

Why the American Cane System and Cane-Fu Works Well in Self-Defense:

Physiological Changes and the Power of Gross Motor Skills

**By
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There is a void in martial arts training that instructors tend to ignore. We are very good at preserving the art form and equally as good at teaching self-defense; what we don't teach is the important bridge that connects our training with the real world. The structure of the bridge consists of what happens with our mind-body connection in a high stress situation. Our body's physiological changes define what works and what doesn't. Like it or not, there is a big difference between training in a controlled environment versus the harsh realities of a self-defense encounter. This applies equally well to armed and unarmed encounters. Most modern day weapons training revolve around reasons other than self-defense; character building, tournament play, or rank requirements.

What is easily performed during training becomes very difficult in a true combatives situation. According to research found in books like *Warrior Mindset*, fine motor skills start to deteriorate when your heart starts beating at 115 beat per minute (Bpm). At 145 Bpm your complex motor skills start to deteriorate. Above 175 Bpm, you experience irrational fighting, fleeing, or freezing. The optimal rate for survival and combative performance is 115-145 Bpm assuming you are well trained and conditioned. Since we can't stop these physiological changes from happening we can only hope to limit their effects by focusing portions of our training on what happens under these conditions. In doing so we can find ways to take advantage of the physiological changes that occur and use them to our benefit. In a fight or flight type state of arousal, techniques that revolve around gross motor skills will always be more effective. Since the cane can be manipulated using gross motor skills, *the cane is an effective self-defense weapon.*

A Primer on Physiological Changes During Physical Conflict

There are certain physiological changes that occur within our bodies when engaged in a self-

defense type conflict. The intensity of that conflict will determine the levels of physiological arousal and subsequent capabilities of the individual. For example, visual narrowing, loss of fine motor control, accelerated breathing, and reduced cognition are just some of the changes that will occur. Selective attention and inattentive blindness are also factors to be considered (refer to *The Invisible Gorilla: And Other Ways Our Intuitions Deceive Us*). Because of the way our body reacts in its survival mode, blood is moved to larger muscle groups and for all practical purposes, fine motor skills are lost. In other words the simple act of using keys to open a door or texting a message on your phone will become extremely difficult if not impossible. Knowing about these changes and how to deal with them can give you a significant strategic advantage. Learning to work with the physiological changes instead of against them reduces the reliance on fine motor skills. They also reduce the need for intricate maneuvers or techniques that require your strength for success which are prone to fail.

Of course, if you have the dedication, appropriate instruction, and time to train you can reduce the effects to a more manageable state. By training consistently and using high numbers of repetitions, you can compensate for these changes and work through them. Certain martial sports enthusiasts, law enforcement officers and special operations units in the military train to the point where they can operate in an elevated state of arousal for significant amounts of time and be very effective. The key word here is *training*; quality training and a great deal of it. You can't train for three hours a week and expect to have a major impact in your reactions; it just doesn't work that way. Lt. Kevin Dillon (RET) a long time martial artist and internationally recognized police combatives instructor says it best, "Your body will dictate your physiological changes during a violent encounter; your training will dictate your response." There is no way to completely get rid of your physiological changes so you might as well learn to live with them.

Physiology and Weapons

The loss of fine motor skills reduces the effectiveness of most weapon techniques because they can't be completed with gross motor skills. Techniques that require intricate maneuvers or multiple

skeletal manipulations are lost unless you have hundreds of hours and thousands of repetitions behind you. And even then most weapon techniques should remain in kata competition. If you have trouble wrapping your head around that concept try this simple exercise. Take a personal inventory of what you use the most often from your combatives repertoire. You may have learned hundreds of techniques throughout your martial arts career, which turn into thousands when you use combinations, but in real world terms, your arsenal is quite limited. I would venture to say you only have eight to twelve techniques you do with any unconscious competence. You really only have a handful of moves that you have practiced so much which you can do basically at any time. Since a weapon is merely an extension of your existing skills, then by default your real world application with a weapon is limited as well. Under a high state of survival stress, you can throw out any technique that is fancy, intricate, or requires fine motor skills. This is where the cane shines as a weapon of self-defense. At its most basic level the techniques revolve around gross motor skills. You can easily hold a cane with one or both hands to block, poke, jab, strike, swing or push. The crook of the cane makes it easy to grab, hold, or pull.

