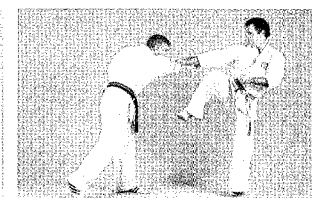


# finding liberation from CLASSICAL KARATE



# A Fresh Look at Bruce Lee's Classic Treatise

by Jerry Beasley, Ed.D

It was the summer of 1971. Richard Nixon was still in the White House. Anti-establishment peace rallies were all the rage among draft-age college students. *All in the Family* was the top-rated television series. And karate was king of the martial arts.

First introduced commercially to Americans in the mid-1950s, karate found fertile soil in the United States. Throughout the 1960s, it and its Korean twin, *taekwondo*, became the most popular martial arts in the world.

Employing the techniques of military discipline, karate spread as a method to instill confidence, develop character and build a strong body. Successful in all these areas, classical karate was triumphantly marketed as the most devastating hand-to-hand combat method ever devised.

But times soon changed. In spite of its reputation for offensive finesse, karate and taekwondo black belts were often defeated in common street fights. Some members of the martial arts community had already begun to challenge the position enjoyed by leaders of classical karate.

## Enter Bruce Lee

Many students had discovered that although the endless drills, the emphasis on "pretend fighting" (or *kata*), and the lack of an efficient contact-sparring method greatly depreciated their potential in real combat. However, few if any were willing to confront the traditional masters of karate. Then Bruce Lee burst upon the scene and quickly became the champion in the struggle to change the training methods of the classical martial arts.

In 1971 Lee authored perhaps his most important article for *Black Belt* magazine. Titled "Liberate Yourself From Classical Karate," the article introduced Lee's personal art of *jeet kune do* as a method for gaining freedom from the dictates of classical training.

Bruce Lee and jeet kune do became the antithesis of classical karate. As such, Lee was widely ridiculed by traditionalists. Lee wrote, "Man, the living, creating individual, is always more important than any established style." He believed that the classical styles—indeed, any style—caused the individual to react in terms of what *should be*, rather than to the reality of what *is*. In other words, Lee believed that mastering a style required from the student an emphasis on acting, thinking and performing like the style's creator. To learn the *shotokan* style of karate, for example, one must perform like the master of that style. In the process of acting like the creator of the style, individual freedom is lost.

A style teaches the performer to react with a choreographed response. Combat, which is spontaneous and unrehearsed, requires the individual to act not in a controlled fashion, but with freedom of expression. Of his art, Lee said, "I am interested in its effect of liberation when JKD is used as a mirror for self-examination."

Lee's treatise on JKD may well have been discarded had it not been for his success as a kung fu film star. His legendary

performances in *Enter the Dragon* and other martial arts movies resulted in continued attention to Lee and his art. When he died of undetermined causes in 1973, he was hardly prepared for death; rather, he was preparing to enjoy the celebrity status he had worked so hard to achieve.

Leaving no appointed successor to his art, Lee had closed his JKD school as early as 1971 to devote all his time to his Hong Kong-based acting career. The brilliant lesson of using JKD as means to liberate oneself from the classical martial arts was left unfinished. However, Lee did predict that upon the death of a martial arts master, the meaning of that person's art would be divided. And so Lee's was.

Lee wrote, "In reaction to 'the other's truth,' another martial artist or possibly a dissatisfied disciple organized an opposite approach—such as the 'soft style' versus the 'hard style,' the 'internal school' versus the 'external school,' and all these separative nonsenses." Without leadership, JKD became open to interpretation. Today we have the original school, the progressive school, the combat school, the concepts school, and so on.

Lee continued: "Soon this opposite faction also became a large organization with its own laws and patterns. A rivalry began, with each style claiming to possess the 'truth' to the exclusion of all others." As Lee himself predicted, JKD has become a battlefield with each faction competing with the others for the universally accepted diagnosis.

