

# Karate and Self Defence: selected articles

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KARATE

& SELF DEFENCE

selected articles

John Titchen

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Adapt, and move forward.

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## Foreword by Peter Consterdine

To say this book is a collection of selected articles written by John over a number of years is to do it an injustice. There are supposed, empirical works on Karate and self defence that are simply not in the same league as this work and most certainly not as thought provoking; this is no small offering either.

Running to over 150 pages it is both comprehensive, very well structured and especially well written and in a style that holds one's attention. Whilst it is a book that one can dip into at any point it benefits from treating it like any book and working from front to back, with each article essentially a chapter, flowing naturally from one subject to the next and with a history of the particular article at the end of each one.

The thought provoking thread running through the book is John's endeavour, over more than two decades of training and researching, to square how an Eastern martial art such as Karate serves the purpose of working against what he terms 'habitual acts of violence (HAOV) and how he has adapted the key principles of a traditional karate system to the imperatives of this western 'curse.'

This is a book after my own heart and I thoroughly commend it to anyone who questions what their current karate training is geared towards, but also to those who don't need convincing about the efficacy of their karate in dealing with real life violence but need a plan to affect change. This book will answer both question and need.

Peter Consterdine

9th Dan Karate

Chief Instructor

The Combat Group

Introduction by Jay Cooper

"Nothing is more harmful to the world than a martial art that is not effective in actual self

defence.”

Choki Motobu

When John first asked me to write the introduction for his book I have to admit I was a little taken aback. Although I have a background in traditional training there is very little that is “traditional” about me, or my approach to martial arts. I am known for a direct (many would say “blunt”) approach to stating my opinion that can often cause a degree of consternation amongst people. I am irreverent, eclectic, profane and pragmatic to a fault. I pointed this out to John and his response was characteristic of the man I have come to know:

“Jay, that’s exactly why I want you to write it.”

I have known John for several years now, and we have communicated online for the majority of that time. I have always followed his work very closely because right away I was able to see the tremendous value in it. I am often approached by people requesting an endorsement or a write up too, and I very, very rarely write these – to date John is one of the few people who I actually have endorsed, and more significantly I actually did it without him requesting one.

In all my years in martial arts, which are now starting to add up considerably, I am very selective about who and what I let teach my students or me. It isn’t that you cannot learn from anyone, it’s more that I have to be confident that the new information isn’t swathed in layers of detritus and artifice – or as I normally say “I don’t have the time to pick the corn out the crap”. The list of people I invite consists of Masters and Grandmasters in their disciplines: Sifu Harinder Singh, Grandmaster Daren Tibon and Professor James Hundon for example. Inviting John to be another was a no-brainer for me, because his material and his teaching is quite literally world class

My passion is teaching, and specifically teaching Self- Protection. Let’s be frank, most of us started in the martial arts with a view to becoming physically capable at defending ourselves. However there has been a move away from this aspect over time, facilitated largely by the martial arts being viewed as a “pastime” or “hobby”. Sporting activities take precedence, and the martial arts have been swallowed into this classification. The advent of MMA has done nothing to counter this, and in many ways has actually contributed significantly to it. MMA has provided a metric that for better or worse has led to the common question of “does it work in the cage?”

On the other side of the coin there are a plethora of styles, stylists and systems that all promise to deliver “real world self defence” that is “for the streets and not for sport”. They sell themselves as

being able to teach people how to survive an attack – few of them actually do.

Every week it seems as if there is a new method of fighting or combat that is being thrust upon us, typically with some very slick marketing and branding applied behind it. They offer instant gratification: a quick fix to calm the fears that many in society have concerning interpersonal violence, but they frequently lack substance. Even worse they offer an apocalyptic view of conflict resolution, where every assailant needs maiming or crippling. There is rarely (if ever) anything beyond a cursory mention to legalities, ethics or any other essential elements. Training with John in his Applied Karate system or on one of his “Sim Days” for even a cursory moment reveals a depth of knowledge that is really quite remarkable. Rather than simply give a “fight” scenario, he gives subtle layers of interaction with multiple possible resolutions. Many people have walked away with a better understanding of their art, but more importantly themselves. John has an exceptional grasp of legal, ethical and moral implications of Use of Force.

