



Underlying Philosophy:: [Understanding JKD Part 2]

JKD is as much of an art as it is a philosophy – a way of thinking. People want to believe it is its own martial art style. Indeed for the purpose of simplicity and brevity, I have found myself on occasion telling people that Jeet Kune Do is a combination of all the arts. However, that is not the whole truth. JKD is more than a composite of many separate styles. It has a defined central theme, and core of concepts and techniques – preserving the centerline, efficiency, etc. Dan Inosanto mentions, Techniques may always be added or removed, but not in haphazard fashion, because the main purpose is the preservation of the common thread that binds it all together.

To define JKD is not an easy task. It's like trying to nail down a babbling brook. Such is the nature of JKD. How can you define the ever changing except to say, well...“It's always changing?” Larry Hartsell comments, “It is extremely difficult to write a book about JKD, since the reader may look at the book and say, ‘This is Jeet Kune Do;’ or he may turn the ideas ...into rigid laws...” All too often this is a reality, because people miss the point.

Bruce seemed to define JKD through the ancient eastern way of thinking; teaching with metaphor, analogy and allegory. He compared it to many things but most of all, acting like water in various ways. He saw water as the embodiment of the ethereal spirit of the martial arts. Water is flexible. It is transparent, and yet at other times it can hide things from sight. It can erode rocks with persistence over time, or it can flow around the tiniest pebble, or it can crash through things. It assumes the shape of its container. When water is poured into a cup it adapts and forms itself to become the shape of the cup. One can strike water and nothing happens. One could stab water and it suffers no dent, and to grasp a handful of it is impossible. He believed that any art should have these attributes. It is, allegorically speaking, the guiding principal and symbol for Jeet Kune Do.



Bruce compared the learning process to constantly filling a cup with water and then emptying it again. This thought comes from an interview where Bruce was using an allegory about a master who was trying to make a point to an arrogant visiting martial artist. This martial artist came to learn from the master, but merely wanted to push his own ideas onto the master. In the story, the master begins to fill the visitor's cup with tea, but when it became full, the master continued to pour and the tea ran out onto the table. When the visitor pointed this out, the master replied, "Until you empty your cup, you cannot get any more tea." The point is that if you are full of your own ideas, there is no room for new ones. In essence, in order to learn we must be open-minded and humble enough to know *we don't know it all*.

The philosophy of JKD, and Bruce's life experiences exemplify this. He was constantly emptying his cup and taking in new ideas. In his brief lifetime, he continued to learn from others causing him to change practices and ideas many times, and create a philosophy and martial art based on these constantly renewing ideas.

However, rather than adding to what already existed he conceptualized a process of siphoning and winnowing out. Making ideas and techniques direct. Simple. Efficient.



This is reminiscent of the Tai Chi and Wing Chun background Bruce originated from. Those arts strive towards simplicity and efficiency within the style. The highest levels of these arts are considered to be those with the least amount of effort while gaining the greatest amount of results. For instance, why block and then hit as two separate motions, when you can block and hit at the same time? – “The straightest distance between two points is a straight line,” Etc. You get the point. No pun intended.

The underlying thought in the formation of JKD was summed by Bruce as, “Take what is useful, reject what is useless, add what is specifically your own.” A martial artist must transcend the duality of ‘for’ and ‘against’ reaching that point of unity which is beyond distinction of the two. The understanding of JKD is the direct intuition of this point of unity. According to Bruce Lee, knowledge in the martial arts ultimately means knowledge of one’s self. He put it this way, “...any JKD man who says that JKD is exclusively JKD is simply not with it. He is hung up on his own self-enclosing resistance, still anchored to reactionary patterns, still trapped within limitation.”

The efficiency of any style depends on circumstances. Like life, martial arts are in a state of constant flux, arrhythmic movements and constant change. Flowing and adapting to this change is very important.

Therefore, for Bruce Lee, the intention of JKD was to free martial artists from clinging to any style, pattern, or mold. JKD is neither opposed nor unopposed to the concept of style. We can therefore say that it is outside as well as inside of all particular structures. Because JKD makes no claim to a style, some have concluded that it is neutral or indifferent to the question. Again this is incorrect because JKD is at the same time ‘this’ and ‘not this.’ Or to say it differently, it is a style unto itself and intrinsic to, and inside of, all other styles simultaneously.

Dizzying thoughts!

Bruce thought JKD should be organized in accordance with the premise that a practitioner must undergo different experiences. He strongly advocated this. It is why he never actually achieved high rank in any style or system himself. Also, Larry Harstell said, “In the final analysis JKD must be felt, not written about.” And Dan Inosanto also says, “I deeply feel that students should be taught experiences as opposed to techniques.” It’s the only way we learn, grow and advance.

It is only through these experiences that each student will ever find their way in the martial arts. The pupils are responsible ultimately for finding their own way to the truth - their own expression of their collective experiences. Sijo Lee frequently was heard saying, ‘Your truth is not my truth; my truth is not yours.’

The object lesson of JKD, is to be unbound, to be free. It possesses everything yet nothing at the same time. It calls into question everything and subjects each person to think,
to examine,
to question,
to seek.

It would seem those who understand JKD are primarily interested in its powers of liberation when JKD is used as a mirror for self-examination.