The Evolution of a JKD Teacher

by Chris Kent

Every creative journey begins with a problem. For me, it arrived a number of years ago in the form of the question, “How can I take the teaching of Jeet Kune Do into the twenty-first century and help it grow and flourish in the manner I believe it should?”

From the moment I began training under Dan Inosanto in 1973 he emphasized the same idea to me that his own teacher, Bruce Lee, had emphasized to him, which was, “if you’re seriously interested in something, find out about it; learn about it.” I have always had an abiding interest in the human body and physical activity, so at the same time I began studying JKD, I began educating myself more on these things. I bought and read books dealing with kinesiology, exercise physiology, sports psychology, and other related subjects. I took some college classes on certain elements.

In the mid 1990’s I became interested in the subject of neuroscience and how the human brain learns. I felt that studying it and learning about it would be an important and integral part of my growth and development as a JKD teacher. In addition, my friendship with John Little for over 16 years enabled me to step out of the mist-shrouded forests of folklore, myth and tradition with regard to strength and fitness training. The combination of the aforementioned elements has dramatically altered my perception and thinking with regard to how I believe JKD can best be taught.

The following are examples of how my approach to teaching JKD has changed and evolved in certain areas:

The Role of Genetics

Bruce Lee wrote, “My truth may not be your truth” and commented on numerous occasions that what worked for him might not work for someone else. JKD is about the cultivation of the individual. While as humans we may all be very similar in overall physiology, when it comes to genetics there are huge differences. Genetics can relate to such things as body-type, skeletal structure, muscle length, neuromuscular efficiency, etc. Genetics would also apply to an individual’s ability to commit themselves to neural development, skill training, and physical conditioning. It can also have to do with how a person is “wired” mentally and emotionally. As a teacher, you have to look at the genetic material (the student) you’re working with. When it comes to using various techniques, genetics can enter the equation. There might be a technique that one student might be able to do that another student may not have the genetic make-up to be

able to execute at the same level. Perhaps they lack the requisite size, speed or power to use it with true effectiveness. I don't tell that student, "Keep working on it until you can do it." I have them find a better way to make it work.

If you arbitrarily teach everyone to respond to an attack in the same manner, such as, "Just use a foot obstruction followed by a straight blast" well, it may work for some people but be unsuccessful for others. This doesn't mean that they shouldn't understand the use of the foot obstruction or straight blast (i.e. - in case they have to deal with an opponent attempting to use it against them). But their psychological make-up might be such that it may not be in their nature to want to close and blast someone.

Different Learning Styles

Learning comes in three forms: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic, and people often have different learning styles. Some rely primarily on one type of learning while others utilize a combination or two (i.e. - visual/kinesthetic). Visual learners need to observe and see how something is done over and over numerous times. Auditory learners require lots of verbal description and directions. Kinesthetic learners prefer to just do something over and over again, learning by a sense of body-feel (kinesthetic perception) as they go along. For this reason as a teacher you have to be able to teach one thing several different ways to ensure that what you're teaching is comprehended by each student.

Skill-Conditioning vs. Physical-Conditioning

It is essential make a clear delineation between skill conditioning and physical conditioning. Learning martial art is primarily neural. While there is obviously a certain amount of physicality involved, it's still primarily about the development of skill. Furthermore, it's about taking those skills and moving them from volition to reflex action, so that they're instantly accessible, ready and able to be used under pressure in high-energy, highly-adrenalized situations (such as a fight).

Skill conditioning is a neurological event that readies the martial artist to be able to perform a skill, technique or action, or betters the martial artist in the performance of whatever skill, technique, or action they need to do. In other words it's the mechanics. You can do it as often as you want and the more you do it the better you get at it. (Remember, we are talking about "purposeful practice," not just random, hit-or-miss training). But it isn't a demanding physiological event.

Physical conditioning, on the other hand, is demanding muscular metabolic work that stimulates the body, or prompts the body to produce physiological change. This includes such things as strengthening the muscles and joints of the body.

I don't try to make the student's martial art skill training physical conditioning. For instance, I don't have students do conditioning exercises that imitate or mimic movements they use when practicing JKD. Nor do I have them do things such as punching with heavier gloves or wearing weights strapped on their ankles while kicking (even though I myself promoted the use of such things when I originally co-wrote "Jun Fan/Jeet Kune Do - The Textbook.") in order to supposedly make them faster.