John has not invented or discovered anything new – and he will be the first to tell you this. What he has done is allowed us to see exactly how effective and relevant karate is in the modern world. Everything he presents is logical, sourced and in many cases there are “light-bulb” moments, where what he shows is so apparent that one wonders how the application was never seen or understood before. Recently the traditional arts are having a resurgence in popularity, as more and more people look beyond the modern incarnations and return to the original source – John is absolutely leading this charge from the Karate world and his work on Applied Karate is second to none.

Karate, specifically Shukokai karate, was actually the first system I started in. I trained at a very traditional school, and the emphasis on the basics was considerable. Kata and pad work were the order of the day and if nothing else it certainly taught me how to strike hard. However, there were still some worrying gaps I found within it, and these were almost exclusively focused on kata. I was told the standard “fighting multiple opponents” explanation, which would be plausible if I was attacked by several people one at a time I suppose... but even leaving that aside there were an abundance of moves that looked and felt ridiculous and the explanations offered were unsatisfactory.

Although I enjoyed my time there, they were unable to offer me what I felt I needed at that time so I left to search for the “cause of my own ignorance” – I am now a Senior Instructor in Jeet Kune Do and I am considered an expert in use of force and self-protection by the Canadian, US and UK legal systems and I am sought after internationally to teach these subjects.

The highest compliment I can offer is that had I been under John all those years ago I would not have left Karate.

We do not agree on everything – John still maintains that Batman v Superman is a good film

whereas I maintain it is an absolute cinematic abomination – but even where we differ we are both able to see why the other thinks that way. Our discussions are often animated and certainly protracted, but there is always a mutual respect that I value tremendously.

The effective training and clear, thorough instruction in his dojo translate perfectly to John's written thoughts on the pages contained herein. You can read in sequence or simply pick an entry at random and find thought provoking content. I can think of no one else in the Traditional Karate field that has such a firm grasp on the application in the modern world and I cannot recommend him highly enough.

Jay Cooper

Canadian Director

Jeet Kune Do Athletic Association

One step at a time: keeping the kettle boiling

Recently I found myself passing a few days under observation in the specialist surgery ward of one of the local hospitals due to an obstruction in my airway. While I was there one of the young nurses who had moved to the UK from Portugal came to talk to me about karate as she had seen my occupation on my notes and wanted to ask about training in Oxford. The problems the young lady faced were finding a club with a similar atmosphere and training regime to the Shotokan she had practiced in Portugal, and finding a way to train that could accommodate her varying shift patterns as a nurse.

I think both of these represent common issues for many martial artists, and in many respects her first 'problem' is probably more prevalent in the martial arts than in any other form of physical exercise.

The young nurse had trained to a 6 Kyu level in Shotokan in Portugal and was looking to continue in England. This should in theory not be a problem, after all Shotokan is one of the most popular and widespread karate systems in the world. The difficulty lay in finding the 'right' type of Shotokan.

I have trained with Shotokan karateka from eleven different associations in the UK that I know of, probably more besides at a few 'big' seminars back in the 1990s, and I've also been fortunate to train with American and European Shotokan karateka during my travels. Like any modern karateka of this age I've also been privileged to be able to see many more members of the same system (or indeed any system) share their training through video media on the internet. While there are many things that unite these karateka, it would also be fair to say that they are all different, in a myriad of subtle ways. A karate style so big and so widespread cannot be like a single set model of a car, absolutely standardized throughout the world (or even a single country). To continue the analogy, different 'same style karate' organisations have different interior trims, different in-car media platforms, different paint jobs, different brake and wheel types, different engine sizes running unleaded or diesel, and different fuel management settings programmed into the computer. There's probably one that even has a Neil Diamond cassette tape in the glove compartment (you know who you are). Beneath all this they are still the same car, they are still 'Shotokan', but even then within different clubs in those associations the way you learn to drive that car (and how you are allowed to drive that car in class) will vary according to the instructor, as will whether different models are recognized as 'the same' and allowed to continue, or forced to change to their 'default factory settings'.

