

Your Art is Not Self-defense 2

...you may have to learn an art rigidly to gain rank, but your application of the art in self-defense can be a lot looser than your rank requirements demand...

Unfortunately, most people study blindly. Because Sensei and seniors know so much more than they, students often give up their faculty of analysis and cogitation in favor of “Sign up, Line up, and Shut up”. Now, ironically, I am in favor of Sign up, Line up, and Shut up until a black belt is earned. Too many students, coming from a questioning Western background challenge everything that is unfamiliar or uncomfortable. That is like a third grade history student arguing with Mrs. McGillicuddy that George Washington was an incompetent leader because the student heard his dad, a history Professor, discussing with a colleague a specific incident about Washington as a 22-year-old general. Perhaps Professor Dad could have engaged Mrs. M with a valid argument, but the third grader cannot—he does not know enough to back up his claim. So, where I suggest that white, green, and brown belts quietly absorb the wisdom of their seniors, I also suggest that, as they go up in rank, they start doing some personal reflection so that they are ready to be thinking, contributing black belts, not just a higher ranked beginners.

Because people have difficulty making the transition from unthinking-but-well-disciplined student to open-minded-and-multi-disciplinary student, they allow the very art they study to prevent them from reaching self-defense. Although they may not be able to study other martial arts to have a more holistic point of view, they can assume a more holistic point of view of their own art by recognizing what it has to offer.

While conducting a karate seminar with a dozen very well trained students, I was happy not to have to teach a lunge punch in order to receive a focused attack during demonstrations. However, I noticed that as soon as I did a technique from a stance other than a front or back stance, or received a blow with something other than a basic block (even though that non-basic reception came from a kata they practiced), these well-trained students could not easily adapt. What they practiced regularly, they knew well, but they did not use their entire range of knowledge to create broader self-defense possibilities. If a drunk of small stature touched their overcoats to beg a dollar, would they react with a block that would break the lush’s limb, following up with an obligatory reverse punch (they could respond with little else) making his spleen surge up toward his tepid tongue?

It is perfectly fine to have the discipline to withhold your karate (or any other art) unless pushed toward a life-or death situation; but does that mean you have to put up with an insistent drunk hanging on your London Fog as you schlepped toward a taxi to get out of the rain? In related vein, what if the drunk became belligerent and tackled you to the concrete? How could you haul off and sidekick him into the alley?

Simply said, self-defense is not karate *ippon kumite* (even though *ippon kumite* comes closer to self-defense than does *jiyu kumite*), and it is not an aiki attacker running toward you with a momentous, if obvious, *yokomen uchi*. Self-defense is not sparring a good kicker nor performing Young Duck Seeks Sam Pekinpah in a kempo drill. Self-defense is whatever it damn needs to be.

To be ready for a self-defense encounter (and there is no guarantee even the best trained martial artist will be ready), one must not only train in one's martial art to develop a repertoire of techniques, but also to see that the art as an *art* that will not automatically prepare you for every encounter any more than your knowledge of how to drive a car prepares you for handling an eighteen wheeler, a drag racer, a motorcycle, or a getaway car. Only your deeper understanding of your basic knowledge and your commitment to adapting that knowledge when necessary (even if it looks like another art) will do the trick.