

BY JERRY BEASLEY, ED.D.

EVOLUTION

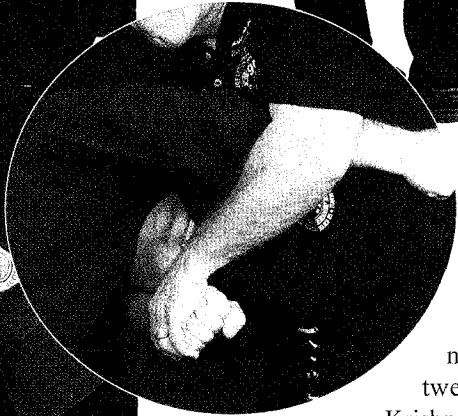
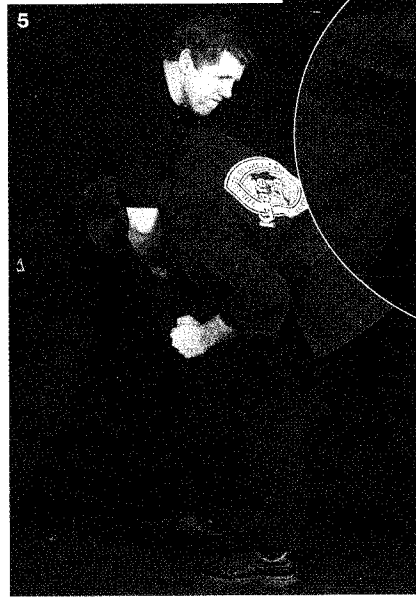
ON PHILOSOPHY, JEET KUNE DO AND MIXED MARTIAL ARTS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICK HUSTEAD

It's funny how the path to truth takes many curves.

Sitting in Dr. Grover's philosophy class in the spring of 1973, I was more concerned with job offers after graduation than with his lecture about Indian gurus and mysticism. That was the day I let the potential influence of Jiddu Krishnamurti on Bruce Lee's *jeet kune do* completely escape me.

At the time, I was very much an advocate of classical martial arts, tradition, organizational structure, discipline and all the



Close-quarters combat is best described as a struggle for position. In this sequence, author Jerry Beasley traps his opponent's forward hand (1-2) and sets up a trap for his right cross (3). The opponent attempts to pull out of the trap (4) but is overcome by the author's superior positioning, which results in a neck crank (5).

other things that Krishnamurti, an Indian spiritual leader and philosopher, opposed. That same summer, I was able to see for the first time a movie starring Lee. It was *Enter the Dragon*, and it had just been released to theaters. Years passed before I made the connection.

In 1969 my karate instructor invited me to travel with him to Washington, D.C., to compete in a national tournament featuring Joe Lewis, Chuck Norris and a guy he'd been enthused about: Bruce Lee. I didn't go because I had to work.

As I think back, I wish I'd gone to the tournament. More important, if I'd paid attention in my senior philosophy class,

I might have made the connection between Lee and Krishnamurti much sooner.

According to Linda Lee Cadwell, Lee severely injured his back in 1970. During his three-month recovery, he studied the works of Krishnamurti. As his wife pointed out in *Bruce Lee: The Man Only I Knew*, he didn't just read the books. Rather, he "underlined key passages or scribbled comments in the margins." He quickly became a convert and adapted Krishnamurti's philosophy to JKD. After 1970 Lee was a changed man, and his art reflected the change.

Music buffs might recall that Beatles lead-guitarist George Harrison had a similar indoctrination to Indian mysticism. He became a student of Hindustani *sitar* guru Sri Ravi Shankar and made significant changes to his musical compositions and playing style to reflect his new adherence to Hindu spiritual beliefs. By 1970 the Beatles had completely changed their musical direction. It seems that a similar experience happened with Lee.

