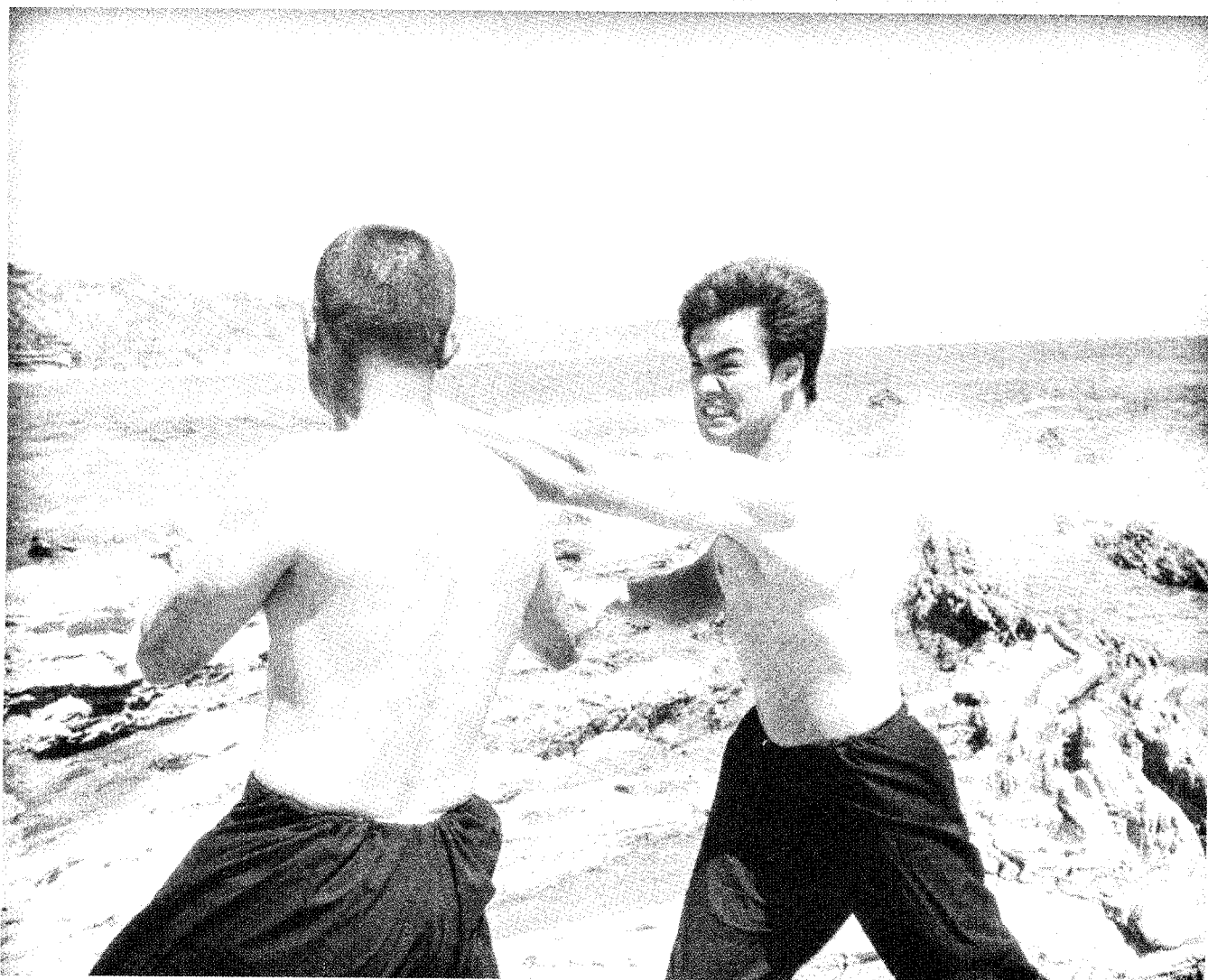


# JKD AND THE PROFESSOR

## AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. JERRY BEASLEY, JEET KUNE DO'S PREMIER RESEARCHER

Interview by Robert W. Young

*Over the past three decades, Jerry Beasley, Ed.D., has made a name for himself by being one of the few Americans to merge academic research methods with the martial arts. In this interview, he explains his views on the controversies and riddles that are an inseparable part of the jeet kune do phenomenon.*





*Bruce Lee—shown circa 1967 with Daniel K. Pai (left), Jhoon Rhee (second from the right) and George Dillman (right)—hobnobbed with the top martial artists of his day. No doubt they all shared a mutual respect for each other's fighting ability.*

**Black Belt:** Have you focused your research more on Bruce Lee or *jeet kune do*?

**Jerry Beasley:** My particular interest was strictly JKD as a fighting method.

**BB:** What was it about Lee and his art that captured your interest?

**Beasley:** I was very interested in his philosophy of fighting. After I read his first article, "Liberate Yourself From Classical Karate," it occurred to me that I, too, was a product of the classical mess. In the 1960s I, too, was very limited and organized and had dissected combat into a neat little package that really didn't work. After reading that article in 1971, I became interested in JKD.

