

Is Your Kenpo Real? (Part II):
Chinese Kenpo
("Tracy Kenpo", Tracy Variants, numerous pre-1980's Parker
curriculum)
vs.
American Kenpo
("AK", "EPAK", "Parker Kenpo" & numerous
variations/alterations/incarnations defined after Mr. Parker's passing)

This has been one of the longest-running and counter-productive debates in the modern era of our art. Driven by politics and personalities more than principles, it has also been the ugliest (and probably the most unnecessary) of debates. Thankfully, in recent years, senior practitioners on both sides of the issue have started to set aside their personal differences to work toward the overall advancement of the art. Occasions such as GOE I and GOE II and similar events have gone a long way in beginning to mend the rift that has existed for so long in the Kenpo community. It is now time for those of us who are juniors in the Kenpo community to continue what the seniors have started and end the feud that has only served to weaken our status as America's premier martial art!

To that end, this article will examine the REAL differences between the two major divisions of Mr. Parker's art. It will also investigate the reasons for those differences and why the matter of whether you practice "Chinese" or "American" Kenpo is not in and of itself the defining factor in whether or not your Kenpo is "real."

"American Kenpo is less than 10% of the original Kenpo."

This quote has been used by numerous practitioners on both sides to argue the various merits/deficiencies of either subsystem. It is probably the single-most misleading statement ever uttered by any member of our system. Why? Because it has been misinterpreted and misused over and over to continue an argument which should have ended years ago and which never had much real merit. Let me state this very clearly (here comes the part that some people aren't going to like, so pay attention): "Chinese" and "American" Kenpo are NOT different arts, they are different curriculum that lead to different expressions of the same base art.

To truly understand this, one must first realize from where Mr. Parker drew his inspiration and his genius. First, he drew from the wisdom of those who were his seniors in knowledge and experience in the martial arts. Second, and even more importantly, he spent immeasurable amounts of time in continued, repeated physical practice of the Kenpo techniques themselves. It was this intimate knowledge of the techniques that was the primary source of his insight. For, while the techniques themselves do not constitute the end all and be of what is Kenpo, they are the vehicles by which the principles, concepts and theories of the art are ingrained in the practitioner.

Someone once said, "a true martial art is like an onion." Throughout his life, Mr. Parker continued to peel back layers of this onion to reveal more and more of the beauty of Kenpo. But "revealing" is not the same as "inventing" or "creating." Regardless of which incarnation of

the art was being taught, the major wellspring of Mr. Parker's Kenpo was the original techniques. And all of the principles and concepts (with one or two notable exceptions) were always present in the techniques at some level.

If Chinese and American Kenpo truly operated on different principles and theories, then it would be logical to assume that those differences would be reflected in the techniques of their respective curriculum. A comparison

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of the two major curriculum (Tracy and American 24) clearly shows this is not the case, and quickly dispels the myth that it is the techniques (and, therefore, the general combat theory) that separate the two divisions of the art.

So what then, was Mr. Parker referring to when he gave the "10%" analogy? He was referring to a difference in teaching method and in teaching attitude. It was a change from a traditional, technique-driven curriculum to a modern, concept-driven curriculum. The question then becomes "Why would Mr. Parker change his curriculum and teaching method?" After all, Mr. Parker himself came from a very traditional martial arts background, and traditional training methods had produced some of the fiercest, most talented martial artists of that generation. And throughout his life, Mr. Parker retained certain very traditional attitudes. So why did he see a need to change? Two reasons: competition and a desire to cut the learning curve. His primary competition would come in the form of the Tracy brothers (on the traditional/classical side) and Bruce Lee (on the modern/conceptual side).

First of all, whether you like the Tracys or you hate them, if you think that they're the best things to happen to Kenpo or evil incarnate, you can't deny that they know how to market their product. They spread their version of the art farther and faster than anyone else did - and the version they spread was based on a traditional training model. Both Mr. Parker and the Tracys were making their respective livings teaching Kenpo full-time and competing for the same pool of students. No one, including Mr. Parker, was going to out-Tracy the Tracys. If both schools were to survive, they would have to differentiate. While much has been made of this in the past, it was not, however, the main reason for the shift in Mr. Parker's methods.

