



# Martial Arts for the Blind and Partially Sighted

**Foundation Institute  
For Regional Development**

A large, stylized graphic of an eye, rendered in shades of blue and grey, centered on the page. The eye is composed of concentric arcs and a central white circle, giving it a three-dimensional appearance.

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**Foundation Institute  
For Regional Development**

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# Introduction

The present study looks at the problems involved in preparing a programme of martial arts training for blind and partially sighted people and represents part of a project carried out by the Partnership for Improving Access to the Labour Market for the Blind, whose activities are carried out within the framework of Theme A: "Facilitating access and return to the labour market for those who have difficulty in being integrated or reintegrated into a labour market which must be open to all". Theme A is part of the EQUAL Community Initiative Programme for Poland 2004-2006, an operational programme co-financed by the European Social Fund. The project is administered by the Foundation Institute for Regional Development in Krakow. The martial arts programme was devised by Andrzej Szuszkiewicz, and the brain child behind the idea was his assistant, Bartłomiej Maleta.

The aim of the martial arts programme devised under the Partnership project is to make visually impaired people more active, feel more secure outside the home, encourage them to overcome their own weaknesses, promote perseverance and tenacity as well as a sense of order and discipline, learn how to overcome stress and, as a consequence, achieve self-improvement. These goals, which are undoubtedly the effects of martial arts training geared towards self-defence, have helped significantly increase the independence of project participants and made them more attractive on the employment market..

By way of an introduction we would like to provide a brief outline of the history of Eastern martial arts. Our hope is to avoid any possible criticism from practitioners and theoreticians of this discipline who will read the present text. Any simplification in presenting such an extensive and complex issue is due to our desire to ensure that the subject is understandable even to the layman.

## Sifu and the “White Dragon” Academy of traditional martial arts

In the field of the martial arts the Foundation Institute for Regional Development has initiated extensive co-operation with Sifu Andrzej Szuszkiewicz (the title Sifu means “master” or “teacher”) who is a Class II trainer at the Academy of Physical Education in Krakow. Sifu Szuszkiewicz has already launched other training programmes and thus has a wealth of experience in elaborating comprehensive training structures. He has used his own knowledge and skills to draw up his own pioneering programme for teaching elements of the eastern martial arts adapted to the needs of visually impaired people.

The programme for blind people was based on traditional systems which Sifu Andrzej Szuszkiewicz has practiced for the last 33 years. Since 1991 Sifu has run the White Dragon Academy of Traditional Martial Arts in Krakow which teaches combat systems from the Far East and in this way tries to propagate a healthy approach to life. With this aim in mind the Academy has organised



*Pic. 1 Andrzej Szuszkiewicz at a wooden dummy used for exercise*

camps and seminars in which both Polish and foreign instructors have taken part. The Academy has also collaborated extensively with martial arts personalities and experts from all over the world. The Academy also organises training programmes and courses for individuals who want to obtain state instructors' licences.

The Academy of Traditional Martial Arts specialises in instruction in Wing Chun Kuen (translated as “Fist of Beautiful Spring”), which is broadly based on using the sense of touch. Many of the principles of Wing Chun became the basis for a system specially created for blind people. A number of ways of moving the body, and “chi sao” (sticky hands), were borrowed from this martial art), whereby the adept senses the power and direction of an attack through touch. This basis in Wing Chun was then enhanced with the inclusion of Ju Jitsu techniques. – i.e. primarily learning lever movements, and also the skills of gripping and getting oneself out of a hold.

# A history of the martial arts

Combat skills have been an integral part of human existence practically from the dawn of civilisation – only their character has changed over the centuries. Traditional-Far East fighting systems elevate combat into an art, as occurred in Asia, and in China in particular. It was there that the practical skill of defeating an opponent was transformed into a discipline shaping the body, mind, character and self-discipline of the adept.

The history of the martial arts goes back at least several thousand years. However, in this case it is only necessary to point out, while overlooking major historical events and descriptions of particular styles, that the traditional methods of combat we know today are directly descended from the meditation methods practiced by Hindu monks. Several hundred years before Christ, traditions of meditation training in motion made their way from India to China. In the Middle Kingdom exercises promoting physical and all-round development used to train the body and mind began to evolve, although now deprived of any combat value, into systems and techniques which were then disseminated further East (via China, where many systems known generally as “kung fu” emerged, they spread to Korea, Okinawa and later to Japan where the most diverse range of specialist systems developed that had no common name, and included “karate”, “ju-jitsu” and others). It was only much later – in principle only in modern times – that martial arts have spread throughout almost the entire world.

