

Effective Self Defence

Preamble

Some ramblings on self defence, a personal view.

What follows says little that should not already be known to the martial artist, but it does no harm to give ourselves a little reminder from time to time.

The discussion delves lightly into legal matters, I am not a lawyer, I offer no more than an opinion which I hope will set you thinking about some of the wider issues around self defence.

This essay has been produced in partial fulfilment of the ITFNZ requirements for grading from 2nd degree to 3rd degree black belt.

Introduction

When we think of self defence we tend to think of the physical aspect - the confrontation, the fight, it is after all, what we train for, but it is the last thing we should be doing.

Effective self defence starts long before a confrontation occurs. It starts with working to ensure you don't become a victim. It is about being aware, of thinking ahead. It is assessing the environment you are moving into - is it safe?, what are the dangers?, is there an alternate route? What are you wearing and carrying - can these be used against you?, it is knowing the legal ramifications of any action you take. It is knowing your abilities, but equally, knowing your limitations. It is being prepared physically and mentally.

What Self Defence is..... and Isn't

In my view, self defence is using what means are at your disposal to prevent or quickly end a situation that is physically threatening.

Avoiding the situation is self defence. Talking your way out of danger is self defence. Running away is self defence. Striking someone so that you can then run is self defence.

Self defence is not standing toe-to-toe and arguing. Self defence is not using force to protect your hurt emotions or to cover your embarrassment. Self defence is not fighting. (Fighting is participatory – you are as keen to continue as the other fellow is, you want to “win”, you have “a point to prove”).

The use of force in self defence is orientated to ending the immediate physical (not emotional) threat.

The Law...

If a confrontation occurs be aware of the limitations that the law places on just how physical you can get.

The law says, *"Every one is justified in using, in the defence of himself or another, such force as, in the circumstances as he believes them to be, it is reasonable to use."*

There are two parts to this statement - **the situation as you believe it to be** is subjective and is likely to be accepted by a judge but **reasonable force** is objective and how much is too much, will be determined by the Courts. In making this assessment, the total force will be considered - there will be no breaking it down into how much was ok and how much was excessive. This also applies to the number of hits, or how prolonged your action was, if you strike someone and render them unable to continue their attack then you must stop - any further strikes and you become the aggressor, this may leave you liable to prosecution.

You can also use force to protect property but your legal defence is much weaker. Whilst you may still use force to retain or regain possession of your property, in general you can not, as I understand it, strike or harm the other person.

...and more

What was mentioned under the previous heading I have heard or read many times before but in my view it doesn't go far enough, some additional, cautionary comments are offered.

Be conscious that if the situation results in force, there may be legal consequences. If you fend off an attack but end up in Court, it may help your legal defence if you can say that you tried to avoid a fight, that you tried to back away and leave the scene. If you do not leave the scene when you have opportunity to do so, it may be considered that you were a willingly participant in the situation. This may

shift you from being a defender all-be-it using forceful means, to an aggressor - you become half the reason the confrontation continued. It may be helpful to say you were scared, that you feared for your (or others) life, even if they did just demand your wallet. (If it was just property they were after, give it to them, your life and liberty are more precious).

The general public, and by extension, the Courts, will I believe, expect you the martial artist, to have the knowledge and skill to assess a confrontational situation and determine and apply the least amount of force necessary. It is your responsibility to know your strength and abilities and apply yourself in a manner to cause as little harm as possible. Once you cross the line and become a black belt, expect to be held to a higher standard - in the eyes of the layman (and law), you are an expert - never mind that the Taekwon-Do encyclopaedia says 1st to 3rd Dans are novices!

If you use force you need to be able to explain firstly to the Police and, perhaps, later to the Court, why you felt that that force was necessary, you will be asked to explain and justify your actions clearly stating the actions and mindset of the other party and what you did to avoid/de-escalate the situation. During the confrontation you may be scared, emotional, the adrenaline will be pumping, but in Court you will need to explain how you took actions to calm/leave the scene based on calm, reasoning and not heated, emotional responses. You will need to be articulate, if in Court, you will need to counter the arguments of the opposing lawyer who will be trying to discredit you. The lawyer will be in his element but you will be in unfamiliar territory.

The legal ramifications may be as, or more daunting, than the original confrontation.

