Context, Sport, and Art

Originally, as everyone knows, martial arts were a set of combat skills used in battle. When battles diminished in frequency, *bujutsu* (martial skills/arts) became *budo* (martial ways). I'm using Japanese terms here, but the same conversion from practical skills to self-development life-styles happened in China and Korea, as well as other Asian countries. We tend to group bujutsu and budo into a generic form called "martial arts," and thereby avoid squabbling over the differences (a squabble that actually used to happen in the 1970s). The sport form of budo entered the picture as soon as World War II was over. The occupying American army did not allow the Japanese to practice martial arts, but they were allowed combat sports.

Flash forward to the mid-twentieth century: Asian arts become popular in the West in a hybrid form that emphasizes both sport and way-of-life. So when you sent your little Janey to study at Cubbie Bigkick's Tae Kwon Do studio, you weren't sure what the mix might be. She was learning self-discipline and that made you feel good, but then she asked for the entry fee for a tournament next week, and you hadn't bargained for that. "Okay," said you to yourself, "it's part of the program, here's the twenty bucks." Western ways of thinking are imbued with sportive analogies and attitudes, so a martial art that is also a sport does not seem very alien.

Now widen your lens. Around the country, Tae Kwon Do, Tang Soo Do, Shotokan, Goju, Shito, Wado, Uechi, Kempo, Kung-fu, and HooKnowsHoo got together in open tournaments, competing in a friendly way with rules that attempted to be fair to the proclivities of each system. But there were those who would not enter tournaments because they felt their art was meant for real down and dirty self-defense and tournament rules watered down what they would use in a real fight. There's no doubt that tournaments were symbolic fights, not real fights, just as boxing and amateur wrestling were symbolic of aspects of a real fight rather than a street skirmish. Still, the criticism from self-defense aficionados was valid: sparring was not fighting. In a real fight, a landed blow (illegal in most tournaments) would negatively affect an opponent, thus allowing further blows to be landed.

I don't need to tell you what happened next. Tournaments morphed into light- then semi-contact contests, which led the way to full-contact kickboxing, which opened the door for NHB cage fighting. The irony is that aficionados of NHB fighting now criticize the self-defense traditionalists for never making contact. How real can a system be if no one ever gets down and dirty? The traditionalists' defense is exactly the same as the sport martial arts defense used to be: full contact with all weapons out would be too dangerous. Both the criticism and the defense have validity. Few students of traditional martial arts want to get down and dirty enough to report to work with bruises and cauliflower ears, but they still want to study something that would, if it actually used, function in self-defense.

To sort all this out, consider the context. Cage fighters train hard and are tough, so they can take a beating if necessary. Those qualities would serve them well in a self-defense situation. They may not fare well

against more than one opponent or against an opponent with a weapon, but one-on-one their roughness and toughness would benefit them. On the other hand, a traditional self-defense person would not do well in the octagon against even an intermediate cage fighter because he would not be familiar with such a specific scenario. It would be like putting a Uechi guy into a tournament with Tae Kwon Do rules. On the street, however, a well-trained self-defense-oriented traditionalist would have a variety of skills that could save her from harm, or at least beat an opponent back long enough to affect an escape. What the traditionalist tends to lack is the toughness and endurance of the cage fighter in case her SAD (Sudden Attack Defense) became CAD (Combat Attack Defense) and lasted more than a few seconds.

Sport is not self-defense and self-defense is not sport. Unfortunately, we group them into the general category of martial art, so we think one should fold smoothly into the other. However, as regards the concentration on sport or street defense, if you fold, you mutilate. I doubt if you would enjoy a cage-fighting match in which Janey is accosted by three drunks, kicking one in the *cajones*, poking another in the eyes, and then climbing out of the cage before the third can reach her—not worth the $60 pay-per-view, for sure. Similarly, we would not think it wise that a cage-fighting athlete, accosted by the same three nogoodniks, took one down pounding him to a ploody bulp just until his cronies finally buried the athlete in beer-scented bellies and baseball bat blows. We would expect that the cage fighter would, reasonably, act in his own self-defense and do what Janey did.

There is no evaluating a martial practice without a context. If I could wave a wand and magically be Janey or the cage-fighting athlete, I would opt for the cage-fighting athlete, knowing that his superior conditioning would allow me to learn and apply the 3SD (Sudden Skillful Self-defense) that traditional arts teach. **But I can't wave that magic wand and neither can Janey.** The average person, therefore, must evaluate the worth of training hard and getting in great shape as well as which type of art and in which environment she wants to do so.

If you want to get tough and roll with the bad boys, maybe cage-fighting training is for you. If you want to train for a long time and in many different aspects of self-defense, your conditioning, although better than average, will not be superb, but your skill set will be broad and deep enough to handle SAD and even a little CAD if necessary.