

Is Your Kenpo Real?

Part I: Ed Parker

By Stephen D. Howard

If you've been involved in kenpo for any length of time, you've probably questioned the differences among the various subsystems within the art. You may have even wondered whether or not your own school is teaching "real" kenpo. After all, with so many "masters" claiming to have exclusive knowledge of the "true secrets" of the art, how can one be sure that the system he or she is practicing is a valid one? What even constitutes "valid" kenpo?

While this site cannot and will not address each individual school or system, there are certain criteria that the serious practitioner should seek to ensure that he or she is receiving competent instruction in a system that can deservedly call itself "kenpo." However, before discussing those criteria, some background knowledge is necessary. In order to understand what constitutes "real" kenpo, one must first understand who Ed Parker was and what he did—and, more importantly, did not do—for martial arts.

Ed Parker has been called a genius, a visionary—even a prophet. And however deserving some of those titles may be, it is unfortunate that, in their sincere devotion to Mr. Parker, many kenpo instructors assign attributes and accomplishments to Mr. Parker that simply aren't true. These instructors (who, unfortunately, constitute the majority of kenpo instructors) hold Mr. Parker in the same mythological position as the JKD community (and the general western martial arts community, for that matter) hold Bruce Lee. And, indeed, there are many parallels between the two; including the propensity of their respective followers to overstate their accomplishments to extent that it detracts from their true contributions to the martial arts.

One thing must be understood first and foremost before any analysis of the art itself can begin, and that is simply this: ED PARKER DID NOT DISCOVER, CREATE OR INVENT ANYTHING—except the American (Parker) Kenpo Karate System! Let me go over that again for those that can't believe what they just read. Ed Parker did not create a new martial art; kenpo had a long history prior to Ed Parker. He did not invent

any new combat theories; combat had existed and been analyzed for thousands of years before Ed Parker ever donned his first gi. And he did not discover any principles of motion; all of his principles of motion had been known and utilized in numerous combat systems for hundreds of years.

By now, most of the instructors referred to previously have already labeled me a heretic and stopped reading. That's too bad; it's that same narrow world view which created all the political divisions in our art and which allows so many unscrupulous instructors to blatantly lie to their students. And it's that same blind attitude which has marred Ed Parker's true legacy. That legacy is every bit as important and impactful as the mythological legacy that some of his followers have attempted to manufacture for him; for Ed Parker (along with some of his more notable contemporaries) was a true pioneer in that fact that he incorporated Eastern combat methods into Western culture by framing those methods in logical, scientific terms.

This accomplishment cannot be overstated. Much of the terminology first advanced by Mr. Parker is common usage among all martial arts and artists today. Being able to clearly define and discuss the principles of eastern combat methodology opened up new doors of opportunity for countless martial arts students and instructors. The mysterious, once made understandable, becomes obtainable. Principles such as economy of motion and point of origin, etc had been understood and employed by systems such as wing chun, bai mei and jow gar long before Ed Parker "defined" them. However, the culture and history surrounding many of these arts often prevented instructors from openly discussing or disseminating these principles. Once Ed Parker made this acceptable, all martial arts benefited.

Also, Ed Parker, much like Bruce Lee, was very adept at "absorbing what was useful." He knew a good thing when he saw it, even if it was originally from an entirely different art, and incorporated those "good things" into his personal system. He was also good at giving people what they needed, and also what they wanted. By that I mean that Mr. Parker was an expert at adapting the techniques of the system to fit the individual practitioner. A larger, stronger student was taught the techniques differently than a smaller, but more agile student would be—but each variation would be effective for the respective student. On the other had, Mr. Parker was equally adept at modifying his entire system to conform to the prevalent cultural climate of the time. When Mr. Parker began teaching in the late 1950's and the majority of his students were male, ex-military men, he taught a more traditional, disciplined and technique-driven system. Why? That's what these men were used to, it was what they expected and what they wanted. When Bruce Lee and his JKD became the

new craze, Ed Parker modified his system to reflect the concept-driven approach utilized by Lee. It worked because, again, it was what the people wanted and because many students now came in with outside backgrounds and expertise in other arts.

Which brings me to my last point: Ed Parker was a consummate salesman. Don't believe that? He got Elvis to put the IKKA crest on one of his guitars. And he convinced generations of instructors and students alike that the shift from a technique-driven curriculum to a concept-based curriculum was an "evolution" (it wasn't) as opposed to just a shift in teaching methods in response to the public demand. For, despite what so many instructors would want you to believe, the principles of motion and combat were ALWAYS present in the techniques (after all, that's where Mr. Parker "discovered" them in the first place)—it was only the method of instruction that changed.

So Mr. Parker was not an inventor. He didn't invent kenpo or concept-based martial arts. In many ways, his art was as reactive as it was proactive. Mr. Parker was very much a product of his times, but he was also influential in shaping the times that consequently shaped him. His drive to make martial arts accessible and understandable to everyone led to a new way of explaining and discussing the martial arts. His methods of tailoring the art to the individual meant that every student could now experience his own personal "truth" in combat—and paved the way for other innovators like Bruce Lee. In the end, whatever else Ed Parker was (or wasn't), he was a great martial artist and instructor.

In Part II of this article, we will discuss the differences (or lack thereof) between, Chinese (a.k.a. Tracy) kenpo and American (Parker) kenpo.

Salute.