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THE BLOG

The Pleasures of Drowning

[Martial Arts](#) | [Self-Defense](#) | [Violence](#) | February 6, 2012



(Photo by [Peter Gordon](#))

After writing an article on the [principles of self-defense](#), I was inundated with emails and Internet comments—many of which came from experts in the field. The response was very supportive, and I haven't found anything of substance to amend in my original essay. However, I did take one criticism to heart: I don't know enough about Brazilian jiu-jitsu (BJJ).

I am now doing my best to rectify that problem. What follows is the first installment of what (I hope) will be an ongoing

journal of my progress in BJJ. I suspect that many readers of this blog have no interest in the martial arts and will consider this an unfortunate departure from my main areas of competence. I am convinced, however, that training in BJJ offers a powerful lens through which to examine some primary human concerns—truth v. delusion, self knowledge, ethics, and overcoming fear. I hope some of you bear with me.

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Martial artists are often slow to appreciate how their beliefs about human violence can be distorted by their adherence to tradition, as well as by a natural desire to avoid injury during the course of training. It is, in fact, possible to master an ancient fighting system, and to attract students who will spend years trying to emulate your skills, without ever discovering that you have no ability to defend yourself in the real world. Delusions of martial prowess have much in common with religious faith. A crucial difference, however, is that while people of faith can always rationalize apparent contradictions between their beliefs and the data of their senses, an inability to fight is very easy to detect and, once revealed, very difficult to explain away.

There may be no case more perplexing or egregious than that of Yanagi Ryuken, a purported master of aikido. Master Ryuken apparently believed himself capable of defeating multiple attackers without deigning to touch them. Rather, he could rely upon the magic power of *chi*. Video of him demonstrating his devastating abilities shows that his students were grotesquely complicit in what must have been a long and colorful process of self-deception. Did these young athletes actually think that they were being hurled to the ground against their will? It is hard to know. What seems certain, however, is that Master Ryuken came to believe that he was invincible; otherwise he wouldn't have invited a martial artist from another school to come test his powers.

Here is the master in action:

And here is his belated encounter with physical reality:

Of course, it is sad to see a confused old man repeatedly punched in the face—but if you are a martial artist, or have even a passing concern with safeguarding basic human sanity, you will take some satisfaction in seeing a collective delusion so emphatically dispelled. (Just think of what must have been going through the minds of Master Ryuken's students as they witnessed this performance.)

Unfortunately, a similar form of self-deception can be found in most martial artists, because almost all training occurs with some degree of partner compliance: Students tend to trade stereotyped attacks in a predictable sequence, stopping to reset before repeating the drill. This staccato pattern of practice, while inevitable when learning a technique for the first time, can become a mere pantomime of combat that does little to prepare a person for real encounters with violence.

Another problem is that many combative techniques are too dangerous to perform realistically (e.g., gouging the eyes, striking the groin). As result, students are merely left to imagine that these weapons decisively end a fight whenever deployed in earnest. Reports from the real world suggest otherwise.

These concerns make BJJ and other grappling arts unique in two ways: BJJ can be safely practiced under conditions of 100 percent resistance and, therefore, any doubts or illusions about its effectiveness can be removed. Striking-based arts can also be performed under full resistance, of course, but not safely—because getting repeatedly hit in the head is bad for your health. And, whatever the intensity of training, it is difficult to remove uncertainty from the striker’s art: Not even a professional boxer can be sure what will happen if he hits an assailant squarely on the jaw with a closed fist. The other man might fall to the ground unconscious, or he might not—and without gloves, the boxer might break his hand on the first punch. By contrast, even a novice at BJJ knows beyond any doubt what will happen if he correctly applies a [triangle choke](#). It is a remarkable property of grappling that the distance between theory and reality can be fully bridged.

I can now attest that the experience of grappling with an expert is akin to falling into deep water without knowing how to swim. You will make a furious effort to stay afloat—and you will fail. Once you learn how to swim, however, it becomes difficult to see what the problem is—why can’t a drowning man just relax and tread water? The same inscrutable difference between lethal ignorance and lifesaving knowledge can be found on the mat: To train in BJJ is to continually drown—or, rather, to be drowned, in sudden and ingenious ways—and to be taught, again and again, how to swim.

Whether you are an expert in a striking-based art—boxing, karate, tae kwon do, etc.—or just naturally tough, a return to childlike humility awaits you: Simply step onto the mat with a BJJ black belt. There are few experiences as startling as being effortlessly controlled by someone your size or smaller and, despite your full resistance, placed in a choke hold, an arm lock, or some other “submission.” A few minutes of this and, whatever your previous training, your incompetence will become so glaring and intolerable that you will want to learn whatever this person has to teach. Empowerment begins only moments later, when you are shown how to escape the various traps that were set for you—and to set them yourself. Each increment of knowledge imparted in this way is so satisfying—and one’s ignorance at every stage so consequential—that the process of learning BJJ can become remarkably addictive. I have never experienced anything quite like it. ^[]

Most students of the martial arts have been aware of BJJ for years—since its emergence in the Ultimate Fighting Championship in 1993. The UFC was the first series of “mixed martial arts” (MMA) tournaments to get serious attention. The great novelty of these events is that they allow any style of fighting to be pitted against any other. Combatants from all disciplines—karate, boxing, Greco-Roman wrestling, muay Thai, kung fu, judo, tai kwon do, sambo, kickboxing, sumo, Brazilian jiu-jitsu, etc.—are simply placed in a ring (or, at the UFC, in an octagonal cage) in pairs. In the first years of the UFC, there were no weight divisions, rounds, or time limits and very few rules. In fact, there were no judges, because every fight ended by knockout, submission, referee stoppage, or a fighter’s corner throwing in the towel.

