

# BOXING: Bruce Lee's Forgotten Art

Unknown to most, Bruce Lee valued boxing skills as much as his more famous Oriental arts.

By L.R. Ferolino



**A**fter Bruce Lee died in 1973, the art of wing chun — the primary art Lee practiced — gained vast recognition in part because of the general public's interest in keeping the legendary fighter's image alive and intact. Since most identify the Oriental methods of self-defense as having the most effective techniques, it was conceivable the wing chun component of Lee's overall system would be the most remembered.

Unbeknownst to most, however, is that boxing skills — especially footwork — were just as important to Lee's training methods as any other skills. Much of Lee's famous book, *Tao of Jeet Kune Do*, contains specific references to boxing concepts. He states, "Footwork can and will beat any kick or punch . . . Without footwork, the fighter is like artillery that cannot be moved . . ."

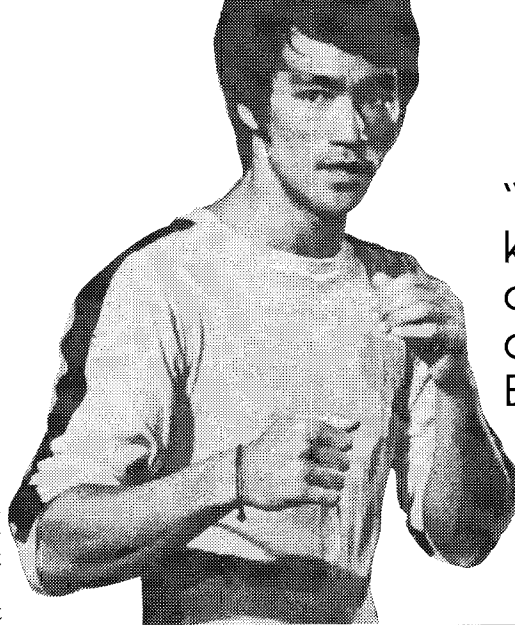
So why, then, didn't the boxing aspect become as popular as his wing chun skills? Radford (Va.) University professor Dr. Jerry Beasley, who teaches fighting methods, including boxing, as part of his multicultural martial arts curriculum, notes since boxing is an American sport, many people think they know the skills. Also, many people don't understand professional boxers are highly trained athletes who can take and recover from devastating blows. "Because these professional athletes can absorb considerable punishment, it is sometimes reasoned that the average person would respond similarly to a boxer's punches. Thus, the viewers may falsely reason that boxing is less devastating than other martial arts. This is not true." Beasley maintains these false impressions must be discarded.

Beasley, a trained sociologist, has researched how cultural norms and environmental variables influence the development of physical skills. He earned both a master's and a doctorate in part for his research in martial arts education at Virginia Tech (Blacksburg, Va.). A sixth-degree black belt, Beasley has trained with several prominent martial artists, including Joe Lewis, Dan Inosanto and Larry Hartsell. He's the author of numerous articles and the book, *The Development of American Karate: History and Skills*, and has founded several martial arts organizations, including the American Independent Karate Instructors Association (AIKIA), which he co-directs with Joe Lewis and point competitor Steve "Nasty" Anderson.

"I've trained at seminars investigating jeet kune do concepts and, although I don't consider myself part of the JKD group, the multicultural self-defense system that is the major theme in the college curriculum at Radford University has a similar theme as the concept of JKD because in multicultural self-defense, we believe the student should be adaptable to, or have an understanding of, the combative methodologies inherent to both comparative and independent cultures."

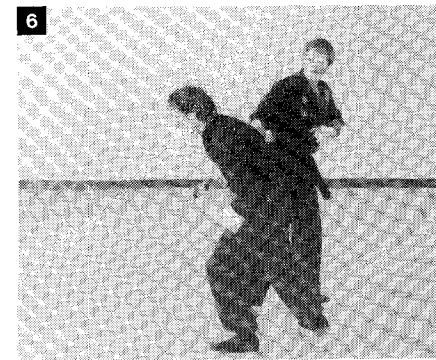
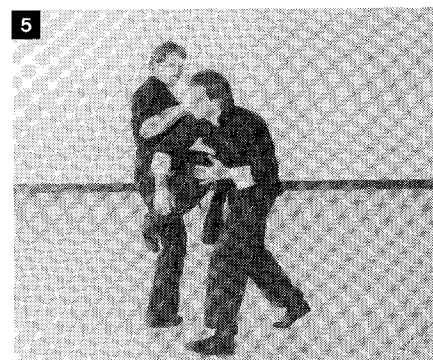
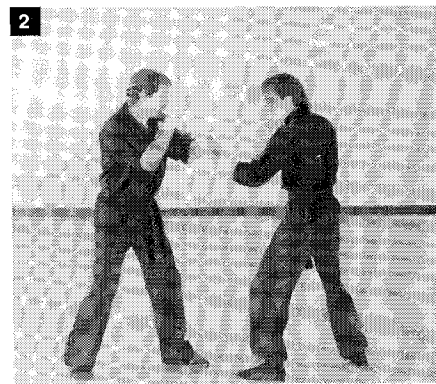
Each martial artist, says Beasley, has a particular conceptual framework which allows him to view the world in his own way. Therefore, various interpretations exist of the arts.

