ON THE THEORY AND CONCEPTS OF JEET KUNE DO


I will discuss the theory and concepts of Jeet Kune Do (JKD) by unpacking the following statement-

“Jeet June Do is not a style but a concept”.

This distinction between style and concept\(^1\) is the most important element to grasp in understanding JKD. Everything else that characterizes the philosophy of this martial art merely duplicates this distinction.

However, there is a sense in which this distinction is still too simplistic. Dan Inosanto writes,

Jeet Kune Do is neither opposed to style nor is it not opposed to style. We can say it is outside as well as inside of all particular structures. Because JKD makes no claim to being a style, some people conclude that perhaps it is being neutral or simply indifferent. Again, this is for JKD is at once “this” and not “this”\(^2\).

I plan to unpack the apparent conundrum between the two quotes given above by discussing the theory of JKD in two parts- the comprehensible parts and the incomprehensible parts. What is comprehensible about JKD are the facts that are able to be explained quickly and learnt easily. To punch or kick your opponent with your longest weapon to their closest target is a teaching that can be understood easily. It makes obvious sense without much thought. Its “truth” or correctness as a technique is self-evident. There are a lot of these practical applications that “make obvious sense” within JKD. But the incomprehensible components of JKD are facets which perhaps, a western mind might find less easy to grasp. These are the influences from eastern philosophy whereupon definitions and explanations are expressed in terms of what-is-not rather than what-is, and where teachings and sayings are couched in

\(^1\) We would do well if we initially defined what we mean by “style” and “concept”. I’ll leave it up to the reader to ponder this. Another question to think about at this stage is to ask, what is the difference if any, between JKD and a martial art that picks the best techniques of all and combines them. If there is a difference, what is that difference? If there isn’t a difference, what’s so special about JKD?

\(^2\) A point on logic. Traditional western or bivalent logic maintains that there are four possible scenarios given when two states are combined, (i.e., \(2^2 = 4\)). And so, given that the question here is whether JKD is a concept and/or a style, there are four possible answers: 1. It’s a concept but not a style. 2. It’s a style but not a concept. 3. It’s both a style and a concept, (assuming that these terms are not mutually exclusive). 4. It’s neither a style nor a concept. Lee and Inosanto, however, seem to be saying that it’s all of these possibilities. For this to be meaningful we can either adopt a different system of logic, or we could perhaps maintain that the semantic boundaries of “style” and “concept” are fuzzy in that they each have different meanings in different contexts. This adaptable way of understanding JKD anticipates the later thought in this article that it is basically a combination of Taoist thought and western pragmatism. The former being incomprehensible, the later comprehensible.
paradox, contradictions, and short pithy aphorisms like “using no way as a way and no limitation as a limitation”.

My point that these facets of JKD are more incomprehensible does not belittle them or make them worthless, but rather, they are teachings that are understood more through intuition than mere rational analysis alone. For example, a teacher may instruct her class by stating that “the only rule in my class is that there are no rules”. It would be improper pedantry for a student to reply that the teacher has contradicted herself. That would be to miss the point. An insightful and intuitive student would not be distracted by the contradiction and would glean the positive meaning immediately. Some truths are so ineffable, and unable to be explained in direct manner, that they can only be expressed as paradox. I take this teacher-student example to be indicative of an interchange between a novice martial artist brought up with a western world-view, talking to an eastern sage, - the former bewildered by the logic, the latter, patient until the intuitive logic is uncovered by the student.

THE COMPREHENSIBLE

*Eastern tradition meets western science.*

Bruce Lee’s coinage of the term “Jeet Kune Do”, (Way of the intercepting fist), is instructive for us to understand the most general theme underpinning this “martial art”. In conversation with Dan Inosanto, Lee remarked that it was better to hit an opponent in one step, (i.e., the stop-hit), rather than in the traditional two moves of block and then hit.

But the stop-hit is just a technique. What’s more important is the principle underlying the technique. The ‘block then strike’ of traditional martial arts is slow and uneconomical of movement, while the ‘stop-hit’ is fast and efficient. So the theory behind the *why* of the stop-hit reveals the nature of JKD which may be understood as a combination of Taoist thought (minimum effort for maximum gain) and western pragmatism.

