

Little about Palanzo's appearance would suggest that he would try such a thing, let alone get away with it. Short, stocky, balding-one would think the first bar he threatened to clear out would be his last. Except for his belt, nothing sets him apart. Sure, he's dressed all in black, but who isn't these days? But that

black belt with two broad red bands on it gets one's attention. With each band representing five degrees, Joe Palanzo is a 10th-degree black belt, the highest rank: a senior master in kenpo karate. The president of the WKKA, the Worldwide Kenpo Karate Association, has just punched me in the gut. I'll never wash that spot again.

How did I get here? I have never studied martial arts before in my life, having retired from fighting at age 8 with a record of 0-2, both by knockout. But the martial arts are great for kids, teaching them discipline, patience, respect and selfconfidence (not to mention giving them a better chance in the odd playground scrape). After two years of watching my own kids learn, and repeated entreaties from their teacher to try it myself, I had to admit these were traits from which any adult could benefit.

It wasn't long, maybe one class, before I was hooked by the fluidity, the remorseless logic of each technique, the ability to blend one technique into another and another in an endless stream of graceful, if destructive, movements. During my first test, to earn promotion from white belt to yellow, I watched fellow students taking more advanced tests. The test for orange belt didn't look too bad; purple maybe just within reach. But the tests for blue and green belts, let alone brown, lay well beyond my imagination's horizon. (Black belt tests are conducted privately and confidentially, shrouded in rumors of marathon sessions of physical and technical extremes.)

Four years and eight tests later, I'm now a brown belt, with my black belt test on the horizon-still hazy and indistinct, but drawing closer. As the philosopher Woody Allen said, 80 percent of success is showing up. For the past three years,

that's what I've been doing on the average of two or three nights a week: kissing wife and children goodbye, and taking myself off to learn how to hit and be hit (or, better yet, block), how to throw and fall, how to wield and parry weapons, how to stand kick and move in ways I had never even considered before.

The particular form of karate I study, American kenpo (also spelled kempo), was developed and codified by Ed Parker, a contemporary and equal of Bruce Lee, and a restless and relentless student of the martial arts. Based on traditional Chinese martial arts (like kungfu), interpreted by Japanese masters (specifically Okinawan), kenpo first washed up on American shores in Hawaii. By the time Parker had finished with it (like Bruce Lee, he died prematurely-in 1990, at age 59), Chinese kenpo had morphed into American kenpo. Although he never stopped tinkering-black belts in his system were not to be rote memorizers of techniques, but artists, martial artists-Parker's final system bears the simplicity of maturity. Students like myself now learn basic self-defense techniques first before revisiting those techniques later for "extensions." Where Parker cut, the art grew back more fully. Lacking the athletic kicks of tae kwon do or the balletic body shifting of judo, kenpo karate is a marriage of speed and power especially power. Each self-defense technique is designed first to deal with the attack (by blocking or evading it, often both), then respond with overwhelming force. The more advanced techniques leave the attacker in a crumpled heap on the floor

My teacher, or "sensei," Brian MacDonald, is a sixth-degree black belt (his wife is a fourth, and I'd hate to be Brian in a family argument). He is as powerful and convincing a martial artist as I ever hope to see close up, but gentle enough to, well, trust



with your kids, as I have. My fellow students-men and women-range in age from late 40s, like me, to teens, and in occupation from architect to public radio producer, from carpenter to student. MacDonald is a skilled and patient teacher, but his ideal martial arts acolyte is more

techniques. He or she should be strong, fit and fearless. Tests for promotion are no mere recitations of previously taught curriculum, but grueling sessions of punching, kicking, sparring and push-ups, plenty of push-ups.

Anyone considering the study of martial arts has to make one basic decision: Mr. Miyagi or Cobra Kai. For the uninitiated, Miyagi (played by the late, great Noriyuki "Pat" Morita) was the wise, patient, mischievous instructor of Daniel-san (Ralph Macchio) in the Karate Kid movies. Miyagi taught Daniel the lessons of karate and life. Cobra Kai was the rival karate studio, whose students strutted, cheated and bullied

under the approving scowl of their sensei (Martin Kove). Allowing for cinematic license, that's pretty much the choice: Buddhism vs. machismo-or, at best, an uneasy alliance of the two.

The next consideration, no matter how one is enjoined to ditch Western notions of time and distance, is how long it's going to take. The long answer is to encourage the enjoyment of the journey, not the arrival, and to learn the value of hard work under the guidance of a wise and omnipotent sensei. The short answer is about five years.

Really, it depends on the system, but that's how long it will take me (knock on wood). Some self-defense systems, Krav Maga for example (which Brian MacDonald also teaches and which I also study), simplify matters by eliminating belts and building self-defense techniques out of instinctive reactions and straightforward movements. Others require a devotion to physical training and personalized study beyond that which most people can summon but, consequently, with a potentially more rewarding payoff.

Of course, the most important consideration is, is it fun? We're too old for tears of humiliation (leave that to the kids); we have to want to go. Karate is my gym, my social club and my continuing education classroom, all in one. Nothing else I've ever done has so focused me on training and fitness: My jacket

size is bigger and my resting pulse rate lower than at any time in my life. My younger self might still run circles around me, but he would have to say his prayers if I ever caught him.

But I still haven't fully answered the question of what I am doing here, at this moment, with Joe Palanzo's knuckles still imprinted on my diaphragm. At Brian's urging, I've driven an hour to attend a seminar-a kenpo kamp-taught by Palanzo and other luminaries of the WKKA, one of several they put on every year around the country. Be around people who are good, MacDonald says; try to copy their movement, their stances. When it all comes together, when this takedown or that spinning kick, once seemingly impossible, happens as naturally as walking, I truly feel like a martial artist. Other times—when I'm nursing a kenpo-related injury to my shoulder, elbow, knuckle, knee or big toe-I recall the wisdom of Groucho Marx: "I don't want to belong to any club that will accept me as a member."

But there's another reason, beyond mere personal attainment. We don't talk about it much, but no one studying any system of self-defense doesn't at least once think "what if." What if, faced with danger, the alternative to action was too dreadful to think about? It's a long way from naive chump to Chuck Norris-but as yet another philosopher, Lao Tzu (founder of Taoism), said, the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.

> A single step back to clear the hips from the thrust of the blade, while spearing your right arm down, to redirect the blade past your gut; hook your left arm under the attacker's right, securing the blade hand, and spin clockwise, until back to back, hyperextending his elbow as you do so; simultaneously, throw your right elbow to the back of his head; reverse direction, and secure your opponent's blade hand with your right hand, freeing your left to chop to his throat; put both hands back on the blade hand (if the blade still remains) and fold his hand back and past his neck, stepping through and taking your opponent

to the floor (don't let go yet); slap an open palm against the locked elbow for another break, then slap the opposite direction for a shoulder dislocation; finish by sharply pulling your opponent's limp arm up while stomping down to the face.

That technique is called Piercing Lance, and it's on my next test. Overwhelming force-but as Ed Parker said, it's not about who's right, but who's left.

oooh...

Sky contributor Josh Passell has been known to splinter five computer keyboards at once in his kenpo writing workshops.



Chop to It! For more information about kenpo and events in your area, visit the Worldwide Kenpo Karate Association Web site (www.wkka.org).