**BB:** Were Lee's film fights representative of the way he really thought about combat?

**Beasley:** I think so. I've heard people say that what Bruce did in the movies was not what he taught in the school. They call it "theatrical jeet kune do." Yet if you look at everything he wrote and things he did in his home movies, you will see that it was all the same thing. He did the same kicks, the same punches, the same trapping. I think Bruce's jeet kune do is exactly what we see in his movies, exactly what we see in his books and exactly what we see in his

home movies. Using the research methods in which I was trained, I made participant observations, conducted interviews and studied films, periodicals and documents to uncover what I believed to be jeet kune do.

**BB:** Was all your research academic, or was it also physical?



*Jeet kune do was created as a means to liberate practitioners of the traditional martial arts from the limitations inherent in those arts, said Bruce Lee (right).*



*Experience and master the truth at each range of combat, Bruce Lee (top) advised.*

**Beasley:** I trained in the concepts method with various instructors. And I trained with Joe Lewis, who in my opinion is the ultimate fighter from the Lee school of martial arts. I wanted to rethink the theory of jeet kune do and answer the questions and riddles that Bruce had presented.

**BB: What answers did you find?**

**Beasley:** There were many questions: What was jeet kune do? Was it an art? Was it a system that Lee taught in the Chinatown school? Or was it a concept? I initially rejected each of those theories. I could now easily defend each one.



I sometimes refer to “original jeet kune do” as “pre-’73 jeet kune do.” On the other hand, I call his idea of “using no art as art” the “concepts method.” You flow from one art to another. You are moving from one limitation [defined by the art you use] to another limitation. If your goal becomes to flow from art to art, you must constantly evaluate the limitations imposed by the arts you select.

**BB: That sounds like a non-classical mess.**

**Beasley:** It’s like the story of the three blind men and the elephant: One feels the tusk and says, “The elephant feels like a long, smooth pole.” Another feels the tail and concludes, “The elephant is like a whip.” The last one feels the leg and says, “The elephant is like a large tree.” People have worked with jeet kune do as participants, and they say: “When I participated, I felt that jeet kune do was an actual art. Here’s how we did our back kicks and front kicks.” Another group says: “Jeet kune do is a concept. It’s flowing from one art to another. It’s covering the concept of range.” And they are 100-percent right. The researcher sees that they are limited to what they experienced. As a researcher, I took the participant observation as one view and examined both schools of thought: original art and concept. Then I looked at the literature and film footage of Bruce and started analyzing those bits of information to come up with opinions. That’s how I remained objective.

**BB: Have you always held the same opinion of JKD?**

**Beasley:** That’s an excellent question. The fact is, someone can say, “I read something you published in 1983 and you said this.” And someone else can say, “I just read an article you published in 1996 and you said that.” Each step was part of my own development. I was researching and understanding the “cause of my own ignorance,” which was based on the limitations of each school of thought. I was limited to the point of view of the conceptual school, or I was limited to the original-art school, or I was limited in trying to put the two together. Now I see no limitation. Having put the two together, there’s a kind of genesis of opinions and principles that came out of that.

**BB: How do you see JKD today?**

**Beasley:** I see it just as Bruce referred to it in the 1971 article: a way to liberate oneself from the classical arts. He said jeet kune do is not merely a style; it’s a way to gain freedom of expression. How can a person go back into the classical arts, then escape into something that’s more natural, that expresses the individual? One way is through the concept of formlessness. In my opinion, formlessness involves looking at all the possible techniques or variations of techniques and realizing that there could be any number of ways to execute a single technique. Formlessness simply means taking no form. When we study an art, we learn a particular way to perform a backfist or a side kick. As Bruce said, before I studied an art, a backfist was just a backfist. Then I studied the art to find that a

*The techniques Bruce Lee (shown on the set of *The Green Hornet*) used on screen were the same as the techniques he demonstrated in home movies and wrote about in his books, says Jerry Beasley.*

backfist reflected the limitations of the art form that I studied. And now that I've mastered the art, the technique is again just a technique. At any given time it could reflect a Japanese form, a Chinese form, etc.