Ever wonder why Lee would write

(in his personal notes edited by John Little), "I never wanted to give a name to the kinds of Chinese *gung fu* that I have invented"? Or when asked, "What is jeet kune do?" he said without hesitation, "Chinese martial art, definitely!" From 1968 to 1970, JKD was very much a Chinese martial art. "Reason for not sticking to *wing chun*," Lee wrote (personal notes), "because I sincerely feel that my style has more to offer regarding efficiency." He'd created a style he called JKD, and he had every intent to teach his style to others.

Students who studied with Lee between 1968 and 1970 learned the art of JKD. Lee's students can tell you how their classes began, how they were taught to perform a JKD kick, how they executed hand strikes and so on. Some were promoted by the Jun Fan Gung Fu Institute to various ranks in JKD based on years of training.

In stark contrast, Lee's 1971 article for *Black Belt*, titled "Liberate Yourself From Classical Karate," is immersed in

Krishnamurti philosophy. At that point, JKD had evolved from a nonclassical Chinese martial art to what Krishnamurti described in 1929 as a "pathless land." In the *Black Belt* article, Lee stated, "I have not invented a new style, composite or modification. ... There is no series of rules or classification of techniques that constitutes a distinct 'jeet kune do' method of fighting."

Apparently, Lee wrote the above passages in compliance with Krishnamurti's belief that "truth being limitless, unconditional, unapproachable, by any path whatsoever, cannot be organized; nor should any organization be formed to lead or coerce people along any particular path." (<http://www.uni-giessen.de>)

Lee was so convinced Krishnamurti held the ultimate truth that in 1971, he reversed his earlier interest in opening a chain of gung fu schools, claiming (in his personal notes), "I do not believe in schools." He went on to announce, "I have disbanded all the schools of jeet kune do because it is very easy for a

member to come in and take the agenda as 'the truth' and the schedule as 'the way.'"

After 1971 JKD became the philosophy of liberation from classical arts. The "new" JKD promoted the Krishnamurti philosophy that opposed the establishment of a JKD style. By emphasizing liberation from all styles, Lee's new JKD advocated the practice of communal systems in which no style could be dominant because no style could represent the truth. This way of thinking might have helped open the door for the development of the now-popular mixed martial arts.

Nonclassical Mixed-Style Martial Arts

It's been recorded that in 1962, a young Bruce Lee was instructed by Wally Jay to improve his classical wing chun system by incorporating other martial arts to discover where their strengths and weaknesses lay. To attack where other systems are weak requires a passionate search for answers.

The early JKD was indeed a mixed-style martial art. Lee had integrated skills from wing chun, boxing, fencing and *Shaolin* fighting in nonclassical jeet kune do and sought to develop counters to more than a dozen other arts.

In accordance with Krishnamurti thought, it follows that JKD as truth cannot be taught. You must experience JKD to understand it; hence, the JKDism, "My truth is not your truth." In *Tao of Jeet Kune Do*, Lee tells us that to experience JKD, you must first seek truth in combat. What we know as truth in combat comes from actual physical confrontation. The message was simple: Be prepared to investigate arts or fighting methods from many teachers representing many cultures.

Step two, according to Lee, was to experience and "master the truth" at each range. In other words, be prepared to box with the boxer, kick with the kicker and go to the mat with the grappler. The next step requires that we "forget the carrier of the truth." The all-too-frequent trap facing the JKD stylist is becoming so enamored with a single art that an attachment is formed. The fighter feels the

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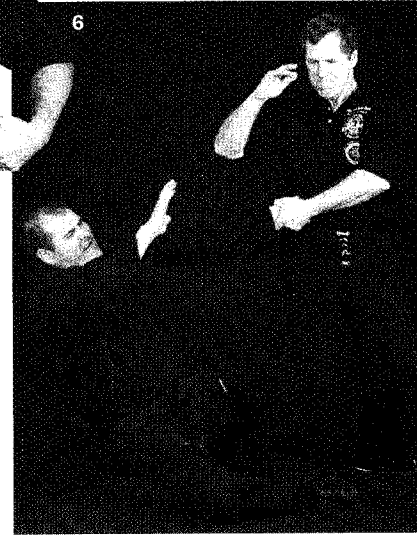
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Interceptions, redirections, elbows and takedowns are common to many arts; jeet kune do includes them all while being limited to none. Using a typical karate-style interception (1-2) and redirection (3), Jerry Beasley follows with a Thai elbow strike (4). He then off-balances opponent Rudy Corrales with a sweep (5) and effects a takedown (6).

and evaluating arts for personal use “the JKD concept.”