It is a hard truth that every club (even within the same system) is going to be different. It is the sum not only of the style, but also of the pedagogy of the instructor (team), the venue, and crucially the membership. The age and health diversity of the members, the mix of ages and sexes in class (or not), the aims of the students in training: all of these put yet another spin on the class. You cannot step into the same river twice: you have to accept that in training with someone else things will be different, but that different is not necessarily better or worse (for you) and the onus is on you to make the most of it. In moving from one area of the world to another it is rare that you will see something that looks 'the same' straight away, even in the same style of martial art: the important thing is to observe, choose something to try, and accept the potential offered by the change. As I have written in short blog posts about contact in training, six things you should do in your training and speed in training, variety and different training methods can all bring benefits.

Attending a new class can be daunting, whatever your grade, because those pesky belts can carry expectations. That can especially be true if work and family patterns mean that despite your enthusiasm and best intentions, actual attendance is irregular. The less you attend a class, or the larger the gap between lessons, the harder it can become to return. Self-containing walls of comfort, fatigue and apathy are surprisingly easy to build.

Irregular training is the death knell of martial arts participation and progress, but it is not the same as infrequently attending class. As Gichin Funakoshi observed in his 20 precepts,

"Karate is like boiling water, if you do not heat it constantly, it will cool."

Not being able to get to class does not mean you cannot train. Not having the time to build a sweat doing karate (or any other martial art) does not mean you cannot train. Training is cumulative: regular short practices will maintain (and can improve) your technique (and

flexibility, and concentration, and strength, and resolve to continue to attend class) if not your aerobic or anaerobic capacity. Short intensive bursts of non karate exercise for aerobic and anaerobic benefit can complement slow methodical karate training with results that are on a par with (or superior to) long 'treadmill' aerobic karate (or other martial arts) classes in a club.

Since I first began training in karate I have taken a rather literal leaf from Gichin Funakoshi's precepts. I almost always do karate while I'm boiling the kettle, or if not boiling the kettle then while I'm keeping an eye on something that's cooking.

This is an easy free time to train. I've trained in kitchens big enough to do entire forms, but actually all I really need is the space to stand in a stance and rotate my hips. Good quality training does not have to be complicated or require lots of space, or even lots of continuous time: repetition is the key. On the spot (whether for a minute or five or twenty between other little jobs) I can work on almost anything. Even if I can't make someone else's class, or set aside a full hour for training on my own at home, I can still manage anywhere from five to sixty minutes in a day in short stints if I really want, and it does all add up. This keeps the kettle boiling and the water hot. It is not a substitute for paired training or attending classes, but a complimentary way of maintaining and refining elements of your skillset so that when you do work with other people you get more from the experience.

Keeping training does not have to be hard if you take it one step at a time.

This article was written for my online blog and first published in June 2014.

I think the points I've made here apply not only to every karate system but also to every martial art or self defence discipline. Physical and mental skills require regular repetition to remain fresh. Memory is not an exact science so it's also important to have a means of checking what you are doing against what you were originally taught (and what other people are doing) so if there are any discrepancies they are the result of conscious choices rather than poor recall.

Personal kata training – taking the red pill

"This is your last chance. After this, there is no turning back. You take the blue pill - the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill - you stay in Wonderland and I show you how deep the rabbit-hole goes."

## Morpheus, The Matrix

Kata is a form of training that divides the martial arts community. As martial artists our obvious focus is on paired activity, with its immediate feedback on our strengths and weaknesses and clear benefit for the development (and 'measurement') of fighting spirit, timing, reaction time, telegraph reading, distancing, power and speed. Against this the solo exercise of kata on the surface seems to develop little that is not already worked by kihon drills. Even amongst karateka whose systems drill kata as a core syllabus requirement, there are experienced people who view them as no more than a traditional 'chore' to be trained for the purpose of passing gradings.

Kata can be studied and trained for many different reasons. What I'm discussing below are my thoughts on personal kata training with a view to improving close quarter combative ability, rather than attempting to improve the look of the movements to conform to an aesthetic ideal, or using kata as a vehicle for recovery and injury management after an accident.

