

Is Your Kenpo Real? Part III: Attributes

Parts I and II of this article dealt with the history and development of the two major teaching models most often utilized in modern kenpo. Part III will address those qualities that, regardless of curriculum or training regimen, should be embodied in a well-developed kenpo program. Please note that Part III, even more so than the previous installments of this article, will reflect the personal opinion of the author himself. That being said, it is not an opinion arrived at lightly, but only after consultation with various seniors from differing branches of the art and thousands of hours spent on the mat both as a student and an instructor.

Things You Must Have

There are certain qualities in their training that all good martial artists possess. In addition, there are certain aspects that any student wishing to have “real” kenpo should pursue. Chief among these are: proper stance and basics, proper progression, a knowledge base which provides the necessary depth to develop effective response patterns and attention to kenpo’s dual fighting philosophy.

Strong Basics:

At the most basic level, kenpo techniques are merely chains of individual movements either performed simultaneously, or strung together in sequence. Just as a chain is only as strong as its weakest link, a kenpo technique is only as effective as the weakest basic movement in that technique. It is a logical fallacy to believe that any number of multiple strikes will compensate for an ineffective strike.

Ex: Five Swords—if the initial strike (the inward block) is ineffective, the defender is either A) eating the right punch or B) defending against a second attack, most likely the left punch.

Solid Stances:

Without solid stances, you’re only working at half-power. When the upper and lower body aren’t coordinated, you aren’t operating at peak proficiency. You not only sacrifice power, you also expose yourself to any number of unbalancing techniques. Without power and balance, it is impossible for your strikes to be effective.

Ex: Five Swords—Student attempts to stop attacker’s right punch with a right inward block, but fails to step into a proper stance. One possible result is that the student in question, having thrown his hardest inward block, may actually “bounce” off of the punch—oftentimes with enough force to send himself to the ground. If the student manages to remain on his feet (usually by stepping back with the lead foot), he has most likely exposed himself to a follow-up attack from the opponent’s left side: namely, the left step-thru front thrust kick or left cross. With a solid stance, even if the student had

had to “eat” the initial punch, he would have been in a much better position to continue defending or counterattacking.

Proper Progression:

“Speed Kills.”

One thing that invariably garners attention whenever a skilled practitioner is performing kenpo techniques is the incredible speed of his execution. Understandably, many students become overly enamored of this speed. Seeking to become too fast too soon, those same students often develop habits that actually prevent them from reaching their maximum speed potential.

*“Form First, Proceed with Power, Seal with Speed” or
“First, Form; Second, Speed—Punctuate with Power.”*

The two slogans above illustrate the order of development which a student’s training should emphasize. While certain seniors may disagree upon whether speed supersedes power or vice versa; in the author’s experience, proper execution of technique is always given the first consideration. Why? Because speed and power are natural byproducts of proper form. Proper form minimizes wasted motion, thereby increasing speed, and incorporates efficient body mechanics to maximize power generation. There are no shortcuts; efficient motion is only achieved through proper form. Sacrificing form for quick gains in speed or power eventually limits the student’s progress. One more slogan: “No Sloppy Karate!”

Depth of Knowledge:

Part II of this article discussed the respective strengths and weaknesses of both a concept-driven curriculum and a technique-driven curriculum. Either, when used properly, can lead a practitioner to a reasonable level of proficiency, but both have their own traps which must be avoided. It is entirely possible to have too many techniques in a curriculum. When this occurs, the student is so overwhelmed by the volume of information that comprehension (and thus internalization and proficiency) becomes impossible. The practitioner spends so much time learning different response patterns that he never becomes comfortable with actually utilizing any of them. Conversely, having too few techniques can be just as dangerous, if not more so. In this case, the practitioner may be very comfortable with a particular response pattern, but may not have the breath of experience necessary to utilize that pattern in situations outside of its “ideal” application. Worse yet, for situations wherein the favored response pattern is not applicable, he may be left with no response at all!