Your Attitude

There are measures you can take to lessen your chances of being set upon or to win through if force is necessary.

Don't look like a victim, walk with your head up, look alert and confident, walk in a purposeful manner - don't dawdle. Talking on your cell phone, having a CD player plugged into your ear, or searching in your bag gives opportunity to a would be attacker, it tells him you are not alert and therefore easier to overcome.

All the training in the world is of no value if you adopt a meek, submissive attitude, your attacker wants someone he can dominate, show him that you are not that person - even if that is not how you feel.

The ability to perform pretty patterns do good step sparring or board breaks is of no value if your attitude is not good - no matter your skill level, if you don't feel confident it is difficult to perform - its what you can deliver when you need to that matters and there is unlikely to be a second chance!

Train your mind to act instinctively without conscious thought, the body to move effectively and apply an appropriate amount of force in attack and defence - loose the sport sparring attitude, this is for real, you need a much harder win-at-all-costs attitude.

If a confrontation is unavoidable, then you must be fully committed to the ensuing conflict, you must be prepared to see it through to the end however long and hard it may be and you must be prepared to strike with all the force necessary to stop your opponent, this is not the time for touch contact.

You must be prepared to be hurt, your defence wont always be what it ought to be - a punch or kick will get through. To reach your opponent taking a hit may be unavoidable. Sometimes winning is not a question of what you can do, but what you can take.

If the opponent is armed, serious damage can be inflicted more readily - a real knife can do real damage, expect to get cut!

However your first line of defence remains to avoid getting into this situation in the first place.

Your Dress

When thinking dress sense think safety, wearing jandels or sandals does not allow for good foot technique especially those that use the ball of the foot as an attacking weapon nor do they allow for a fast getaway. The same can be said of tight fitting dresses and to a lesser extent, tight trousers.

Pony tails, braids, long necklaces and the like are handles, just a convenient appendage for your attacker to grab hold of. Short hair makes you a less convenient target.

Handbags are commonly carried with the strap over the near-side shoulder, this is very easy for the opportunist thief to grab and run off with. Although not fashionable, it is safer to have the strap over the neck.

Street Rules

In Taekwon-Do we spar, we do not fight, we work within clearly defined rules for both defence and attack. We (usually), don't hit hard, don't hit below the belt, don't sweep and don't grapple. In street fighting there are no rules it is unrelenting, unchoreographed chaos and we must be prepared for the unexpected.

It follows, our counter-attack also, does not have to follow the Taekwon-Do rules of sparring - it must be quick and decisive. Look to attack the soft targets, on the lower body, the knee, especially from the side; the groin, and on the upper body, the throat and the eyes. It is legitimate to use weapons not acceptable in Taekwon-Do sparring such as the knees and elbows. The elbow is a very effective weapon - hard, fast and multi-directional.

Weapons

The armed attacker is becoming more and more common, fortunately in New Zealand, hand guns and rifles are not common but knives and batters are becoming more common place.

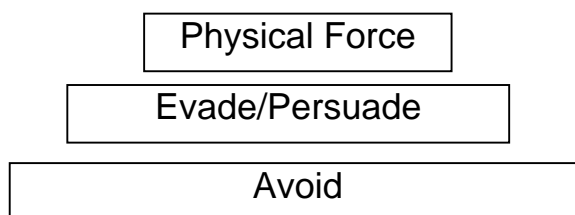
It is not legal to carry a weapon in New Zealand and that includes mace and pepper spray. Many innocent objects can be considered a weapon, the test is how you intend to use the object, for example; you carry your car keys in your hand to avoid scrambling around in your bag to find them when you get to your car, you are attacked and strike out gouging the attacker with the keys. I believe it is unlikely you will be charged with carrying or using a weapon, however if you were carrying the keys to ward off an attack and on being attacked, struck out and gouged your attacker, then the keys might be classed as a weapon and you may be charged accordingly.

If your attacker has the weapon then the level of threat is raised to another plane - assume he is prepared and able to use it.

In training where weapons defence is practised, it is with mates and toy knives and nobody gets hurt if your technique is off - not so in the real world. This year (2004) there have been two cases that I am aware of, where each victim was stabbed, each victim received just one stab wound, but both died.

Your Defence

Defence can be considered as a three tier pyramid, the higher we have to climb, the more skill we need and the less certainty there is of a favourable outcome.