"There's a lot of controversy over the term 'traditional' martial arts," Beasley states. "There's an interest in keeping traditional arts

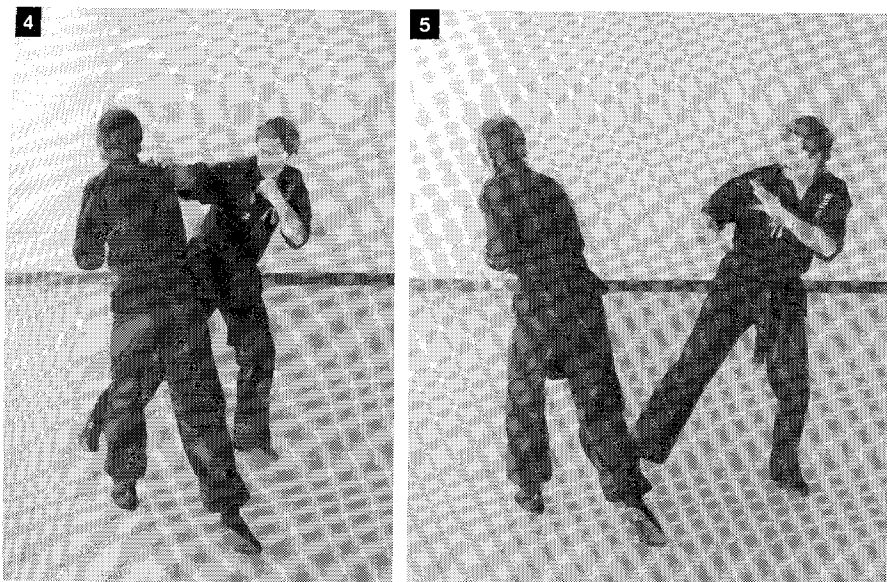
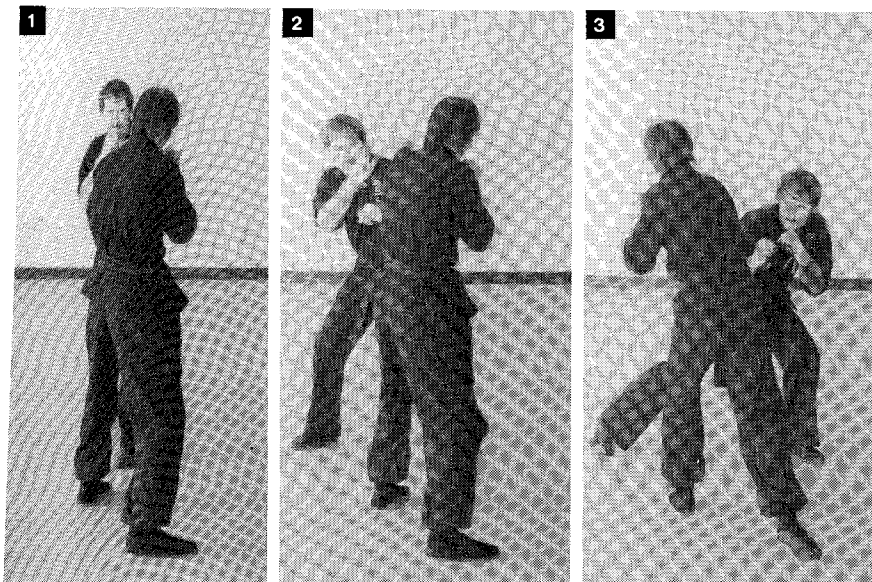


"There's an interest in keeping traditional arts pure. That's one of the problems Bruce Lee had. A lot of the traditionalists said his art was not traditional, pure."