## JKD and Classical Karate

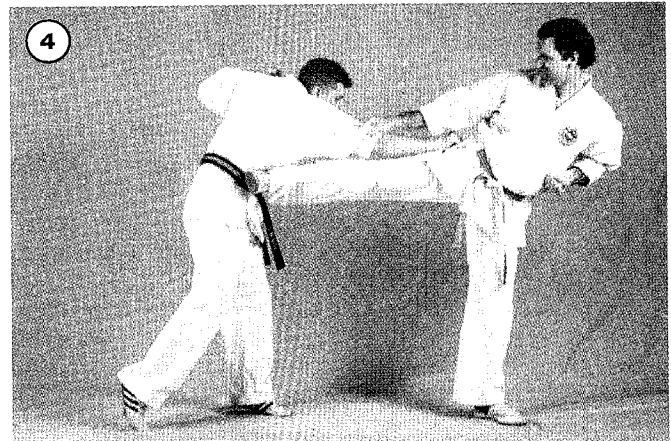
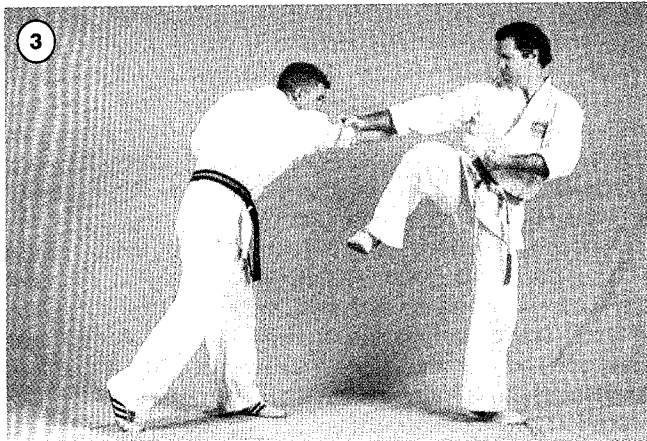
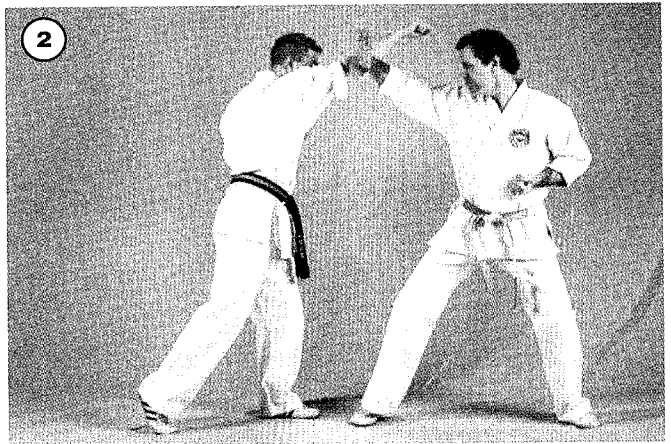
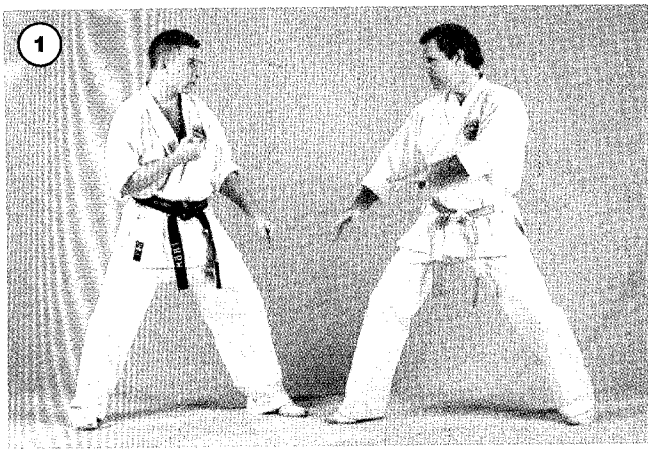
To be sure, there are many ways to interpret the meaning of jeet kune do. And since Bruce Lee left no instructions regarding how to best use his principles, we must devise our own interpretations regarding what he called the liberation from classical karate. Quite often we hear karate or taekwondo instructors tell of how they have combined several arts like Bruce Lee; therefore, they claim they teach JKD. Is it that easy? Is JKD simply an eclectic application of combined arts? Is it merely the ability to flow from one art to another?

This article will show that when liberation from classical karate is the goal, JKD cannot be thought of simply as an eclectic art or a flowing pattern of arts. Jeet kune do is liberation from all arts.

Lee wrote: "Let it be understood once and for all that I have not invented a new style, composite or modification .... On the contrary, I hope to free my comrades from bondage to styles, patterns and doctrines." By Lee's own definition, JKD is not a style but "merely a convenient name."