The Cane in Self-Defense

Like any other martial art, there is a difference between the art form, its preservation for future generations, and real world application. You need the correct balance of all three. Though the cane is found as part of many martial art styles, there are very few that teach the cane exclusively as its own system. Grand Master Mark Shuey of Cane Masters does just that. He is probably the biggest proponent of the use of the cane for self-defense in and out of the United States. He is internationally recognized "The Cane Master and the quality of his hand made canes is known world wide. He even created a cane for the Abbott of the Shaolin Temple after working with him on the design during a recent trip to China.

The American Cane System is not like most martial arts programs because the heart of the system is self-defense. Many martial arts have techniques that you would never consider using in self-

defense but are important to learning the art in general or solely used in tournament play. Let's face it; you are not walking around the shopping plaza with a Tai Chi Sword strapped to your side but you could be walking around with your cane. Though Grand Master Shuey incorporates more intricate maneuvers at the intermediate and advanced levels in his system, the core of his program is designed to make use of the mind and body connection I spoke of earlier. He has learned to bridge the gap between art and real world application. All of his core techniques can easily be applied under stress. Many, if not most, can be applied equally well while standing or sitting.

GM Shuey's newest system, called Cane-Fu, is ear marked for those over 50 or disabled. Grand Master Shuey states, "We have created the Cane-Fu system, which contains the most efficient and effective exercises and self-defense techniques from the American Cane System. The modalities are easy to learn and will help instill a sense of confidence, as well as a higher level of health, to those who are willing to devote the time to practice them on a regular basis." All Cane-Fu techniques are simple, easy to retain, and can be performed under stress. Because the techniques can be executed with gross motor skills, they work well within the framework of the physiological changes you experience under a fight or flight type situation.

GM Shuey considers Cane-Fu in this light: "Please understand that these techniques are just the basics, and that with a little imagination, you can create your own that will feel more natural and reflexive. If this information can help to prevent just one senior citizen or disabled person from being a victim of a violent crime, it will be well worth the time and effort I have put in to create it." I think Cane-Fu is very well thought out and includes many application options. They may be basic, but they create a core set of skills which can be used effectively in self-defense. Because skill sets can be easily retained, your chances of prevailing during an encounter are significantly increased. Grand Master Shuey reiterates that once you get the foundation, you can create your own combinations or your own forms.

Though there is a set curriculum for Cane-Fu and Black Belt rank structure for the American Cane System, GM Shuey doesn't limit his students by locking them in. Instead he encourages continuing their education as a lifetime passion. As with all good teachers, he shows you a way, not the way. As a long time martial artist and police combatives instructor, I can certify without hesitation that anyone can benefit from this core program. I have been involved with training with the cane on and off for more than 11 years and I have yet to get tired of it. For those seeking more advanced training beyond the core self-defense program, you can continue training in the American Cane System up to Black Belt or even become a certified Canemaster. This certification is highly distinguished honor in and of its' self. To my knowledge, though the cane may be taught elsewhere, Grand Master Shuey's programs are the most comprehensive and well rounded. If you ever get the chance I highly recommend exploring the use of the cane and specifically these systems.

Closing Thoughts

There are very few martial arts weapons that have real world applications outside the training or competitive arena. There are also very few weapons you can carry legally around the world. Luckily for us, the simple cane can. Whether your focus is self-defense or you wish a higher level of expertise, the cane has something for everyone. I would recommend that as instructors we include training that revolves around the physiological changes we experience under stress in conflict. If you can't do it under stress, it is of little value to you in a fight or flight type situation. I also recommend that you take a look at the cane and offer your students a form of weapons training that clearly has a viable self-defense option which can be used almost anywhere. A great place to start is with Grand Master Mark Shuey or his senior instructor, Master Eric Stalloch. Both are dedicated martial artists and masters of the cane.

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