Additionally, because kenpo is a physical activity, proficiency simply cannot be acquired without an adequate amount of physical practice. Learning kenpo can be likened to learning to play a piano. The student can learn all the music theory he desires, and while this will help to improve his comprehension, one cannot expect him to perform on the

instrument unless the student has spent a sufficient amount of time actually running scales, chords, arpeggios, etc. Since kenpo techniques are the vehicles through which the arts principles are physically ingrained into the student's response mechanisms, the student cannot be expected to effectively employ kenpo principles in self-defense unless he has spent a reasonable amount of time practicing and adequate number and variety of kenpo techniques. While no one needs 600 different techniques responding to a right step-in punch, the individual practitioner will probably still want more than one. An instructor developing a well-rounded program may want considerably more.

So how does one go about determining what is too many and what is too few techniques? History can be of some assistance. Many of those now considered "seniors" in the kenpo community—men like Chuck Sullivan, Dave Hebler, Al Tracy and others--were trained under a 40 or 32 technique per belt "pre-conceptual" curriculum. Many of these seniors are among the most knowledgeable and physically capable practitioners in the kenpo community. Obviously, this was not too much information for them to absorb or apply. The 24 technique per belt, conceptual model has also produced some extraordinarily talented instructors, and is well-represented by men like Larry Tatum and the Flores brothers. Additionally, some have claimed that Mr. Parker eventually intended to move to a 16 technique per belt conceptual curriculum. Mr. Huk Planas and Dr. Chapel are just two prominent kenpo seniors who have been able to develop a 16 base curriculum which produces exceptional results among their students. So, with proficient instruction and proper motivation, it would seem that a well-designed 16 base curriculum would be more than adequate to provide the information and practice necessary for the average student to achieve a respectable level of proficiency.

Another tool one has in examining the adequacy of a curriculum is Mr. Parker's Web of Knowledge. Mr. Parker divided the attacks he felt should be addressed in his curriculum into eight categories: Grabs and Tackles, Pushes, Punches, Kicks, Holds and Hugs, Chokes and Locks, Weapons and Multiple Attacks. Regardless of whether one follows a concept-based curriculum or a technique-driven curriculum, or agrees or disagrees with Mr. Parker's categorization, the Web of Knowledge can provide a useful starting point for evaluating a particular kenpo curriculum. Programs which do not contain enough techniques to adequately explore these categories must be suspect. For example, using the categories derived from the Web of Knowledge, and assuming a seven-belt program to 1st degree black (Yellow to Black, inclusive, but with no gradation within kyu-level belts) with each category addressed only once per belt, obtaining a 1st degree black belt would require learning fifty-six techniques. This is hardly an overwhelming number. In fact, it is considerably fewer techniques than most instructors are currently using.

Is it possible to achieve proficiency using fewer categories and techniques? Depending on the proficiency of your instructor and your method of training—possibly. It is true that Mr. Parker was continually streamlining the art. But there was never any indication that Mr. Parker ever intended to abandon techniques all together. He was not creating Jeet Kune Do. Mr. Parker understood that even a conceptual art benefited from having certain concrete examples to illustrate the art's principles and serve as starting-points for further exploration. That being said, a certain number of examples (techniques) would be

necessary to adequately illustrate these principle without sacrificing clarity or comprehension. And while that number may vary from individual to individual, it is not impossible to set a reasonable standard. Indeed, in regards to a teaching model, it may well be preferable to err on the side of “too much” than “too little.” It is true in business and economics, and it is true in kenpo, that too much streamlining can actually lead to inefficiency. While there is something to be said about removing redundancy in a curriculum, one must remember that any time one removes something from the system, one risks eliminating something which might have proved useful.

To carry our previous example forward: five swords is a highly versatile technique and readily adaptable to any number of different attacks. However, it is not particularly useful against a rear bear-hug. And while it can be used effectively against a wrist grab or a two-hand rear choke, it may not be the most practical or efficient response to those situations. And this doesn't even begin to address the concerns of a student who just might not be comfortable with the five swords technique.

