

MAKING BRUCE LEE'S NOTES WORK FOR YOU

by Chris Kent

Bruce Lee's intense thirst for knowledge and understanding was a prime factor that led to his growth and evolution as a martial artist. In his never-ending quest for personal development, Lee went to great lengths to gain insight and learning that would aid him in actualizing his full potential, drawing from all forms of combative arts, modern dance, body-building, exercise physiology, kinesiology, philosophy and psychology. And in the years before copy machines, computers and printers were part of the mainstream, Lee put pen (or sometimes pencil) to paper and recorded his thoughts, observations, and ideas on these as well as other subjects, leaving behind countless pages of written and typed notes. Many of these notes have been compiled into books over the years since his passing.

In order to get the most out of JKD it is essential to know how to make Bruce Lee's notes work for you—how to bring them to life and use them to help you achieve your fullest potential as a martial artist. Lee's notes have been likened to guideposts, or clues, that can lead an individual to their own self-expression in the martial arts. But guideposts do a person little or no good if they don't know how to read or interpret them correctly. So the first thing that needs to be understood is how to study Lee's notes. This is not as easy as it sounds. When reading Bruce Lee's notes, three intrinsic principles should guide your study. These principles may, in the beginning, require several separate readings but in time can be done concurrently. The three principles are as follows:

Understand the notes: You need to comprehend thoroughly and perceive clearly the nature of what you're reading. What are the particular writings or notes you are studying saying?

Interpret the notes: The word "interpret" in this case means, "to bring out or explain the meaning of something." In other words, what do the notes you're studying mean? In martial arts it seems that many times people immediately rush to the application stage of Lee's teachings and bypass the theoretical stage. They want to know what the technique means to them before they understand what Lee intended it to mean.

Evaluate the notes: To evaluate something means to judge or determine its worth or quality. In other words, is the given principle right or wrong for them? Is it valid or not? Unfortunately, many people tend to skip over the first two principles and jump right into evaluating Lee's notes. They judge a particular concept to be right or wrong before they understand what it says or before they interpret its meaning.

The above three intrinsic principles are, however, by themselves, inadequate. To study Bruce Lee's notes successfully and get the most out of them, a person also needs three important extrinsic aids. These aids are:

Experience: Experience is the only way to interpret and relate what has been read. A person who has little or no experience in martial arts and/or philosophy is going to be at a distinct disadvantage in understanding, interpreting, and evaluating Lee's notes. I may be able to tell you what I like or don't like about a particular painting by a master like Van Gogh, but I will not be able to interpret and evaluate the painting like a person who has and education and background in fine arts. But experience by itself is not enough. We need to research our experience. Experience that has been understood and reflected upon informs and enlightens your study.

Other Books and Writings: Books and writings that precede or advance the subject you're studying can be very significant. Very often books or notes can have greater meaning when they are read in relation to other writings. I have had the privilege of perusing the books in Bruce Lee's personal library at great length on numerous occasions. But I have also established my own library that includes books on martial arts, Western fencing, physical fitness, kinesiology, philosophy, psychology, and various other categories of interest. Studying and analyzing these books has unquestionably helped to increase my understanding of Lee's notes. Bruce Lee always approached a subject wanting to know as much as possible about it and with an open mind ready to absorb new information. If he were alive today, there's no doubt that he would avail himself of all sources of information including books, videos, films, dvds, and the internet to gain access to the most up-to-date information on whatever subject that interested him or that he was studying. And you should follow his example and do the same thing.

Live discussion: The final extrinsic aid is live discussion, which means the interaction that occurs among individuals as they pursue a particular course of action. My close friend Cass Magda and I have spent countless hours discussing JKD, sometimes amongst ourselves, and other times with other friends or students. When we discuss and debate certain issues, techniques, or philosophical attitudes relating to JKD, many times new insights emerge that might have never occurred without this type of exchange.

As important as it is to successfully research Lee's notes, however, it is equally important to know how to use them. The first step of this process is to read Lee's notes without trying to fit them into established categories. The goal here is to simply grasp the content of the material, the essence of what is being presented, and to understand it. Expect to hear new things in new ways when you read the notes at different times and don't be concerned if you don't get some things in the first reading. It might take several readings before you fully comprehend something. All of us have had the experience of reading something over and over and then, all of a sudden, understanding what it means. This "Wow, now I get it!" experience of understanding catapults you into onto a new level of growth and freedom. You might find it useful each time you read the notes to use a differently colored pen to mark certain things that stand out to you at that time. Another idea is to keep a journal or notebook handy to jot down thoughts and impressions that occur while reading.

