

Observing The Differences Between Stages In The Evolution Of Bruce Lee's Martial Art



One of the major reasons for forming what is now called The Bruce Lee Educational Foundation was to promote unity and comradeship between the four phases of the evolution of Bruce Lee's martial art. Unfortunately this may not always be the case. The reason may be a misunderstanding of what Bruce Lee was attempting to do with his personal evolution. Bruce was interested in constant experimentation, but it was not just experimentation for its own sake. Bruce's intense study of other martial arts, and the passionate analysis of various modern training methods were for one purpose and one purpose only, and that was to make himself a better martial artist. With this end in mind Bruce Lee used his schools as a sort of living laboratory. For example, a technique could be tested in the crucible of full contact sparring. Then an analysis could be made as to its efficiency.

The yearly JFJDK seminar can give participants a chance to experience all four eras of Bruce's martial art. As James Demile said, during an interview about the late and great Ed Hart who was Bruce's second student, he was glad that people got to see all four stages of Bruce's development as it was important to see how A became B, and B became C, and finally C became D. If you were at the Seattle seminar it was obvious that there are vast differences in the way the four eras approach Bruce Lee's martial art. I think that James DeMile said it best during his portion of the third seminar in Seattle Washington. Referring to the differences he observed between that of first era, which he was an important part of, and the fourth (Chinatown) era, he said that it was as if we had different teachers. At first glance it does look like the first era and the last are two totally different martial arts with the only thing in common is that they were taught by the same person, Bruce Lee. But if we look at a brief history of Bruce Lee's martial art growth we can see that instead looking at it as four separate arts, we should look at it as merely stages in one extraordinary man's desire to become the greatest martial artist in the world.

It must be remembered that when Bruce Lee came to the U.S. in 1959 he was only 18 years old. His main martial art was wing chun, which he had studied since the age of 13. His first student was Jesse Glover who went to Edison High School in Seattle with him. Through Jesse Bruce started training his second student, Ed Hart. Later he started teaching James Demile and then Taki Kimura. At that time Bruce Lee mainly taught a modified version of wing chun with some techniques from other gung fu systems. After about a year, Bruce, tired of being a bus boy at Ruby Chow's restaurant, opened a school with Taki as his assistant instructor. Jesse Glover, Ed Hart and James Demile, not wanting to start all over, dropped out.

In 1962 Bruce started teaching James Lee and Alan Jo. In 1963 he moved his family to Oakland, leaving the Seattle school in Taki Kimura's capable hands. In Oakland Bruce started a process of shedding some of his old techniques and adding some new elements to his personal martial art. He added a major emphasis on physical conditioning. Bruce also added Western boxing footwork to add mobility to his art, and

Western boxing punching to add variety and angles to his punching reparatory. At this time Jun Fan Gung Fu, which is what Bruce Lee called his art, consisted of wing chun trapping and straight punches with four corner simultaneous blocking and hitting, a mixture of Northern and Southern Chinese kicking techniques with angle punching and footwork from boxing.

In 1964 Bruce made his move to Los Angeles to co-star in the Green Hornet television show, and left James Lee in charge of the Oakland school. While in Los Angeles, Bruce made many trips to both Oakland and Seattle to work with James and Taki.

In 1967 Bruce opened the Chinatown school with Dan Inosanto as the head instructor. At this time Bruce started adding fencing theory to his martial art. His front hand finger jab was used in a similar way to a Western fencing foil. He adapted fencing attacks into the five ways of attack. But most important of all he took the most efficient defensive technique, which is to intercept your opponent's attack with a stop hit. Bruce Lee felt that being able to stop hit is so important that he named his art Jeet Kune Do which means "the way of the intercepting fist".

With all of the above in mind, how should someone from let's say the Taki era look at a technique from the Chinatown era which seems to contradict the way Bruce taught them to do it? First of all we must get over the concept of what is right and wrong. It is my opinion that techniques from all the eras have value and are in their own way correct. We must also keep in mind that the four eras were not totally separate as they flowed from one to another. Having studied with various students of Bruce Lee from the Chinatown era, I can state unequivocally that there are even variances in the way Bruce taught them a particular technique. A careful study of Bruce's notes from the Chinatown era shows that while he seemed to teach the same things to different people, he made sure they worked on what would be better for their body type. It is clear from working with different Chinatown students that Bruce Lee tailored his instruction to the individual so that they would do what worked best for them. This can be a small difference punching with a diagonal fist instead of a vertical fist, or a large difference as the stop kick with its most common follow-up. He seemed to teach people of smaller stature to do a shin-knee side kick followed by a finger jab. For people of larger stature, like Bob Bremer, for whom it would be more efficient to crash the line, he taught a leg obstruction followed by a snapping diagonal punch. In the above case neither technique is right or wrong. They're just different.

One thing I know for sure is that Bruce Lee was not looking for an inferior way to do something. The idea that a technique from the Chinatown era is inferior to a technique from an earlier era would be opposite of all we know about Bruce Lee. After all he was audacious enough to write in a magazine article an invitation to anyone reading it to drop by the Chinatown school and full contact spar. Bob Bremer told me that more than one person showed up to spar, watched the training for a while, then changed their mind and left.

One example of a change between Bruce Lee's first era and the Chinatown school is the straight blast. Bruce told Bob Bremer that there are really two straight blasts. He told Bob to use the wing chun shoulder square blast when your opponent is right in your face to get him off of you and stun him. This gives you the proper distance for the one-inch penetration-snapping punch. Once you get the proper distance you finish your opponent off with a straight blast that uses the weight of your body by throwing your shoulders into

the punches as well as your entire body. This is what Bruce Lee would call a non-crispy attack which can also use boxing hook punches as well as straight line punches. But this should only be used after your opponent is injured and would be unable to counter attack effectively. An example of this can be seen in a video taken in Bruce Lee's backyard where he is punching the heavy bag with heavy hooks. He, of course would never have attacked someone with this method unless it was safe to do so. If you want to see this type of straight blast in action look at Jack Dempsey attacking Jess Willard in their title fight. I know Bruce Lee watched it.

I feel that all of Bruce Lee's students should make an effort to learn as much as possible, or at least experience, the techniques and drills of all the phases of Bruce Lee's martial arts. We should try to understand why Bruce threw away what he did; why he changed certain things; why he added certain things. We need to know, for example, if his not focusing on the wooden dummy in Chinatown was because he had already got the value out of it, or if he found a training method that he felt was more productive. We can't know only guess.

If by some miracle Bruce Lee could come back for a short visit, I would ask him, "Sifu, of all the techniques you learned, of all the drills you did, and of all the exercises you went through, which ones were the most important? Which ones do you feel were a total waste of time? And which ones were essential for turning you in the great martial artist you became? Although we cannot know the answer, I feel that students from all the phases of Bruce Lee's life should get together in the spirit of mutual cooperation and love for the legacy that Bruce Lee left us and try to the best of our ability to answer these questions. I know that we would all become better martial artists and teachers if we could do this.

After all we can't really know what JKD would look like if Bruce Lee were still around to look into the most efficient ways to use the human body for combat. Probably a student of Bruce's would look at what we were doing in 1973 and say that it looks as if we had different teachers. What we need to do is look at the core curriculum and use it as a guide into our own investigation into the most efficient way to use the human body for combat. I feel that by sticking to Bruce Lee's principles of combat while at the same time learning and developing our own JKD we will honor Bruce's memory in a way that he would approve of.



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