

## ***But I Still Can't Defend Myself! Part One***

Some people feel that enrolling in a martial arts school is the same as being able to defend themselves. This would be like saying going to a doctor is the same as staying healthy.

“Sensei, I having been studying for two and a half years now. I like the school and the art, but I still don't feel I can defend myself.” Okay: a legitimate concern based, more than likely, on an understandable lack of understanding. “How do you know if you can defend yourself or not?” one might ask. “I don't know, but I still don't feel confident about protecting myself.” Here the proposed problem divides into two sections: (1) what a person feels and (2) what they think self-defense really is.

**Part 1, what a person feels, first.** If you feel you can defend yourself, you may just be too darn cocky to avoid dangerous situations. If you feel nervous when three large pro-wrestlers drinking their lunch between exhibitions happen to call you a girly-man, you are being justifiably uncertain of your self-defense ability. “But I took martial arts to be more secure,” you say. “Then,” one might respond, “quit hanging around pubs where off-duty simians congregate.” I am not being facetious (I am, but I am being sincere, as well.) People think that martial arts are supposed to make them Clark Kent without the double-breasted suit. Sorry. What martial arts training *does* accomplish, however, is to give one a more realistic view of what one should not defend against. This is why senior traditional martial artists, despite their experience and abilities, tend to be so passive. They know that an errant blow, or an ungracious environment, can accidentally do them in. The safest victory lies in walking away.

**Next, Part 2, what a person thinks self-defense really is.** There is a lingering belief among civilized people that self-defense bears some resemblance to either (a) a sparring match, or (b) the movies. Neither is the case, in my opinion; but what about your opinion? Have you considered what self-defense is *really* like? Have you even considered what you mean when you say you can't defend yourself? Most people mean they don't spar well, or that they can't be mean, strong, or quick enough. Enough for what? And compared to whom? Self-defense is seldom what you expect it is. A friend of mine, a martial artist with more than a decade's experience, was an officer in the San Francisco police for a number of years. He told me that in real confrontations (and this eliminates surprise street confrontations that tend not to happen to blue uniforms) sometimes martial art techniques work perfectly and literally. Sometimes the situation is so bizarre, that no school could ever train for it. The unique and bizarre, he reported, happens at least half the time.

So the problem is not actually measuring one's self-defense ability (a pretty hard thing to do accurately), nor with estimating it through classroom drills and exercises. The problem is the martial artist's attitude. He expects the art to do the work for him. That is like expecting a marriage counselor to readjust your thinking about your mate through some sort of instant hypnosis. She may tell you what you can work on, but you have to do the work yourself. The doctor can tell you what medicines alleviate your allergic symptoms, but you have to

take the pills. The martial art instructor can show you what can be done and can urge you to do it with effort and proper intent, but he cannot make you feel that it will work because he cannot make you feel that *you* will work.

The beginner tends to say, “Hey, this technique won’t work!” The intermediate tends to say, “I can’t do the technique!” The more advanced student says, “I am getting better at the technique.” The master feels the technique is incidental. It is *he* that works, not it.