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Teaching People with Disabilities

My Style, Shuri-Ryu Okinawan Karate as taught by the late Grand Master Robert A. Trias, has, at least since his time, been accessible. He used to say to me, "Wendi, people with physical talent can train anywhere in any style, we need to make sure that Shuri remains accessible to ALL people". This wisdom may have been the single most important lesson I was to learn. It reinforced my own commitment to accessibility and anti-discrimination that has influenced every aspect of my life for as long as I can remember.

If you have the ability to move, it is easy to find a solution that fits with the principles of martial arts training. If you can only move your mouth then presumably you use an electric wheelchair with a mouth stick...learn how to make your chair a weapon of defense. Most importantly, use your voice, use your ability to reason and don't let anyone take advantage of you.

The most important element of accessibility for all concerned is patience. Everyone has to be patient with themselves and with anyone who may need special attention. You don't need to be disabled to need special attention, and just because you are disabled does not mean you will always need special attention.

In the early 70s, as Viet Nam Vets returned to the USA with missing limbs and found their way to the Trias Dojo, I had the great honor and privilege of teaching them, making sure that there was a place for them there. Those early experiences enriched my understanding of the basic principles of my Art. That those basic principles do not change when teaching differently abled folks is an important insight. As a result of these early teaching experiences I never imagined not having an accessible school. Happily, accessibility is a value that I seem to have been able to encourage in my own students as they have become teachers and started their own schools.

Making sure that Karate, and in this case Shuri-Ryu Okinawan Karate, remains accessible has been an easy task. I have always made sure that all people who have been marginalized by society have a place in my school. My students have for the most part done the same. For most of my life I have been actively fighting against systemic inequities and the fact that Defensive Arts training provided a form and a method for focusing resistance in these struggles is a wonder and a gift.

Shuri-Ryu is an Okinawan style that, thankfully, has not lost its practical aspects and become pure sport. Although Grand Master Trias was the head of the largest multi-style organization in the world, an organization that promoted and sanctioned tournaments, the goal of the Trias line has always been practical application of all aspects of training, as well as personal growth and development.

The goals of Shuri-Ryu have continued to focus on the defensive themes that form the basis for all Defensive Arts training. Early empty hand defensive practices have always focused on what we call "Habitual Acts of Physical Violence" (this catch-all classification was invented by Patrick McCarthy). These habitual acts represent how the human body acts both defensively and



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aggressively. Some obvious Habitual Acts are: grabbing, striking, knocking someone to the ground, grappling, and choking. The human body has changed very little over time; and so although our own understanding of defensive themes may have experienced changes, the types of non-weaponed attacks have changed very little.

Within the martial arts, defensive choices have become more sophisticated as self-defense has been contextualized within a framework of ethics, morals, values, and principles. Over time we have replaced aggressive responses with de-escalation techniques. We have learned to set our egos aside and leave situations that appear to be leading toward violence and so our non-physical self-defense has also developed. This development is especially important for people who are looking for alternative answers to violence. We have added communications skills as well as de-escalation techniques to our arsenal of pattern responses to the habitual acts of violence. These developments are especially important as we realize and support the notion that size and strength are not pre-requisites for good leadership. Women, people of different ethnic/racial backgrounds, people with different abilities/disabilities and people of different ages, through a more realistic look at defensive themes are also finding a place in both the study of and teaching of Defensive Arts. Many of these changes are due at least in part to the Black Power Movement of the 60's and the Women's Movement of the 70's.

Self-Defense is only in its final stages physical. Before a defensive situation ever becomes a physical confrontation there are often signals. If one picks up the signals in time, one has many options. The first and best of these options is to avoid the confrontation completely. However, people don't always realize that something is happening until they feel a threat in their physical space. There are so many ways to deal with such situations. De-escalation is always a great choice. Learning to talk in ways that are positive, setting limits, being clear, and reacting on time are important elements of all self-defense situations. Learning that there is no face loss by retreating from an absurd situation is good self-defense.

Nevertheless, since physical response remains an important aspect of effective self-defense, incorporating both the non-physical and physical skills is necessary. Fortunately, this task is easier than many people often fear.

Through the years, as the discussion about accessibility has become more global, I've been struck by how incredibly difficult people tend to make things. The simple fact is that the Defensive and Physical principles do not change. If one understands the physical principles of a technique then teaching anyone who is interested regardless of any limits is a very simple process. The human body only works in certain ways, regardless of our abilities/disabilities; therefore the defensive reactions remain basically the same.

