

## Sangha Safety: Self-awareness is “Self-defense”

by EBMC community teacher **Michele Benzamin-Miki**

We want our Sangha (spiritual community) to be safe and happy, including in their travel to and from East Bay Meditation Center in downtown Oakland. As a martial arts instructor, I prefer not to talk about self-defense; instead, I promote self-awareness.

In the Martial Arts we choose to be centered, to focus on being centered, AND I will add that you can have fun while doing so. Being centered is self awareness; it means you are aware, taking in what you are experiencing on the inside along with your environment and circumstance in a way that informs a response rather than a reaction. When you do this you are already ahead of the game. **When you choose awareness you choose not to be a victim.** Practicing self-awareness will help to keep you from being a victim.

Let’s begin with a SELF-AWARENESS EXERCISE: Practice in the daylight. Do this exercise during the day, when you’re walking or traveling in your wheelchair/scooter to EBMC, starting from your bicycle, or your car, or the 19<sup>th</sup> Street BART, and see what you notice. Notice people, people’s activities, doorways or areas where people might be hidden from your view. When you get to EBMC, ask yourself: “How many people whom I would identify as men have I spotted on the way here? How many people I would identify as women? How many people whose gender presentation was ambiguous to me? Were they dressed casually or dressed up? What activities were going on? Were they playing a game? Were they looking tough in their attitude?” Notice groupings of people and singular people. For now, you’re practicing in the daylight in a less stressful way. Make this awareness and observation a habit, then you’ll be able to track your observations when you travel to or leave the meditation center at night. When you leave the Center at night, practicing being alert and observant, and this will cultivate in you a strong presence – you are not an easy target looking scared; instead you’re mindful, confident and aware.

## Safety and Self-awareness

- Leaving the meditation center: When you're meditating, you're operating on the assumption that you are in a protected, physically safe environment, and that the work you are doing is inner work. The meditation hall or meditation session is an elevated environment, and your world has been changed in that environment. But when you go out of the doors of the meditation center, onto the street, you're in a different environment. You can't keep the same kind of awareness. You need to shift your focus and awareness. **You need to expand your awareness filter to the environment you're going into, and your speed in accessing information is crucial. You are shifting to a faster paced environment with more flow.**
- In traveling to or from EBMC, have a **buddy system**. Be silent together and enjoy the silence. Maintain expanded awareness, looking with a wider scope, peripheral seeing, especially while talking about what you've learned about meditation. Make it fun. When you leave the meditation hall, notice if you want to "spill" and start talking a lot immediately. Instead, you and your buddy can practice safety awareness together, observing people, buildings, exit points, places where you could get trapped if you run or move into them, etc.
- You can call the Oakland Ambassadors and request an escort. Information is posted in the EBMC office. The Oakland Ambassadors' Team Leader's phone is 510-898-8592. Their Security Ambassador Operations Manager's phone is 510-898-8488.
- **When you walk or move around outside, blend to the streets.** See who's there and move to become invisible with the speed and flow of the group that is there; OR change it so you're drastically different and more visible, because you're totally aware, not totally unconscious, and you are totally centered and present. For instance, if you can see people half hidden or in strange activity somewhere in the distance, you can choose to walk in the middle of the street or in the light. This is a statement: "I know you are there so I am totally going to be seen by you as confident." Stretch yourself

towards an attitude of confidence in your behavior. **Walk or move with more and more confidence, being more and more present.**

- Use peripheral awareness. **Instead of staring at something, see around what you're looking at and get that to be a bigger area.** A lot of people focus on someone they think might be an attacker. But if you see around the attacker, you can see a strategy, like places where you can go for help.
- How far do I need to have my awareness extended around me? A police officer told me, "In a range of fifteen feet or less, an attacker can be on you immediately." Therefore, **twenty feet is a good awareness bubble to keep around you.** If anyone comes within twenty feet of me or I notice any activity within twenty feet of me, I train myself to become aware of it. I'm not leaping to any conclusions. I'm basically being open to the information I'm getting, so I'm not skipping into the future. I might think, "OK, these guys I'm seeing are focusing a little more on me than I'm comfortable with." **Make yourself bigger, or stronger looking, which is the same as looking friendlier, or more loving.** This is counterintuitive, so you might need to practice it. Why this is necessary, even though it is counterintuitive is because it dispels the fear in you. A potential attacker will smell the fear in you otherwise, and they might go for it. For example, many of my men friends have told me that they can feel the fear or lack of fear in women, and said that they did not feel that fear from me. A man's intention might be to make me feel vulnerable and afraid. So my intention is not to feel that way. The question is, who can get their intention to be stronger? So, here is an example – if I'm with a friend, and I see someone ahead of me who might be focusing on me in a way that makes me uncomfortable, and I know I'm going to have to pass that person, I might become more vocal, let's say, and friendlier and more joyful with my friend as we approach that person. Get your energy to be bigger than any discomfort you may be feeling and utilize it in a friendly way to put someone off if their intentions are to harm you, and they will just see a gregarious, friendly person walking down the street. You can freely adapt these points of awareness to your own situation.

- Make sure you're carrying your bag or purse in a way that's comfortable and secure, and look confident and friendly. If you feel uncomfortable as you are approaching one or more people, don't pretend. Cross the street. **Whatever you do, do it with confidence and complete clarity.** Don't project uncertainty. Say to yourself, "I'm doing this because I feel more comfortable, not because I don't like you or don't want to have you around. It doesn't have to do with those projections." Trust your instincts and your instincts will get stronger and bring more clarity.
- Women are most vulnerable and percentages are high of getting attacked in and around their car if they sit in it, texting, with doors unlocked, or spend time arranging things in their trunk, or hang out in it or around it, in an unconscious state. **Be purposeful and efficient in your movements.** Look in the back seat of your car before getting in, then get into the car, lock the doors, and drive away. Do what you need to do in a safe environment before you get to your car – have your keys ready – have your destination in mind and calls done beforehand.
- Activities around your **transition zones** are important too. Going into or out of your car, going into or out of the meditation hall are places for heightened awareness. Be open, alert, loving and confident, and when you're in a heightened state, trust your instincts. Your subconscious mind is constantly giving you information. If you say, "No, this is not happening," your instinct gets weaker. Your subconscious mind will get stronger in giving you valuable information to keep you safe if you pay attention to it.

### If You Reach a Decision-point

Decide what you will or will not do ahead of time. If you get into a conflict or struggle and you are going to use violence, know how to efficiently do that, by taking classes that offer that, and make that decision and follow through with it. Be real with yourself as to what you will do or what you won't do. **The biggest thing you can do in terms of self-defense is make a decision and be complete with it.** This takes care of karma – what happens to you, what happens to the

other person, and possible consequences in the larger legal system. The other person will feel the clarity of your decision.

Make a decision: you're going to cultivate being in a fear mode, flight mode, or clear and aware mode. It's best to be in a clear, aware, present mode, because that means you are the owner of whatever karma you create through your actions. You take responsibility for your action. As a martial artist, I may make a decision in a situation to use hard martial arts, for instance, even though I am clear that I practice and teach diligently a nonviolent principled martial art called Aikido and its complement, Aiki Toho Iaido sword.

Once you choose, you're operating at the responsibility level: "I choose, and I stand by my choices." That doesn't mean there isn't a learning curve and you might make other choices after learning more.

**Be More than Safe – Be Living an Aware Life!**

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