Training aimed at strengthening the body brought monks a genuine benefit in the form of the strength needed to ensure long-term meditation. According to historical accounts, the most credit for propagating fighting skills should undoubtedly go to the residents of closed monasteries (such as the Buddhist Shao-Lin monastery or its Taoist counterpart – Wudang), who raised their technical skills and physical fitness to quite improbable levels. This gave rise to tales and legends regarding the supernatural skills of monks capable of mastering their own “internal energy”. Obviously, there is no such thing as “magic” and the supernatural in the martial arts – the unusual levels of fitness of those in training simply resulted from an in-depth knowledge of the mechanisms governing the functioning of the human body as well as the long-term arduous development of the mind and the body. Nevertheless, these legends aroused the West’s interest in martial arts, and in turn helped significantly expand their territorial reach and technical development. In modern times films and the media have played major role in popularising fighting techniques.

Combat systems in the Far East were also developed outside monasteries and temples in both traditional family schools and state institutions – the latter tended to place much more emphasis on the practical combat value of acquired fitness rather than on developing the soul and intellect (which does not mean that this aspect was not important for them).

## **The Eastern mentality and its influence on shaping martial arts**

The technique of fighting that evolved in China should be considered in the context of the mental outlook of people living in the East. Chinese philosophy perceived Man as an integral element of the surrounding world, above all as part of nature. Based on such an understanding training in combat techniques became an art – the art of improving one's body and mind so as to form a continuous and harmonious unity with the environment. This aspect of martial arts training is not something that could not be assimilated by people raised in Western cultures, however it is precisely to Chinese philosophy that we are indebted for the fact that the discipline evolved in the way it did and not differently.

It is worth pointing out that traditional training methods – and the life philosophy of the East in general – has always involved a duality of opposing energies: softness and hardness – yin and yang. They should complement each other in training to form one whole. When practicing martial arts one must be aware of the co-existence of hard combat methods with “soft” training in breathing and relaxing – i.e. spiritual, “inner” training. When learning combat systems, and thus doing harm to the health of one's opponent by combat techniques, adepts also received instruction in traditional Chinese medicines and were acquainted with treatment methods that depended on a knowledge of how energy circulates throughout the human body. Only the right combination of both these aspects ensures the individual can develop him or herself in martial arts training and each adept should try as best as possible to draw from both these paths.

# Physical activity in the life of the individual

## Evolution of the modern lifestyle

Looking at the human body from the point of view of evolving lifestyles it is important to observe that modernity is placing less and less pressure on us to be active. The use of physical strength and power has been restricted in many areas of life (particularly in developed states) to such an extent that it has led to a deterioration in the health of society. It is important to remember that Man as a species was formed in physically harsh conditions, which demanded strength, considerable fitness, speed, coordination and precision of movement, etc. However, the growth of civilisation, has to a large extent subordinated these characteristics to mental and intellectual values – but this does not change the fact that Man remains a “biological machine” and we should be aware of all the consequences this fact entails. Just as we cannot expect any mechanical device to remain effective without proper maintenance, Man will not properly function if he does not take care of his physical condition. Sport, in the broad meaning of this term, allows the individual to enjoy an active and fully independent life for longer.

## The importance of being physically active

The most important benefit of caring about physical fitness is that it improves overall health. Sport safeguards us against many “civilisational” illnesses, which include, among others, diseases of the cardiovascular system, obesity and diabetes. A fit, well-trained body undoubtedly copes better with such complaints and ailments as infections. A well-trained and strong physique protects us against injuries that we are exposed to in our everyday lives, such as strains and twisted joints, and even broken bones, which are toughened up by training. If, on the other hand, an injury occurs, a physically fit person recovers much faster and more completely than do people who avoid movement.

An important – although perhaps not the most important – argument in favour of doing sport is that an increase in physical fitness is usually accompanied by enhanced external attractiveness (a better body and musculature), which significantly improves a person’s self-image, and thus self-esteem and confidence.

Another argument in favour of practicing sport is the fact that a physically active life helps counter the negative effects of stress and makes the individual calmer and more relaxed, which in turn improves overall mental fitness.

Sport teaches us the values of interpersonal relationships, self-acceptance, teamwork, persistence, responsibility and diligence as well as the ability to handle defeat, which is extremely important in everyday life. Positive experiences arising from the joy of being with others, are transferred to other areas of life, which in turn encourage us to make brave life decisions. A physically active life is a perfect way to spend one's free time.

## **The problem of physical activity for blind people**

Blind and partially sighted people are often deprived of the opportunity to take advantage of organised forms of physical activity and its beneficial effects. This is because of all kinds of barriers that the surrounding environment places imposes on the blind. Apart from physical problems, which considerably affect access particular sporting disciplines, blind people encounter a variety of other problems, primarily in the form of a lack of qualified instructors and infrastructure, and thus properly equipped sporting facilities.

