

# The Concept of Pretend Sparring Versus REAL Fighting:

by

Gary Simpson

In every martial art, there comes a time where you have to test your skills and techniques against an opponent. When I say “opponent” what I mean here is against another student, in the dojo or training venue – whatever you call your training space.

Often this will be under strict supervision. Most often it will require protective equipment like a head protector (as in amateur boxing), some mitts to cover your hands, possibly a groin protector, shin guards and also a mouthguard. In other words, it is a VERY controlled environment. You are prepared for it and you KNOW that you probably won’t be hurt.

Compare that with the utter chaos that comes with an unexpected confrontation somewhere like a car park, where somebody may become very upset that you pulled into the space that they wanted. They get out of their vehicle, storm across to you and start screaming and shouting at you. They may even damage your car.

Or perhaps you simply looked at somebody who is strung out on some illicit drug. Say, meth.

We’ve all heard the stupid taunt: **“What are you looking at?”**

I think you know what I mean.



There are people in society that can become aggressive or unhinged for the slightest little reason. Maybe they have had an earlier issue that has them already steamed up. They are already angry. And then, sadly, you become their next source of irritation. Maybe they don’t like a slogan on a tee-shirt you are wearing or the actual “brand” of a pair of jeans you have on. Maybe they think you are “snooty” or “stuck-up.” Maybe you are wearing something like a MAGA hat and that does not comport with their political bias. Maybe they just don’t like the look of you, per se. Whatever!

残  
心  
会  
空  
手  
道

My question is this:

**Will your gloved-up, protective, dojo-controlled or ring rules “sparring,” where everybody is all so NICE and RESPECTFUL of one another, stand up to a proper test?**



Do NOT fool yourself that your dojo experience or boxing prowess will keep you in good stead. It will NOT! It will only mildly protect you against a fierce and determined aggressor.

Why?

Quite simply, the two experiences are polar opposites. When you have somebody sparring against you who obeys all the “rules of engagement” you will NEVER feel truly threatened. And that’s OK. Nobody wants to fight with other people all the time in the “survival of the fittest.” It’s just stupid, to say the least.

That was the situation that gave birth to martial arts in the first place. Pretty much it was **kill or be killed**. And many people carried weapons for that very purpose. Think of the time of the gun-slingers in the Wild West of the US, people like **Billy the Kid**. Think also of the age of the Samurai in Japan, people like **Miyamoto Musashi** (pictured right). They were both feared and revered. But most people just wanted to avoid them. Their fierce reputations preceded them. Why get involved with them?



In the formative years of karate and kung fu and so many of the other arts, reputations were won and lost in real life blood-bath battles where combatants were maimed and even killed. We are a far cry from that today, thank goodness.



Today, most would-be “street warriors” with a bad attitude, who are out looking for victims to prove to THEMSELVES how truly awesome they are, KNOW that they must not be captured – either physically or on the tens of thousands of surveillance cameras that are now EVERYWHERE! That is both a blessing for our safety and a curse for our privacy. So, they often pick their places and times very carefully, or they try to hide their identity by wearing the classic “thug wear” – the “hoodie”(see picture left). Seriously, avoid these people. They are dangerous to themselves and to others. They are hiding their faces for a reason. Don’t become their “reason.” Many of these people have long records of unprovoked assault.

Yes, I know I am stereo-typing people with these comments. I don’t care. To me, they are flagging to the entire world that they cannot be trusted. Ask yourself: WHY are they hiding their faces? They might say: “Oh I just like hoodies.” Or. “I’m just shy.” Yeah, right.

So, bringing this all back to PRETEND “sparring” versus REAL fighting, what can you do?

**You need to be able to simulate what might happen in a real fight.** You cannot say to an aggressor, “Hey, wait a minute! I need to warm up!” You cannot say, “Hold on, I need to remove my shoes.” You cannot say, “I wasn’t ready for that push or shove or punch.” You just CANT! There is no time for excuses or pleasantries like in the dojo or the ring.

You have to be ready, mentally, to engage before you are ready, physically, to respond.

You may get some prior warning that an attack is imminent, you might not. Prior warnings may involve what I call “the look” – a hard or nasty stare your way, eye contact. Or it could be what is known as “the interview” – a brief verbal engagement, something like: “Hey, pal, you got a cigarette?” or “Do you have any spare change?” or simply just, “Give me your money!”

What do you do? If you want to give them what they want then do so. But it won’t work!

First of all, **prepare for sudden impact.** And if you have never experienced a punch or a slap or a forceful shove in the chest or a throat grab or even a swift bout of extreme verbal abuse then your training “under dojo rules” or “ring etiquette” is seriously lacking. You must also be able to fight in street wear and with shoes on. This is precisely why we, at Zanshin Kai Karate Do and Kobudo (ZKKD), most often wear shoes at training.

