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Martial Arts and Self Defense.

Sensei Robert Graves, my karate teacher, once made a point of saying karate was the best self-defense system in the world. It takes at least three years to learn enough karate to defend yourself reliably. A black belt usually takes five years. Even if karate is the best self-defense system in the world, karate is not for everyone who needs to know some self-defense, and-or who needs to know quickly. Sensei Graves would disagree with some of what I say here, and, for that, I apologize.

If you want to learn self-defense rapidly because of an urgent problem, neither Tai Chi nor karate is the way to go. They are outstanding for self-defense but take too long. Sometimes groups such as the local police department teach courses in self-defense. The quality varies. If there is a local Krav Maga school (Israeli style of close combat), and they teach a self-defense course apart from Krav Maga courses, that might be useful. Sometimes karate schools or kung fu schools adapt material for separate self-defense courses. I saw a couple of classes for children at a Tae Kwan Do school in Auburn, AL, and they seemed good, so you could also look for a self-defense course at Tae Kwan Do schools. Ask local schools and city recreation programs about a specific self-defense course. See the Jennifer Lopez movie named, I think, "Enough".

If you want good solid self-defense and are not in a hurry, then any of the long-standing well-respected martial arts will do. Visit half-a-dozen styles. Here is not the place to offer my assessment on which styles might be best taught and most useful for what purposes. I don't really know anyway. Karate and Tai Chi are as good as any in the long run.

Unless you are highly skilled, you cannot defend yourself just by dancing around, staying at a distance from your opponent, interacting only when you want to interact, easily parrying his-her strikes, without any risk to yourself, and while causing only the minimum necessary damage to a person who is actively trying to hurt you. I have never met anyone this highly skilled. You see that only in movies. It is not realistic.

In a real fight, you have to act decisively, what you do is ugly, what you do is not exactly like what you learned in school, you have to hurt the other person hard enough and fast enough, and you likely will get hit even if you are not seriously hurt. "Hurt hard enough" means enough so the bad guy cannot follow you as you run away. Your aim is not to shame the bad guy, discourage him-her, or kill him-her but to save yourself and people in your protection. "Hurt hard enough" often means to cause damage to the bad guy that does not heal well. Both Tai Chi and karate stress engaging the opponent at close range right away and getting the job done. You cannot expect to end a fight with one blow unless you are unusually skilled and unless you do damage that might kill a person. I have never had to fight. I avoid fights. I am proud of that. I do not enable rude and indecent people, but I do not fight.

The Internet has many books on self-defense. I have read only a few. I was able to pick, for my use, what seemed best. In other notes, I recommend some books on martial arts, but not many, and not on self-defense. You should not learn self-defense from books. Ideally, you should learn a martial art first

and then read self-defense books to see how they might improve your martial art. You should not start a martial art from books, and you should avoid books when you do start a martial art. Before you start a martial art or self-defense training, you might read some books so you have a better idea of where to go from there, which martial art to go into; but not to learn the self-defense or martial from the book itself. If you take the time to read many blurbs and reviews (not only a few) about books on the Internet, you can usually figure out who has real experience and who make the most sense. Nobody can teach you how to be safe in all situations, so avoid books that promise to do that. I suggest you watch a movie that starred Tim Allen and Jim Belushi, where Belushi played a practical down-to-Earth martial arts teacher, and Allen played a man who wanted to learn to fight so he could recover his reputation after a beating from a bully. I forgot the name of the movie. In the end, Allen does not beat up the bully.

Contrary to what seems to be advertised, in a self-defense class (not regular karate or Tai Chi) it takes at least three months to learn well enough to be able to defend yourself. It takes at least six months to learn well enough so you can use techniques reliably. One week is not enough. In this regard, the movie with Jennifer Lopez is wrong. Expect to spend a few months. To put that time in perspective, a black belt in karate takes about five years, and competence in an "internal" "soft" art such as Tai Chi takes about ten years. You cannot learn on the basis of only the time you spend in class. You MUST put in time yourself. Besides course work, I suggest putting in an hour a day for six months for minimum self-defense. Then, if you like the activity, enroll in a martial art such as karate or Tai Chi.

One of the most important components in successful self-defense is the willingness to hurt other people. I have seen athletic people get hurt because they hesitated to use their natural ability and hesitated to hurt other people. This wavering is natural, and often commendable, but you have to get over it. You cannot expect to get over it in a few days training. It takes months to get over natural wavering. A chief goal in military combat training is not to impart sophisticated skills but to get soldiers to where they are willing to use what they have learned to hurt people. You must learn not only defensive techniques but also hurting techniques. If you take a good self-defense course, expect to change both in your physical skills and attitude. Don't worry; you won't go home to beat up your spouse and kids. Bullies have an advantage because they are willing to use whatever skills they have to hurt non-bullies while non-bullies usually waver long enough to get hurt.