Jeet kune do is the process of obtaining freedom from fixed styles. Lee tells us that styles, or "formulas," can only inhibit freedom. "The product of imitation is a dependent mind," he wrote.

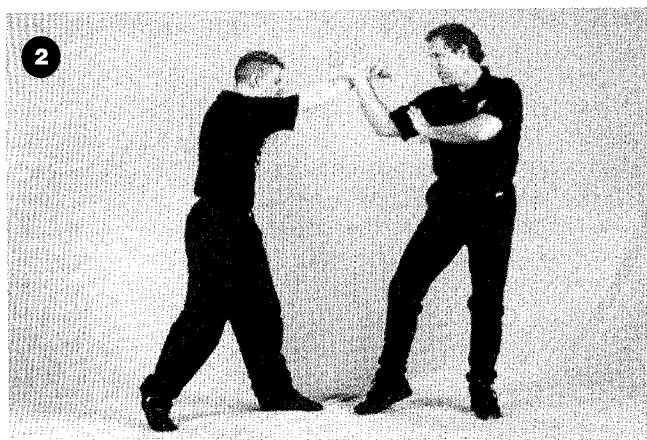
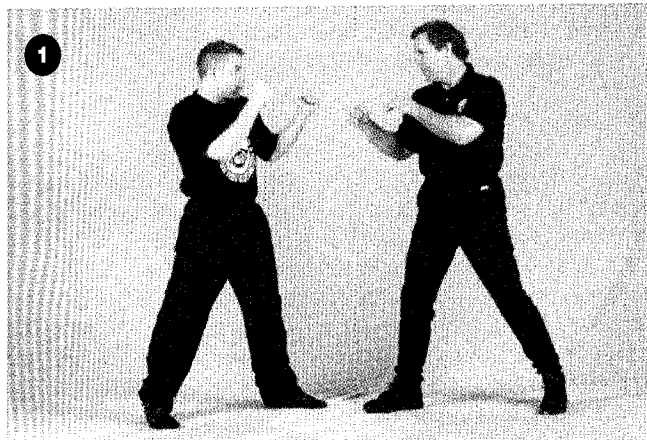
Herein lies the important part: To achieve status in a classical style, one must give up individual freedom and totally yield to the dictates of the style. It may be said of classical training that the greater the devotion and adherence to the



style, the greater the potential for status in the art. A classical art requires that we approach combat just as though we are the embodiment of the style.

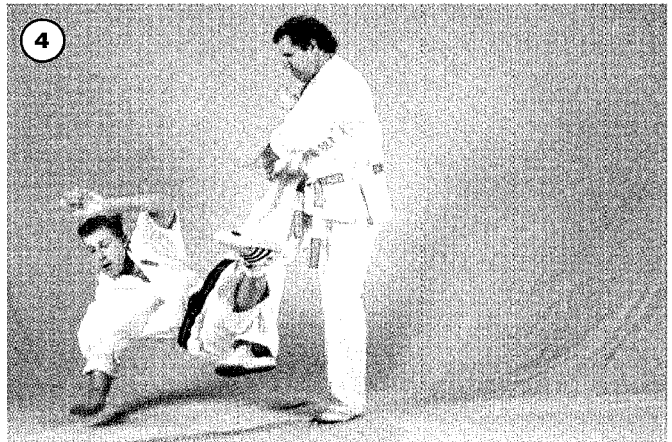
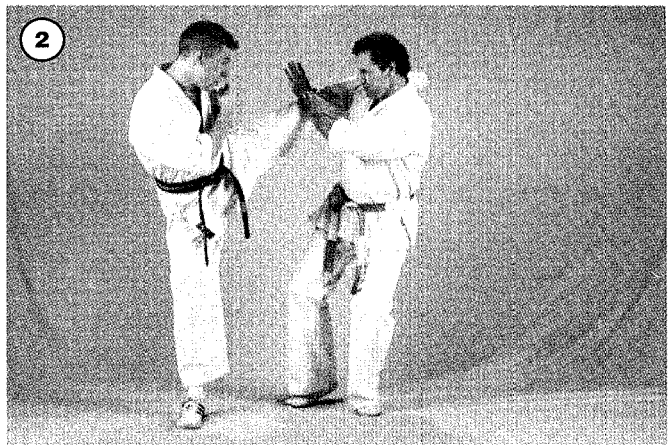
At the root of all classical arts (and classical karate in

