

Combat Magazine Interview with Chris Kent (March 2010)

CHRIS KENT

With over 35 years experience, Chris Kent is widely acknowledged as one of the world's leading authorities on Jeet Kune Do. A full-time, professional martial art instructor, educator, author, and public speaker, he has gained international recognition for his knowledge and leadership in disseminating the art and philosophy developed by Bruce Lee, and is considered one of the few individuals in the world having total comprehension of all facets of Lee's martial art.

Some of his accomplishments include:

- Youngest and final member admitted into Dan Inosanto's fabled "Backyard JKD" group during Bruce Lee's lifetime.
- One of the first students to be awarded the title of Full Instructor in the Jun Fan Martial Arts (Jeet Kune Do) by Dan Inosanto.
- Author / Co-author of 4 of the highest rated books on Jeet Kune Do.
- Featured in such books as "Jeet Kune Do Conversations", "Jeet Kune – The Art and Philosophy of Bruce Lee" and "Filipino Fighting Arts – Theory and Practice."
- Co-founded and for 5 years served as a Board of Directors member of the "The Bruce Lee Educational Foundation".

Combat: Hi Chris, could you please tell the Combat readers how you first got involved with martial arts?

Chris: My parents immigrated to America when I was eight years old. As a kid I used to watch "The Green Hornet" on television, and was blown away when I saw Bruce Lee in action as "Kato". At that time, my parents didn't have the money for me to train at a school, so I saved my allowance and bought some karate books and stand in my bedroom practicing the stances, moves, etc. My actual training started after we moved to Santa Monica, California, and I found out the YMCA had a Judo and Ju Jitsu program. That is where I first began training. Later on I practiced Shotokan Karate for a brief time until I had a minor knee injury playing soccer. After moving back to England for a period of time, I returned to California, where I began training in classical Five Animal Kung Fu in Los Angeles Chinatown under Grandmaster Ark Y. Wong. While I was training there, I read two articles on JKD, one by Bruce Lee and one by Dan Inosanto. I decided that's what I wanted to study, so I set my sights on doing so. And the rest, as they say is history.

Combat: What was training like in Dan Inosanto's back yard class?

Chris: Coming from a traditional martial art background it was very different from anything I had experienced before -- We would warm-up by skipping rope to the theme of the television show "Hawaii Five-O". We would train on equipment such as focus gloves, heavy bags, kicking shields, etc. Then we would spar, working on different things at different times. Sometimes Dan would limit the tools we could use, such as lead hand and lead leg only. We did a lot of sparring. After a while, Dan started bringing in sparring drills to show us how we could develop certain qualities and attributes without getting our heads bashed in. After sparring we would work energy drills and trapping hands. At the end of the class, Dan would teach Filipino Kali/Escrima to those people who wanted to stay. The attitude was very informal, yet there was a sense of decorum. Everybody knew why they were there. There was only the one class, so there was no talk about "phases" or "levels". It was a cool atmosphere.

Combat: I know you were a student of Dan Inosanto for many years and you got to train with some of the best known JKD practitioners in the world, but was there any one who really stood out and inspired you?

Chris: I couldn't really say that there was one particular individual. But if I had to choose one I would say it was Dan Inosanto. Dan ignited my passion for martial arts, and helped me develop the "educated eye" and discerning mind" so that I could develop on my own and not rely on him or anyone else. It was a different time back then. Dan was not only my teacher he was my friend, mentor and counselor. I learned how to teach by standing side by side with Dan, observing him teach and assisting him as he taught. I would have to say that, quite honestly, Dan Inosanto was one of the most influential people in my life.

Combat: Since each teacher has their own perspective towards Jeet Kune Do. What were the contributions of Dan Inosanto, Taky Kimura, Ted Wong and Richard Bustillo to your Jeet Kune Do?

Chris: Each of the people you mentioned brought their own perspective and attitude towards the art and training methods, as well as the philosophy of Jeet Kune Do. Dan was, and still is, in my mind, a perpetual student. He never stops learning and growing. He taught me that no one knows everything, and that in the end, each person is responsible for their own growth. That doesn't mean that other people can't help them, just that personal growth is each individual's own responsibility.

