

“JKD – An Art Caught in an Identity Crisis”

By Chris Kent

In January 1975, Karate Illustrated published an article written by my good friend and training partner, Gilbert Johnson, titled *“The Furious Pace of JKD – Where Has it Been? Where is it going?”* The article talked about the identity of JKD both during Bruce Lee’s life and the perpetuation of the art following his untimely passing. In the article he posed the following question -- *“If JKD changes with the personalities of each practitioner, will it eventually change altogether?”* He also wrote -- *“What JKD becomes in the future will depend on what the JKD people of today make it. Lee taught a handful of people what might be described as the most direct route to their own self-expression in the martial arts. They in turn are using similar methods to teach others.”*

In this article I’d like to take it a step further and ask the question -- *“What Has Happened to JKD?”* To be completely honest, in many places in the martial art world, the perception of JKD is not particularly great at this time. In recent years some people have commented that JKD has become or is becoming ‘irrelevant’ in today’s martial art world. Others have stated that the art is obsolete. While I disagree with both of these perspectives, it’s clear to see that over the years JKD’s image has become tarnished, and upon close inspection it’s not difficult to see why -- Jeet Kune Do is an art caught in an identity crisis.

Numerous misperceptions and distortions regarding Jeet Kune Do have been put forth over the years since the time of Bruce Lee’s passing, many of which still exist today. The following are those I consider to be the most fundamental misperceptions (I’ve written about these in-depth in other articles so I won’t go into them here):

- JKD was Bruce Lee’s “very personal expression in martial art” therefore only he could do it
- JKD cannot be taught
- JKD is simply a philosophy – a concept
- JKD is mere eclecticism – it’s about taking the ‘best’ from all different martial arts
- JKD died when Bruce Lee died
- JKD’s evolution and growth ended when Bruce Lee passed away
- JKD is simply modified Wing Chun Gung Fu
- JKD is simply MMA

This article is not about finger-pointing or playing the blame-game, both of which are a waste of time and energy and do absolutely nothing to fix the situation. The villains I am talking about that exist in the JKD world today are not so much individuals or groups, but rather such things as confusion, ambiguity, apathy, mediocrity, and lack of direction.

Before we proceed any further, we need to understand first and foremost that, regardless of what anyone may think or say, there is no universally-accepted definition of what "Jeet Kune Do" actually is. Some people define it as Bruce Lee's "personal martial expression." Others refer to it as the martial art and philosophy of Bruce Lee. Some consider it simply a concept or an idea, while others view it as a method of martial art research and investigation. Some use the name to refer to only the exact physical techniques that Bruce Lee used and taught, while others use it as an umbrella term to cover a "do-whatever-the-hell-you-want" approach to martial art training.

At one time JKD had a clear-cut and definite sense of identity. Its design, purpose and goals were specific and unambiguous (freedom from styles and systems, totality in combat, self-expression, scientific street-fighting, etc.). All of these things stemmed from Bruce Lee's vision regarding the art and the trajectory of that vision. However, somewhere along the way JKD seems to have lost that clear sense of identity. Over the years it has become blurred and in some cases completely obscured. How did this identity crisis come about? The following are some of the factors that I feel played a prominent part in it:

Lack of "Vision"

By lack of vision I am talking about a clear-cut and compelling vision regarding JKD which would serve as a catalyst to drive the art forward and give it momentum, energy, and a clear sense of direction. An example of such a vision would be something like -- "To make JKD the most innovative, cutting-edge martial art on the planet." There was no such vision concerning JKD's continued growth and development. Initially this was quite understandable because (a) nobody was expecting or ready for Bruce Lee's death and (b) no one was quite sure which direction to take with regard developing or perpetuating the art following Lee's demise. I remember how devastated Sifu Dan Inosanto was when it happened. He wasn't even sure he wanted to continue teaching JKD anymore (we should all be thankful that he decided to carry on). And in the years that followed when Dan was questioned about the direction he felt JKD should go his basic response was that he wanted JKD to "be known by many but practiced by few." While this sentiment is nice, it's not what would be called a compelling vision. This is not an indictment against Sifu Inosanto, because I firmly believe that his attitude towards the growth and development of JKD stemmed in large part from a promise he says that he made to Bruce Lee about not commercializing the art and making a lot of money off of it; a promise he steadfastly remained true. Had he wanted to, Dan Inosanto could

have become a millionaire many times over by capitalizing on his friendship and affiliation with Lee.

