

My Karate Philosophy  
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*Try to hit me, pay a price.*

Beginnings

I learned early on, as a youngster, to dissociate from my physical self; simply to not be present in my body. This was a means of survival. It wasn't a healthy one, but it was what I had available then. One of the things I hope for my young son is to allow him to be comfortable in his body: to protect him from shaming, bullying, and abuse, as long as he needs me for that, and to give him the tools to protect himself as he gets older.

There was one exception to my unphysicality, and that was sprinting. In my early school years – the first few grades – I regularly placed in sprints during track and field day. But even that was dissociative: when the “Go!” sounded, I went into a kind of mental tunnel, where there was no one but myself, and I simply transported myself to the end of the sprint.

Later in elementary school I lost the ability. I would twist an ankle or otherwise fall behind. I won no more prize ribbons.

When I was 16, I saw a karate demonstration by children and teenagers in the Bronx neighborhood where I lived. I wanted to be able to do what they did. What impressed me most was the beauty of it. To this day, it is the beauty of karate that most motivates me.

A year later, I met a black belt who was a couple of years older than me, and he offered to give me lessons. I did not get very far, not even to my first belt promotion, although close. This fellow, it turned out, was a compulsive liar. I do believe he was a black belt; but beyond that, he was a pretty sad case, and eventually we parted ways. When I resumed training, some 35 years later, it was nice to revive the muscle memory. Some of it was still there, in the punches, kicks, and blocks.

Training as an Adult

I wasn't flexible when I trained as a teenager, and I wasn't flexible when I started again as an adult. I'm still not, although I am a lot more flexible now than I was then. My karate journey has been largely a discovery of how to integrate kicks into my fight, while using the skills that came more easily, in order to compensate. I have learned well how to compensate! Mostly through footwork. In Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu they say, “Position before submission.” Position is primary. I believe this is true in stand-up martial arts too, including karate.

I am good with my hands. I speculate that my background in piano caused that part of my brain to become finely tuned, and that this now translates into manual skill when I fight.

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As I trained through the belt levels, from white to black, there have been several breakthroughs. One of these was lowering my stance: something my teacher had been advising me to do for the longest time. I finally got tired of hearing it and decided to try it. (That has been a recurring pattern in my training!) It turned out to be a game changer: all of a sudden I could put myself where I wanted to be, almost effortlessly.

Another breakthrough was learning that, when fighting “inside” (close to my opponent), it was okay to turn more facing straight on (square), rather than presenting a profile (bladed). True, it exposes more of me, but at punching (rather than kicking) range that is less of a worry, and it has the big benefit of bringing my rear hand (usually my right hand) into the picture, both for defense and for striking. I think that was the beginning of my developing good defensive skills, which are now fundamental to my entire fight.

Related to this was an incident when I saw my teacher demonstrate defense-by-parrying. I was amazed at the effectiveness of such slight movements. I decided, then and there, that I wanted to be able to do that, because it would allow me to shut down my opponent regardless of how flexible or athletic he or she was. This, too, is a now fundamental aspect of my fight.

Probably the last breakthrough before getting my black belt (there have been others since!) was informed by Kenpo, a particular style of karate, and motivated by my continuing frustration with some lingering vulnerabilities. One particular fellow student would regularly nail me with an indirect punch to the left side of my head. Another fellow student would nail me with a side kick to the stomach. At a time when my defense was getting better and better, what allowed them to do that? I thought and thought and thought about this, replaying the incidents in my mind, slowing them down as I visualized them, and trying to come up with a systematic way to prevent them.

What I came up with is, I think, a very general method of stand-up fighting, and it seems to work for me: I counter a line with a circle; I counter a circle with a line. If someone throws a direct strike at me (a line), I will use the line to pivot around (a circle), thereby gaining the dominant angle where I am facing my opponent but he/she is not facing me. If someone throws an indirect strike (a circle), I will move straight (a line) into the space inside the arc, thereby getting close to my opponent while they are vulnerable and open.

This is a winning strategy. I believe that when I don't win, it's because my opponent has prevented me from applying it.

It's a counter-fight, and for me, that's the best kind of fight, for both technical and moral reasons. On the technical side, it's a waste of energy to strike when there's no opening, unless you're trying to create the opening (through a combination or feint). But I find that the single most effective way to get an opening is to let the opponent (try to) strike. That's when they're at their most vulnerable. This is perhaps the biggest lesson I have learned from my teachers over the years.

From the moral point of view, counter-fighting is superior to offensive fighting, because I don't want to hurt anyone. I just want to stop you from hurting me.

So why not just be a defensive fighter? Simply because no defense is perfect. As my teacher often said, if you're only on defense, eventually you'll get hit. It's just the odds. One has to strike, or use some kind of offense, in the service of defense.

Going back to my childhood, and then thinking about my son, I feel that inculcating defensive skills is the most important aspect of teaching martial arts to a child. When my son raises his hands and exclaims, "I'm protecting my center-line!" it fills me with pride and joy.

### And Now?

I like to joke, "When I can fight like Bruce Lee, I'll stop trying to get better." But the fact is, Bruce Lee did fight like Bruce Lee, and he *never* stopped trying to get better.

It's a process of continuous – or, at least, continual – improvement. I am constantly trying to improve my skills in stand-up fighting. I would also like to acquire some proficiency in ground fighting, like Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu.

These days, I teach karate to kids in after-school classes, and that is both challenging and gratifying. I cannot guarantee that after any one class, any one kid will have a better jab, cross, ridge-hand, or round kick. What I *can* guarantee is that they will walk out of the class different from who they were when they walked into class that day.

This may consist of a little more confidence, a little more self-respect, a little more comfort with themselves. Or it might mean a better side kick! But they will have taken something good from each class – because I put my whole self into teaching, from the moment we bow in to the moment we bow out.