

Michelle Roemig
November 18, 2000

Hapkido and Self-Defense

The Nebraska Hapkido Association describes itself as teaching, “a Korean art that uses both kicks and punches . . . and locks and throws . . . then puts it all into a self-defense format. . . .Our *outward expression* of [character building] is learning self-defense.” (Howard 1) Does that mean that learning Hapkido will teach you everything you need to know about self-defense? Unfortunately, no. While Hapkido is certainly helpful , there are aspects of self-defense that it does not teach.

Hapkido is designed to teach students how to react to a threatening or dangerous situation. It incorporates a number of different techniques and responses, ranging from mild to lethal, from defending to controlling to damaging. And unlike many martial arts, Hapkido is designed to be used outside the dojang; its moves are neither meditative nor based on the needs of fighters two millennia ago but rather are meant to be useful to respond to the street-fighting and attempted assaults of modern-day times.

If you use the most basic definition of self-defense, “defense of one’s self, one’s rights, etc.,” (Webster 676) then Hapkido seems to cover the need. But as soon as you start looking beyond how self-defense is defined into what self-defense *is*, the gaps in Hapkido’s curriculum become apparent.

The National Coalition Against Sexual Assault describes self-defense as “a set of awareness, assertiveness, verbal confrontation skills with safety strategies and physical techniques that enable someone to successfully escape, resist, and survive violent attacks.” (quoted in Weiss ‘NCASA Guidelines’) Notice that the physical skill is

mentioned only at the end of a long list of skills designed to prevent or avoid a physical attack. The book *A Guide to Rape Awareness and Prevention* describes itself as a guide to self-protection for women. Out of eleven chapters, only one discusses how to physically stop an attack; the rest are devoted to preventing such an attack from ever happening. Laura Goodin of FullPower (an organization related to Model Mugging) states, ‘Self-defense--in other words, keeping yourself physically and emotionally safe--usually boils down to stopping a dangerous situation as soon as you recognize that you’re in it.’ To put it even more simply, the best way to not get hurt in a fight is to not get into one.

One of the most important aspects of avoiding an attack is to develop an awareness of the world around you. Part of this involves becoming more observant of people and learning clues that mean that someone could be a potential attacker. Part of it is as simple as knowing where the exits are in a public building and where you can escape to if you need a safe place to go if trouble occurs. (FullPower, ‘Toolbox’) And one of the most important parts is learning to trust yourself if you sense danger. People can instinctively pick up on tiny clues that signify that a person is dangerous, and yet many people choose to ignore those clues unless they can consciously find a logical reason for them. Learning to trust your intuition when it says you may be in danger can be a vital survival skill. (de Becker, 12-14)

Just as important as recognizing a dangerous situation is coming to grips with the concept that acting to get out of a potentially dangerous situation is not only acceptable but vital, and that that action must be quick, decisive, and forceful. Especially for women, this can be difficult to grasp. Most women are not encouraged to be aggressive; they are taught as little girls to be quiet and polite and to not give offense. Even men are conditioned to obey social conventions so as not to make waves. But self-defense requires a different mindset. In a potential self-defense situation it is vitally important to react now, without hesitating to worry about looking paranoid or hurting someone’s

feelings. You must believe that your safety comes first and everything else is second. Then you must be willing to act on that belief to remove yourself from the situation, no matter what it takes. (Strong 46-51)

Despite their importance, these skills are not taught as a part of Hapkido. They are touched on in class, and some of them are a natural outgrowth of learning an assertive skill such as a martial art. But they are not formally included in the curriculum. Hapkido teaches how to defend against an attack, not how to prevent it. If self-defense is ‘awareness (95%) and the ability to repel an attack (5%),’ (quoted in Weiss, ‘Martial Arts’), then Hapkido focuses nearly all of its energies on a minimal part of self-defense.

But this is not a flaw in Hapkido; it is simply its nature. Hapkido is a martial art that focuses on self-defense, but it is still primarily a martial art. Webster defines the word martial as, “1. of or connected with war, soldiers, etc.; military. 2. warlike; militaristic.” (Webster 459) Hapkido concerns itself with the fighting aspect of self-defense because that is what the martial arts do.

Even within the realm of fighting Hapkido is not perfect for self-defense, for it shares two of the problems that most martial arts have in relation to this area. One is the time frame that studying Hapkido involves; it takes years to achieve a mastery of the art, and most people training for self-defense neither have that much time to devote to it nor can afford to wait that long to develop their skills. The other major problem is the reality of situations, or more specifically the lack thereof. Although Hapkido trains students to hurt/damage attackers, in a practice session that are obviously not trying to hurt each other. They pull kicks so as not to injure, they unconsciously aim punches slightly off to the side so they cannot connect. Even in sparring full contact is rarely if ever used. Unfortunately, in a stress situation the body follows the patterns it knows, and if you’ve ingrained a pattern of missing in class, your body will try to miss in a fight as well.