*Against a high punch, the author (right) uses a classical karate high block (1-2), then chambers his leg (3) and shoots a side kick into the ribs (4). Some non-classical fighters believe that traditional styles place too much emphasis on having "perfect form" when replying to such an attack.*



particular) is the emphasis on learning the form, or kata. Every technique has a right way and a wrong way to be performed. A kata is a pre-planned series of techniques that are used to fight an imaginary opponent who always attacks in the same way. Classical karate teaches us not reality in combat, but the discipline and perseverance to follow one path even if it is the wrong path. Gichin Funakoshi, the founder of modern karate, said, "The ultimate aim in karate is not the

*To illustrate a jeet kune do response to a right cross, the author (right) intercepts the attack (1-2) and counters with a front kick to the groin (3). Using "no particular way as way," the JKD fighter simply reacts with the most economical counterattack.*



**Against a high roundhouse kick (1), the author (right) uses a classical karate response which consists of trapping the leg (2) and following with a sweep (3) and a takedown (4).**

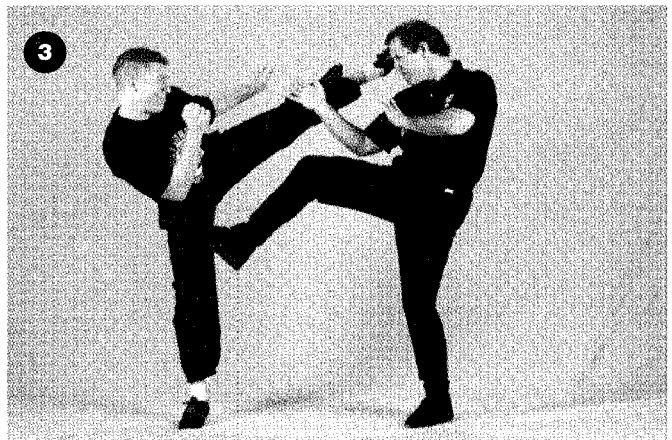
effective in developing discipline, perseverance and other intangible qualities, they are less successful at developing efficiency in uncontrolled violent combat. How, then, can we use JKD to gain liberation from classical karate? We must be

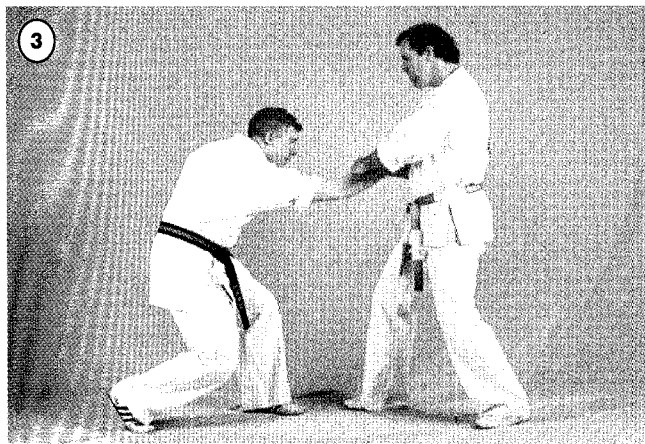
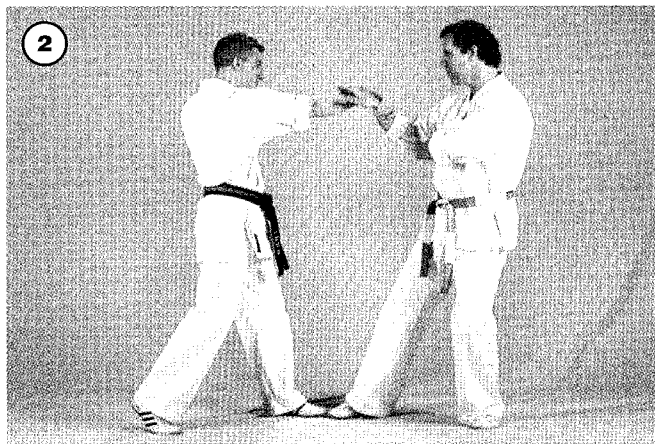
victory or defeat, but the perfection of the character."

Lee wrote: "How often are we told by different *sensei*, or 'masters,' that the martial arts are life itself? But how many of them truly understand what they are saying? Life is a constant movement, rhythmic as well as random. Life is constant change, not stagnation. Instead of choicelessly flowing with this process of change, many of these 'masters,' past and present, have built an illusion of fixed forms, rigidly subscribing to traditional concepts and techniques of the art, solidifying the ever-flowing, dissecting the totality."