Fragmentation of the JKD Family

While he was alive, Bruce Lee served as an extremely strong gravitational field that held the people who were training with him tightly together. After his death that gravitational field remained strong for several years, but eventually, over time, it began to weaken, and a fragmentation of the JKD clan began to take place.

For instance, some of the senior students who had trained with Bruce and Dan Inosanto at the Los Angeles Chinatown school and then in Dan's backyard gym began turning up less and less to train after the Filipino Kali Academy was opened in Torrance, California. Eventually some of them stopped coming completely. Part of this may have been due to the normal twists and turns that take place in people's lives. However, part of it was also due to the fact that there were differing and conflicting opinions over the direction JKD should go and what should be done with the art. Some people believed the art should be shared with members of the public while others felt that it should be kept small and taught only privately in backyards or garages. Some people believed that other elements and training methodology could and should be brought into what was being taught, while others objected and firmly believed that the art was complete as is and nothing needed to or should be added.

Eventually, different factions or camps (JKD Concepts, Original JKD, and other splinter groups) came into existence. As with the world of religion, the question asked became "What JKD denomination are you?" To make matters worse, illegitimate JKD schools and instructors began popping up both in the U.S. and various other countries around the world.

It should be noted that over the years two JKD organizations were formed by the JKD clan to help sort out the situation, deal with the phony JKD groups, and hopefully bring the various legitimate groups together in some form of harmony and interaction. The first was "The JKD Society" which was formed in the early 1980's and the second was "The Jun Fan JKD Nucleus" which began in the mid 1990's. Senior first-generation JKD people such as Dan Inosanto, Richard Bustillo, Daniel Lee, Ted Wong, and Jerry Poteet were part of both groups (although Dan Inosanto elected to not be a part of the Nucleus following its initial meeting). I, along with several other second-generation instructors was also part of both organizations. While both organizations were armed with noble intentions, for reasons that would take far longer to explain than I have time for in this article, both groups ultimately failed in their proposed objectives and were ultimately disbanded. With various groups and people now vying for the top spot in the JKD world

and staking their claim that their JKD was the 'real' or 'true' JKD, the fragmentation continued and Jeet Kune Do eventually became one of the biggest political hornet's nests in martial art history.

It's now 2018 and while many in the JKD world still like to continue to speak about JKD in terms of "family," "tribe," "clan," and other totally inclusive "we're all in this together" type of euphemisms, in reality such is not the case. As in the world of business, everyone, to use the phrase, wants a piece of the action. Some groups, while having different ideas and opinions, choose to respect each other get along amicably with one another. Others have not, choosing instead to disseminate negative material about their supposed rivals and striving to spread dissension and create discord. The unfortunate victims of such actions are the members of the public who are sincerely interested in seeking to learn about the art.

Decline of JKD Culture

When the first public training facilities at which JKD was taught (The Filipino Kali Academy, The Inosanto Academy, and The IMB Academy) initially began they all possessed what I call a strong JKD culture. By culture I am referring to the core beliefs and values of the schools, and patterns of behavior of those who trained at them. The essential nature of JKD was the same at all of the places. Simplicity, directness and non-classicalism were the foundation stones upon which the entire art was built. Speed, power, adaptability, and flow were fundamental principles upon which physical techniques and actions were developed. Sparring was the lifeblood of the art, and everything was pressure-tested out on the floor to see if it was functional and worked in a real-life combative situation. If it did it was kept, if it didn't work or work well it was tossed out.

In addition, regardless whatever other arts might have been shown or explored at the school during both the senior JKD class and the regular Phase 1-4 classes (who, even though they might often doing the same techniques that the JKD class was doing, were told they were not learning JKD but Jun Fan Gung Fu), the overarching idea was that if one chose to absorb something, it was adapted and synthesized into one's core structure so that what you ended up with was a single, cohesive art that covered all elements of fighting. It wasn't about accumulation or adding things because they looked cool or simply for the sake of adding. While one of the fundamental tenets of JKD may have been constant growth, it was growth which maintained a central theme, which was total combat efficiency. Things that were brought in were analyzed, stripped down to their essence, and simplified if necessary to make them more efficient or effective. This is what is commonly referred to as the "JKD mindset," and it was an integral and essential part of one's personal development. Even the Filipino martial arts of Kali and

Escrima which at the time were being taught concurrently with the JKD were heavily influenced by this JKD culture and mindset.