For some of the people taking part in the project administered by Foundation Institute for Regional Development, this was the first initiative that offered them a chance to improve their physical well-being and motor coordination, as well as increase their belief in themselves and their sense of security.

Opinions of specialists working with visually impaired people confirm the argument that a lack of opportunity to practice sport and improve physical fitness affects all aspects of the life of a disabled person. In the opinion of Urszula Zuberek, a tiflopsychologist and defectologist, an impaired sense of sight is a sensory defect which shapes the individual's extra-visual picture of reality. For most blind people the absence of visual stimuli provides no stimulation for the organs of movement, which as a result impairs motor coordination, delays in motor development and biochemical disorders. A blind person moves in a way that is different from a person with non -dysfunctional eyesight – above all it stiffens the body and the person moves in a way which can be defined as "protective". Often dysfunctional directional orientation gives rise to forms of "sideism", i.e. a tendency to deviate from the intended direction of movement when there are no reference points in space. Another problem that can emerge is "blindism", which manifests itself in movement related stereotypes (nodding sideways or backwards and forwards), by means of which the central nervous

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system tries to acquire missing stimuli. Although “sideism” is very difficult to eradicate, “blindism” can be largely alleviated through movement-related exercises.

Blind people are very often reluctant to engage in physical activity, for as far as they are concerned their own movements are ineffective. They fail to develop any sense of spatial imagination, as they do not “penetrate” such space and prefer instead to remain at home away from stimuli which for them constitute a difficult challenge and a source of some danger.

Classes teaching blind people certain aspects of martial arts are not organised for theoretical or rehabilitation purposes, but rather are aimed at lessening a blind person’s aversion for spatial cognition. Urszula Zuberek points out that spatial imagination is an important component of thinking processes. Progress made in spatial perception helps in turn to develop the intellectual faculties of a person subjected to kinaesthetic stimulation. The central nervous system compensates for difficulties in building spatial images by creating temporal ones. For this to happen, however, some kind of motor stimulation is necessary, and this is ensured through participation in classes featuring aspects of the martial arts. Blind people that experience such stimulation not only develop harmony in their movements and a feeling of control over their bodies, but also a temporal imagination regarding their own body, as well as a sense of spatial direction, distance and height, thanks to which training is translated directly into effective cognitive processes.

# Martial arts and sport

## The distinction between sport and traditional martial arts

As part of the project administered by Foundation Institute for Regional Development, we provided blind people with training in certain aspects of traditional combat systems which clearly cannot be classified as sport *sensu stricte*. This distinction is unusually important on account of the differences in the way martial arts and sports classes are taught.

The basic criterion distinguishing martial arts from sport is the purpose of training. Sport is a form of competition between people that is organised according to strictly defined rules. Training is solely designed to prepare the individual for a confrontation with an opponent involving technical skills, strength, speed, dynamics, endurance, etc. The most important things here are competition, victory and the spectacle. The competitor will familiarise him or herself with the specific rules of his or her sport and the consequences of failing to observe them. He or she is made aware of the fact that success can only be obtained when he or she is better than other participants in the competition whilst at the same time acting in accordance with all the rules of a given discipline.

On the other hand, martial arts training is a form of competition against oneself – against one's own weaknesses, laziness, pain, etc. Confronting one's own skills with those of others, although not out of the question, is not necessary. The aspect of competition, as a test of fitness and strength, only comes to the fore after a certain period of training. However such rivalry is not assessed by a judge and observed by spectators, but is simply a case of people exercising together and evaluating their own progress. Although it is important for the competitor in sport to achieve the best of his or her ability in the starting season, the adept practising a traditional system struggles against him or herself in every training session, and the concept "starting season" is completely alien to him. The aim of traditional martial arts is above all to shape the soul, the intellect and the character of the individual performing the exercises via the use of "external" combat techniques. The absence of objective skills or the failure to make rapid progress which disqualifies sportsmen and women from further competition does not pose a problem here as long as the participant does not succumb to temporary problems and continues to work on his or her further self-development. For it is not the goal, but rather the path to that goal which represents the real challenge for the practitioner of Far East combat systems.

One should be aware, however, that both disciplines, i.e. martial arts and sport, can function perfectly well together or even completely separately, in spite of the fact that often they are built (for example in the case of martial arts and combat sports) on the same or even very similar technical foundations. The difference lies in the attitude of the mind to the exercises performed. There is nothing to prevent a school of martial arts from organising competitions whilst at the same time respecting all values arising from the traditional system. Similarly, sports training can be treated as a way of developing the mind and body independently of all expectations regarding results and prizes.

