

# CLASSICAL KARATE

BY JERRY BEASLEY, ED.D. • PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICK HUSTEAD

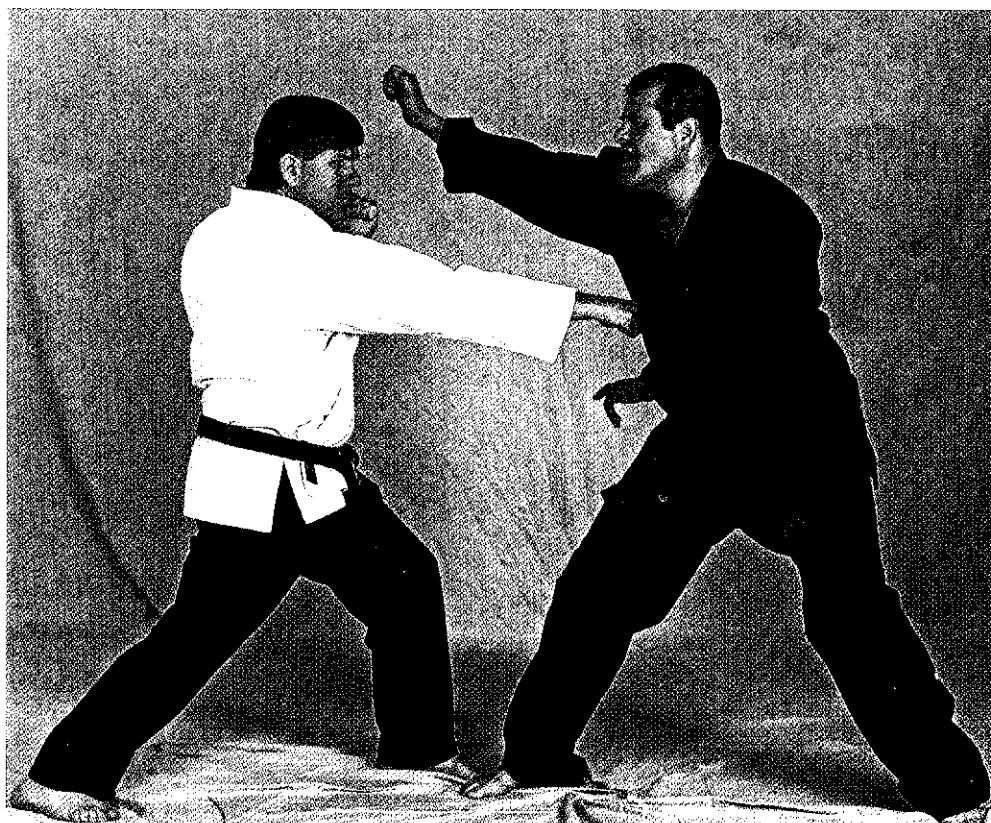
In the hit movie *The Karate Kid*, Daniel-san and especially his mentor, Mr. Miyagi, represented the ideals of classical karate. Miyagi was a peaceful warrior. He was able to fight with great skill but preferred to avoid confrontation. In contrast, members of the Cobra Kai Dojo were all too eager to test their skills. Miyagi and Daniel-san knew that the skills of karate must be controlled and are best understood by proponents who seek perfection of character. The Cobra Kai *sensei* and his students seemed to think that karate gave them the ability to bully others.

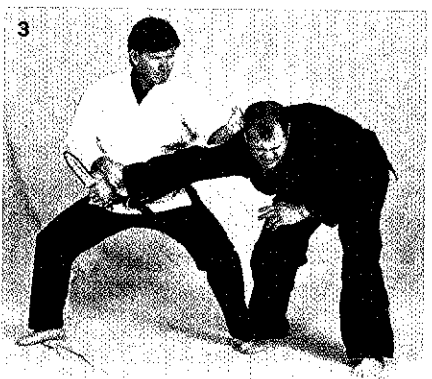
Years ago, I had a 21-year-old student named Josh. He'd trained in a nonclassical style of karate reminiscent of the Cobra Kai's. Josh had been told that tradition was bogus. At his former *dojo*, students wore no belts and had no chain of command. Members of the school would get together to spar, enter tournaments and socialize. Josh had won a few tournaments and believed he was capable of defending himself. He seemed eager to get into a real fight. He'd enrolled in my classical karate course but had a problem adjusting to the discipline.