People are often looking for ways to change what they do in order to be accommodating. However, merely embracing and teaching the very simple and usable basic concepts would be a much better use of time and resources. Of course, if someone cannot use their legs, hand techniques that accomplish the same basic goal must be found to replace kicking techniques; if someone has spastic muscle reactions one needs to look at how this persons body reactions



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work and adapt an already existing technique for that student; if someone is blind then any application that requires losing contact with a partner and then re-finding that person will make training a frustrating and less than successful defensive experience. Nevertheless, using the basic principles that each art embraces, the teacher has a guide that will not only help her/him to teach the interested candidate, but will help her/him discover weaknesses in her/his own understanding of the defensive art.

Although it can be inspiring and can change attitudes when people with disabilities are given publicity, that publicity comes at a price. In my own training I was found exceptional -- I believe the words were, "Wendi 'fights' just like a man. She's amazing". Of course I realize that this was meant as a compliment, but the inherent sexism that it exemplifies did not go unnoticed by me. In the same way, when someone with a disability performs something that is considered "normal", they can be made to feel unusual or isolated. I know that for me I was furious that I had to fight to be allowed to do something that I was good at because it was seen as normal for men, but not for women. The same kind of prejudice is active when disabled people who are doing everyday things are considered special or unusual. The opportunities that people have to fight for are activities that should and need to be available to everyone regardless of their gender, abilities, age etc.

Over the years I have taught people with many different abilities and disabilities. Each and every one of these people requires a certain amount of special attention. Each individual comes to the training with a whole set of life experiences that tend to make them more or less open to different aspects of training. A woman who has been sexually assaulted may not want to train with a male partner until she has been able to deal with some of the old pain and fears that accompany that experience. A man who has been sexually assaulted may feel the need to dominate others as a way to deal with his experience. A blind person who has also been institutionalized may be in a stage of her/his development in which being told what to do by yet another person may irritate them. A deaf person will need to be placed and place themselves in a position in the room to be able to see the explanation of the technique as well as to read lips if they are lip readers. If not either the teacher will have to learn some basic sign language, invest in a signer, write the instructions or make it clear that they are not able to accommodate someone with this condition. Someone who is paralyzed on one side will have different needs than someone who is in a wheel chair who has good upper body function. A person who has lost a limb will have different needs than someone who is paralyzed. Someone who has spastic muscle reactions will need different instruction than someone who has lost muscle function to some degree. The number of variations of abilities and disabilities is as diverse as the number of people. Abilities and disabilities are sometimes visible and sometimes invisible. Making room for people regardless of these visible or invisible abilities/disabilities is essential for promoting change beyond the training hall – it encourages broad social change.

Each disability comes with it's own set of solutions. Making space accessible and making learning accessible involves some very general and also some very specific things. In general, asking questions about how the person experiences their abilities, what limits they feel and involving them in the search for solutions is paramount. Specifically there are some simple



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things that can help each person integrate into the training. When working with a mixed group of people with different disabilities or without disabilities it is important to be as open about all of the different needs as possible, without invading anyone's right to privacy. For example, the first time I taught someone who was blind, she was someone who was happy to talk about her situation and share her experiences. At present I have a young man who is visually impaired. He does not want anyone to know, so we don't talk about it unless his or his partner's safety is at risk, or we have a guest instructor. In order to help students get a small glimpse of what it is like not to see, I often blindfold the entire class for the entire class. This challenges them to listen and to feel and it challenges me to be very clear. It is also important to use touch in teaching since sight is not available. I often show what it is I want to do with the person for whom the instruction will be more difficult to understand. That way they get to feel it and work it with me before being confronted by a new partner. Making sure that the room is uncluttered and that things don't move without warning also makes life a lot easier.

I also often teach without talking, making people learn to look and feel even if they can hear, but for people with hearing impairments, this can ease the integration as well. I had a long-term student who was deaf. I learned sign language. It's rusty now. When I am teaching a seminar and there are deaf participants I try to make sure that there is an interpreter at the training. When that is not possible, I write down an explanation of what we are doing, give it to the person in question before I start explaining so that she/he has the words, then I start explaining and showing what the exercise is supposed to be. Just knowing a few simple things, like shouting doesn't help but a gentle touch does, as well as a not so gentle pounding of the floor. The vibrations are felt where the sound is not heard.

When dealing with people who use wheelchairs there are a few very simple things to remember. Make sure the entryway is clear of all shoes etc. If you have mats make sure that there is a place that is mat free for the wheelchair user. If possible, show things from a wheelchair. If you don't have a wheelchair, be sure you show things from a seated position, and make sure you understand the basic principles so you won't feel compelled to change what does not need to change. Remember, most supposed technical problems are just magnified beginner's problems.