While the methods used to teach classical karate are

**To illustrate a jeet kune do response to the high roundhouse kick (1-2), the author (right) intercepts his opponent's technique with his hand and blasts an inward kick into the supporting leg (3).**





prepared to subscribe to a different way of thinking. We must be able to use no technique as our technique.

### The Way of No Way

Jeet kune do's most famous riddles include "using no way as way," "to float in totality," and "formlessness." Understanding formlessness is the key to solving the puzzle of the art. Lee wrote: "Consider the subtle difference between 'having no form' and 'having no-form.' The first is ignorance; the second is transcendence."

Typically, if a person is taught a backfist in one style, it varies from the backfist that he may be taught in another style. In JKD all forms of a backfist are represented. Lee said, "While JKD utilizes all ways and means to serve its end (after all, efficiency is anything that scores), it is bound by none and is therefore free."

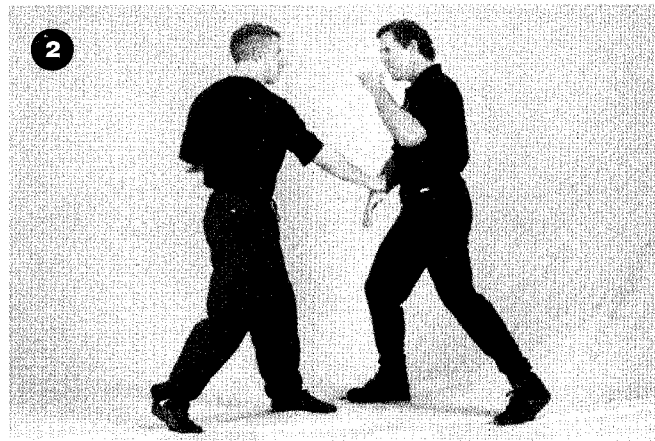
This does not mean that a person must practice the shotokan, wado-ryu, goju-ryu, shorei-ryu or any other style of the backfist. Names serve only as limitations. To be a JKD

*To show classical karate's way of defending against a wrist grab (1), the author (right) circles his trapped arm (2) and locks his opponent's wrist to force him down (3). He follows with a roundhouse kick to the head (4).*

practitioner, he must be free of the limitations of style and simply express what works at that particular moment. Styles attempt to freeze in time a single expression of a backfist. If a person agrees that sometimes a backfist works because of an increase in speed, deceptiveness or power, he understands that the technique can take no single form. Rather, it is dependent upon how it is executed.

"JKD possesses everything but is, in itself, possessed by nothing," Lee continued. That is to say, there is no single technique that defines JKD. At any one time, the "right" tech-

*As performed by the author (right), a jeet kune do response to a wrist grab (1) might be a simple punch to a weak and unprotected part of the opponent's body—in this case, the face (2-3).*



nique may resemble various arts. JKD fits in with any art that works in combat. Simply stated, given different circumstances, a person will perform his backfist differently.

A boxer learns only four techniques—the jab, cross, hook and uppercut—yet his individual expression of boxing might include several hundred ways to perform combinations of his skills. A classical stylist would be one who would spend a lifetime perfecting his writing of the numerals 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9. The classical stylist might respond, “Yes, I only have 10 numbers, but they are perfect numbers.” The classical stylist seeks perfection in his expression of his art. He is, after all, an artist.

In JKD the artist’s 10 numerals are seen as a source of infinite expressions of numbers from zero to infinity. Likewise, the backfist or any other technique is seen not as the artist’s perfect expression but as the source of infinite expressions.

JKD practitioners are supposed to have no way as way. This means that contrary to the classical stylist’s single perfect expression that cannot be altered without altering the style, JKD practitioners have no particular expression (way) as their only way. Ask a classical karate stylist how to perform the reverse punch, and he will explain in intricate detail the accepted method employed in the style. Ask a JKD fighter to perform a right cross (reverse punch), and he will gladly show one way. If that way doesn’t work, he will show you another, and another, and so on.