The simplest, least stressful form of defence is not to become a victim in the first place. Apply common sense. Yes, anybody should be able to safely walk through a park at any time including at night but the reality is you can't. If your instinct tells you that it might be unsafe then listen to it and don't go there - use an alternate route even if it is longer.

If you see someone or a group of people ahead of you that you feel uneasy about, cross the street. If you hear someone behind you and you are not comfortable, test their intentions by speeding up - see if they keep pace with you, try crossing to the other side of the street and see if they follow, but remember other people are allowed to walk the same street as you, on the same side and at the same speed. There is safety in numbers, try, especially at night, to avoid being on the streets alone.

Avoid a confrontation if at all possible, walk away from the situation. It is not a act of cowardice or lack of belief in your martial arts skill to walk away, it is a legitimate self defence technique which is unfortunately underrated. If this is not possible, talk to your opponent for two reasons

- 1) to directly dissuade him from his apparent cause of action and
- 2) to change his perception of you - show him that you are a person with feelings and not some inanimate object.

Be assertive in talking to your attacker but don't provoke him by becoming aggressive. To be assertive you need to be confident, you need to know that you have something to back up your words, you need your martial arts training.

Talking to your assailant may not work, indeed you may never be given the opportunity, be ready to use force.

Notwithstanding what has been said about the use of force, it is an option and it may be necessary. I suggest standing in a loose vertical stance, one arm across your chest, fingers tucked lightly to (not in), the bend of your opposite elbow and the other hand to your chin in a contemplative look. This places you in a position similar to a knife-hand ready stance, - half facing with hands up in a defensive position,

but does not look aggressive and indeed suggests that you are not looking to fight (physical defence). Tell him that you don't want to fight and back away, this may or may not stop your attacker, but may fix in the mind of any witness that you tried to defuse the situation (legal defence).

Follow the KISS principle - **K**eeP **I**t **S**imple, **S**tupid.

Keep to simple techniques, the more parts there are in any sequence, the more there is to go wrong and the more likely it will go wrong. There are numerous moves both simple and complex that could be used and they can all be effective, but if they require more strength, speed or flexibility than you have, then they are not for you.

A few moves that are well known and competently executed, are of more value than numerous poorly understood and poorly performed techniques.

Taekwon-Do is known for its fancy foot techniques, they look great, but they are not for the street - leave them in the dojang and for demonstrations.

When making an attack, go for multiple strikes - forget about "victory in a single blow", it's an ideal that is unlikely to happen in practice. Make the first strike fast with your closest weapon to the closest target, it is more likely to startle rather than stop your opponent, but enables you to take back the initiative, the second and if necessary, subsequent strikes are to stop the attack. If I'm wrong and the first strike is a winning blow then great, you can stop there.

But remember what was said earlier, you are acting in self defence – not fighting.

On Being Prepared

Being prepared also means being practised. Most of us I suggest, do enough of our chosen martial art to know a sequence of moves we call self defence - techniques we can pull off given enough time to think about what to do. This is not good enough in a real situation, indeed it may lead to a false, inflated belief in our own ability. What is needed is skill. Skill is the ability to react appropriately to a situation automatically without conscious thought, moving in a natural fluid manner. Turning knowledge of techniques into a skill comes with practice and for most of us, a lot of it - there is no free lunch!

Conclusion

Self defence starts with situational awareness, mentally keeping your guard up and doing this instinctively, habitually. Make situational awareness a habit.

Always look to avoid a conflict but if it is unavoidable, be prepared to commit 110% mentally and physically. Being prepared means having a physical and mental edge over your opponent. Try to out think them, out talk them or out run them so you don't have to out fight them!

You have a right to use reasonable force to defend yourself but remember the force must be reasonable in the circumstances and what is reasonable may be challenged in a court of law. Just because you believed you acted in self defence, it doesn't follow that the Court will believe the same.

Of all the things you can do to protect yourself, force is the last option to use. To have to use force is tantamount to an admission of failure - failure to recognise and avoid a situation, failure to evade your would be attackers, failure to dissuade your opponent. Never-the-less there are some people who are never going to be dissuaded, who may have sought you out as their next victim, ensure you have the necessary skills and be prepared to use them.