

Your Art is Not Self-defense

During a karate seminar, I was asked to demonstrate an aiki reception. I requested that a black belt throw a lunge punch, but the attacker, probably out of habit rather than malice, threw a reverse punch. I avoided with a *tenkan* (turn) and, even though my timing was good, I did not float him off-balance in the way you might see in a typical aiki demonstration. When he added an off-balanced punch to follow up, I deflected, introducing his face to a backfist. Before I could complete a throw or lock, someone in the audience said, “Hey, that’s not aiki!”

“No.” I responded, “It is self-defense.”

If you expect your martial art, no matter what it is, to provide various skills that you can use for self-defense, you are, of course, justified—that’s its primary job. Martial arts, after all, come from attack and defense arts originally used for war, but modified for civilian use, that is, for personal defense. But, if you think that your art *is* self-defense, and that by training in your art, you become knowledgeable in the wider subject of personal protection, you are sadly mistaken. Show me a traditional art and I will show you a self-defense situation in which it does not function well.

This statement, of course, echoes Bruce Lee’s sentiment of many decades ago. He was bristling against the rigid way we perform our traditional arts and also reflected on the way the art itself limited freedom of motion. As a result of his iconoclastic articles in *Black Belt* magazine and the exposition of his philosophy in movies and in books, Bruce Lee fans everywhere began to give up their “classical messes”, embracing freer martial arts training. Of course, being completely free can be the same as being completely lost, so rather than flail at opponents in an uneducated way, their training regimens became either mock-ups of Lee’s Jeet Kune Do or combinations of more traditional arts: Wing Chun combined with Aikido, Shotokan combined with Hakkoryu, Shaolin combined with Ba-gua, etc. Nowadays, we tend to think that the pinnacle of combined arts is MMA, but MMA combines martial *sports* mostly for octagon contests, not self-defense. It should be credited with adding grappling back into the family of martial ways (long ignored as a minor part of sport judo), but MMA is decidedly not *sogo budo* (integrated martial ways) at its utmost.

I would like to echo Lee’s initial sentiment in my own way. I don’t expect all readers of this essay to supplement their Goju training with Tae Kwon Do, nor pastiche Kuntao-Silat to their Nihon Jiu-jitsu. Some martial artists have already coagulated similar mixtures, to be sure, but others are content with their single art—that’s all they have time for anyway—and that’s fine with me. I would however like to encourage martial artists to be realistic about the limiting factors created by their very adherence to a chosen art.

Have you ever seen TKD one-step sparring with a guy who, out of habits created by his art, always wants to take an unrealistic distance to start the encounter, always steps forward to block, and always steps back to finish with a kick? Have you ever seen Shotokan karate-ka finding themselves too close to retaliate wishing they had learned Goju close-in double palm heel strikes? Have you ever been swept and wanted to borrow some Northern Chinese iron broom techniques so you could fight from the down position? Think for a moment: does

TKD *require* you to fight at a long distance? Or do practitioners take that distance because they practice more kicks than arm strikes? Why couldn't a Shotokan person understand how to get power in a short double palm-heel? He has that movement in his advanced kata, doesn't he? You don't have a kata with iron broom sweeps? Maybe you should engage in some informal practice from the ground using some techniques that *are* in your kata that you have adapted for floor work.

In other words, you may have to learn your art rigidly to gain rank, but your application of the art in self-defense can be a lot looser than your rank requirements demand. To loosen up requires a creative mind a surprising amount of discipline—a kind of discipline not gained by stopping your study at rank requirements.

More on this next time.