In the early 1980's things began to change and the perspective began to shift. Various different arts were brought in from the outside and added to the school curriculum (as opposed to elements of them being absorbed into overall structure as I mentioned). Although the Jun Fan Martial Arts Phase classes and Filipino Kali/Escrima were still on the menu, the curriculum now offered became more of a multi-brand experience with different arts being taught and students taking their pick of what classes they wanted to attend. Perhaps instead of training in Jun Fan they wanted to study Boxe Francaise – Savate or train in Thai Boxing or Silat. Perhaps they wanted to train in several arts at the same time. The choice was theirs. The result of this was that there was a gradual shift in perspective regarding martial art training. The mindset began to change, and as it did the JKD culture which was so strong and prevalent earlier slowly began to wane.

There is also another factor which I believe contributed to the loss of JKD culture at many martial art training facilities and has played a significant role in JKD's current identity crisis, and that is the martial art "industry." Over the years, some individuals and groups in the JKD world started following an agenda set by the martial art industry – an industry that by and large did not share JKD's goals, mindset, or attitude (remember that JKD was developed by a martial art rebel, and was rebellious in nature, throwing away anything considered non-essential to martial art training, including such things as colored belts, traditional uniforms, forms, etc.). They latched on to and began following guidelines given out by professional martial arts business consulting organizations on how to run their school and program and make JKD fit into the mainstream martial art industry so they could cater to more people. There were even programs advertising how a martial art school could add JKD to their current curriculum (regardless of whatever other arts they taught) in order to generate more income.

I personally feel that a lot of the schools and instructors who became ensnared in this trap ended up sacrificing the soul of Jeet Kune Do for profit and paying little more than lip-service to the art. And again, who paid the price? That's right, the public. How would the unknowledgeable person interested in possibly studying JKD who is scrolling through the internet looking for schools in his or her area or who walks into a school or training facility to check it out tell the difference? They had no reason to suspect that the school displaying Bruce Lee's JKD symbol amidst several others in their advertising or on their window or school t-shirt didn't actually "teach" JKD per se, or was merely using the name to cover a 'do-what-you-want' approach to teaching.

The "Classicalization" of JKD

Since the mid to late 1990's there has been a kind of movement underway, the goal of which appears to be an attempt to formalize and in some ways even "classicalize" Jeet Kune Do. This includes such things as the addition of more and more Chinese jargon which has been steadily creeping in and now fills many people's JKD vernacular -- the development of various pre-arranged sets and forms -- the handing out of belts and sashes, etc. In more recent years some people have put a great deal of energy in trying to somehow reconnect JKD to Wing Chun in some way. Some have even put forth the notion that in order for a person to truly understand JKD, it is necessary for them to study Wing Chun Gung Fu in depth.

While some Chinese terminology has always been a part of JKD (I use some of it myself), it was always quite limited. Now one finds more and more of it being brought into full use and pushed on people for everything related to JKD, from the names of tools one uses (jeong = palm), to the names of various techniques one uses (o'ou chue = hooking fist), to one's level or standing in the JKD family hierarchy (Si Bak, etc.), and even the term used for your teacher's spouse (Si Mo).

I'd like to address the issue of pre-arranged sets and forms, because more of them have been popping up in many people's JKD curriculum, especially since the mid-1980's (such as the "Ung Moon" form and "JKD wooden dummy sets"). When I first began training in JKD, I learned a pre-arranged sequence of kicking actions which was called "The JKD Kicking Set," which for all intents and purposes was basically a form. This kicking set was also taught in the Los Angeles Chinatown school as part of the curriculum. (You can find it listed in the "12 Week Lesson Plan for JKD") However, as soon as I learned the set I was told by Dan that I should toss it away and instead shadowbox and freelance my kicking. Years later I was also with Dan when he put together what he referred to as the "JKD Wooden Dummy Set." While this was a pre-designed set of movements, it was very fluid and mobile and built around actions that we actually used in JKD as compared to the traditional 108 movement form taught in Wing Chun. And as with the kicking set, once I had learned it, Dan told me to use my imagination and simply freelance my actions on the dummy instead. That was it as far as any forms or sets went. (For further information about this subject I suggest you read Dan Inosanto's Inside Kung Fu article "*Was Bruce Lee Anti-Form?*", which, while being somewhat ambiguous, discusses the subject in greater detail).

