and founded Itten Dojo in 1992. His articles on martial arts have been featured in publications such as *The Bujin*, *Budo Shinbun*, the *Journal of Asian Martial Arts*, *Bugeisha*, *Aikido Today Magazine*, *Inside Karate*, *Martial Arts Training*, and *Martial Arts Professional*.