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**One benefit of studying traditional karate is restraint: The black belt has the power to kill but chooses not to use it unless he's forced to.**

## ***THE MOST EFFECTIVE FORM OF SELF-DEFENSE TRAINING EVER DEvised!***





While performing a self-defense routine, the martial artist (left) envisions himself engaged in a life-or-death struggle. He faces his attacker (1) and acts as soon as the confrontation escalates (2). His response is composed of a front kick (3), standing arm lock (4) and head strike (5). Exercising self-control, he pins the assailant to the ground and takes control of the knife (6) without inflicting further injury.

Josh considered traditional kicking techniques to be outdated and inferior to his sport kicks. Whenever the class practiced the back fist, he'd substitute a jab. He scoffed at bowing to his opponent. His recalcitrant attitude stemmed from his assumption that classical karate was inferior to his modern sport-fighting system, replete with its let's-get-it-on philosophy.

Nevertheless, he'd joined the class, and because of his athletic ability (and in spite of his impatience), he maintained at least a C average on skills tests. He missed the final exam, however.

On the Sunday morning before the test, Josh took his girlfriend to a restaurant for breakfast. After being seated, he

noticed two middle-aged men staring at his girlfriend. Josh offered a few words to one of them, then told him to follow him outside. The man did. The cursing ended when Josh smacked the guy in the nose with a perfect right cross. He fell to his knees, his nose bleeding and broken.

The fallen man's buddy rushed out and helped him to his feet, and together they entered the restaurant. Some customers screamed at the sight of blood, while others left in disgust. The manager called the police. Josh was arrested, handcuffed and taken to jail. His girlfriend had to call for a ride home.

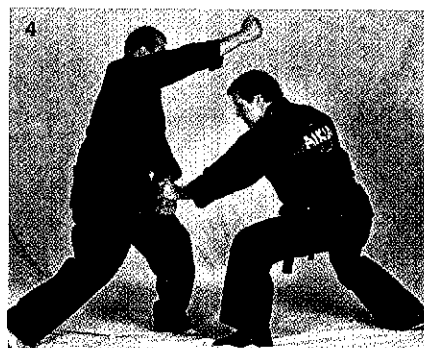
When Josh was released on bond, he returned to the university and attempted to salvage the semester. He requested a grade of "incomplete," which would allow him to make up the exam at a later date, and told me his story. Fortunately, his parents could afford an attorney—which wound up costing almost \$10,000. He was sentenced to three consecutive weekends in jail and had to pay the victim's medical bills, as well as a \$15,000 fine. His probation would last for three years.

Josh's karate training had failed him but not because he lacked the ability to fight. The lesson to be learned in classical karate is that avoiding the fight can be a more prudent decision. Because of a bad decision, Josh was now in debt and had a criminal record. He'd learned the physical skills of karate but neglected the mental side.

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Today, it's popular to view the Cobra Kai version of karate as more effective for self-defense, but it's classical karate that offers the more effective path. In most cases, self-defense is more about mentality than physicality. As human beings, we're blessed with a complex network of nerves called the autonomic nervous system. Thousands of years ago, our ancestors relied on immediate adrenaline rushes to avoid being eaten by predators. Today, books are written about the negative effects of adrenaline, and drugs are prescribed to curb its influence on our health and actions.

We can feel its effect in the form of increased heart rate, respiration and blood pressure. According to cardiolo-



**Jerry Beasley (right) faces his opponent (1). He seizes the man's lead hand (2) and pushes it down (3). The opponent immediately sees the opening and executes a reverse punch, which Beasley evades by changing levels (4). Beasley then shoots in (5) and plants his right foot behind the man's lead leg (6) for the takedown (7). Karate teaches that physical responses such as this are appropriate only after nonviolent methods have been tried.**

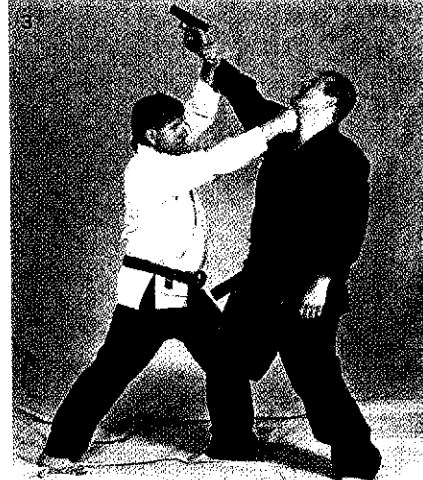
gist Dr. James O'Keefe, activating the sympathetic nervous system sets off an exhilarating rush that helps the body respond to a threat and readies it for fight or flight. The problem is, the adrenaline rush can immobilize us if we fail to flee or must negotiate a peaceful conclusion to an altercation.