## **Sports and martial arts for blind people**

Many blind and visually impaired people are excluded from competing in sports. This is not only because of visual dysfunctions, but is also due to accompanying disorders which are frequently the cause of a person's loss of sight.

One cannot state unequivocally and authoritatively that martial arts are "better" for blind people than sport. For each and every one of us is different and has different needs. On the other hand we can certainly argue that Far East combat systems (adjusted of course to accommodate the abilities of blind participants, as we will discuss below) offer an excellent way of developing the body and mind of people with impaired vision. One advantage of martial arts is that in principle anyone can practice them regardless of their age, level of training or actual chances of achieving "objective" results. Moreover, the "advantage" of this discipline is that whereas in a sport the technical part is as a rule limited due to the fact that competitors need to prepare quickly for starts (for the most part sportsmen and women are content to perfect only a limited number of known elements), martial arts, due to their wealth, do not in principle suffer from such restrictions on development. Getting to know and mastering a certain disciplines opens up another path of knowledge. Thanks to martial arts training the beginner not only makes progress in terms of knowledge and skills but also becomes more interested, intrigued and engaged. Although combat sports have the advantage, as was mentioned above, that the basics can be learnt quickly there eventually comes a moment when the sportsman stops developing as he has got to know all the technical sides of the system. On the other hand, the martial arts adept never stops developing throughout his or her entire life, and even reaching perfection in one discipline never constitutes the end of the learning process.

Our experiences show unequivocally that our classes have a positive impact on participants. Besides improving typically "physical" aspects such as muscle strength, motor coordination and stable posture (which often poses a major

problem for blind people), they also, and most importantly, develop “mind” and character. By the latter we mean above all else greater confidence and belief in oneself, skills in concentration and perseverance in performing set tasks, and also responsibility. Adepts begin to realise that the knowledge they have learnt can, when applied in the proper manner, cause serious harm to another person and they learn to master their skills and reflexes and also become aware of the consequences of the tasks they perform.

## Conclusions

The chapter above should not be treated as an attempt to present sport as an unsuitable or “inferior” form of physical activity for the blind. Many sports have been admirably adjusted to accommodate the abilities and limitations of the blind, and others have been devised especially for their needs and function excellently when they have been popularised. The blind community requires the help of outsiders in almost every walk of life. This includes the teaching of martial arts, which requires specific instruction from an experienced trainer. All the same, customised and methodically adapted facilities allow for individual training sessions (even in a very small area, for example, one’s own room), which is often impossible in the case of other disciplines.

# Limitations of blind people in martial arts training

## Health limitations

Every kind of physical activity involves some risk of injury, a fact which not only participants of training sessions should be aware of, but even more so instructors who are responsible for the physical health of the participants.

In the case of the blind and the partially sighted it is important to have the best possible knowledge of their physical limitations during classes in order to ensure the safety of their participation in exercises. This is because many of those who are visually impaired are more susceptible to suffer further damage to the organs of sight. In addition to such dysfunctions visually impaired people often suffer from a variety of other serious disorders, such as, for example, epilepsy and diabetes. These in turn are connected with rigorous contraindications in relation to all kinds of physical effort. Classes must thus be adjusted to be able to cope with the abilities of participants susceptible to such complications. Often such people should be systematically excluded from certain stages of the training regime. In particular, we should be aware of the risk of shock (for example after being hit or falling) or a rise in blood pressure during physical activity – especially when wrestling or performing excessively strenuous exercises. If there are any doubts whatsoever, including even the smallest ones, as to whether the participants are at risk the adept should (after consulting the instructor who will show how adepts are to perform an exercise and also provide advanced warning of its effects) obtain a detailed opinion from a suitably qualified physician.

## Safety

During a training session, demonstrations of new techniques should be preceded by detailed instructions that not only include a description of the exercise to be performed but also a warning of the dangers of performing the exercise incorrectly.

One should also be careful about how much physical training the adept undertakes. Although martial arts entail a minimum level of strength and fitness, with the right technical skills, a knowledge of anatomy and an understanding of the basic rules, strength is not so crucial. Training should provide a suitable balance between physical and technical aspects. The number of tasks performed should



*Pic. 2 Lever on shoulder controlled on the ground*



*Pic. 3 Lever on elbow controlled on the ground*

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also be regulated by an experienced instructor according to the needs of the group and sometimes even the individual. Particular effort should be made to ensure exercises are adjusted to the general level of fitness of participants, and those suffering from chronic and progressive diseases should be excluded from performing any techniques which might pose a serious danger to his or her health.