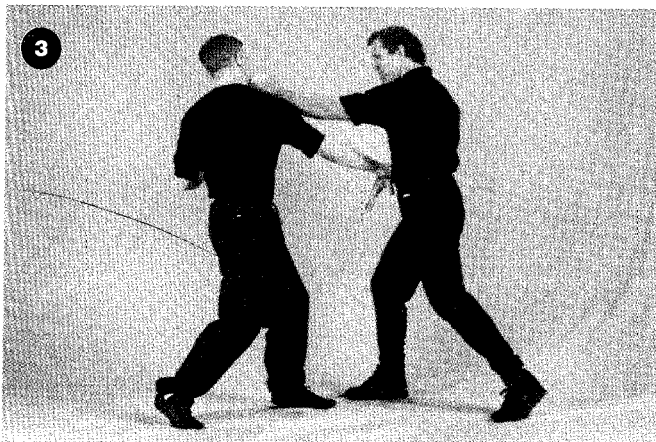
Jeet kune do uses what works. This means that the emphasis is placed on technique execution, not on meeting a pre-conceived expectation of how a technique should be performed. Just as combat is ever-changing, the JKD practitioner sometimes will be required to punch or kick from various positions with alternate methods of execution. He must adjust to environment and circumstances. The practice of reality fighting has proved that in combat, adherence to style serves only to limit the opponent’s opportunities. Having no style allows the fighter to adjust to the strategy inherent in each range of combat.

That other JKD aphorism, “to float in totality,” means that the practitioner can readily adapt his technique. He is the total expression of all the techniques he has mastered. He is JKD—using no way as (the only) way. To say that JKD uses all ways and is bound by none simply means that the practitioner can use any expression of his technique to score even if it does not fit the artist’s expectations of perfection.

### Five Conditions Leading to Liberation

Understanding and applying the following conditions will aid the martial artist in his quest for liberation.

- Economy of Motion: JKD techniques must be simple and direct. The skills that fit into the art must be nonchambering



and readily adaptable to change.

- Specificity of Exercise/Training: If a martial artist’s style is designed for self-defense, he must perform drills that are specific to that goal. Focus-pad drills and contact sparring allow the JKD practitioner to maintain endurance, aerobic/anaerobic fitness, focus, distancing, timing, sensitivity, speed, power, the ability to deal with contact, and an attitude of peace under pressure.

- Using What Works: Again, being specific to goals, one must adapt techniques (regardless of style) that will help him achieve efficiency in combat.

- Limiting the Use of Forms: Forms practice is a method of learning skills that may work for a certain person under ideal conditions. It does not teach realistic foot work or the ability to “fit in” with an opponent’s energy. It does not teach target denial or adaptability. Classical forms, Lee said, stifle creativity.

- Applying the Concept of Range: One must prepare to control the distance and function at long range (kicking, boxing), medium to close range (trapping or trapboxing), and on the ground (grappling). He who controls the distance controls the fight. Seek the truth in combat. Find out what works. Experience and master the truth at each range. Kick the kicker; box the boxer. When a martial artist can control his distance and adapt to each range, he becomes free of the limitations of classical styles.

It is essential to remember that each classical art represents a “partial truth.” Flowing from one art to another is simply changing from one limitation to another. In JKD students must be free of the need to express their own values in terms of the limitations of single or multiple styles. It is important to recall Lee’s words: “In JKD we begin not by accumulation but by ... a shedding process.” Self-discovery is far more important than imitation.

Bruce Lee once proclaimed, “I hope to free my comrades from bondage to styles, patterns and doctrines.” According to him, JKD is not a style but a process which leads to freedom of expression.

“The most pitiful sight,” Lee said, “is to see sincere students earnestly repeating those imitative drills, listening to their own screams and spiritual yells.”

### Conclusions

The reader should bear in mind that although JKD was intended to be total freedom of expression, applying its principles can be, at the very least, partially liberating. Karate and taekwondo stylists can maintain the framework of their style (as long as they realize that every style has limitations) and still enjoy elements of individual freedom. Today most progressive karate and taekwondo instructors employ JKD strategies: contact and reality sparring, an understanding of range, the principle of economy of motion, specificity of training, independent motion, five ways of attack, etc.

These independent-thinking instructors are discarding the limitations of style and preparing their students for the realities of combat as they constantly seek to discover, as Lee would say, “the cause of their ignorance.” Thanks in part to Bruce Lee, they need no longer be burdened with the limitations of the “classical mess.” For many, liberation from classical karate has already become a reality. ✕

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*About the author: Dr. Jerry Beasley is the author of two books and numerous magazine articles about jeet kune do. His new set of instructional videotapes is available from Panther Productions.*