The Principle Is No Principle

Lee was among the first to discover that the best way to compete against other styles is to be limited to no particular style. He found that the principles others would follow could be discarded. His art, jeet kune do, was defined as the way of no way. The difference between having no form and having no-form, he found, was like comparing a beginner who lacks form to a mentor whose form is limitless.

To achieve formlessness, one must examine a number of possible technique variations to discover that there’s an

need to become identified with the art and becomes bound to the expression of that art. JKD is intended to be freedom from the bondage resulting from style identification. Remember that Lee was referring to his Krishnamurti influence here, not to his pre-1970 martial art.

Lee believed it was important to “forget the carrier of the truth” to avoid the limitations of each art. When one has spent months, even years, studying Brazilian *jujutsu* or *muay Thai*, for example, it’s indeed difficult to simply discard the art. Lee argued that to become JKD, one must discard the attachment to any art,

even JKD. JKD, he thought, was like a boat. Its usefulness is in crossing the water. Once on the other side, the boat must not be carried on one’s back.

The final step in the Krishnamurti-inspired JKD evolution is to “repose in the nothing.” An example was given of Lee tossing his wallet at a student. Lee would then ask, “What style did you use to avoid being struck by the wallet?” The response would invariably be “no way.” The student simply responded. JKD is to simply respond. In this reference, JKD is not an art but a fighting philosophy. Some have called this way of researching

unlimited number of ways to perform even a simple technique. A backfist, for example, can be viewed in the Japanese way, the Chinese way, the Korean way and so on. Lee discovered that there's no one best way to perform a skill but that

cept, or philosophy. If you use this same approach, the skills and methods you eventually choose might be very different from the skills I select. This formula might work for some, but the masses want organization. Indeed, the concepts

Evolution of Mixed Martial Arts

- **1950s** World War II veterans and Asian masters introduce the martial arts to the United States.
- **1960s** Americans mix stand-up styles in competitions.
- **1970** Joe Lewis introduces full-contact kickboxing.
- **1973** The Bruce Lee persona draws thousands to martial arts training.
- mid-1970s Americans win kickboxing/full-contact karate titles and receive recognition.
- **1980s** Top masters from around the world immigrate to the United States for economic benefits, and many arts compete for attention. People wonder, Which art is best?
- **1993** Brazilian no-holds-barred competitions are introduced in the United States, pitting art against art.
- **mid-1990s** American wrestlers, including Dan Severn and Mark Coleman, prove the efficiency of grappling arts outside the limits of the martial arts.
- **late 1990s** American athletes, including Tito Ortiz and Chuck Liddell, prove the efficiency of striking outside the limits of the martial arts.
- **2000s** The concept of art vs. art proves inefficient. Today's MMA fighter combines boxing, kickboxing, grappling, fitness and nutrition for success. —J.B.

the skill must be perfectly suited for the immediate need.

Any successful skill performance must be a personal expression, not an attempt to make a classical skill fit the circumstances. Lee's phrase "to float in totality" can be used to identify the sum of all the variations of the technique you've mastered. To float in totality means you make no conscious choice about which is the best way to respond. You simply respond like an echo, Lee would say. An echo offers precision because it doesn't have to make a conscious choice.

When you make a choice, it's because you recognize a limitation. An echo doesn't "think" about how it will respond. It simply responds. To use no way as way, you also must simply respond. How do you respond to a throat grab? You might use your hands to grapple or strike. You might kick. Anything goes! A classical art has structure. To use an art, you must make the skill fit the situation. To employ post-Krishnamurti JKD, you simply use what works.

Here again, I'm interpreting JKD/Krishnamurti-based thought as a con-

cept of character development, discipline and the *bushido* code must be bypassed so as not to interfere with individual expression.

