

Teaching the Art of Self Defence

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Why is there is a strength to learning a martial art for the purpose of self-defence as opposed to doing a self defence course?

Most self defence courses teach the basic defence:attack combinations required to adequately defend oneself in a given situation. The strength of a martial art is that as well as giving the knowledge of techniques required to defend against an attack, it gives the ability to use the same or similar techniques for a broader range of possible scenarios

This comes from the different methods of training employed. Self defense courses use repetition of short defensive combinations against common attacks used in a limited variety of scenarios. The advantage of this is the speed with which the defences can be learned.

These defences are effective given the correct prompt for the given defence is used. Herein lies the disadvantage - if the correct prompt for the defence is not used by the attacker, the “victim” may not be able to defend him or herself effectively, as there is no allowance in the learned technique to modify it accordingly to combat similar attacks.

As an example: the release from a wrist grab can be learned quickly and executed effectively very soon after a short period of repetitive practice. However, to a junior rank who has only learned this release, any small modification to the grab can render the practised movement ineffective.

A small modification to a wrist grab to grabbing from below (underhand) as opposed to an overhand grab, or grabbing with the other hand, changes the release technique required. Although the releases for each of these is similar, it requires an understanding of the principles behind the technique to execute them successfully, if only the first basic release is taught. Once these basic principles are learned, the defense is no longer just a physical movement learned by heart but a base principle that can be modified to accomodate any small difference in the attack that it is designed to counteract.

The overall strength of a martial art as a method of learning self defence is that although techniques are learned by heart through repetition, each technique is learned in its broadest possible context. For example, a low block is not learned to defend against a front snap kick, but against an attack directed at the lower abdominal area.

The martial arts student therefore learns to execute this block to defend an area of his or her body against *any attack which targets it*. As training continues, more blocks are learned, as are their effectiveness against a variety of different attacks.

This, along with the practice formats employed by the different types of sparring (one-step to free sparring) gives the ability to “think on your feet”. This enables the martial arts student to respond to an attack with one of a variety of known defences, based on an understanding of why and how the chosen defence is going to be effective, rather than a learned reactive movement.

Teaching of self defence should follow a similar method. White belt students learn to block then punch from walking stance. After this they learn the two fundamental movements and chong-ji, followed by three-step sparring. This progression of learning takes a basic set of techniques, then teaches combinations that they can be used in and then teaches their application against an attack.

This progressive approach should also be used with self defence. A technique should not only be taught as a response to a set attack. The principle used in defense should be taught, then the methods that the principle can be applied to, to obtain the desired effect.

For an example, a release targetting the weak point of the grip. The student learns that the release technique works by directing pressure to the area which forms the weak point of the attackers grip to free his or herself. Once this is understood, having an opponent grab in a variety of ways can be used to teach a direct application of this principle.

The student therefore needs to understand the underlying principles of a technique before directing its application - for reasons of effective learning of the technique, as well as safety. As an example, a joint lock can be damaging if it is applied suddenly. Teaching the principles of how and why the lock works can be a very effective caution to a student attempting its application for the first time.

Once an understanding is gained the student can be taught to quickly adapt the principle to be effective in many similar situations and in a self defence situation this ability to adapt to what your attacker is doing becomes your greatest asset.

The ability to adapt a principle to counter an unusual or unorthodox attack can be the difference between success or failure of the defence.

The next issue is the timing of the defence and its effectiveness if not done at the right moment.

With repetitive learning of a technique, the defence is always executed after the prompting attack. This means that a defender has to wait for an attack before using their training. There is also a chance that the defence is mistimed and rendered ineffective. If this happens, the only options available are to repeat the defensive movement and keep repeating it until it works, or to fight back, or to give in.

From a martial art a practitioner learns the timing required for each technique in the same way as a self defence course. The difference however is that the broad range of possible applications of a principle of defence gives the martial artist the option of executing a single or even multiple defensive principles at any time during the confrontation, from a preemptive strike to a defence against the attack once it is made.

If the martial artist mistimes a defence, the options are similar. The difference is that the ability to fight back is greater due to the martial art training, and if the defence is redone it can be adapted to ensure its success, based on the theoretical knowledge of how it works.

Through the teaching of the principles of focus and control, a martial artist also learns that a strike can be executed to do minimal damage, be used as a deterrent or warning, or with maximum efficiency, thus causing more substantial damage. This control, along with the knowledge of vital spots and the techniques used to strike them, form a formidable arsenal for the martial artist to draw on.

This arsenal gives the martial artist the ability to know how and where to strike for the most desirable effect - from creating an opening for escape, to ensuring the attacker cannot give chase.

A martial artist has the ability to be more proactive in defence of his or herself, no longer needing to wait for an attack to come in order to defend.

Use of other tricks, such as feints and distractions can be learned by any student. The ability however to use these openings effectively is learned better in the context of a martial art.

A distraction of any sort will be reacted to in different ways by different people. Again the ability to adapt the learned principles to take advantage of this is given by the martial art.

Training in a martial art uses sparring as one of its core methods of teaching. Sparring teaches the basic principles of timing a defence. A self defence course teaches its techniques in a way very similar to 'one-step' sparring. It does not teach sparring as a free flowing controlled fight. This is the area where a martial artist gains proficiency in timing.

The ability to defend and countersrike are taught by sparring, as is the timing of any technique to make use of an opening created by a distraction etc.

Teaching of self defence in a similar way teaches the student to visualise the situation and how quickly the same situation can change to something more, or even less, dangerous, thus requiring a different response.

In conclusion, the teaching of self defence should be put in the context of a martial art.

- The theory behind each technique should be taught first, before application of the techniques. The techniques should then be taught to cover the broadest possible range of scenarios and their effectiveness against each.
- The applications should then be taught in a progression from one-step sparring, to two-step sparring, three-step sparring and pre-arranged sparring situations.
- Finally, use of the techniques in a free-sparring situation where all the martial arts student's knowledge is tested and their ability to adapt a technique can be effectively practised.

In brief, applying the principles of martial art training, and the methods used, to the teaching of self defence in order to increase its effectiveness.