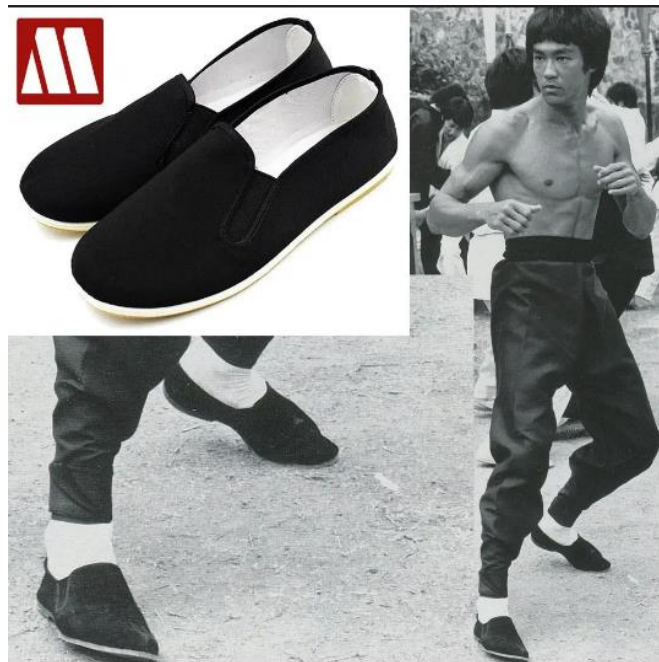
That little bit of extra weight makes a LOT of difference. Try kicking with shoes on versus

kicking in bare feet? Try moving in stances. Try swift “Yori Ashi” (transitional body shifting for those not familiar with the term). You will be very surprised at what very small differences will do to your timing, co-ordination and technique.

There is a reason why one of the greatest martial artists of all time, the late **Bruce Lee**, always trained and fought in traditional Chinese kung fu shoes.

From Wikipedia:

*“Bruce Lee (born Lee Jun-fan - November 27, 1940 – July 20, 1973) was a Hong Kong-American martial artist, actor, and filmmaker. He was the founder of Jeet Kune Do, a hybrid martial arts philosophy which was formed from Lee’s experiences in unarmed fighting and self-defense—as well as eclectic, Zen Buddhist and Taoist philosophies—as a new school of martial arts thought.”*



**Here is a little experiment for you.** Put your karate uniform on, tie your belt on and wear a pair of slim sports shoes, or even the classic kung-fu shoes as shown above. Practice a kata. Was it fairly good? I hope so. Now slip a small stone into one of your shoes so you can feel it when you step. Make it irritating for yourself. Repeat the exercise. What happened? Were you ANYWHERE near as good the second time? I will bet that you were not. WHY?

Because conditions changed. All of a sudden you have an impediment to your natural movement. That small amount of pain can cause a large amount of disturbance to your performance. You may even have to pause when you normally would not, to concentrate on your next move. There was a disruption to your flow. Your concentration was lost, even if it was for just a moment. But, in that moment, you could be taken down. BOOM! All over.

I’m not trying to be alarming. However, ANY alteration to what is “normal” to you will be detrimental to you. It’s the same with an injury, even a superficial one. **You must TRAIN your MIND as well as your BODY!**

This leads me to the main point of my entire purpose with this short article.

**You need to be able to respond swiftly and powerfully against ANY opponent.** When you

realise that you cannot walk away or you cannot negotiate a peaceful outcome by “reasoning” with a person hell-bent on trying to harm you, then, **it’s GO time**.

You can put up “the Fence” against their advance, you can even try retreating but, at some point, you just know that this unreasonable and aggressive knucklehead wants to try to hurt you. Are you prepared to let that happen?

You may even try to assume our “Exclamation Posture,” also known as the contemplative stance in ZKKD. This will protect your head while your hand already has a shorter distance to travel to their head, thereby giving you a substantial advantage, particularly if you are skilled in the use of **Hebi Uchi** (snake strike for the uninitiated). We practice this often.



Make **NO MISTAKE**. Their **PRIME target will be your face or the side of your temple or jaw**. It is the most commonly used attack – the roundhouse punch, also known as the “haymaker.” **EXPECT IT!**

Those who are skilled in this attack would themselves be **SHOCKED** if you were to defeat the prime weapon that they completely rely on and have used time and time again with the same result – a decisive KO. This is why we, at ZKKD, most often finish our sessions with the

response to this most common assault – defence and counter to the roundhouse punch.

Sparring in any martial art can teach you a LOT of things and it has many benefits. However, if it takes you more than 1 step to defeat an aggressor then... you are doing it all too **NICELY**. Be fierce. **Be the BEAST!** No prisoners. **END IT AS FAST AS YOU CAN!** Beast Mode...



*Gary Simpson*

[ 09 November 2025 ]