Enter Bruce Lee. Bruce Lee disregarded traditional training methods and ideology. He rejected pre-arranged techniques and kata. He rejected the tradition of secretiveness, exclusiveness and formality that had previously defined the Chinese martial arts. Instead he emphasized basic skills and strategies proven in freestyle, full-contact sparring, borrowing from whatever system or style that "worked." He also fostered an open exchange of ideas and information between the student and the teacher. And the American public ate it up. If Ed Parker was the first to apply Western logic and scientific method to Eastern martial arts, then Bruce Lee was the first to infuse the Eastern martial arts with a big dose of good-old American "attitude." The writing was on the wall, and Ed Parker didn't fail to see it.

Part I of this article pointed out that Mr. Parker was both a product of his times, and a man very much ahead of his time. In no instance is this more evident than in the creation of American Kenpo. The advent of Bruce Lee's Jeet Kune Do signaled a change in the attitude of the American martial artist. This new breed of practitioner didn't want

ritualized respect or a program which required 5-10 years (or more) to attain proficiency. They also wanted a martial art that was highly personalized. The "fast-food" era was just around the corner, and there would be no turning back. The cycle had turned and Mr. Parker knew he would have to adjust, or be left behind.

Now, Mr. Parker faced a real dilemma. He had spent years building his legitimacy and credibility in the traditional martial arts community. He didn't want to lose that. He also knew that the overwhelming popularity of the new "formless" martial arts would eventually stabilize at a level that would peacefully coexist with the traditional arts. However, the new philosophy they brought (techniques that worked NOW and the freedom for the student to define his art for himself) would change the face of American martial arts forever. Mr. Parker needed to address these attitudes without alienating the rest of the traditional martial arts community. And he needed to do so in a way that would carve out a unique niche for his American Kenpo and set it apart from both his earlier, traditional art and the newly emerging non-classical arts, such as JKD.

To accomplish this goal, Mr. Parker would create a hybrid philosophy and design a unique curriculum that took advantage of the strengths of both schools of thought. Mr. Parker would keep the techniques and katas that carried the legitimacy of a traditional system. However, he would streamline these techniques to only those representing the most common attacks. In place of the material he removed from the system, Mr. Parker would institute a set of concepts that (in theory) would allow the student to become self-corrective and self-adaptive.

So, the biggest difference in the two major subdivisions of the art is in the sheer number of techniques (or, more correctly, variations upon techniques) and the framework in which those techniques are presented, not in the underlying principles or theories of combat. It is these differences which define the strengths and weaknesses of each subsystem.

Strengths of the Traditional (Chinese) Training Model

1) Number of Techniques. The larger number of techniques in the traditional model translates into a larger number of possible combat scenarios and variables addressed during training. They also provide a great deal of physical practice that is meant to ingrain specific response patterns within the student. Many of the techniques and variations represent different ways of applying the same response pattern to different attacks. Therefore, once a student has found the response pattern(s) his body is most comfortable with, the student can tailor that pattern to deal with a wide variety of possible defense scenarios. Also, the traditional training model does not address the "what if" phase in the same way as a conceptual teaching model does. Rather, "what if" scenarios are answered with physical illustrations - techniques representing a possible answer and a model for further exploration.

2) Primary transmission of information is through direct physical experience with the techniques. If one is trying to achieve physical proficiency in combat, the benefit here is readily visible. Proficiency in any physical activity is achieved primarily through the practice of that physical activity. For example, if one wishes to become a proficient trumpeter, one must spend time practicing the physical

rudiments of the trumpet (notes, scales, arpeggios, etc.). If a baseball player wants to improve his batting average, he spends time in the batting cage. (and so on...)

3) Primary responsibility for discovery rests upon the student. In order to achieve "higher" levels of proficiency and expression in the art, the student must "peel back the onion" on his own. One does this by following the same path that Mr. Parker himself took, by seeking the wisdom of seniors and spending time in physical practice of the techniques. While this isn't necessarily the fastest path to mastery, the insights gained through this process generally occur in-line with the effort and maturity of the individual student. As such, the student's level of physical application either exceeds or mirrors his conceptual understanding of the art.