**BB: Are there any other sticking points in the JKD world?**

**Beasley:** "To float in totality" is another one of those philosophical riddles that made jeet kune do so appealing. The conventional way of looking at totality is "all the ways a person can fight you." He can fight you on the ground or standing up, he can fight you at long range or short range. But that doesn't address the individual; it addresses something external to the individual. I don't think JKD should focus on the external. We must recognize that the environment could change and dictate the way a person fights.

**BB: Then what is totality?**

**Beasley:** I believe totality refers to the sum-total of all the techniques you have mastered. It's a sum-total of all the techniques you can express. To float in totality means you do not make a choice. You simply respond like an echo. An echo offers precision because it doesn't have to make that conscious choice. When you make a choice, you must recognize the limitation. Jeet kune do has no limitations; therefore, you must simply respond. An echo doesn't think about how it's going to sound; it simply responds. The jeet kune do fighter doesn't think about whether he is using the Korean way, the Thai way or the Philippine way. Rather, he is free to simply respond using no way as way.

**BB: How do you explain "using no way as way"?**

**Beasley:** It means, "no way" as the only way. No particular way becomes the way. How do you respond to a throat grab? You might use your hands to pull the person down, strike him or kick him in the groin—anything that works. If you look at an art that has structure, it will tell you exactly how to respond: You always do a low block, then a punch and a backfist. In jeet kune do, you simply respond using self-expression. Jeet kune do becomes a method of liberation based on your ability to respond in whatever manner suits the situation.

**BB: How does a person get to that level?**

**Beasley:** Jeet kune do is not something you can just go and learn; you have to experience it. It is more of a graduate course than an undergraduate course. First, you have to seek the truth in combat; that is, you have to want to find out what works.

**BB: What is truth in combat?**

**Beasley:** What we know as truth in combat comes from actual physical confrontations. You have to get in the ring and try your techniques full contact. Bruce talks about this in *Tao of Jeet Kune Do*: "Experience and master the truth at each range." That simply means you must get on the mat if you want to find out what works in grappling range. If you want to experience what works in punching range, get in the ring with a boxer. Experience it, then work on it until you master it. Once you have mastered an art, you naturally want to name it. Let's say you've mastered ground fighting so you want to call it Brazilian jujutsu. And you move on to a stand-up art like savate and master it. Then in a fight, you think, Here's my savate,

and now I'm going to my Brazilian jujutsu, and now I'm back into *kali*. It's so tempting to do, but you are still burdened by the limitations of style. You still prefer to cling to that safety mechanism called "style," as opposed to gaining the freedom that jeet kune do demands. The next step is to forget the carrier of the truth. Forget that it was Brazilian jujutsu that you used on the ground. Forget that it was good, hard-core boxing that made you good in stand-up range and then, using no way as way, "repose in the nothing."

**BB: Could you explain that expression?**

**Beasley:** "Repose in the nothing" means to simply answer the attack. A person strikes and you counter. Bruce used this kind of analogy: You take out your wallet and throw it at a person. You wouldn't ask, "What way did you use to catch it?" or "What did you use to block it?" The guy just put up his hand or moved his head. What way did he use? There was no particular way. He simply responded. Jeet kune do is using no art; it is simply responding to the situation.

**BB: Can a person apply JKD principles like that to the traditional martial arts?**

**Beasley:** Yes. When you are trained in a classical art—be it karate, *taekwondo*, kung fu or any traditional style—you have to follow certain rules and regulations regarding the way you do things. Ask a classical stylist how to throw a reverse punch and he'll spend an hour placing his hand on his hip, putting his hand in just the right position, shifting his weight correctly as he does his *kiai*—and his uniform has to look right, too. That's an art, and there's nothing wrong with being part of an art—except that in combat, an art will always have limitations. If you were to repose in the nothing, you would simply answer the attack. Using no way as way and having no limitations, you become jeet kune do. It's that simple. Or that complex.

**BB: Can instructors actually teach JKD?**

**Beasley:** Physical JKD, whether it's the concepts or original art, always becomes the JKD practitioner's attempt to limit his expression at a particular time. JKD is always going to be the method used to discover preferred skills and never the skills selected. The minute you look at a group of skills or arts and say, "JKD is this and never that," you have lost JKD. Whenever you become completely satisfied that the skills you have perfected are all you need, you have effectively discarded JKD. Like a boat you once used to cross the river, JKD becomes a valid vehicle only when it is used or experienced. It can never be stored or passed from one generation to another in the form of an art. People want to believe JKD is an art or is controlled by one teacher or group of teachers. It is not. I can show you where JKD led me, but I can never take you there. As Bruce advised, don't mistake the finger for the heavenly glory. Far too many trade the glory of experiencing JKD for membership in a club or a certificate of recognition. ✕

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*About the interviewer: Robert W. Young is the executive editor of Black Belt.*