It is important to remember that martial arts are based on physical contact and during training sessions based on specific techniques an “offensive” person (attacker, aggressor) is confronted with a “defensive” opponent in a counter attacking position. During a properly conducted training session the likelihood of serious accidents and injuries occurring is minimal. This is due to the fact that participants are aware that techniques performed pose a serious danger to the health and sometimes even the life of another individual. Many people, (not only the blind) are downright opposed to making moves that cause pain to their partner or stop themselves before carrying out a move, which is a positive thing from the point of view of safety, but has a negative influence on the practical teaching of martial arts or the technique of self-defence. Common sense and appropriate explanations from the instructor are the most important factors in achieving a balancing between these values.

Although professional sportsmen and women do sometimes place their own health and sometimes even their own lives at risk to achieve success, it is important to bear in mind that in the majority of cases blind people are excluded from professional competition. Even when disabled people participate in competitive events, the pressure to win is far less intense than in professional sports involving able bodied participants, and hence there is no such temptation to penetrate the barriers set by the human body.

Training aimed at teaching people self-defence and hence designed to maintain the adept’s physical well-being and safety cannot cause any harm to the adept’s body. The safety of participants in training is always the chief priority of instructors of the visually impaired.

When it comes to training for blind people, all training rooms must be equipped with mats that protect participants from falls. It is important to ensure that no objects should be present in the training environment that would increase the risk of damage or injury, hence unsecured windows, columns supporting the ceiling in the middle of the room, any obstacles, etc. Only a qualified instructor with suitable knowledge and experience can ensure safety during training sessions.



*Pic. 4 Lever on wrist from underside grasp*



*Pic. 5 Takedown by controlling wrist and elbow*



*Pic. 6 Controlling opponent's body by holding his or her shoulder and hip*



*Pic. 7 Lever on shoulder joint*

Particular attention should be paid to the utilitarian character of the martial arts, and thus to the practical skills of acting in self defence in situations where an attack poses a real danger to life. During arduous and often painful training sessions participants gradually become accustomed to the idea that when such a danger arises he or she must accept an appropriate level of risk when making a move. He or she must accept that defending themselves against an aggressor may entail some physical danger. The task of a well-organised training programme is to prepare the participant for such a risk and minimise it.

## Technical limitations

When developing a system of martial arts adjusted to the needs of visually impaired people attention should be paid to the limitations arising from this specific disability. Although it is unrealistic to teach a blind person blows and kicks and expect them to be used effectively during a confrontation with an opponent, our experience shows that in principle there are no limitations to teaching techniques involving contact with a “partner-aggressor”. They include lever actions, smothering, holding on the floor etc. These techniques are often more difficult to teach to the visually impaired than to those with regular eyesight.

Some blind people prefer a move to be explained to them, while others like to have their body guided by someone standing to the side. Another good method is to allow a blind person to feel the position of the instructor’s body when a technique is being demonstrated. However, this involves certain requirements in the way training is organised and also demands that all specific aspects of a move be described clearly (often making use of associations with circumstances known from everyday life). Our experiences show that the most difficult challenge is to describe clearly and accurately the direction of a move – especially when, for example, the direction of one limb runs counter to the rest the body (e.g. the body moves backwards, but the direction of force is forwards or to the side). Blind people require much more effort from the training instructor than even the partially sighted – they require far more frequent adjustments and much greater attention. They cannot, after all, “observe” the move a trainer makes when instructing another pair, or when the trainer performs a technique independently. Subtle aspects of the movement of the teacher’s body, which even for the non visually impaired are difficult to observe, are for a blind person essentially impossible to grasp without proper instruction. As a result even small classes (e.g. approx. 6 people) involving the participation of blind people should be conducted by at least two persons, one of whom will be responsible for the dynamics of the session, explaining technical issues, preparing and carrying out the program of lessons, and for the proper sequence



*Pic. 8 Lever on wrist from cross grasp*



*Pic. 9,10 Lever on wrist from cross grasp*

of techniques to be taught, while the second person (the assistant) will constantly correct the movements of participants demanding assistance.

# **A system of fight training for the visually impaired**

## **The complexity of a combat system**

The martial arts are a highly complex form of physical activity and to practice them properly one should take into account the fact that only instruction from an experienced teacher allows the participant to fully understand and benefit from training. An ability to use specific punches or lever actions is not enough on its own. It is vital that we learn all aspects of a given discipline. For this very reason, developing the right system for the needs of a given individual or group must be the responsibility of an expert who has as much knowledge as possible of his or her discipline. What benefit do we gain if we know the alphabet but don't know how to compose words and then full sentences from it? The same problem can by analogy be seen in martial arts training. If we teach a group how to perform several techniques perfectly, but do not provide them with knowledge of how those techniques should be used properly, what moves should be employed to counter an attack what dangers they will be exposed to as a result, then training will have little effect, even if we master those techniques to perfection.