One of the fundamental reasons many people have been attracted to training in the art of JKD has always been the idea that they didn't have to deal with such things as belts, uniforms, and learning various martial art forms -- the very things that some JKD schools and instructors are now busy adding in. Personally, while I cannot say what the purpose or motive behind this movement to classicalize JKD might be or what those

involved hope to achieve, I do, however, know it has definitely contributed to JKD's identity crisis.

Confusion between JKD and MMA

A lot of people today tend to confuse JKD with what is now referred to as "Mixed Martial Arts" and it's easy to understand the reason for this. JKD is considered by many to be the "original mixed martial art" because it seeks totality in personal combat considering all ranges and aspects of fighting. However, while there are some similarities that do exist between Jeet Kune Do and mixed martial arts, they're not the same thing. While MMA may have adopted some of the principles that exist in JKD, such as being a well-rounded fighter who is able to function in the various ranges and aspects of fighting, there are some major differences between the two. On the most fundamental level there are rules in MMA. It's a competitive combat "sport", and as such, the rules and regulations dictate the direction of training. There are, for example, numerous actions that are considered "fouls" in MMA competition that are exactly the type of action a JKD practitioner might use in a self-defense situation, such as kicking the knee, kicking, punching or grabbing the groin, pulling the hair, poking the eyes, finger locks, etc. Remember, JKD has always been about combat "as it is", without any rules or restrictions. This in no way denigrates MMA or its practitioners. Some of the best martial artists in the world today are involved in the sport, and there are many world champion MMA fighters who cite Bruce Lee as their source of inspiration. A number of them have even studied aspects of JKD to supplement their training. Anderson Silva, for example, has visited Dan Inosanto on at least one occasion to train with him at his school.

Now that we've looked at some of the factors which have played a part in Jeet Kune Do's identity crisis, the questions that need to be addressed and answered are (a) What can be done to correct JKD's identity crisis? (b) How can each of us (JKD practitioners and teachers) be part of the solution to the problem? If we want Jeet Kune Do to take its rightful place in the pantheon of martial arts, there are several things that I believe we need to do:

Establish/Re-establish the vision regarding JKD

If we don't have a clear-cut vision of JKD, how can we expect other people to? We need to establish (or re-establish) a clear, unambiguous vision of what JKD is and know how we want the art to be perceived by the rest of the martial arts world. Such a vision will give us a clear sense of purpose, and serve as a catalyst to drive JKD forward and give it energy and a focused sense of direction.

How can we go about establishing the vision? To do this we need to understand the thinking processes of the art's originator (the evolution of Bruce Lee's thinking). We also need to look at the trajectory of the original vision, which traveled from the objective of creating the ultimate fighting system, to the idea of doing away with martial art styles and systems entirely and offering total physical, mental, and spiritual freedom for the individual practitioner.

It's not about trying to create an entirely new vision regarding JKD, but rather to shine a light on the spirit that's already there – that's always been there. It's not about clinging to the founder (which, for some people means they need to stop staring at the 'finger' and instead look at 'the heavenly glory'). Rather, it's about understanding what the soul of JKD is – what its core values and beliefs are – what it stands for. Once the vision for JKD is established, we can kick into action to actualize it and bring it to life.

Cultivate a strong JKD Culture

We need to make sure that the essential nature of JKD, its "DNA" if you will, is being transmitted and imparted to the new generations of practitioners coming in. In order to do that we must make sure to develop and maintain a strong JKD culture in any and all schools and training facilities at which the art is taught. As I said, by culture I'm talking about core beliefs and values, and patterns of behavior.

Wherever JKD is being taught, be it a professional martial art school, a backyard gym, or a garage, it should be a learning environment in which a student can immerse themselves and experience JKD with all their senses, develop what is referred to in JKD as the 'educated eye' and the 'discerning mind', and perhaps most important of all, cultivate the "JKD mindset."

Cultivating a strong JKD Culture is not about creating some brand new sort of culture, or being a slave to an old one. We want the heritage but don't want to be stuck in the past. We want the art to move forward. It's about making sure that the culture that played such an important role in JKD's development is maintained and doesn't simply disappear.