You can over-learn willingness to hurt, as with the bad karate school in the movie "Karate Kid", and with some soldiers. For the vast majority of people who need to learn self-defense, this is not a problem. On the whole, don't worry about it. Don't worry even if, for a while, you get enthusiastic about combat. Don't run away from your school because your teacher makes you do contact drills and contact sparring. Do re-consider your school if your teacher continually returns to killing techniques.

If you are in imminent danger, please contact the police right away. If you know anybody who can help defend you, please contact them as well. Please contact anybody else who might be able to help, such as a counselling office, shelter, priest (of any religion), or lawyer.

Some people are natural martial artists; some people are natural street fighters. If you are a natural, you will learn faster, but still you will not learn enough in one month. If you encounter a natural fighter, and you are not a natural fighter, you will lose, even after six months of training. Even a second degree black belt in an art such as Tae Kwan Do or karate might lose.

Thankfully, I think most muggers are not natural martial artists or else they would not be making a living robbing people. Still, most muggers have used violence, continue to use violence, are comfortable with it, and are at least competent at it. Street thugs are not a joke. Bar thugs are not a joke. To repeat a basic message: avoid fights if you can.

If you need self-defense because of an urgent problem such as an abusive partner, hopefully that abuser is not a natural martial artist. I think most natural fighters are not abusers but I cannot defend my opinion. If you face an abusive person, again, contact the police and-or a help group regardless of your training and regardless of the skill of the other person.

Even if the person who is abusing you is not a natural martial artist, the person is a bully. Forget the old adage about bullies being cowards at heart, so, if you hit a bully, he-she will run away. That adage is true, but only if the bully sees clearly that you can really hurt him-or-her. If you hit a bully but do not hurt the bully, and the bully sees that is all you've got, so the bully feels he-she cannot get really hurt, and he-she will win the fight, then the bully still will attack you. That was the point of an episode of the TV show "Doogie Howser". You must be able to show the bully you can really hurt him-her, and you cannot learn enough martial arts self-defense skills in a few days for that. I think bullies are not often natural martial artists. Still, bullies are used to violence, have hit people, enjoy hitting people, enjoy hurting people, have been hit and survived, and have learned some skill during their lives as bullies. All this makes them dangerous opponents – but not insurmountable. Get help and get training too. In the meantime, avoid the bully if you can.

When you hurt somebody, you open yourself to legal liability, even if you act in self-defense. Suppose a person threatens you, and you break that person's knee so as to avoid hurt to yourself; that is, you cause lingering damage. In doing so, you might be open to a distressing draining lawsuit even though you acted in self-defense. Even with "stand your ground" laws, you should assume the law expects you to run until you are cornered. Even if the attacker is a habitual criminal, and the attacker was committing a crime when you hurt him-her, you might be open to a lawsuit. You should never hurt anybody just because he-she is rude – the world has too many rude people for you to fix it. Hurt somebody only to protect yourself or to protect somebody else in danger. Knowing a little bit about self-defense is not a license to be a bully and not a license to be reckless. The best self-defense is to avoid bad situations, and, if you find yourself in one, get out before anything bad happens. Plan ahead, and don't take chances. Think about what you want your children to learn from what you do, and act accordingly.

A gun can be a useful self-defense tool but only if you know how to use it under stressful conditions and only if you are willing to use it. Most people don't know how to use a gun effectively during stress and they are not really willing to use it. I have never been tested and I hope I am not. A gun also is a source of great danger to the owner, friends, and family. The last time that I checked the statistics, people are much safer without guns than with guns. Most shootings, and most shooting deaths, are done with small-caliber handguns among family-friends-and-neighbors. Seldom are guns useful against home invaders except in the hands of skilled, willing, lucky, prepared experts. Both skill at using a gun and the attitude take training. Most people are not naturals with guns any more than with fists. Only a trained person is actually safer with a gun than without a gun, and even those people take a risk. I own guns, but I do not expect to use them for self defense (at my age and where I live), and I keep them unloaded away from

ammunition. They are small caliber, and I use them for target practice. If you use a gun and you hurt a person, you are open to legal problems just as if you used martial arts. I leave you to search the Internet for further advice on owning and using a gun. I offer none.