When engaged in solo training you need to visualise your opponent(s). Visualisation is not necessarily the best term since it only implies seeing, whereas what we should be doing is imagining an event. See the attack, hear the attack, imagine how the impact feels on your body, how your movements affect the other person. You should try and build from your strengths into your weaknesses. Start with the strongest perceptual sense that you can recreate - be it sight, or sound, or touch, or smell - and create that memory. Each technique, each sequence should be practiced in context when training solo. Don't do a move for the sake of a pre-determined sequence, you move to create an effect. Visualisation is not difficult, but it requires practice to become an effective training tool. One of the limitations of visualisation is that it generally requires experience. What I mean by this is that to effectively create a memory and reinforce that memory you need to have had real experience of the physical practice of elements of that training. For example it would be difficult to recreate an arm bar in the mind (even if doing the physical movement concurrently) if you do not have the visual and tactile framework of reference of applying the technique.

This is controversial. I recently had a long conversation over some liquid refreshment with a friend in the early hours of a morning about conflict management. He was convinced that his past training, in a martial art, which will remain nameless, enabled him to snap another person's arm with a simple crossing of his arms, despite the fact he had never done this for real. In fact this seemed to be his solution to any form of violence against him. There is an issue between the disconnect between practicality and student gullibility when it comes to many of the 'too deadly to spar' techniques in martial arts. It is very easy to give a compliant training partner an unpleasant injury by applying a locking technique with too much force, too much speed, or a poor angle of attack. The reality of causing a fight ending injury against an actively resisting (and striking) opponent under pressure in an adrenaline-fuelled environment can be very different. You will get good at what you train for, and if you want to get good at striking or grappling, you need to get your hands dirty and work those physical skills. Tactile memory is vital for building accurate and useful visualisation skills.

Speed is a variable, not a constant. Work slowly as you create your visualisation. When it is strong in your mind, you can move fast, but there is little pressing need to move fast when you are creating such important pathways in your mind to reinforce appropriate behaviour. If you run before you can walk here you will begin to dance rather than shadow box. One further aspect of slow speed training with regard to visualisation is that many people experience 'slow time' under the influence of high adrenaline levels. Time does not actually slow down, it is merely a perceptual distortion, just like 'fast time'. Given that this perception of slow time is relatively common in high stress encounters, rehearsing in slow time and imagining things in slow time can actually help make the rehearsal more beneficial. Training at high speed is an important part of training overall, but it should not characterise all your training. Speed can instead be used for the supplementary impact training on pads and bags, which in turn helps create tactile memory.

Treat kata like an exercise book, not a short children's book. People tend to want to do a kata from start to finish, because that is how the memory of the movements is taught in class. When you train kata solo, treat it like a school exercise book, working methodically on a page at a time rather than reading quickly from cover to cover like a simple picture storybook for young children. Pick and choose exercises, and work on them. A single short exercise done for 5 minutes well is better than 3 rushed repetitions of a whole kata. This is a crucial element of good quality solo karate training. Too often people feel that they need to set aside 30 minutes or an hour to train properly, or that they need to sweat buckets and elevate their heart rate. I do not dispute the value of longer periods of aerobic training, but for many people it can be difficult to fit these regularly into their daily lives. Furthermore, the key benefits of such training are the development of the grit to carry on and the aerobic capacity to sustain a fight. I would suggest that these qualities do not necessarily have to be developed through karate practice, and that in many cases running/rowing or swimming could have similarly beneficial effects (and be easier to do). Returning to the concept of short periods of training, the vast majority of people cannot effectively focus intently for more than 20 minutes at a time, so training for short periods of time is not necessarily a bad thing. A focused five minutes can not only have greater value, but also be easier to fit into a daily routine.

In class each kata performed as a whole takes up a fairly large amount of space in a particular shape. The advantage of breaking down the kata to focus on small sequences (as described above) is that far less space is required, which in turn makes it easier to find a moment to practice. Combinations can often involve little more than a shuffle in terms of footwork and can be practiced in an area smaller than 1m squared. More complicated applications that involve moving and changing direction can be done in areas of 1m by 2m. The recognition that less space is required may seem to be common sense, but it brings with it (as does working for smaller amounts of time) a greater freedom to practice. Visualisation training with kata does mean that space and movement can be unnecessary, and indeed studies have shown that even the muscles (as opposed to the mind) can gain a small benefit from visualisation without movement.