In a sort of *yin-yang* relationship, the parasympathetic nervous system calms us down. A recent *New York Times* article indicated that strong social connections, such as marriage and religious faith, can curb an overactive sympathetic system. Membership in a karate school can forge strong social bonds. Success in karate training can promote faith in our ability to survive. The realization that we won't be harmed can activate the parasympathetic nervous system. And in a real fight, that's what we want to do.

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When taught by a disciplined and skilled instructor in an environment that nurtures complex social-group configurations, traditional karate can be the most effective form of self-defense training. Experts agree that in real-life scenarios, physical skills are of secondary importance. The person who wins the fight does so as a direct result of successful psychological preparation, which enables him to establish and maintain a mental advantage throughout the confrontation. Thus, an enraged man with a pocketknife can control an entire office of employees even though the employees, if they acted as a group, could overpower him. What you take into the altercation mentally makes all the difference.

A view espoused by nontraditionalists is that the predator-prey scenario is the ultimate test of martial arts validity. The empowered experts of the predator-prey philosophy, including many highly trained and persuasive people, often suggest that we'd be well-advised to abandon the classical training before we're preyed upon by a drug-crazed killer. In such a situation, they claim, traditional karate would be of little use. So effective have they been in changing popular opinion that sometimes the mere thought of such an attack is enough to make women shiver, children seek the safety of their mothers and talented black



Floyd Burk is threatened by an armed attacker (1). Burk turns and deflects the weapon upward (2), then slams a reverse punch into the gunman's chin (3). He traps the man's right arm and closes the gap for a leg sweep (4-6). Once the assailant is down, the martial artist can take away the gun or continue to strike (7). Traditional karate teaches that this type of training in the dojo helps students remain calm during a real attack.

belts to break out in a cold sweat.

The fact is, the predator-prey scenario represents only a small part of the self-defense equation. The majority of situations develop as a result of a stimulus and response. As an individual, you create through words and body language a stimulus that results in the response of physical, yet most often verbal, aggression. Thus, through your own choices and actions, you initiate a self-defense situation. Most of these situations can be effectively controlled through nonviolent means that include defusing, de-escalating and leaving the scene. Unfortunately, it's possible that a person can get so fixated on a single event (the predator-prey scenario) that he can miss most of the benefits that karate training offers.

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If you frequent the proverbial "biker bar," dine and shop in high-crime districts, and associate with gang members,

criminals, drug dealers and other predator types, you may need to study the most effective forms of self-defense known to man. Depending on how much time you have to train, traditional karate may or may not be your best choice. To reap the benefits of classical karate, you must invest the time and develop the discipline.

Traditional karate is designed to improve character and develop confidence to meet life's challenges and achieve goals. Chuck Norris, perhaps the world's best-known master of the empty hand, said: "Karate means developing yourself as a person. It involves developing respect for one's self, which in turn instills respect for others. What I stress is that they have a clear mental image of what they want; the desire to achieve it; the determination and patience to stay the course; and that they study and train accordingly. If you follow this formula and your goal is within your range of accomplishment, then success will be yours."

The emphasis in traditional karate instruction is on the long-range goals of improving or changing the participant's character to reflect the goals of the martial arts, including virtuous conduct in the face of hardship or combat. It certainly behooves the prudent *karateka* to investigate different methods of physical training so long as it yields the benefits of a successful socialization process, culminating in a psychological perspective that recognizes the importance of the individual. Thus, acquired self-efficacy and self-esteem, the byproducts of an organized karate school, have more utility than sheer brute force when it comes to avoiding trouble and controlling a self-defense scenario.

As the *karateka* progresses through a regimented ranking structure, roles are established and disciplined behavioral patterns are required. The yellow belt observes the actions of the green belt. Perhaps imagining himself in the superior role, the yellow belt practices the behavior required of the higher rank. The yellow belt takes on the role of his superior and is psychologically tested with the same prescribed duties and expectations as if he actually held the higher status. In so doing, he prepares to assume the rank

of green belt. The same can be said of the green belt desiring to advance to brown belt and so on.