The next step is to investigate why Lee drew a particular essence from an art or why he chose to absorb something into his own art. It's important here to recognize the

difference between absorbing and simply adding. Bruce did not add something simply for the sake of adding it. To “absorb” something means, “to take in and incorporate; to assimilate.” To “add” means to take in and unite so as to increase the number, size, etc. Ask yourself, “What is it about this particular technique that Bruce Lee felt was useful or valid to what he was doing?” Analyze it by breaking it down into its component parts and examining it to find out its interrelationship with other material in Lee’s notes.

The third step is to apply what you are studying. Theory without application means nothing. You’ve got to take the material you’re investigating onto the floor and test it. You need to see if, and how well it works under pressure and in realistic situations. Keep in mind, too, that just because you may not be able to do it or use it at that particular moment, doesn’t mean that it’s not valid or that it’s no good. If your instructor shows you how to do a spinning rear kick and then you try it and miss the target completely, don’t immediately respond with, “Oh, that’s stupid. It doesn’t work.”

The final step is evaluation, in which you judge the value of the material for a given purpose. Ask yourself, “Is this particular principle or technique valid or not? How does it relate to me? Does it have application to what I’m doing?” If, for example, the particular style of martial art you practice doesn’t believe in the use of hand immobilization attacks, then sensitivity training such as *chi sao* may have no application for you. Keep in mind, though, that just because something might not have an application for you, that doesn’t mean it won’t have an application for someone else. The following are some pitfalls you should try to avoid when studying and/or using Bruce Lee’s notes:

- Simply memorizing and regurgitating Lee’s words, ideas, etc. Anybody can repeat someone else’s words by rote. Remember, it’s not how much fixed knowledge or information you have accumulated, it’s what you can use and apply that counts.
- Taking the material in Bruce Lee’s notes to be the “Bible” of martial arts. Some people approach JKD very dogmatically and with the fundamentalist view that “If it’s not in the *Tao of JKD*, or if it’s not in Bruce’s writings, then it’s not JKD.” This is the very antithesis of Lee’s teachings. Bruce was a seeker of truth. To him, each thing he wrote down represented *a* truth, not *the* truth. No one has a monopoly on truth. There is no “one way.”
- Thinking that Bruce Lee’s notes are all there is to his way of martial arts.
- Adding your own interpretation to Bruce Lee’s material. I am not saying that you shouldn’t interpret Lee’s material. I am simply reminding you to keep things in proper context. Many times people read something with an eye towards finding support for what they themselves are doing. For example, in Lee’s notes it states, “Investigate into fighting from the ground...develop such mastery that one can fight safely from the ground.” But Lee doesn’t make a point of telling you to study any particular style of ground-fighting or martial art that includes ground-fighting. The point is to hear what Bruce Lee is saying, not what we want him to say.

- Solidifying Bruce Lee's guideposts into laws. Bruce changed his mind about publishing his notes when he came to the realization that trying to encapsulate fighting into words was like trying to capture something on paper that is alive and constantly changing. It was, he concluded, "like attempting to tie a pound of water into a manageable shape." So don't calcify what should remain alive and growing.
- Starting from a conclusion. Remember, to taste someone else's tea you must first empty your cup of preconceived ideas, notions, etc. Begin with an open mind.

Bruce Lee's notes are like an extension of Bruce himself. They describe the direction of his studies and shed light on his own process of intellectual growth and development as a martial artist. As such, they can serve as a pipeline to his way of thinking, feeling, and researching. Bruce's notes can also act as a navigational guide, like a compass, which can help direct you to where you want to be as a martial artist. If you know how to use a compass, even if the terrain changes, a road becomes blocked, or a detour arises, you can still remain on course toward your ultimate destination. In order to do that, however, you must know where it is that you want to go and whether the goal is physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual. Once you know that, then you can take all of the information in Lee's notes and consider it; debate it, turn it upside down; look at it from your own perspective; refine it to suit you; rearrange it; keep what you think will work for you; and even throw some of it out (just make sure you know why you're throwing it out). Don't allow anyone to simply hand you the truth. It cannot be done. Take an experiential attitude and find out for yourself what works for you. See Bruce Lee's notes as a literary work in progress, not as something that was finished or completed. Remember, "If you understand it and can use it, it belongs to no one; it's yours."