Adapting martial arts training to the needs and abilities of the disabled requires in-depth and interdisciplinary knowledge on the part of the instructor so that participants can familiarise themselves with all aspects of a combat system, which is particularly difficult on account of the specific methods needed to teach the visually impaired.

## **Classification of the martial arts**

To gain a clearer understanding of the problems involved in choosing the right strategy and assortment of techniques for blind people, we must first familiarise ourselves with the basic divisions existing within the framework of traditional martial arts and combat sports. Specific systems fully covering a given area of combat have emerged within the domains of traditional martial arts and combat sports. Some of these systems have specialised in long distance combat (hence, high and long kicking, long punches with the body extended, jumping techniques, and so on), others in medium distance (based on stable positions and fighting out of arm's reach and of contact), and others in fighting at short distances and close quarters as well as in floor techniques (including levers on

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joints, throwing techniques, strangling techniques, grasping, holding etc.). Over the course of time, traditional systems have evolved and changed to varying degrees. The accepted historical technical cannon of a given school has ceased to play the role of determinant through which the adept acquires skills. At present, mainly because of broad access to competing fields of knowledge many adepts have begun to specialise in a number of different disciplines, learning to fight from different distances and sometimes making use of techniques that used to be “alien” to one another. In this way people who want to defend themselves effectively from a broad range of possible attacks, must also learn different strategies and a vast range of technical assortment.

However, it is impossible for the visually impaired to learn all distances and a learning program (i.e. a system of fighting) had to be created especially for them.

### **Assumptions of the system, a strategy for fighting and choosing techniques**

When devising a system comprising different aspects of the Eastern martial arts specially adjusted to the needs of blind and partially sighted people, it is of



*Pic. 11 Parallel grasp on wrist with control of the other hand*

upmost importance to eliminate any techniques which visually impaired people are unable to perform effectively. These include long distance fighting techniques – a blind person certainly cannot kick or punch an attacker. Even if they were to manage to do so, would they be able to do so with enough power and accuracy to harm their opponent? Landing a punch or kick which failed to “knock-out” an attacker would only encourage the latter to further aggressive acts, which as a result may be so dangerous as to lead to disaster. Training in throwing an opponent has also been eliminated because of the possible shock experienced when falling, which can be dangerous to the health of the participant.

A blind person should aspire to fight at closer distances where the right moves and positioning in both defence and attack prolong the duration of contact between the limbs and torso of the attacker. If such contact cannot under any circumstances be “broken off” (for example, by pulling a hand out of a hold), it can then be used to control an attack and, as a result, eliminate a danger. This is the only area in which a blind person has a chance of conducting an effective defence.

The system that has been developed for the blind and the visually impaired thus comes down to controlling distance, sensing an opponent’s intentions (in particular, the direction of an attack and the amount of force used), getting out of the line of an attack and adjusting one’s position for the right counter – which in the case of blind people mainly involves levers, strangulation techniques and flooring an opponent by completely controlling and holding the latter.

Contact and lever combat, which is the basis of the system of eastern martial arts developed for blind and visually impaired people, is one of the most difficult methods of confronting an opponent and requires great precision and decisiveness. Such training also requires the use of a certain amount of force – although this is not key. We have observed that even people who due to the nature of their condition had until then seriously neglected their physical condition were able after some time to make up for basic deficiencies. Carefully rationed physical training combined with technical training enabled a sizeable majority of participants to develop enough strength to perform self-defence techniques on an averagely fit and healthy person. However, they must still go through arduous and strenuous training and the never-ending task of self-improvement.

## **Training methodology**

Guided by the goals outlined above, a basic analysis was carried out of the technical sides of martial arts and an appropriate system was developed which blind people could not only assimilate, but also be equal to its requirements.



*Pic. 12 Lever on wrist controlled on the ground*



*Pic. 13 Lever on wrist controlled on the ground*



*Pic. 14 Lever on wrist controlled on the ground*



*Pic. 15 Lever on wrist controlled on the ground*

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Every combat system must be based on achieving the right positions and movement. For it is vital to remember that it is not the hands and fists that determine the effectiveness of a given combat method, but rather a stable posture and where and how the energy of a move is directed. The participant should pay particular attention to achieving the right body pose – i.e. primarily the arrangement of the feet, knees and hips, but also the torso, upper limbs and even the head, which if it is in the wrong position or moving in the wrong direction can upset balance and disperse strength. By contrast, a properly posed body is reflected in a stable posture, the ability to make moves using properly directed force, and protection of the maximum body area from a potential attack. Assuming the right positions must become natural for the participant so as to ensure a fluid transfer of the centre of gravity without unnecessary pulling or yanking, which would lead to a momentary loss of balance.

