

Is Taekwon-do practical for street self defense. How do you know?

By Kevin Joe

When a new student joins ITFNZ I think we can assume that they expect that after some training Taekwon-Do can be used for street self defense and that it will be practical. It is after all, one common reason why people join a martial art.

From an instructors point of view the question isn't as simplistic.

When asked is Taekwon-Do practical for street self defense, my first thoughts are, "well that depends on the student and who the attacker is?" I've come to the conclusion that it is, but whether it works or not will depend on the student.

In our self defense syllabus we break it down into 4 sections. Avoidance, de-escalation, response and recovery.

Avoidance

I think avoidance is highly practical as it requires no prior knowledge or skill. The benefit of successful avoidance is obvious. Starting with the simple traffic light system there are good examples in the handbook and good emphasis on using intuition and instinct to classify the situation and environment. I feel it is an easy system to remember and successfully implement by the student. More examples for different ages and genders would improve the practicality.

The success of the traffic light relies firstly on student awareness of their surroundings. This seems less likely to occur when at all ages people seem fixated on their mobile phones and other devices. Common sense advice as mentioned in the handbook like only using 1 headphone may be falling on deaf ears. Whether we can in reality effect any change in behavior outside the dojang in this area may well be minimal.

Over the years I have heard the accounts of confrontations from actual victims and from news media and it seems random unprovoked attacks with no warning seem to be on the rise. Here we have a green light situation suddenly change to red unexpectedly. How can we train for this.? One solution is to practise unexpected attacks on each other outside of training. I remember in younger days other students or sisters attacking me unexpectedly and after a while reacting (blocking, moving and countering) almost unconsciously.

Most of my observations are of Remuera club students who would unlikely have much experience in orange or red light environments or identifying them unless it was plainly obvious.

Role playing avoidance to cover more scenarios than just examples in the handbook would be a great benefit. I think more training for instructors in this area is also needed.

Little training is given to recognising when a individual or group can pose a threat due to alcohol and substance abuse. Could teens and children pick up on the tell tale signs. I would doubt most of the younger students at our club could, especially if it is occurring with family and friends.

Training to recognise sexual attacks or aggression in my experience, has rarely been covered. Role playing situations involving men would provide practical and effective training for women and girls but might also be too frightening for some women. It may also be uncomfortable for the men to role play the aggressor. This sensitive area is a difficult one and outside expertise is probably needed to make our training more practical.

Sessions lead by women may be of appeal, but female instructors with enough knowledge might be limited in some clubs. Regional or national seminars is an option but constant repetition like many things is key for an effective instinctive response in stressful situations.

After recognising the danger, strategies for avoidance as laid out in the handbook, I think are practical but again more age specific examples are needed. Common sense often provides the solution. Sharing of experiences in a class situation would help but time tends to be the problem. Probably not enough emphasis is placed on avoidance in our training.

De-escalation

I have only received training on de-escalation, a handful of times. The points in the handbook are very clear and simple. However, whenever we have practised this in club it has felt a little unrealistic (maybe our acting skills need a bit of work), with responses often incorrect i.e. using phrases with "sorry" or "I didn't mean that". I don't know how practical de-escalation is, not having been in many situations personally but I think it is a sensible strategy.

A list of scenarios and detailing how we could de-escalate each scenario would provide a good practical framework for training.

Response

How students respond when de-escalation fails, varies depending on the student. This is where age and grade seem to make the most difference. The higher the grade and the older the person is, the more effective the response tends to be.

Junior grades who are performing wrist releases (yellow belt syllabus), the execution is often largely an instinctive pulling away of the arms as opposed to the properly technique of using footwork and levering at the grab point. From the students' perspective it appears to work and it may do so in an A response situation, but if the opponent or attacker was holding more tightly or was larger the release would likely fail. This is not to say that the technique is not practical but the skill level and understanding of the technique isn't adequate yet. When the attacker becomes more realistic with pulling and pushing then we see an even greater

lack of success. This obviously changes as the grade and age goes up, as the understanding increases and also the ability to imagine what a real situation would look like.

This in my opinion, is one of the greatest hurdles to the practical execution of what we teach, the lack of ability to imagine what a real street situation is like. This is not a surprise as many students who are young and are lucky to have never been exposed to these situations. So the releases in the coloured belt self defenses syllabus tend to be executed without a rapid immediate reaction, lack strength, and counters in B response executed without force or effect. Yet it is not because students cannot perform the basic kicks, punches or strikes, because we see the damage inflicted when a student is accidentally hit in training or purposely hit in tournaments. We see the skill level and practical nature of what we teach through patterns, line work, pad work etc actually working. The problem is one of imagination and visualising reality.

As we go up the ranks to black belt level I often still see the same problem, where the attacker performs in an unrealistically timid manner. The techniques are practised in a controlled environment. The attacker executes a predefined routine often without too much aggression and then the defense is performed. Once the routine has been practised enough and appears to be performed proficiently, I ask the attacker to be more aggressive and realistic. For example in ground self defense, once the attacker takes a more realistic firm stance the leg sweeps often do not work and this occurs even more as the size of the attacker increases.

So what is happening at almost all grades is the problem of not going beyond the nice controlled scenario, to one where the attack is more realistic and aggressive. The student is then able to see whether the techniques are practical. It is difficult to fully replicate reality as there can be so many variables and situations and of course we can not hit the attacker with too much, if any force in training.

Can a student can remain composed enough in a real street situation to perform all that they have practised. A real event may cause fear and panic. The stress may result in freezing. I always remember how I and almost everyone I knew, almost froze the first time we got into the ring many years ago when we had full contact tournaments. Yet the next time we had the ability to overcome the fear and channel the adrenaline to our advantage. So I often wonder if the student can remain composed in a real life situation.

Participation in free sparring in tournaments is often the closest we come to simulating a stressful situation and that is why I encourage students to enter, knowing that they will be better prepared in the event of a real life attack. The only negative is that execution of B responses can start to look like points scoring in a tournament. While on the positive side a student can learn how little power is required in a properly delivered technique to stop someone.

The effects of adrenaline can also counteract the effects of a hit. I have often seen competitors who have been hit barely register the hit. An attacker can be pumped on

adrenaline, alcohol or drugs and students need to understand that some techniques may not be appropriate in those situations.

Defense against multiple attackers or weapons is an area where we are possibly the weakest in as we generally do not touch on this until black belt. So we rely on general training to prepare us for infinite possibilities. Unfortunately from gradings where there is 2 or more onto 1 the result is often a lot of running away by the defender. The mindset seems to be on keeping one opponent in front of the other as opposed to taking out the attackers and controlling the situation.

From trainings where there have been senior dans against multiple attackers in a self defense scenario with higher contact levels and more realism, the attackers would have been seriously hurt if the situation had been real.

Recovery

It is great that recovery is mentioned in the handbook as it not something we often think about. It is probably an area where we have limited experience and training for as instructors, and it is probably better left for specialists in those areas.

Conclusion

TKD is practical for self defense but the skill level and age have a large bearing on effective execution. More time spent on avoidance and de-escalation is needed in my opinion as these are highly practical. Realistic enactment would also see increased practical application.