Another change I made is with regard to the development of what is referred to as "fatigued skill sets." If you engage in skill practice for too long you develop two different styles; a fresh style and a tired style, which involve two different pathways between your nervous system and your muscles. There was a time when I sometimes used to have my students practice a fine skill at the end of a workout, when they were very tired. I did this based on the theory that doing so would result in the students developing such things as more economical use of motion and force, as well as teaching them how to do something when they were very tired. What I found out was that they were in fact learning a "fatigued skill set" which was different than when the skill set they used when they were fresh.

Skill Specificity

Skills are always very specific to the activity that you're doing. As such, a student's training should replicate exactly or as closely as possible the situation in which the action will be used. In our case we're talking about a fight or combative situation, and the bottom line is that we can only get so close to reality. We cannot, for example, go around poking our fingers into a training partner's eye or kicking them full force in the groin or knee. If we do, not only will we not have any training partners, we will also probably end up getting sued. As the majority of us don't have someone who can create special types of dummies that we can stick our fingers into the eyes of or kick full power in the groin, our only recourse is to practice our skill training on equipment that will allow us to develop the speed, power, accuracy, etc. so that we know we could break a knee or inflict serious damage if needed. Even then though, the drills should try to replicate as closely as possible the actual event.

Training

When I look at a particular training method or drill, I examine it from the perspective of risk versus benefit ratio. Unfortunately a lot of martial artists these days are at much greater risk of being hurt in their training sessions in which they are preparing for possible combative situations than they are in actual combative situations. The idea is to train hard, but also train intelligently.

The Role of "Processing Time"

Neuroscience tells us that much of what we learn cannot be processed consciously, it happens too fast. We need time to process it. After each new

learning experience, we need time for the learning to “imprint.” (It’s been shown that new physical skills can take up to six hours to solidify and that during that time other new learning can contaminate the learning process). The “gym mentality” of cramming more content into each minute of a training session, or moving from immediately one piece of learning to the next, virtually guarantees that little will be learned or retained. It’s funny because I remember my teacher, Dan Inosanto, telling me years ago that with relation to teaching students, “If you don’t want people to get anything, flood them with material, because they won’t be able to remember it.” He was not advising me to do such a thing, simply explaining what would happen as a result. It’s important to encourage “personal processing time” after learning new material. One way of doing this is to take short breaks at certain intervals during the workout during which time students can reflect upon or discuss what they’ve just learned.

Conclusion

It has been said that Jeet Kune Do is both and ‘art’ and a ‘science.’ The same can also be said with regard to teaching JKD. It too, is an art and a science. For me, teaching JKD is about teaching the science behind the art. In the same way that JKD is not a one-size-fits-all art, there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching it either. Everyone who teaches brings something unique to the process. No two people teach exactly the same way, and no two students are alike. It’s not just about WHAT you present as a teacher, but HOW you present it. If we want or expect the art and philosophy of JKD to remain both cutting-edge and innovative, it will require teachers and instructors who are themselves, creative, cutting-edge, and innovative. I’m not talking about someone who simply goes from one art to another or who studies several arts simultaneously, but someone who is deeply involved in the whole JKD process.

As professionals, we must become engaged in systemic, action research. We need to develop new teaching strategies and utilize teaching programs that encourage the attitude of curiosity and problem-solving rather than dissuade it, and that promote the idea of self-development in each student from the moment they begin training. We need to develop assessment methods that allow us to ascertain how each student learns best.

Paul Romer, noted economist, commented, “Ideas are non-rival goods. When knowledge spreads from person to person, that knowledge isn’t diminished or worn out like material objects… The thing about ideas is that they naturally inspire new ones. When ideas are shared, the possibilities do not add up, they multiply.” We need to promote and encourage the open exchange of information and ideas amongst JKD instructors. We need to understand and utilize concepts such as “horizontal sharing” (people sharing knowledge across fields), which will allow us to bridge knowledge fields by taking ideas and approaches from one

area and applying them to different areas to problem-solve, and “conceptual blending” which will allow us to notice new connections we may have otherwise overlooked.

We have to allow for dissent and welcome debate amongst JKD instructors. When I ask for input, I don’t want to simply hear “echoes of my own voice.” I don’t want people to hew to my views and opinions.

Finally, we must remain curious, passionate learners who really want to know about the best way for our students to learn. Our thoughts can become shackled to the familiar and sometimes we need to leave behind the safety of our expertise and regain the beginner’s mind which is open to all possibilities and ready to learn, ready to accept, ready to doubt. We need to be willing to risk embarrassment or failure, ask foolish questions. Yes, we are going to make errors and mistakes along the way. But innovation comes at the boundary of disciplines and as Nancy Andreasen, a neuroscientist at the University of Iowa, commented, “If you’re at the cutting-edge, you’re going to bleed.”