Kenpo's Dual Fighting Philosophy

Much has been made of Mr. Parker's efforts to increase the degree of Chinese influence in his art. So much so, that many practitioners overlook the other influences in the art—particularly with regard to the Okinawan/Japanese concept of “one strike, one kill.” One possible reason for this might be that many practitioners view the application of these philosophies as an “either/or” choice, not realizing that Mr. Parker went to great lengths to ensure that these two predominant fighting strategies could be employed simultaneously. The misinterpretation of this dual philosophy tends to produce a highly predictable result: the practitioner runs through his techniques like a 4-cylinder car taking off from a dead stop on a cold winter morning. He begins with considerably less power and speed than he is capable of generating and then “revs up” throughout the technique so that the final strike is the only strike in the technique which is delivered at full speed and full power. More experienced practitioners can minimize the variance in the amount of speed and power between the first and last strike of the technique somewhat, but years of incorrect practice have still ingrained a habit wherein their attention during execution is on completing the technique to the final strike. As such, it is still only this final strike which is delivered with proper intent and focus. It is exactly this type of execution (unfortunately all too common) which has earned kenpo the derogatory nickname of “slap art” amongst practitioners of other martial arts.

For example, it is not uncommon to see practitioners who, when practicing the technique “Five Swords”, fail to develop any real power or focus until executing the uppercut (notably, the final strike in the “kata” [Long 2] version of the technique, and the natural “break” in rhythm of the standard technique). This author had even attended a seminar of a high-ranking senior in the art who still had his students “floating” through the technique until they reached the palm heel strike—the third movement in the series. Is it realistic for anyone to train responding with two ineffectual strikes with the hopes that the third (or fourth, fifth... so on) will be effective? In the case of Five Swords, it has already been noted that failing to adequately employ the initial block may be enough to nullify

the rest of the technique. But, assuming that you survive with only a half-hearted block and sword-hand... what then? Have you struck with enough power to create the opening for the palm-heel strike? Have you inflicted enough damage or disrupted your opponent's balance enough to prevent a secondary attack? In the real world... probably not. And while not every technique will illustrate this marriage of philosophies as well as Five Swords does—certain techniques definitely favor one or the other—it is the mindset prevalent in Five Swords which exemplifies the proper attitude to adopt when executing kenpo techniques. Not every strike can be a kill, but every strike can count. There are no “minor” strikes and we do not throw techniques simply to occupy space and time until we get to the strike we like.

Further Considerations

In addition to those things which one must have, there are also things one must do, things one must avoid and things one must know in order to make his kenpo real. The things one must do are thus: one must have a variety of training methods at one's disposal, which should include a contact component. Part of that contact component should include drills against prearranged attacks to develop specific skill sets and another part of that contact component should address unknown attacks to develop spontaneous reaction. Also, one must avoid the traps of over-sophistication and over-intellectualization. Finally, one must know his own limitations and the limitations of his particular program so that he may adjust his training accordingly.

Things You Must Do

As has been previously noted, kenpo, as a physical art, requires a physical component be present in any valid training program. As a contact art, it likewise requires that occasional contact occur during training. While it might be possible (at least theoretically) for a person to learn to swim without ever getting into the water, the strength and limit of his ability would be highly questionable. Likewise, the ability of any kenpo practitioner without a well-established background in kenpo technique would also be questionable. Moreover, as a performance art, it is imperative that the practice of kenpo incorporates the same components required of the successful practice of any performance art. Namely, one must include drills that isolate specific skill sets and one must also include drills which as closely as possible simulate the environment of actual performance.

Look at the way a boxer trains. He uses a variety of different training methods to effectively develop the skills he needs to perform in the ring. Some of the methods involve no contact or bear little resemblance to the final performance, but they are nonetheless highly effective in producing the desired results. You will never see a boxer punch his opponent the way he practices punching a speed-bag. However, speed-bag training is useful in developing hand-eye coordination, rhythm and reaction time. Shadowboxing involves no contact whatsoever, but does help a boxer work on natural movement and striking combinations. Heavy-bag and focus mitt work allow a boxer to strike a target without being struck in return—hardly realistic training from the

pragmatist's point of view—yet such work helps the boxer to develop power and proper timing. Finally, a boxer will spar live opponents. Sparring is not the same as an actual boxing match; contact is usually (slightly) lighter, there are fewer rounds or shorter rounds, longer rest periods and more protective equipment is used. However, sparring present the opportunity for the boxer to practice against a resisting opponent and develop spontaneous reactions to unknown attacks. While not exactly the same as a prize fight, sparring presents a close, relatively safe approximation that serves as an effective bridge between practice and performance for the competitive boxer.