People who are missing an arm will need alternatives for 2 handed techniques. If you know the principles, the alternatives are there.

One of the most difficult disabilities both for the person who is disabled and for the people around them is having spasms. Spasticity comes in many degrees. Often what is necessary to create accessibility is to study each person's movements as they try to accomplish the tasks set for them. Often what seems like a spasm is a controlled movement...it just doesn't go where one had expected...but it does go there every time. In such cases...make that the technique expected and apply it defensively in a practical way. I have always believed that in a self-defense situation it is important to use whatever happens. Does one spit when one talks? If yes...exaggerate it. Is one unstable on their feet? Use the stability of the attacker to gain the advantage.



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It's all so simple if we don't make it difficult. The person who is disabled has lived with their abilities for as long as they have had the disability, so use your resources and get a conversation going.

However, the most crippling disability has nothing to do with any individual or her/his abilities. The most crippling disability has to do with Institutional Discrimination. In this case Institution refers both to the Institutions that so many people are placed in as well as the way that society experiences and deals with different abilities. Institutional discrimination is a term not always understood by people who fit into the norm. People who experience institutional discrimination as a result of their life choices, color, physical disabilities etc. need no clarification. But for those who do, institutional discrimination is simply this: Making any form of discrimination acceptable and part of the norms of the dominant culture. People who grow up in institutions will experience that discrimination differently than people whose sexual identity has been criminalized. So too, people who are discriminated against because of race or ethnicity will also have a different experience, but the thread that holds it all together is that the dominant culture is comfortable with discrimination and therefore allows it to exist and flourish.

A person in a wheel chair may only need help when facilities for independence are not available. How hard is it to make sure that curbs become ramps, that public transportation is built in a way that people who can't climb steps can still enter, that public buildings are equipped with proper facilities? Similar questions can be asked regarding any disability. Ironically, independence appears to not often be a goal of institutions set up to "help" disabled people.

My experience has been that many Institutions are "magnets" for violence. Residents are in positions of dependence and caretakers can and do violate their positions of power and trust. Both physical and sexual violence are pervasive problems in Institutions. Martial arts teachers often find that when we start offering classes in such institutions that as members of the group begin to feel more empowered they also begin sharing stories of abuse. When we are lucky, offenders can be identified, exposed and fired. But the amount of damage that has occurred before this exposure to countless residents past and present is monumental. Although the problem has been identified, little has been done to change how these institutions operate in ways that allow these abuses to continue.

We also need to look at how we deal with people and where they are in their own process. In my own struggles I had to be very careful not to fall into the trap of thinking that because I had managed to make a place for myself that others in my position could/should too. I was lucky. I have always been an active anti-racist and feminist and as a result I have a social and political context in which to place my accomplishments. But all too often, fueled by that 'exception' phenomenon I spoke of earlier, people see what they are experiencing as individual rather than institutional problems. So many of the institutional forms of violence are able to exist because as a society we try to individualize problems. It's not a surprise that when people who have been victims of institutional violence begin talking that their empowerment process gets a huge push. The more they share, the better they are able to understand how their experience extends



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beyond individual, isolated episodes. Many forms of violence can only exist in a world of secrets and lies.

As teachers and practitioners of Martial Arts we have a responsibility to end the silence. In many Martial Arts schools there is an attitude that the teacher knows all and is all powerful. In our teaching we are helping people not only to learn to extend their limits but also to set them. If we don't find ways to dialogue with our students and make room for them to set those limits with us, then we are doing them a disservice. We must remember that people know more about their disabilities than we do, just as they know about their personal histories more than we do. We need to ask questions, listen to the answers and provide safe ways for people to share their concerns and needs. In my own teaching, I have learned to create times when training is the goal and other times when sharing and discussing have a place. We need to make the structures and rules by which we live clear, remembering that rules and structures are meant to serve, not to be served. Our structures must reflect the needs of both our traditions and of the practitioners learning those traditions. When the traditions get in the way we need to examine them for their validity.

We need to dare to lead while we are open to learning. We need to remember that we know more about Martial Arts and Self Defense and that ALL beginners have the same fears and hesitations about learning. We need to be sure to balance our own technical knowledge with our possible/probable ignorance about certain abilities and disabilities.

Finally, we need to dare to teach and dare to be wrong and be willing to correct ourselves. Without that willingness accessibility is a dream that will never be realized. Every day we ask our students to take risks, to dare, to trust. My teacher used to say, "Have no fear to die" and "Face your fears or they will crawl all over your back". Have no fear to die might sound extreme, but in times of anxiety, these two sayings have served me well and helped me to be able to serve others.