

## What Flavor is Your Kenpo?

*One hears it all the time at open tournaments: “What art do you practice?” “What style are you from?” Even at events geared strictly toward kenpo practitioners, one has to deal with: “Parker or Tracy’s?” “Chinese or American?” “EPAK or other?” Perhaps what we should really be asking is, “What Flavor is YOUR Kenpo?”*

Chances are, it’s just plain old vanilla.

Now, before anyone gets their gi in a bind, let me say emphatically: THERE’S ABSOLUTELY NOTHING WRONG WITH VANILLA. After all, it’s overwhelmingly America’s number one favorite ice cream. And in the Kenpo world, the overwhelming number of artists practice—and quite happily so—some form of “vanilla” kenpo.

So, just what is “Vanilla Kenpo?” Vanilla Kenpo is a term used to refer collectively to any number of permutations of the art wherein success is achieved by bludgeoning the opponent into submission through the use of successive concussive strikes and accumulative blunt force trauma. Techniques are brutal and designed to either maim or kill an opponent. Although technical proficiency is stressed in practice, in actual application cultivation of the proper mindset is more essential to successful resolution of a conflict. The student must be willing and able to respond with a level of brutality equal to or exceeding that of the original attack. Most commercial schools, regardless of their lineage or curriculum, fall into this category.

Realistically, it is only logical that most commercial schools would teach some form of Vanilla Kenpo, as a majority of the students that walk through any studio door will not make Kenpo a lifetime endeavor. In fact, there are plenty of students in any school whose entire experience with Kenpo is limited to the few hours a week they spend in the dojo. As such, sophistication must give way to margin of error and return on investment. Vanilla Kenpo does this extremely well. Techniques are built around very natural patterns of movement and concentrate on large target areas capable of producing dramatic injury. Strategies are introduced within a striking framework, requiring less intensive hands-on instruction or personal effort than would be necessary in a grappling or weapons-based context. For the casual practitioner, Vanilla Kenpo gives you plenty of bang for your buck.

So what, then, does Vanilla Kenpo offer the more serious student? For one thing, Vanilla Kenpo can be a devastatingly effective stand-alone self-defense system. Secondly, it can provide a solid foundation for further development—whether within the art of kenpo, or in some other art. Generally speaking, reaching higher levels of expression in kenpo aren’t possible without the practitioner first having developed a firm grasp and execution of theory and technique on the primary (vanilla) level. This should not be taken to mean, however, that Vanilla Kenpo assumes a lack of knowledge or skill. It is quite possible to practice Vanilla Kenpo with an extremely high degree of sophistication. Many professional martial artists and long-time kenpo students do. Vanilla Kenpo refers not so

much to a defined set of skills as to a particular fighting philosophy and how techniques and strategies are developed around that philosophy. So long as the focus of a practitioner's strategies and techniques is to "give back better than you get," he is still doing vanilla kenpo. So, the student with only a few weeks experience and the senior with thirty years of practice under his belt can both be doing vanilla kenpo—the senior is just (hopefully) doing it at a much more sophisticated level.

Vanilla Kenpo offers the professional a system which can be readily adapted to the needs of the individual practitioner. This flexibility combined with ease of instruction make Vanilla Kenpo easily marketed to the mass public. We might all love to watch Monkey Style and Drunkard's Fist kung-fu. In a large city, someone teaching such systems might even attract enough students to earn a very nice living—but they probably won't pay the bills in Mayberry. This is why so many instructors, regardless of what "flavor" they might practice or perform at individually, teach some form of vanilla kenpo as their mainstream program.

So how then does one go about beginning to alter the "flavor" of his kenpo? Should one even want to? If you are only a hobbyist, there may not be any need. Vanilla kenpo may more than suit your needs and will probably give you more than enough material to work on. For the more serious practitioner, altering the flavor of one's kenpo tends to happen naturally and begins with developing a high degree of precision in the execution of technique. This can take a lifetime. However, it is this type of precision in execution which allows the individual practitioner to begin to control the amount of injury inflicted upon his opponent. Although victory is still accomplished primarily through accumulative blunt force trauma, greater precision allows the practitioner to achieve victory sooner and often with less overall injury. Operation at this level is still essentially vanilla kenpo, but it is a much richer and full-bodied vanilla than that of the majority of practitioners. The practitioner has begun to move beyond simply being "effective" in combat and begins to become "efficient" at combat.

Once one has developed a certain degree of precision and proficiency, he may begin to explore how to mitigate the amount of damage necessary to bring a conflict to a successful resolution. One can decrease the degree of injury inflicted upon an opponent any number of ways, including (but not limited to) changing the weapons used for striking in a technique or changing the targets selected in a technique. This requires a higher degree of skill, since one is purposely avoiding executing the most devastating counterattacks. This is like building a sundae, where the base is still vanilla ice cream, but the flavor is enhanced by the toppings that have been selected.

Finally, to really change the flavor of one's kenpo, it is not enough just to avoid the most damaging strikes; one must seek to contain the conflict while minimizing injury as much as possible. Often, this may require that aspects of the art which had previously been completely overshadowed by striking applications are now given preference. Performance at this level does not rely on blunt force to achieve results. Rather, the opponent is controlled through careful manipulation of the neuromuscular and skeletal systems.

Generally speaking, operation at this level only comes through a sustained period of practice after a high degree of proficiency in standard applications has already been achieved. As such, it is only very common at the level of the dedicated individual practitioner. There are, however, a very few curriculum which attempt to address and guide the practitioner to this type of execution, such as David German's TAI systems and Dr. Ron Chapel's Sub-Level 4. Interestingly, the author had even witnessed one practitioner who had eliminated almost all striking in favor of "slow pushes." The result was a very tai chi-like interpretation of kenpo technique. By bringing other aspects of the art into greater balance with the devastating hand strikes of kenpo, these practitioners develop flavors akin to Neapolitan, fudge-swirl, cherries jubilee, and the like. Always, however, some degree of vanilla is still present if the need to resort to brutality should become unavoidable.

As an illustration of some of the different "flavors" available to kenpo practitioners, consider the following responses to a left-handed lapel grab:

Defender A responds with a textbook execution of Snapping Twig—breaking his attacker's elbow, nose and jaw in the process. A fine example of Vanilla Kenpo.

Defender B responds by eliminating the initial elbow break and moving directly into a hooking pull with the right hand and a left, thrusting swordhand strike to the opponent's collarbone. He follows with a right-handed Supreme Kenpo Bitch-Slap to the left side of the opponent's face and finishes with a side-hip throw. This is a possible example of how a "Sundae Artist" might respond.

Finally, Defender C steps back with his left foot while pinning the opponent's left hand with his own left hand. Rotating the attacker's wrist counterclockwise as his left foot steps toward 3:00, the defender applies pressure to the opponent's left elbow with his right hand to secure the arm bar and force his assailant to the ground. The Vanilla-Fudge Swirl.

All of the above responses are well within the realm of probability for the experienced kenpo artist. And while certain responses may require a more highly developed sense of timing or physical ability than others, there is no mandate that the more skilled practitioner must necessarily choose the most sophisticated response. An accomplished kenpo artist is just as justified in choosing a "plain vanilla" response as he would be in choosing a "sundae" response or a "Fudge Swirl", "Neapolitan" or the like. No one flavor is any more valid than any other. It is not which method—or flavor—is better, but rather which method is better for the particular practitioner in question.

So, delight in whatever "flavor" your kenpo may be. In the end, it's not which techniques or methodologies that measure the value of the artist, but the individual character and dedication of the practitioner to the art. Until next time—make mine a double scoop of Vanilla Bean.