A good kenpo program should likewise make use of a variety of training methods to develop effective response skills. And there should be both an arranged contact and spontaneous contact component to ones training. Solo forms and technique practice help develop proper execution, flow and personal awareness. Arranged contact drills such as technique lines and tournament-style sparring help develop situational recognition and the ability to adapt to different opponents. Finally, non-competition style sparring drills, such as continuous sparring, multiple-opponent sparring, empty-hand vs. weapons sparring and drills such as the iron circle and the gauntlet help develop spontaneous reaction.

Things to Avoid

The Trap of Over-Sophistication

Not every kenpo program makes use of Mr. Parker's rearrangement concept. That is perhaps just as well. While prefixing, suffixing, inserting, reordering and grafting can be invaluable tools in learning to effectively respond and adapt to his opponent, they are only tools. Like any tools, they have their proper usage. However, employ any of these tools incorrectly or unnecessarily, and the practitioner actually creates more work for himself. The applications of most kenpo seniors actually become progressively simpler, rather than becoming increasingly sophisticated.

Case in point; when asked to respond to a two-hand lapel grab in a group workout class, the responses were as follows: the orange belt responded with Twin Kimono (Kimono Grab), the blue belt responded with Destructive Twins (Two-Headed Serpent) and the brown belt responded with a very explosive extension of Twin Kimono (Attacking Panther). Finally, it was the senior instructor's turn to respond to the attack, at which point the instructor calmly reached up and stuck his thumb in his opponent's eye.

Case 2: Five Swords (American Version) is generally taught as a six-strike (including the initial block) technique. Using prefixing, inserting and suffixing it is possible to double or even triple that number of strikes. Example: meet the initial punch with a rear knife-hand block to wrist/right vertical thrust punch to face combination (strikes 1 & 2); right hand returns with downward raking hammer-fist to opponent's right bicep (strike 3); insert left four-finger eye poke and left oblique kick (strikes 4 & 5); left foot steps back into neutral bow with the right outward knife-hand to opponent's neck (strike 6); right hand claw rips down opponent's collar bone as left hand palm-heel strike to chin (strikes

7 & 8); Left hand claw down face with right looping middle-knuckle fist to solar plexus (strikes 9 & 10); left foot moves up the circle as right hand returns with looping back-knuckle strike to opponent's gut (strike 11); Left palm-heel to opponent's left jaw hinge returning with raking claw across opponent's face (strikes 12 & 13); right knife-hand to back of opponent's neck (strike 14); both hands twist neck (strike 15); right hand chops bridge of nose with right kick to nearest available target (strikes 16 & 17). While the aforementioned series of strikes is possible (at least in theory), in actual practice it is horribly convoluted and cumbersome. More than that, it's simply unnecessary and represents an extreme example of over-sophistication.

Case 3: Crossing Talon. Confronted with a cross-body wrist grab, three students respond thusly: athletic male, 6'+ and 200+lbs performs "Crossing Talon" ala Long 3—strike into arm bar, outward elbow to head, downward elbow to spine (3 strikes); smaller male, 5'8" and 165lbs performs same technique but adds the finishing knee strike to the face (4 strikes); female, 5'6" and 135lbs also performs "Crossing Talon", but utilizes all of the strikes common in the American version of the technique—arm bar, outward elbow, palm heel, eye rake, downward elbow, palm heel, knee smash—and exits with a rear kick (8 strikes). Here is an example of appropriate sophistication. Each practitioner uses whichever strikes are necessary to insure the desired outcome without resorting to superfluous strikes.