Pragmatism as a domesticated philosophy is the point of view that something is true if it works or achieves its purpose. If an act or belief doesn’t do or achieve

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3 For example, early in the *Tao Of Jeet Kune Do*, Lee has titled a section “The Formless Form”. Other JKD aphorisms mirror this apparent contradiction-as in the characterization of JKD as “the art of fighting without fighting” (*film- Enter the Dragon*).

4 As the saying goes, a paradox is a truth standing on its head to attract attention. (Anonymous)

5 There is quite a presupposition here, that some Eastern philosophy is correct in maintaining that truth is ineffable or unable to be spoken about directly. That investigation is beyond the scope of this article.

6 So goes a TV commercial advertising a brand of Chinese medicine. Interesting how Yip Man had been reported to have thought that Bruce Lee was too westernised and pragmatic despite having a genetic and cultural basis in both East and West.

7 This is similar to the wisdom behind the saying that though you can easily give someone a fish to eat, it is better to teach them how and where to fish. Then they can find their own food and be self-sufficient. So a good martial art should explain why something is done and not just teach the practical side of the technique.
anything, then it’s useless— it’s “false”. In this respect JKD is not a style in so far as it is a series of particular moves that one learns off by heart. Rather, it’s an approach to fighting and self-defence. That is— only do the bare minimum which achieves your goals. Any move, strike, punch, or block in JKD should be economical, quick, expedient, ergonomic, and purpose orientated. If a punch or kick does not abide by these parameters, then it is jettisoned. For example, why spend ages learning the correct fighting stance (e.g., seventy percent of weight on the front left foot, thirty percent on the back...”) when the fighting stance that you are in is the position you are in when attacked. And if you are attacked, it’s better to get the fight over and done with than taking even a split second in making sure you have the correct stance.

Herein, is the main key to understanding JKD and this theme is frequently reiterated by Dan Inosanto in his training videos— “accept what is useful and reject what is useless (for you)”. This approach can be embodied under the notion of eclecticism— of glancing synoptically over the whole purview of a particular art form, in this case martial arts, and then choosing the best of each to form a more comprehensive and efficient system. JKD is in part, an eclectic process. Lee borrowed techniques from western boxing, fencing, wing chun, exercise physiology, the study of anatomy, et cetera. But some things were abandoned— the front stance of wing chun and the left-foot-forward of boxing were rejected for the right forward stance in JKD. If a person is right-handed, it makes sense to lead with their fastest and most coordinated weapon, which can be just as powerful when thrown in close range as from a longer distance. At the same time the person’s slower and weaker left cross builds up momentum and power by travelling further. So what is called “unorthodox” or “southpaw” in western boxing is treated as the norm for right-handed fighters in JKD.

Though I say that JKD is eclectic, it more than just eclecticism. To create a new martial art with a wing chun punch, a tae kwon do kick, a kali block and a ju-jitsu take-down, is only to form a new ‘style’, albeit pluriform, of martial art which would eventually suffer the same deficits as the classical arts from which it was borne. Jun Fan, Lee’s first development, appears to have suffered from this consequence. So instead of creating a new style of martial art, (like in Jun Fan), Lee created a new approach to martial arts, in Jeet Kune Do.
THE INCOMPREHENSIBLE

The way that can be spoken is not the real way.

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The tao which can be tao’d is not the real tao, the name that can be named is not the real name.

Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching

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The stillness in stillness is not the real stillness.

Bruce Lee, Tao of Jeet Kune Do

It is at this point where JKD can start to become incomprehensible. For in saying that JKD is more than eclecticism in martial arts, the principle focus is not just on choosing the best techniques from the best martial arts, but rather it is an expression of a particular kind of mindfulness that constantly seeks adaptability to new circumstances, changes in individual strength, flexibility and opponent. In short, if the “truth is outside of all fixed patterns”, and if eclecticism in martial arts isn’t sufficient to guarantee truth, then the only recourse is to find out what is true for me.8 (And for you to find out what is true for you). This relativises truth to the individual martial artist for her to find her own way and not for it to be imposed upon her by the particular school where she is training.