Many people found the resulting spectacle horrifying—a modern version of the Roman games. But to the martial arts community the first UFC events were a science experiment that had been centuries in the making: Finally, there would be an answer to the one question of perennial interest to fighters everywhere: “What is the best method of fighting?” After a few hours, the answer seemed clear—and it wasn’t boxing, wrestling, karate, or kung fu. Whatever a man’s size, strength, skill, and prior training, a relatively diminutive practitioner of BJJ, Royce Gracie, could completely dominate him.

This revelation has acquired a few caveats in recent years, but two decades of pressure testing has confirmed its central

truth. In the absence of rules, fighters of all styles tend to defensively grab hold of each other and grapple vertically. The significance of this “clinch” is disguised in sports like boxing and kickboxing because the referee repeatedly separates the two combatants. In the UFC, or in a real fight, the clinch tends to persist, often with the result that the bigger, stronger person, or the more experienced wrestler, takes his opponent to the ground. Once a fight goes to the ground, there is no substitute for knowing BJJ.

Today, more or less everyone training in MMA has absorbed this lesson, so the advantage of having a BJJ pedigree has been nullified. Martial artists from every discipline have added BJJ to their arsenals, and while the difference between being good at BJJ and being great can still be decisive, the fact that all competitors have good grappling skills has changed the character of the sport. Everyone now understands that the laws of physics dictate a right answer to the question, “What is the best method of fighting?”, and all MMA fighters now do their best to embody it:

When you are standing at arm’s length from your opponent, you want to be able to punch like a Western-style boxer and kick like a Thai boxer.

Moving closer, you want to remain a Thai boxer in your ability to strike with your knees and elbows.

Once your opponent grabs hold of you, or you him (the clinch), you want to have the skills of a Greco-Roman/freestyle wrestler—controlling his posture and throwing him to the ground at will. In the presence of sufficient clothing (jackets, coats, or traditional martial arts uniforms), this vertical grappling can take the form of judo. The general picture at this range is of two people being too close to strike one another effectively: You want to be the one who can move the fight to the ground on his own terms—by executing takedowns or throws—and who can resist being taken there.

And if the fight goes to the ground, the surest path to the safety of home remains Brazilian jiu-jitsu. The original revelation of the UFC still stands—with the coda that since everyone has now learned the same skills, an ability to strike on the ground has grown more important in MMA. Whether one practices BJJ by name doesn’t necessarily matter, because other arts teach similar techniques—submission wrestling, sambo, etc. But no other discipline has mapped the frontiers of ground fighting the way BJJ has.

From a self-defense perspective, practicing BJJ exclusively can introduce one dangerous habit: Because BJJ is geared toward fighting on the ground, and is so decisive there, you can easily acquire a bias toward going to the ground on principle. When rolling on the mat, perfecting arm locks and chokes, it is easy to forget that in a real fight, your opponent is very likely to be punching you, or armed with a weapon, or in the company of friends who might be eager to kick you in the head (facts that are given cursory treatment in most BJJ training). To spend years perfecting the art of ground fighting is to risk forgetting that if a fight starts, the last place you want to be is on the ground. ^[1] 2

To study BJJ for self-defense, therefore, is to prepare for the worst-case scenario—but the worst case remains a high probability in any sudden encounter with violence. If you are ever attacked by a bigger, stronger person, there is a very good chance you will find yourself on the ground, wrestling in some form. The difference between knowing what to do in this situation and merely relying on your primate intuitions is as impressive a gap between knowledge and ignorance as I have ever come across.

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My thoughts on BJJ and self-defense have been greatly informed by discussions with [Chris Haueter](#), [Alex Stuart](#), and [Matt Thornton](#)

Notes

1. **Chris Haueter writes:** As much as I loved wrestling, boxing, and muay Thai, there was something that struck me at such a primal level with my first experiences with BJJ that I became instantly hooked. I've come to believe that BJJ is the near perfect balance of sport/art/street. The fore mentioned three reality-based martial sports are powerfully athletic and explosive, and very much rely on natural talent and physical fitness; the fantasy martial arts (e.g. karate, tae kwon do, kung fu, aikido) can be just as beautiful, often more entertaining (at least as a spectator) but lack effective application in a real fight. BJJ is unique in that it is the art of controlling and submitting your opponent utilizing the minimal amount of strength, and the maximum amount of leverage, coupled with strategic guile. Like the reality-based martial sports, there is no room for untested theory, but unlike these sports BJJ can be practiced and improved upon without the bruises of strikes, body slamming takedowns, or a reliance on youthful athleticism. It is truly the intelligent art.
- **Matt Thornton writes:** I agree we need all three ranges--stand up, clinch and ground--for self-defense; and, in general, we want to avoid going to the ground in a fight. However, the best way to ensure that you will end up on the ground is to never train there in the first place. It's the non-grapplers who are easiest to take down, and being in a "fight" means it isn't necessarily up to you where you end up. So, it's a bit of irony that wanting to stay off the ground in a self-defense situation should dictate a serious commitment to grappling.

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