Over-Intellectualization

The trap of over-intellectualization closely follows that of over-sophistication. It is the penchant of the armchair warriors and internet grandmasters. Without doubt, kenpo is a very logical and well-designed system and a good understanding of its basic concepts and principles can greatly enhance one's ability to execute effectively. The difficulty comes when practitioners become so wrapped up in the analysis of the art that they can no longer demonstrate the concepts they are espousing. Conceptual knowledge is only as useful as its practical application. In other words, don't just talk about it—do it! Don't talk the talk before you've learned to walk the walk.

Know Your Limitations.

Not just your personal limitations, but the limitations of your instructor and your curriculum as well. There is no substitute for either youth or experience. If you're fifty years old, chances are there are things you could do at eighteen that you just can't do anymore. If you're young, understand that there are some things (like proficiency in the art) you can only acquire through experience. Understand that if you attend a commercial kenpo school, the curriculum was designed to serve the mass population. As such, it may not be completely suited to your individual needs. Your instructor may or may not be able to provide additional instruction and insight necessary to make kenpo functional for you depending on his own individual knowledge and experience.

First, understand your own limitations. Physical and or mental limitations may require that you adapt or abandon certain techniques or strategies. Hey, we all work with what

we were given. Also, understand what kind of practitioner you are. Are you a hobbyist, a part-time professional or a career martial artist? Hobbyists make up the majority of all kenpo practitioners and are the bread-n-butter of any commercial school. Their level of enthusiasm and dedication varies widely from individual to individual. Often, “real” kenpo is not a priority for the hobbyist. That does not mean that the hobbyist isn’t a good student or practitioner or any less capable of performing “real” kenpo than any other practitioner, and they should be given every opportunity to do so. The part-time professional usually is interested in having “real” kenpo. They tend to be the senior students and assistant instructors. They seem to live at the studio, even though they make their living at more mundane jobs. They are the backbone of any school... they motivate the hobbyists and allow the head instructor to keep his sanity. The career martial artist has devoted his life to the art. Often, it is even his sole means of support. He is expected to have “real” kenpo. Be forewarned, however; there are lots of pretenders to the ranks of part-time professional and career martial artist. Are you “real”, or just pretending?

Understand the limits of your instructor and your curriculum. Too often, practitioners who cannot make the art work for them claim there must be a shortcoming in the art. More often the deficiency is more correctly assignable to themselves, their instructor or their curriculum. Often times, what the student assumes is “missing” in the art is not missing at all, but was just removed from their particular curriculum. This is all too common in many of the commercial schools. In seeking to “streamline” their instruction, instructors remove anything too difficult or time-consuming, effectively shortchanging the student on knowledge. A prime example of this is limb destruction technique. Some time ago I was given a video produced by a fairly well-known kenpo instructor which emphasized training drills for limb destructions. This instructor began his video by stating that kenpo did not utilize limb destructions, but that he had learned these from his kali and jeet kune do instructors and integrated them into his program. Although this instructor was sincere, enthusiastic and by all account very competent, his assertion that kenpo did not contain limb destructions was dead wrong. The difficulty is that they had been removed from the curriculum he had studied and his seniors hadn’t shown him these destructions. His curriculum did not include techniques like Striking Fang, Drawbridge, Retreating Phoenix or Stopping the Staff. All of the limb destructions on his tape are contained in these techniques; techniques which have been in continuous use in certain Chinese kenpo branches since before 1968—almost 25 years before his tape was released!

Sometimes, the information is present in the curriculum, but the individual instructor doesn’t have the knowledge or experience to effectively teach the information. This is becoming all too frequent as American Kenpo becomes the “new TKD”, with every new 1st degree leaving their studio and instructor to open their own shop. Lacking in experience and real knowledge, these instructors can’t teach what they don’t know. Finally, sometimes the student just doesn’t recognize what he actually possesses. This doesn’t mean the student isn’t intelligent or doesn’t “get it,” it just means that he may not have accumulated enough experience to provide the insight into the techniques which is required to draw out certain areas of knowledge.