The socialization required for each rank prepares students for virtuous conduct because failure to observe rules or expected forms of behavior at any level can result in expulsion from the group, demotion or other forms of discipline. Established patterns of group life are propagated through interaction in which generalized symbols (rank, belts, uniforms, etc.) and modes of interpretation are commonly exchanged, often through the completion of organized activities.

Each time the student observes his superiors interacting with others, his opinions of proper behavior are influenced. Through such interaction, students in the dojo acquire a cognitive understanding of existent norms that mandate responsible and acceptable behavior. Through par-

which is required to accept the subordinate position needed to maintain the superior's position. This unique character trait is produced in part during symbolically violent training in which a *karateka* is expected to fantasize about taking the life of his partner. In creating the act of justifiable murder, he must evoke controlled rage and perhaps hatred. Like a vaccine, the emotions are evoked so the *karateka* can build his capability to control each thought preceding the emotion. Since the mind doesn't distinguish whether the situation is real or imagined, the emotions become real.

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Sport psychologists maintain that when participants engage in vivid imagery and completely absorb themselves in the activity, the brain interprets the images as identical to reality-based interactions. Adding to the validity of the

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ticipation in *kata*, *kumite* and other forms of training, common expressions and values are shared, wherein the individual dramatizes his role in a manner that befits the situation.

Three to four years of continuous dojo training with advancements in status can greatly influence how a person acts in a threatening situation. If the process is successful, the *karateka* will exhibit virtuous conduct regardless of the outcome of the event. It's often said that a black belt, while possessing the potential for great violence, chooses not to use that power. Realizing that a strike could result in the death of his attacker, he knows that he has a moral obligation to turn the other cheek, to walk away.

To someone not tempered by years in a traditional dojo, walking away might seem cowardly. However, it actually reflects a higher state of human emotion,

situation are stress-producing factors, which include the expectations of others who are watching and the skill, appearance and reputation of the opponent. At once, the opponent may become a trusted friend or a vicious attacker. Within the context of a single exercise, the *karateka* can sample the emotions of respect, hate, fear, remorse and altruism.

On any given night in the dojo, the *karateka* has recognized stress and emotional bliss. He's killed, and he's trusted his life to others. He's shared remorse, joy and friendship. In his mind, he's recorded the emotions as real; he actually felt, controlled and released each one. He's prepared himself for more meaningful communication and relationships. This takes place at different levels over years as his socialization in the dojo is completed. Is he capable of self-defense? Yes, he is.

In training, he's developed the ability to role-play. Through vivid imagery, he automatically begins to play out a confrontation. In his mind, he sees the fight escalating. He strikes his opponent, causing great injury. He feels remorse. He feels pity for his attacker. In an altruistic gesture, he chooses to defuse the argument or walk away. He views fighting as an honorable exercise and chooses not to dishonor his training by engaging in an avoidable incident. Aggression is, after all, a learned response. The traditional karate dojo treats aggression as controllable, as something that's available when needed and deplorable when uncontrolled.

The classical dojo provides the perfect environment for kids to learn how to properly react to bullies. Physical aggression against a bully is seldom effective. It's far more important that the child develop self-esteem and a network of friends in the dojo. When that's accomplished, he'll be more likely to tell his peers, parents, teachers and administrators about the bully's behavior. Adults who are subject to harassment, workplace violence and bullying will also find that acquired self-esteem and a network of dojo friends are effective tools for mental self-defense.

Some experts have completely dismissed the idea that karate is useful in self-defense. Make no mistake: It's a most efficient means of self-defense. However, to experience the "empty mind/empty hand" of karate, years of training are required. It's not for everyone, but for those who choose the classical path, there's more to be gained than just the ability to win a fight.

I haven't heard from Josh since he graduated years ago, but I can't help but think that he'd admit now that classical karate wasn't so bad after all. ❧

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*About the author: Dr. Jerry Beasley is a professor of exercise, sport and health education at Radford University in Radford, Virginia, where he heads a popular multicultural martial arts program. For more information, visit <http://www.blackbeltmag.com> and click on Community, then Black Belt Authors.*