Kata as performed and learned in class is a generic model of techniques that hint at applications and tactics. Kata is often executed and taught as a group activity in the Dojo (students moving to a called count, or doing the same kata at the same time) and as such is rather like a stretchy T shirt on a shop manikin. When you train at home you are wearing that T shirt, not the manikin, so it

now conforms to your body. Essentially this means that while the fibres and colours that make up the kata remain the same, the content is now free to vary. Your body has different strengths and weaknesses to that of the average karateka, and so in solo practice you should allow your body to begin to shape your personal interpretation and application of the movements that make up that kata. Through rigorous training you can shape your body to make that T shirt look good, but the T shirt ultimately conforms to you. Solo kata should be your kata.

There is a natural form of evolution to intensive, visualised solo kata training that has to be accepted if the individual karateka is to truly make a kata their own. If a kata is regularly broken down into individual exercises, trained according to visualised (and practised) application, technique preference, space and time, it will change. A movement trained by a class generically, but designed to suit an 'original' martial artist's specific intention, will change as an individual adapts it for their own purpose and build. The student might happily practice a kata that looks almost identical to those of the other students in class, but ask that student to perform the same kata as they train it alone in front of the group, and the sequence, repetition and shape of many of the movements will have morphed. Taking this perspective into consideration the sheer number of the overlaps of sequences and subtle variations in movements between many of Karate's kata begin to make sense.

The question for the individual student is how far do they wish to go down the rabbit hole? Do they wish to explore further and in greater depth and see where their personal kata leads them? Finally, from that stage of development and insight do they wish to save their personal kata for themselves, teaching only as they were taught, or teach the revised material to their own students as others have done before them? The further the path of detailed individual kata study is trod, the harder it becomes to use the older more established generic path. Both paths have value, but there's only one way to discover which is actually the best for you.

This article was initially written for my website in 2011 and later updated for my blog in September 2013. I've used the Alice in Wonderland Matrix analogy ever since the film was released, as it is a nice way of illustrating the difference between learning to perform a kata and learning a kata.

## Kata training and the flinch reflex

Reflexes can be a tricky term when discussing martial arts and fighting as a large number of martial artists do not distinguish between actions that are under their conscious control and actions that are not, or responses that are learned and responses that are not. A reflex action, also known as a reflex, is an involuntary and nearly instantaneous movement in response to a [stimulus](#). If we automatically use a trained response without thinking (such as a parry) in response to a stimuli we might describe it as reflexive, but a true reflex is a behaviour that is mediated via a reflex arc, a neural pathway that controls an action reflex.

When you go to the doctor and have a medical and he/she taps your knee with a hammer and your leg twitches, that is an example of a somatic reflex arc (affecting muscles). When your tongue is depressed and you gag - that too is a reflex. You are not consciously controlling it and you cannot stop it. Do we have similar reflexes applicable to combat? The answer is yes. A working knowledge of withdrawal reflexes and tendon reflexes can improve our combative ability. I'd like to briefly look at something that is the combined result of a number of different withdrawal reflexes, the 'flinch reflex'.

The body has autonomic mechanisms to protect itself from injury and given the right stimuli, your flinch reflex will kick in. Your eyes will shut briefly and your hands and forearms will attempt first to move to cover the head (or perceived area of vulnerability) and second to push away danger.

I use the term 'right stimuli' here because the body only flinches when the brain consciously or unconsciously perceives danger. You might note that after you have been training for a while you rarely flinch in sparring or hardly ever see flinching in the ring. This is because your brain recognises the telegraphs of the techniques and moves into a trained response – it is when you don't spot the telegraph in time for the brain to consciously or unconsciously activate a trained appropriate response that you are startled and as a result you flinch. A simple analogy is that most of us can catch a tennis ball with one or two hands: the more time we have to prepare for catching a ball coming towards us and can see its arc the more likely we are to catch it. If however someone were to shout "look out" and on turning our head we were to see a ball flying straight for our face, depending upon our skill level, the speed of the incoming object, and our reaction time, we would do one of the following:

Scrunch our face up to brace for impact and shut our eyes      The above while turning the head away as much as we can      The above while covering the head with the hands and ducking away from the object      Turning slightly but also pushing out with nearest hand while the other covers the face      Intercepting the object with a previously trained skill

Dealing with attacks, whether in a competitive consensual fight, or a surprise attack or an escalated argument is no different. If you do not spot the telegraphs then your reaction is likely to be at the top of the list above, the earlier you see and recognise the telegraphs (not necessarily on a conscious level) the further down that list your response will be, particularly if you already have your hands in front of your face or body.