Now “truth” in this context is an ambiguous term. Here “truth” stands not so much in being in a correct relation to a body of thought, doctrine or creed, for that is just orthodoxy. Instead “truth” in this context pertains to what is real or authentic. And what’s real for you to be authentic may not be what makes another martial artist authentic in their technique.

In JKD there is a radical determination towards paradigm shifting, towards throwing out the baby with the bath water, rocking the boat, even perhaps figuratively- destroying the master.9 All this is done in order to find out and to explore what is best for you as a student of martial arts, not to find out which is the best martial art. These are two different things. The notion of progressive adaptation to new circumstances may even lead one to reject the “stop-hit” technique mentioned earlier as being superior to the “stop-then-hit” technique. Why even block at all, when you can just get out of the way and strike?

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8 For example, “the truth in combat is different for each individual…”. So again, pragmatically speaking, what is true for you is what works for you… for you to be authentic.
9 I have in mind here the refutation of the principle that a student can never be as good as the teacher. Why not?
To borrow an analogy from religion, JKD is more like Protestantism than Catholicism. Inherent in the former is the ideal of a reformation from classical structures\(^{10}\) and the abandonment of a sacred priesthood and holy lineage to St Peter where salvation is found only in communion with the Popes given by apostolic succession. The notion of teaching or truth “handed down” as if truth is imputed to the individual by the laying on of hands goes against the spirit of JKD. Therefore, it does not matter if one can’t say, “I learnt wing chun from so and so, who learnt it from Yip Man”, or, “I learnt karate from Suzuki who learnt it from Mas Oyama”, or, “I learnt Jeet Kune Do from Steve McQueen, who learnt it from Bruce Lee”. In JKD, everyone is his or her own teacher, priest and prophet.

To understand Jeet Kune Do, one ought to throw away all ideals, patterns, styles; in fact, he should throw away even the concept of what is or isn’t ideal in Jeet Kune Do. Can you look at a situation without naming it? Naming it, making it a word, causes fear.\(^{11}\)

It is interesting to note the similarities between JKD and the ancient Chinese philosophy of Taoism-

[The Tao] is spontaneous, nameless and indescribable, at once the beginning of all things and the way in which they pursue their course … It is non-being, not in the sense of nothingness but in the sense of not being any particular thing … When it is possessed by an individual thing, it becomes that thing’s character or virtue… As the way of life [Taoism] denotes simplicity, spontaneity and tranquillity.\(^{12}\)

The similarity between the JKD and Taoism is obvious especially given Lee’s use of philosophy in explaining his art.

In conclusion, by affirming that JKD is a concept and not a style, I have argued that some facts of JKD are easily learned- these are pragmatic, but some not so easily understood- these are embodied in Taoist aphorisms. The parts of it which I have called incomprehensible are basically constructed on a Taoist linguistic framework complete with its riddles and paradoxical sayings. While not wishing to undermine the paradox and to take away its impact, I have suggested that the key to understanding the wisdom behind JKD is to apply it to one’s own self and journey and in this way the apparent contradictory nature is resolved and given a personal meaning by the individual beholder.

\(^{10}\) Echoing the pretended obituary in Lee’s training room, “In memory of once a fluid man, cramped and distorted by the classical mess”.

\(^{11}\) Bruce Lee, *The Tao of Jeet Kune Do*, p.11

Moreover, the core concept of JKD is not to learn a battery of techniques but a new approach or attitude to fighting. It is understood that some JKD schools teach “JKD Concepts” implying that there are more than one. This doesn’t negate my point and instead I have chosen to discuss the one meta-concept in JKD in which all others can be derived.

To end by looking at the beginning again- at the question I posed in the first footnote- my answer is that JKD is *more* than just picking the best techniques out of all the martial arts and combining them into one. But in saying that JKD is more than this is not to say that there aren’t other martial arts with different names and labels that are qualitatively the same. Bruce Lee was right when he said that JKD is just a *name* which may cause fear. There are other possible worlds where people appear (to us) to be training in JKD, it’s just that in those worlds it’s called something different.

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