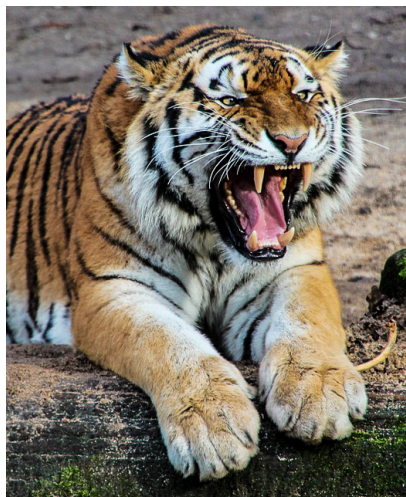


What Kind of Animal Are You?

As an instructor I always enjoy asking new students what kind of animal they associate with karate and in particular when they think about self-defence.

Without fail, the animals selected are always very dangerous or fierce!

A tiger, elephant, lion, cobra and many other ferocious beasts are nominated. This is perfectly understandable as karate indeed draws on our animal instincts, calling for ferocity at times.



Think of yourself at a party where a nasty intoxicated bully begins to intimidate you or worse has violent intentions.

How wonderful would it be to suddenly transform yourself into a fierce tiger and with one

mighty SNARL send him packing!

When I think about karate however, no such powerful and dangerous beasts come to mind. Quite the contrary in fact.

My karate animal is a small furry member of the mongoose family.... a **MEERKAT!**

"You're kidding!" I hear you say.

After all, meerkats are cute cuddly creatures and you probably had a stuffed meerkat called Oscar when you were a kid.

Nor are you likely to confront a bunch of tough looking guys at a party, start chattering and squealing (as meerkats do) and then say...

"Don't mess with me, I fight like a meerkat!"

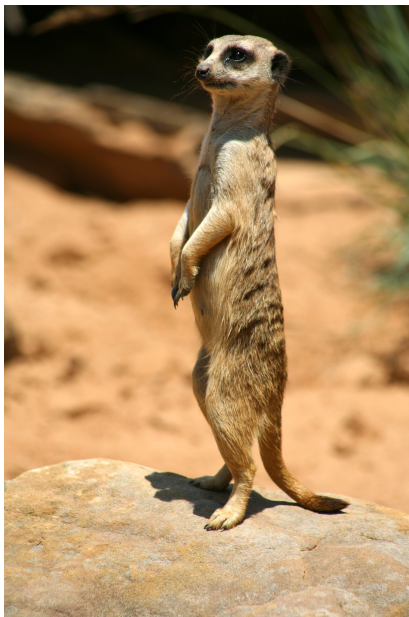
So what quality do meerkats possess that may make them a suitable karate symbol, especially in the context of self-defence?

In a word.....**ZANSHIN!**

In karate, zanshin is a state of **total awareness**. This means being acutely aware of one's surroundings and being prepared to respond appropriately to any perceived threats.

Have you ever observed a clan of meerkats at a zoo or watched a David Attenborough program on Africa and seen them at play, caring for their young or foraging for food?

No matter what they are doing, you will notice that there is always at least one meerkat acting as guardian for the entire group. This is the dude who stands upright on its hind legs, propped up by its tail constantly scanning the environment and on the lookout for anything that may threaten the group.



Meerkats are found in Botswana, Namibia and southwest Angola in deserts where there are threats aplenty. Predators are not just land-based like snakes, jackals, hyenas, big cats and wild dogs but include birds of prey such as eagles and hawks. If a predator is spotted, the sentry makes a distinctive barking sound

warning his pals, and the entire group makes itself scarce by disappearing into burrows or other hiding places until the coast is clear.

There is no more important element in self-defence than good zanshin!

Most animal species are generally more alert to danger than humans, but the meerkat stands out to me, because of the heightened awareness it has of its surroundings and of course the self-appointed sentry looking out for his buddies.

One of the best examples of how human trouble can be avoided simply by applying 'meerkat zanshin', is in a situation frequently ending in tragedy and seen far too often!

This is where an innocent member of the public has been king-hit, often from behind, and usually late at night in a crowded area. Alcohol is frequently a catalyst and the victim has typically been amongst companions.

Imagine the potentially different outcome had just one person in the group been acting like a meerkat, watching over his mates, calmly encouraging them to leave the area as soon as any danger was perceived.

Naturally, the more 'meerkats' or greater the collective level

of zanshin in a group the better.

Other examples of good practical 'street' zanshin are:

.... Walking into a pub late at night in Kings Cross (bad zanshin to be there at all!) and relying on your sixth sense to tell you:

"Nup, this place has bad karma, let's go somewhere else."

... Finding yourself walking to your car alone deep in the basement of a public garage (try not to!) but at the very least making sure that you are in the line of sight of the security cameras and not walking too close to the pillars (someone may be waiting behind them!).

... Standing alone at a bus-top late at night (again, is this smart?) but making sure that you are surrounded by the bus-shelter so that no one can surprise you from behind or the side.

There are endless examples of how good zanshin can help you dilute the risks of getting into trouble and this is before we have even begun to think about applying any of the technical knowledge you may have learned from your study of karate.

The beauty about zanshin is that it's a lot easier and infinitely safer to apply than

defensive karate techniques that usually take years of practice and skill.

It's also one thing practising *bunkai* under the watchful eye of your instructor in a relatively safe dojo setting, and quite another thing fending off what may be a vicious and unexpected attack in the street.

The best form of self-defence is where conflict is **AVOIDED** and I can't say it better than military strategist and philosopher General Sun Tzu who lived in ancient China:

"The greatest victory is that which requires no battle."

From a purely self-defence perspective, I believe that good zanshin provides 99.9% of what it takes to avoid almost ANY tricky situation.

In conclusion, while it may be great and worthwhile to develop the wild animal inside you as a means of protection, don't forget the capacity of the gentle little meerkat to keep you and your loved ones or friends safe!

OSU!

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