— Dr. Jerry Beasley

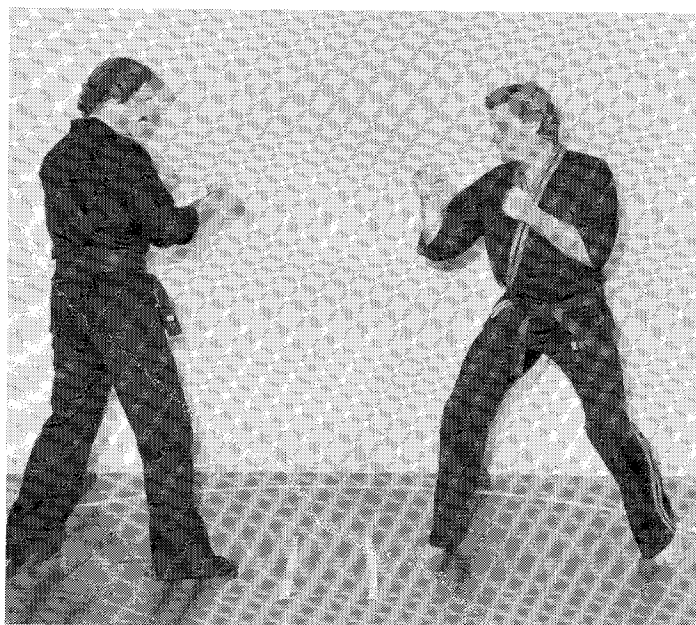


Beasley uses his right hand as a *probe* to test (1) the opponent's response by lightly touching his foe's forward hand. When the opponent does not respond, Beasley sets up a hand-catching, *jao sao fa*, technique (2) which immobilizes the opponent's forward hand. At close range, the opponent may choose (3) to attack with a right cross. Beasley, however, is prepared to deflect the right cross with his elbow, similar to a *bong sau*. He follows (4) with a right cross and a right knee strike (5). He immediately relocates (6) to a neutral area.



In this example (1), Beasley demonstrates the bobbing, slipping and weaving techniques of empty-hand boxing. Against a left jab, Beasley side steps and slips (2) the punch. As the opponent continues to attack (3) with a right cross, Beasley shifts to the left in a flowing, circular motion and follows (4) with a right to keep the foe off balance. He then is prepared to relocate (5).

Beasley (left) was greatly influenced by partner Joe Lewis (right) in both theoretical and mechanical adaptations of boxing methods. Lewis was a former student and training partner of Bruce Lee.



pure. That's one of the problems Bruce Lee had. A lot of the traditionalists said his art was not a traditional, or pure, art. A number of martial artists hold the belief that there's no such thing as a traditional martial art unless the art has actually been preserved in its original state, without changing any training methods or techniques. That's one way to look at it. But my view is that the term 'tradition' should deal almost entirely with the social structure of an art or system. The physical techniques taught in karate, tae kwon do, kung-fu, whatever art, have always varied."

For example, Beasley notes, a person can learn certain wing chun skills from a particular instructor, while another instructor may teach different wing chun skills. And both may achieve the same result. "We strip the art to the bare bones when we look at social structure," he explains. "What we find in comparing the skeletons (each representing a different interpretation of the same art) is they all have lineage to a particular society or group and they all have a number of physical skills identified with that group and its philosophies."

These components, he says, provide the social structure of an art. Tradition begins with the

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origin of the art, whether the lineage extends from a group of monks or from a group of oppressed people who had to train their bodies as weapons.

Beasley contends the physical skills are included (he refers to it as "adding flesh to the bones.") To illustrate why and how the actual techniques differ among various interpretations of the same traditional art, Beasley summarizes an analogy from Dan Inosanto: "It's like teaching someone to play basketball without using the ball," Beasley recalls from one of Inosanto's seminars. "You, being the player, teach a student the form — based upon your physical structure, or on the way you play. The student then teaches someone else based on his perception of how you play. And it goes on, differing from generation to generation."

This is why physical skills play a lesser part in determining whether an art is traditional. However, adding social structure to a group of physical skills can be a successful method of blending the best of both worlds. This is precisely what Beasley has done in developing his empty-hand boxing system. Beasley started his karate and tae kwon do training in 1966. In 1976, after experiencing the freedom of move-

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ment through boxing, he began to incorporate the boxing methods in his martial arts training.

"If we take the sport of boxing and add this social structure we've learned from other arts — the chain of command, junior-senior level and the general philosophy identified with Oriental cultures — we'll have a traditional martial art," says Beasley. "What's important in a martial art isn't so much the physical skill, but the character development. Physical skill is merely a stepping-stone toward achieving one's full potential. Based on my observations, Americans have improved on the physical skills used for self-defense, but we haven't developed a system as successful as the classical, traditional, or Oriental system (which I refer to as the social structure) for character development."