Meanwhile, in the '60s ...

According to Lee, the "blind following of tradition" was the plague that limited the individual freedom of expression for the martial artist in pursuit of self-defense expertise. The tournament fighters of the late '60s had already discovered that for their needs—winning in open competitions—the classical or traditional approach had certain limitations.

Often, it was argued that the way a classical art is taught and performed in the *dojo* has little to do with the way the fighter expresses himself in competition or even in self-defense. In the *dojo*, rules of conduct were to be followed at all costs. On the street or the tournament floor, rules of conduct often were discarded by necessity. Toss out the rules, and you might as well toss out the traditional techniques.

Tournament fighters like Norris and Lewis already had discovered that if they pulled techniques from different arts, they'd be better prepared to face different types of competitors. Lewis combined the art of jeet kune do and principles of tournament karate to create American kickboxing in 1970. Once the competitors discovered that fighting with full contact didn't result in death, as the Asian masters had implied, the stage was set for a paradigm shift to mixed-martial arts competition.

Mixed Martial Arts

Modern-day mixed martial arts is the full expression of JKD when applied to an arena-fighting situation. The MMA competitor is provided with a boxing coach, a kick (boxing) coach, a grappling coach and an adviser for fitness and nutrition. Those five elements form the foundation of MMA. The end result is that the fighter experiences the truth in each range and has no problem "forgetting the carrier of truth."

The ideal MMA fighter is bound to no art because he identifies with no art. MMA is almost everything Lee spoke about more than three decades ago, yet it can be argued that it developed independently of the influence of Lee, Krishnamurti and JKD.

The practice of cage fighting had been popular in Brazil for decades. The Gracies introduced the mixed-style format in the United States in 1993 with no prior knowledge of Lee's research and innovation. Their concept was to compare one fighting system to another. The idea that one style would prove superior held true for the first year.

As soon as American wrestlers like Dan Severn and Mark Coleman, who introduced the "ground and pound" method, entered the competitions, the general approach to training changed. The wrestlers were experienced athletes. They needed only to add striking, kicking and submissions skills to develop a well-rounded style.

Quickly, the format of MMA changed from art vs. art to man vs. man. As Lee had suggested—and as MMA competition proved—the individual is

always more important than the art he expresses.

On Philosophy

When Lee was alive, most of the black belts I knew identified JKD as a full-contact, kickboxing style of kung fu. In the early '80s, I was able to take seminars in what was called the JKD concept. I was told that JKD was not an art but a concept. Yet I remember when it was, in fact, an art.

How can it be both an art and a philosophy or concept? The answer apparently has been too obvious to ascertain. JKD was, in fact, an art. It wasn't until Lee discovered Krishnamurti that he elected to distance himself from accepted martial arts methodology and pave a new path for JKD. Lee said this very thing in his 1971 *Black Belt* article.

The art of jeet kune do is a nonclassical, mixed-style martial art that has much to offer the student. The Krishnamurti-inspired JKD philosophy has been a source of confusion. As Lee proclaimed: "Only one of 10,000 can handle it. It is silly to think almost anyone can learn it." (Little) In following this path to personal liberation, Lee partially developed a model that predated contemporary MMA by perhaps 30 years. Now that we have MMA, we can, as Lee requested, discard the boat named JKD. MMA methodology can easily be applied to self-defense.

I've spent many years trying to make sense of the original-art-vs.-concept controversy. Was JKD always a concept, or are those who claim it was a valid art correct? It seems clear that prior to Lee's adoption of the way of Krishnamurti in 1970, JKD was intended to be an art. Perhaps if I'd listened to my philosophy professor that spring day in 1973, I could have solved this riddle in a more timely manner. Funny how the path to truth takes many curves. ❧

About the author: Dr. Jerry Beasley heads the martial arts program at Radford University in Radford, Virginia. In 2000 he was inducted into the Black Belt Hall of Fame as Instructor of the Year. For more information, visit <http://www.AI KIA.net>.