Even with these flaws, studying Hapkido does have benefits where self-defense is concerned. Like any type of exercise, practicing Hapkido develops strength, stamina, and

general fitness; the better shape you are in, the more it increases the chances that you would be able to both endure an attempted attack and successfully defend against it. Hapkido, because of its specialized, precise movements, also improves your balance, coordination, and general body consciousness. These are all factors that can contribute to how well you can defend yourself in a fight.

Studying Hapkido also has mental benefits for self-defense. It fosters a self-discipline that can allow a person to remain calm in the middle of an attack. More importantly, Hapkido works to build the self-confidence and inner strength of its students. These traits then not only translate into the knowledge that can you fight back against an attacker, but also provide the courage and strength to do so. This is especially important for women, who are rarely taught to be aggressive in their daily life.

These physical and mental benefits make Hapkido a valuable tool in self-defense as it is. And even the flaws that Hapkido has for self-defense are not unsolvable.

Hapkido actually faces the problem of time better than many martial arts. While mastery of the art does require years of study, basic self-defense moves are among the first techniques that a new student learns. A way to make this even more effective, especially for those students who start Hapkido specifically for the purpose of self-defense, might be to isolate a dozen or so techniques and drill the students exclusively on them for the first ten weeks of class (the period before their first testing). Students who do not wish to continue past that point would have a set of basic moves that had become reflex, so that they could be used in the case of an attack without having to waste time trying to think of a response. Students who do move on would have a good grounding in the moves that much of Hapkido is based on.

The problem of realism is more difficult to address, because there is no way to simulate an attack and have it be completely true to life. One solution to the power issue is to have students do regular, frequent pad work. While striking or kicking a pad will obviously not cause it to react the same way that the human body would, the student

would grow accustomed to the feel of actually striking something solid with full power rather than simply punching air or stopping a strike before it can connect with force. Another, more elaborate, solution would be to institute a sparring situation similar to the drills that Model Mugging started. An attacker (usually male) would dress in a padded suit that covered his entire body, including his head. The students would then have to defend themselves from his “attack,” thereby giving them a chance to fight full force against an attacker with little risk of either person being injured.

Even some of the skills discussed earlier, such as awareness and mindset, could be incorporated indirectly into Hapkido. Teaching these issues in class would not really be feasible because it would pull away from the focus of the art--fighting. Besides that, the sheer volume of other issues combined with all of the fighting skills already taught in Hapkido would double the time commitment for the class. But there are many sources, both books and organizations, that do focus on avoiding an attack rather than defeating it, and many of these sources are unknown to students who are just starting to explore the subject of self-defense. If the Hapkido handbook were to contain a list of recommended reading and organizational websites, it would provide as starting point from which students could pursue a line of study of “pre-fighting” skills that would complement their study of physical defense.

Hapkido does not cover everything a person needs to know about self-defense; but then, it isn't designed to. As a martial art its focus by nature is the detailed study of a form of fighting. A good analogy states, “Learning martial arts is like going to medical school: you dedicate yourself to long hours of study in order to become a specialized expert. Self-defense is more like taking a first-aid course that will help you handle an emergency in your daily life.” (Weiss ‘Martial Arts’) The two are in the same field--regaining control of life--but they approach it from different angles. And while Hapkido may not teach everything, it is a good place to start.

Works Cited

- de Becker, Gavin. The Gift of Fear. New York: Dell Publishing, 1997.
- Goodin, Laura E. "How Self-Defense Works." FullPower Self-Defense: Articles and Research. www.learth.net/~fullpwr
- Ferguson, Robert and Jeanine. A guide to Rape Awareness and Prevention. Hartford: Turtle Press, 1994.
- Howard, J. Thomas. Nebraska Hapkido Association Handbook. Last revised July 2000.
- "Self-Defense Toolbox." FullPower Self-Defense: Articles and Research. www.learth.net/~fullpwr
- Strong, Sanford. Strong on Defense: Survival Rules to Protect You and Your Family from Crime. New York: Pocket Books, 1996.
- Webster's New World Dictionary. Gen. ed. David B Guralnik. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982.
- Weiss, Judith. "Self-Defense and Martial Arts." Thinking About Self-Defense. Assault Prevention Information Network: yehudit.org (1996)
- _____. "NCASA Guidelines For Choosing A Self-Defense Course." Thinking About Self-Defense. Assault Prevention Information Network: yehudit.org (1996)

Works Consulted

- Arming Women Against Rape & Endangerment (AWARE). "Questions about self-defense." www.aware.org/faqselfd.htm
- "Is Martial Arts Training for Me?" FullPower Self-Defense: Articles and Research. www.learth.net/~fullpwr
- Snortland, Ellen. Beauty Bites Beast: Awakening the Warrior Within Women and Girls. Pasadena: Trilogy Books, 1998.
- Thomas, Matt, Denise Loveday, and Larry Strauss. Defend Yourself! Every Woman's Guide to Safeguarding Her Life. New York: Avon Books, 1995.