To recognize boxing as a martial art (by applying this social structure) is important because boxing offers some very functional self-defense skills. "Bruce Lee recognized this. Joe Lewis recognized this in the karate world, using boxing footwork and other techniques to win several world kickboxing titles," Beasley states, noting that Lewis was one of Lee's students. Beasley, who has been greatly influenced by Lewis, adds, "Modern-day practitioners of muay Thai also understand that skill in Western boxing is extremely important to a winning strategy."

Beasley's empty-hand boxing system incorporates some of the trapping techniques used in wing chun and kali, koppo jutsu movements utilizing the fists in striking to an opponent's weak areas, kicking skills and footwork (to enter from long-range to medium-range distance.)

Three essential components in empty-hand boxing are: leg immobilization techniques for use against kicks, a kicking method paralleling one's punching skills, and footwork. "American boxers are the most advanced in terms of footwork," Beasley states. "In learning boxing, you learn from day one not to stand flat on your feet, but to move. This is the direct opposite of what's taught in most karate programs, which stress the 'one-shot victory' from a fixed position with deep, wide stances used to generate full power."

In *Tao of Jeet Kune Do*, Lee states, "Mobility is definitely stressed in jeet kune do because combat is a matter of motion, an operation of

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finding a target or of avoiding being a target. . . The essence of fighting is the art of moving."

Beasley stresses the mobility and footwork of boxing can be applied to any martial art. "My feeling is that the deep karate or kung-fu stances can be used for a very powerful technique. The problem is if your opponent moves on you, then you have to re-position to get into your stance again to throw your technique. By learning a better footwork system, you can get in and out of your position, or stance, faster."

Boxing skills can actually be mastered faster than some of the more complex skills in other arts. But, Beasley says, one must train hard to be proficient.

Two theories must be understood when training in Beasley's empty-hand boxing system. Lee states in *Tao of Jeet Kune Do*: "The simple idea is to get where you are safe and he isn't." Beasley has conceptualized a similar idea into what he calls his "target relocation theory," which is based on an opponent generally retaliating as soon as he's struck from the direction from which he was struck. "So you have to hit and move, hit and move. . . You can't remain in the same line of fire once you deliver a technique. Boxing footwork helps in training you to do this," he notes.

The second theory, which Beasley calls "stem snapping," states when an arm or leg (a "stem") is left extended after a technique is delivered, the opponent has an opportunity to trap, immobilize or otherwise destroy it. So once a punch or kick is delivered, the weapon (being the arm or leg) must be quickly "snapped" back to its original or another position.

A considerable number of martial artists are beginning to recognize the validity of boxing as a martial art. To encourage its acceptance among karate and kung-fu schools, a structural approach must be implemented so it can be appreciated by traditional as well as modern instructors. The empty-hand boxing system includes both kicking skills and a social structure. This approach strengthens the potential of boxing as a self-defense system and makes it more easily incorporated into karate and kung-fu programs.

About the Author: L.R. Ferolino is a martial artist and freelance writer based in Christiansburg, Virginia.

matter how long it takes. He claims an out-of-body experience shortly after the explosion has convinced him he was meant to live.

When a rescue team pulled him from the burning building, it used cold water to extinguish his flame-ridden body. The sudden change in temperature sent him into shock. Experts say he was clinically dead. Johnson tells a much different story.

"It was amazing I got out of the building at all," explains Johnson, who admits he still has nightmares about the experience. "I was convulsing and my eyes were fixed. I couldn't respond but I knew everything that was going on around me."

Then Johnson felt peace, serenity. The pain was gone. "You cannot imagine it," he says, his voice halting with disbelief. "It was so peaceful. I started leaving and I remember thinking that this is wonderful. . . I had just been in this horrible, painful situation and then all of a sudden it was completely tranquil. And I could hear them struggling, shaking me, saying, 'Are you alive? Can you hear me?' But I couldn't respond. I started leaving. . . I didn't want to come back. I was above the scene. Then I felt something pulling me back, almost saying, 'it's not your time.' There's a deep knowing we have in our spirits and I experienced that. I experienced that by checking with God as I know him and I said, 'Is it time to go? I'm ready.' I didn't get an answer. Then I came back and as I looked up my chief was just getting up from me. His mouth-to-mouth resuscitation saved my life."

Given a second chance, Johnson maintains he will live every day as if it was his last. And high on his list of priorities is the study of kung-fu.

"I'm not normal and I may never be normal," he admits. "But I'm going to keep progressing as much as I can. I'm not going to quit. I'm going to live every day to its fullest." "Kung-fu has strengthened me in a strong inner way," he says with overflowing gratitude. "It has helped my energy level a lot. I'll keep working. I'll never stop."

Strength such as this forgets how to stop.

Mark S. Brown also contributed to this article.

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