Maintain Jeet Kune Do's Relevance

The word 'relevant' is defined as "*Appropriate to the current time, period or circumstances; of contemporary interest.*" As I stated at the beginning of this article, there are some people in the martial art world who feel that JKD has become, or is becoming irrelevant or obsolete. I disagree. While times may have changed, we, as human beings, haven't, and the fundamental principles of JKD are just as relevant today as they were fifty years ago.

However, in some ways JKD has definitely suffered from neglect in the area of its relevance and vitality in today's martial arts world. The reason for this is not because of the art itself, but because of the mindset of some of the practitioners and teachers. These people adamantly refuse to expand their thinking and step out of their comfort zone, and hold firm to the belief that if Bruce Lee didn't say it, write it, or do it, then it cannot be called JKD. They have, in effect, solidified and 'crystallized' JKD.

With the advent of mixed martial arts there has been a shift in the collective consciousness of martial arts practitioners. As a result, the differentiation between JKD and many other martial arts has been slowly but steadily eroding over the years. Some of the other martial arts have caught up with JKD technically (and I would even go so far as to say that in some they may have even surpassed it in certain aspects). And while there may be an established "core," if the art does not remain alive and dynamic and continue to develop and grow, it will stagnate and eventually glide downwards.

There is a quote that states, "*The relevant can, if we are not careful, become the irrelevant.*" We need to invest time and energy in JKD to make sure that the art retains its relevance and vitality. We must be willing to expand our thinking and step out of our comfort zone. We need to remain open to progress, to changes and improvements in such things as training methods, technology, etc. But we also need to remember that with regard to JKD, growth and development isn't simply an eclectic, do-whatever-the-hell-you-want approach to training. We need to know where we want to get to and use the fundamental principles that are an integral part of JKD as guides or signposts for our journey.

Build Bridges

As I said, there are various factions and camps that exist in the JKD world today, all pushing their own point of view regarding the art. If we wish to help JKD regain its true identity, we need to strive to build bridges that unite or connect people rather than barriers that separate them; bridges that lead to better understanding and better relationships within the JKD community. How do we go about doing this? The answer is by focusing on inclusion rather than exclusion. We do it by seeking out similarities rather than differences, by finding commonalities of thought and ideas – by setting aside creative or philosophical differences and engaging and talking with individuals who don't agree with us on various subjects concerning the art. We do it by inviting people to share in an aggregate vision as opposed to a single forced vision regarding JKD.

The best in any industry bring out the best in one another, and it's no different for Jeet Kune Do. Through inclusion we can bring out the best in one another. We need to stop

feeling fearful of or being threatened by other people who might be teaching JKD near us or competing with us in some way, and instead collaborate and share information and knowledge. In today's world you can go on the internet and Google anything and everything you want to know right now about anything, including JKD. So why not just get on with things and find some great people and share or collaborate with them?

Mark Twain once wrote, "Reports of my death are greatly exaggerated." I'd like to apply the same quote to JKD. Some people have made comments such as "JKD died with Bruce Lee" and "JKD is dying." I disagree; JKD is not dead, and it's not dying. It has become too big and too well-known for that to happen. JKD's demise hardly appears imminent -- the art has still got a lot of life in it. It's surviving, but I don't believe its flourishing. I also believe that if nothing is done to remedy JKD's current identity crisis it could end up languishing in the netherworld of mediocrity, a fate which I personally believe would be far worse than death.

Will restoring JKD's true identity be easy? I don't think so. It will take time and effort. But I choose to remain upbeat about the situation, because I believe that there are a lot of talented and passionate people in the world who believe in JKD and are just waiting for the opportunity to help restore it to its original glory, so to speak.

While it may be impossible to project the future of JKD, what is important is that we be certain JKD will be a part of the future. If JKD is to have a clear identity that identity will come from us, the people who love the art and who want the rest of the world to know what it really is. It won't come from looking to any single organization or association. We are the ones who put the heart and soul in Jeet Kune Do.

So let's stop looking backward and saying things like, "I wish this or that happened with JKD" and "I wish someone would have done this about the art." The past is gone and no longer matters. It's all about what happens now and what happens tomorrow. Instead, let's create the future we want for JKD.