Training also requires participants to improve their motor coordination. With this aim in mind exercises must be adjusted to achieve the goals of the system. “Screen” training is perfect for achieving this effect, during which the adept, practicing moves at the command of the instructor, uses his hands to protect the upper or lower part of the body.



*Pic. 16 Parallel grasp on wrist with control of the other hand*



*Pic. 17 Parallel grasp on wrist with control of the other hand*

To learn how to react in the right way to an aggressor's attack non-stop practice in using the sense of touch is essential. A trained person is able simply by touching a part of a partner's body with whom his limbs are in contact, to determine the arrangement of the entire body. An adept in possession of such a skill can, with the help of the right movements and use of limbs, control the direction of the opponent's force.

Another issue to consider is finding the right method for teaching lever actions, strangulation and so called "holding". Apart from basic information on the arrangement of the arms and legs the adept must gradually be instilled with knowledge of the anatomy – in particular regarding the structure of muscles and joints, the course of arteries and nerve channels, and also the relationship between them. Participants then learn how to use the above mentioned elements in performing a specific technique. The next stage is to learn how to counter the direction of an opponent's moves and force using the correct technique.

To achieve the desired effects it is also vital to guide and control the physical development of the adept. It is essential to choose not only exercises geared towards training muscle groups but also those that help improve motor reactions. This is because physical training must prepare the body for making specific movements.

The existing theoretical and practical system can be technically developed by adding new elements to the established combat strategy.



*Pic. 18 Lever on wrist from reverse grasp*



*Pic. 19 Lever on wrist from reverse grasp*



*Pic. 20 Lever on wrist from reverse grasp with control of elbow*



*Pic. 21 Lever on wrist from reverse grasp with control of elbow*

## Interest in classes

During the course of the current project the majority of those people who accepted the challenge of martial arts training we set for them, are deriving increasing pleasure from doing the exercises and are showing a deeper interest in the system. This is a natural reaction among every disciple of traditional martial arts who enjoys training. Apart from a few exceptions everyone attended our classes at the beginning of the project organised the Partnership for Increasing Access to the Labour Market for the Blind. As the training progressed some people stopped attending for various reasons. Some were forced to drop out due to illness or because of the course of their treatment, while others decided not to take on any further challenges because, in their opinion, the effects took too long to make themselves apparent, which discouraged them, and also because of the harsh training methods (in particular pain, physical suffering and the need to learn technically difficult elements that required constant concentration). A small number withdrew from classes because of organisational problems with getting to Krakow in the early morning from their homes throughout the voivodship. Nevertheless we can declare with obvious satisfaction that martial arts has attracted a great deal of interest among the blind and partially sighted.

Those people who are regularly taking part in our classes appreciate the effect of this kind of training on improving their physical fitness and motor coordination. Participants point out that training in various elements of the eastern martial arts not only helps increase feelings of security, which is a natural consequence of learning techniques that enable a blind person to locate and harm a potential opponent, but also boosts confidence, which has a beneficial impact on their relationship with the surrounding environment. Thanks to learning systematic work habits during training sessions, people taking part in them cope better with day-to-day life, are successful at school and college and later also at work.

### Comments from participants:

Rafał (blind person): *"Thanks to the classes I have become more confident about myself.(...) I think that the lessons had some influence on my decision to move out of my parents, because a year ago I wouldn't have done it."*

Małgorzata (partially sighted person): *"It gave me more confidence, I tread more firmly now, I would say."*

Katarzyna (partially sighted person): *"Apart from the fact that we all work hard here, we are gaining new knowledge, we are learning elements of martial arts, we are all part of a very close knit team, we like to come here and meet."*

Grażyna (partially sighted person): *"It gives me a feeling of security and increases my confidence and it has also encouraged me to make faster decisions. (...) I have a son, Mateusz, who is nine years old, and he seems to be quite impressed that we go to these classes, since he boasts about it to his friends."*

Sławomir (partially sighted person): *"When I see that what I am doing has some effect, it gives me enormous satisfaction."*



Pic. 22 A group of participants of the EQUAL project, Zakopane, July 2005

## Our achievements in the context of international cooperation

One of our European partners is Action for Blind People, which is the third largest charity in the UK, founded in 1857, working with blind and partially sighted people to enable them to transform their lives. The mission of this organisation is "To inspire change and create opportunities to enable blind and partially sighted people to have equal voice and equal choice."

