

What Kind of ANIMAL Are You?

KARATE, ZANSHIN & THE ANIMAL KINGDOM

When it comes to *zanshin*, or awareness, the average Aussie — and even the average martial artist — could probably learn a thing or two from our friends in the animal kingdom. And from one particular friend especially, according to Sensei Jonathan Rabinovitz, a 4th Dan instructor with Shotokan Karate International Australia.

STORY BY JONATHAN RABINOVITZ



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: lions, tigers (as featured in the Shotokan Karate International logo), elephants, cobras and many other strong and ferocious beasts are nominated. This is perfectly understandable, as karate indeed draws on our animal instincts and calls for ferocity at times when it's needed. I can see where the students are coming from: if I think of myself at a party where an intoxicated bully makes a move to intimidate or suddenly makes clear his violent intentions... how wonderful it would it be to transform myself into a tiger and send him packing with one mighty snarl! This thinking is right in line with the beginner's hope that learning a martial art will bestow self-protection skills verging on the magical and make them unbeatable.

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 — the meerkat. 'You're kidding!' I hear you say. After all, meerkats are cute and

cuddly creatures, and you may have had a stuffed meerkat called Oscar when you were a kid. And you are certainly unlikely to confront a bunch of tough-looking troublemakers at a party, start chattering and squealing (as meerkats do), and say, 'Don't mess with me, or you'll bring out the meerkat in me!'

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

In a (Japanese) 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? If you have, you will have seen them at play, caring for their young or foraging for food...but 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 one who stands upright on its hind legs, propped up by its tail, constantly scanning the environment and

on the lookout for anything that could threaten the group.

Meerkats are found in Botswana, Namibia and southwest Angola in deserts where there are threats aplenty and a lot of open space. Meerkat 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 to warn his pals, and the entire group makes itself scarce by disappearing into burrows or other hiding places until the coast is clear. These social, communal little creatures know there is no more important element in self-defence than good zanshin.

Most animal species are generally more alert to danger than we humans, but the meerkat stands out to me because of the heightened awareness it has of its surroundings and, of course, its protective nature, with a self-appointed sentry always looking out for his/her buddies. Of course, they too can be fierce and fearless — the meerkat clan at the Werribee Open Plains Zoo in Melbourne killed an intruding brown snake a few years ago, losing one member

in the fight — but smarts and solidarity are their go-to traits.

One of the best examples of how trouble within human groups can be avoided simply by applying 'meerkat zanshin' is in a situation we see far too often and which frequently ends in tragedy: where an innocent member of the public is 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 among companions — sometimes the attacker is one of those companions taking an alcohol-fuelled disagreement too far, at other times it can be a complete stranger with no justification whatsoever.

Imagine the potentially different outcome in some of these situations 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 practical 'street zanshin' when going solo that students may not immediately think about (in favour of bravely foiling thugs at parties) are:

- Walking into a pub late at night in Kings Cross (possibly poor zanshin to make the decision to go 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 (obviously best avoided where possible), 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 and parked cars — or anywhere a person could conceal themselves.
- Standing alone at a bus-stop late at night, (again, is this the best choice, and is it avoidable?) but making sure that you are surrounded by the bus-shelter so that no one can surprise you from behind or the side, and regularly looking behind you through the glass or around the sides of the shelter (if it isn't glass).



Being alert does not mean being uptight or paranoid

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There are endless examples of how active zanshin can help you reduce the risks of getting into trouble, well 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, more reliable and infinitely safer to apply than defensive karate techniques, which usually take years of practice and a high level of skill. It's also one thing practising the combative applications of our kata or forms (aka bunkai) under the watchful eye of your instructor in a relatively safe dojo setting, and quite another thing fending off

what might be a vicious and unexpected attack in the street.

It shouldn't need saying that the best form of self-defence, no matter what style of fighting art or combat sport you practice, is where you take active steps to avoid conflict, and you do so successfully. I can't say it better than the ancient Chinese military strategist and philosopher General Sun Tzu, author of *The Art of War*, who wrote, "The greatest victory is that which requires no battle."

Looking at this from a purely self-defensive perspective, I believe that good zanshin provides more than 99 per cent of what it takes to avoid almost

any dangerous or violent situation. The key is to make it a way of life so that it is keenly honed and you only act when necessary — a state of heightened awareness should not be confused with a state of paranoia or fear... as the photo of a supremely relaxed but alert meerkat here can attest.

So, while it may well be great and worthwhile to develop your inner lion or tiger so that you can act to protect yourself — or others — when violence is inescapable, don't forget about the gentle little meerkat with his keen eyes and ears. Becoming more like him will do more than anything else to keep you and your loved ones safe. ■

The meerkat is quite capable of physical self-defence when necessary but its strength is in its innate sense of awareness