The less familiar you are with the telegraphs and the environment, the less likely you are to access a trained response. If you are unused to dealing with verbal aggression or the stimulus of multiple people moving and not knowing which one is likely to attack, then your brain will be more occupied with this along with 'fight/don't fight' questions. As a result of this extra neural engagement you may be less likely to spot telegraphs that you would have identified with ease in a 'cleaner' competitive environment. The net result is that you are more likely to flinch.

The good news is that you do not need to train the flinch - it is built in. The bad news is that if you are spending time working other more complicated methods of intercepting attacks then in the one instance when you will truly need them, when you are caught off guard by the ease of the attack (entry angle of attack, attitude of the attacker, speed of the attack and the environment in which the attack takes place), you've spent a large amount of your time honing a fairly redundant skill because you will flinch rather than perform that complex motor skill.

Now if there are movements in kata that mimic the flinch - will practicing them improve your ability to flinch? No. Practicing them will improve your ability to fight because following the 'fake' flinch in the kata you move from that position into a combative application. Thus what kata can do is help you make a transition from a natural protective movement into a trained combative movement so fast that it seems reflexive.

This could be one of the most important things that kata gives us. There are clear differences between the movements in sparring and those in kata, and the key to those differences is that both are reflections of differing scenario and attack specific skill sets. The environment of the sparring and sport arena make redundant the employment of natural movements that the body will use in a 'real' arena (and if you've pulled off your sport techniques in that arena then either you hit first or the other guy telegraphed his intentions so clearly or attacked so weakly the ease of the attack was incredibly familiar and did not stretch you out of your comfort zone). Kata by contrast often mimics (though now in stylised form) the flinch and then practices moving from that to a combative strike. If you look at the extended arm set up common in various versions of kata for all of Karate's receiving techniques - Age Uke, Shuto Uke, Uchi Uke, Gedan Barai and so forth you can see a protective motion to ward away danger and in many cases a hand attempting to shield the head.

There is an intrinsic problem here that kata gives us the drills and skill sets needed to move from a natural position in self defence while sparring improves our timing, hand eye coordination, reactions and conditioning, while failing to properly prepare us for what our body will do under an extra dojo/mat situation when someone attacks with none of the pre-contact cues that sparring provides. Kata's weakness is that we are using it as a solo exercise rather than taking its movements into the paired area of training. Kata techniques do not work so well in sparring because the stimuli and attacks that they are often paired with are all wrong. Kata based 'sparring' should be against habitual acts of violence (HAOV). There is a truism in the joke that the Shotokan Kata Wankan is a solo recreation of movements that were originally intended to give a more productive experience as a two person exercise. \*

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This book brings together over twenty carefully selected articles on the subjects of karate training and self defence written over a period of twelve years. Based on the study of the reactions of students to common forms of aggression and violence in high pressure scenario simulations, personal experience and the shared experiences of friends and professional colleagues, and years of research into violent crime, it examines subjects as diverse as knife defence training, the role of tradition in karate, building safe scenario training, personal kata training and ways to focus training

towards self defence.

This is not a book written specifically for 'instructors', nor for 'students', rather it is designed to make the reader think about what they are training, how they are training it, and what they want to achieve from their training. The aim of the articles is to provide information suitable for everyone, regardless of style or grade.

*“To say this book is a collection of articles written by John over a number of years is to do it an injustice. There are supposed, empirical works on Karate and self defence that are simply not in the same league as this work and most certainly not as thought provoking.*

*This is a book after my own heart and I thoroughly commend it to anyone who questions what their current karate training is geared towards, but also to those who don't need convincing about the efficacy of their karate in dealing with real life violence but need a plan to affect change. This book will answer both question and need.*

Peter Consterdine

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