There are many visually impaired children, particularly those in mainstream education, who are keen to take part in activities outside school time but are unable to find a local club that can cater for their particular needs. Action for Blind People has established the Actionnaires Clubs, allowing visually impaired children to experience a range of activities in a safe, structured and fun environment outside of mainstream or specialist education. Martial arts is taught at the clubs to aid in the development of each child's self confidence, social interaction and their ability to develop a range of physical skills. Ultimately the children will be involved in mainstream participation with sighted children.

The Self Employment team, a part of Action for Blind People, offers support to blind and partially sighted entrepreneurs who are looking to establish new businesses or developing an existing business, who may be facing specific problems and who welcome professional support. Through the business planning process, Action for Blind People help people to decide if self employment is a viable option. If the business is viable, then advisers will provide support in the following areas:-

- | Business plan coaching
- | Market research and customer profiling
- | Identifying training needs (i.e. accessing business courses)
- | Accessing funding where possible
- | Business advice
- | Help with marketing; including promotional flyer design
- | Marketing and business development training
- | Ongoing mentoring and support
- | Networking opportunities
- | Advertising

Currently Action for Blind People support a wide range of businesses, from traditional crafts to recording studios and consultancies, Arts & Crafts, property maintenance, clothing retail, trainer for the visually impaired, massage and of course Martial Arts training.

One of Action for Blind People's clients, Mark Paterson, is a martial arts and sword work instructor and has launched a martial arts school in the Marske and Guisborough area. Mark is registered partially sighted, having been born with only 7% vision. Action for Blind People helped create his business plan, the aim of which was to obtain £1600 of funding. This funding financed his 8th Dan Masters grade as well as crash mats, protective equipment and advertising leaflets.

Terry Powell is another entrepreneur, a blind person who has had a lengthy sporting career, a captain of the Great Britain Judo Squad at the Sydney Paralympics in 2000. He is a World Medallist, European Champion and Fifth Dan, aims to teach children the techniques and etiquette of judo, while focusing on the enjoyment of the sport. As a qualified British Judo Association Coach, with over 18 years experience, Terry makes his session very enjoyable, while informative for all children at the club.

Terry holds also motivation seminars to give an insight into his experiences as a child with a disability in both an educational and community sport setting. Helen Pearce, Vale Royal Borough Council's Development Manager, said about one such seminar: *"The event was a great success, Terry really motivated all participants to ensure that everyone has equal access to local sporting opportunities."*



## Information about the authors



**Andrzej Szuszkiewicz**

owns the title Sifu (which means “master”, “teacher”) and is a Class II trainer at the Academy of Physical Education in Krakow. He has already launched other training programmes and thus has a wealth of experience in elaborating comprehensive training structures. He has used his own knowledge and skills to create the pioneering programme for teaching elements of the eastern martial arts adapted to the needs of visually impaired people within the EQUAL project. Since 1991 Sifu Szuszkiewicz has run the White Dragon Academy of Traditional Martial Arts in Krakow which has taught combat systems from the Far East and he also has organized training programmes and courses for individuals who want to obtain state instructors’ licences.



**Bartłomiej Maleta**

has trained traditional Chinese martial arts since 1995. He achieved Polish state instructor’s license for physical recreation in Kung Fu specialization seven years ago. Since then he has run trainings in Kung Fu. As it was his idea to start a martial training program for visually impaired people in the EQUAL project and to engage Andrzej Szuszkiewicz for this purpose, Bartłomiej has worked with Sifu Szuszkiewicz as his assistant.

The Foundation Institute For Regional Development is a non-profit non-governmental organization active since the 26th August 2003 in the fields of science, transfer of innovations, entrepreneurship and complex and multifarious support for the most discriminated people in the society. The fundamental mission of the Foundation is balanced development of entrepreneurship, the transfer of innovative solutions, as well as support of companies and other subjects in obtaining and using modern technologies. It has cooperated with the Ministry of Science and Information Society Technologies, the Polish Agency for Enterprise Development as well as the local authorities of the Malopolskie Voivodship, and has recently been cooperating very intensively with numerous organizations for the support of handicapped people, in particular the visually impaired. Since February 2007 the Foundation has had the status of a Public Benefit Organization (OPP).

The project realized by the “Partnership for Improving Access to the Labour Market for the Blind”, consisting in – apart from the Foundation – also the Polish Association Of The Blind, the University of Science and Technology in Krakow, the Foundation for Blind and Partially Sighted People, the Institute for Marketing and Social Research VRG Strategia and the Agency HandiSoft, is co-financed by means of the European Social Fund within the EQUAL Community Initiative. Its main objective is to help visually impaired people find and keep jobs or undertake and graduate from university studies. Participation in the project have given opportunity to improve qualifications and skills to 60 people at the age of 16-35 from the region of the Malopolskie Voivodship.