Weaknesses of the Traditional Training Model

1) Number of Techniques. The larger number of techniques in the traditional training model can lead to confusion for many students. The seemingly endless number of techniques and variations can at times seem overwhelming. And while there is a ~~method~~ method to the madness, it is not always readily apparent, especially at lower levels of proficiency. Students who haven't made the connection between the various techniques are in real danger of becoming discouraged and "burning out." Students who have drawn the connection between various techniques must likewise avoid becoming complacent or bored with the program.

2) Primary transmission of information is through physical practice of the techniques. While this method of training can produce great fighters, those fighters don't necessarily understand why they are great fighters. While knowing "why" a technique works isn't necessarily important if your only concern is self-defense, it is extremely important if you are an instructor. It is also helpful if one wishes to realize more advanced applications of the art.

3) Primary responsibility for discovery lies with the student. Unfortunately, many students simply won't make the effort. So, the number of high-level practitioners will be a relatively small percentage of overall students. However, those that do make the effort are easily recognized.

Strengths of the Conceptual Training Model

1) Number of Techniques. The smaller number of techniques in the conceptual training model helps eliminate a possible source of confusion. Also, by studying fewer techniques, the student (arguably) learns each technique (and, hopefully, the associated principles and concepts) "better."

2) Physical Techniques are accompanied with Conceptual Explanations. The "why" is taught alongside the "how." By assigning clear intent and purpose to the physical movements, the student should, in theory, become self-correcting and physical proficiency should be obtained sooner.

3) Primary Responsibility for Discovery Lies with the Instructor. Principles and concepts are presented openly and up front in their relation to specific techniques. This can save the student years of time spent searching for these relationships himself. In theory, more students will progress to higher levels within the art.

Weaknesses of the Conceptual Training Model

1) Number of Techniques. The smaller number of techniques used in the conceptual model means that fewer scenarios/variables are directly addressed. Whenever techniques are abandoned, one runs the risk of also losing the information tied to those techniques. This, in turn, places a great deal of emphasis on the "what if" phase of the conceptual model. An individual's success under this model is, therefore, directly correlated to the degree of success with which the "what if" phase is addressed and is highly variable based on both the effort and emphasis put forth by the student and instructor and by his own instructor's proficiency and limitations. This can also lead to students looking for information that was never missing from the traditional model, but which the conceptual model sacrificed in favor of "streamlining" the learning process.

2) Teaching the "Why" along with the "How." Mostly, this is a good thing. However, what must be understood is that, because Kenpo is essentially a physical art, proficiency **MUST** come through physical practice. NO amount of conceptual knowledge replaces time spent on the mat. And the student training under the conceptual model must take care not to confuse conceptual knowledge and understanding with physical proficiency, as often one's conceptual knowledge under this model with outstrip his physical ability.

3) Giving the Student too Much Knowledge. The danger here is the same as not giving the student enough knowledge. The student never reaches higher levels of capability. Not because he doesn't know (or doesn't bother) to look for it (as might be the case with the traditional-model student), but because he assumes he already has all the answers.

However, when taught and practiced correctly, either method (traditional or conceptual) can lead a student to proficiency. Neither method is necessarily more "real" than the other, but each method is certainly more appropriate to some students than to others. How then, does a student decide which method of instruction to follow? First, one must know what his particular learning style is. Not all students are conceptual learners. In fact, most students are not. That is why the conceptual approach to martial arts instruction has never surpassed the traditional training method approach used by most martial arts systems. However, someone who is a conceptual learner or who already has a strong physical understanding of movement (someone who already has a strong traditional martial arts background or a strong background in another physical art such as gymnastics or dance) can benefit greatly from a conceptual training model.

Whichever training method you are involved with, practice it honestly and earnestly and you are already halfway to ensuring that your Kenpo will indeed be "real."

Salute,

Stephen D. Howard

Part III of this article will examine those specific attributes that should be present in any Kenpo system, regardless of curriculum or teaching model, which wants to be considered valid ("real") Kenpo.