Richard Bustillo always had a "no-nonsense" attitude and approach toward training. Maybe it was due to his boxing background. It was always, "Yeah, well that's great. But let's take it out on the floor and see if it really works ". There was never any B.S. with Rich. You always knew exactly where you stood. If he didn't like something about you, he told you, but he also told you why. I think he and Dan were a great team. They fit together like Yin and Yang. So I guess that Richard's contribution was the understanding that while theory and principle is great, you have to put everything you do to the reality test of sparring.

Although I knew Taky for years through my relationship with Dan, I became friends with him primarily through the formation of the Bruce Lee Educational Foundation. I would say that Taky's contribution was to help me see far beyond the martial applications, and that the ultimate goal is not simply to become a better fighter, but to become a better human being. Taky holds a special place in my heart for that and I have the utmost respect for him.

Combat: You have written several books on JKD with my good friend Tim Tackett. How did this collaboration occur?

Chris: I guess it just came about naturally. Tim and I had been friends since I began training in JKD -- He was already training with Dan when I joined. In the mid-eighties several of us discussed the idea with Dan of writing some books about various facets of JKD, because at the time there so much misinformation floating around the marketplace. Dan was all for it and gave us the go-ahead. Other people such as Larry Hartsell had also expressed interest in possibly writing books, so it was mutually agreed upon that we would write about different aspect of JKD so that no one would be stepping on anybody else's toes. Tim and I decided to collaborate co-write our first book about the kickboxing elements of JKD. The book was very well received, so a short while later we decided to write "The Textbook" in order to give people a clear overview about JKD and various training methods.

Combat: Are there any new Chris Kent books we should know about?

Chris: I have a new book on 'equipment training' which should be coming out in the next couple of months. I wrote it about eighteen months ago but I have no control over when the publisher decides to release the book. While I am obviously viewed as a JKD instructor, I wrote this book from a "non-style" perspective, with the idea that any martial artist can use the material in it to improve their proficiency as a martial artist, regardless of what method or style they currently practice.

Combat: How do you Define Jeet Kune Do?

Chris: The important thing to keep in mind is that there is no universally-accepted definition of Jeet Kune Do. Take a look around at all of the various factions, camps, etc. and you'll see what I mean. Having said that, I'll give you my own definition of it based upon my years of involvement in it. To me, Jeet Kune Do is, "*A principle-based training process to cultivate the ability to express the human body in combative form with any restriction or limitation*". It might sound complicated to some people, but it's not. Actually it's incredibly simple. It's about you cultivating your body as a 'martial instrument' and then expressing that instrument with the highest level of efficiency and effectiveness possible. That's it.

Combat: How has your training developed since starting the Kent Institute of martial arts? And what curriculums do you teach?

Chris: Basically by following the definition I just gave you. I am continuously researching the most effective way to use the body in combative form. This includes all aspects of martial training, as well as fitness training, sports psychology, and philosophy, etc. Again, this has nothing to do with "styles" or "methods". Nor is it just some form of "eclectic" mixed martial

arts. Even when it comes to the weaponry skills I teach, I try to do it from a “non-style” perspective. I learned numerous styles or methods when I was training under Dan, but I am not interested in promoting this particular style or that system at my school. Rather, I want my students to have an understanding of weaponry, and to be able to pick up an type of weapon, be it long or short, heavy or light, and use it effectively in a situation. I’m not talking about guns here because that is a completely different category.

Combat: What is S.A.V.E™? And what inspired you to create it?

Chris: SAVE™ is an acronym for “Safety Against Violence Education”. The statistics today concerning the abuse that occurs to women and kids today sucks. It’s horrible what is going on. So basically, what I do with SAVE is conduct free workshops for women and children that cover the issues of personal safety awareness and include basic physical self-defense skills. It is not a self-defense class per se, because it is usually a one-shot deal. But each workshop deals with developing skills that help people learn how to avoid potentially dangerous situations, and some basic survival skills that they can use if they find themselves in such a situation. I don’t do it as a method of attracting new students. If a person chooses to start training after attending one, that’s fine. It is just something I have always felt very strongly about so I do it as a form of community service. I also developed SAVE programs that can be taught to businesses and corporations.

Combat: for potential students out there looking to join a JKD class, what steps would you recommend they take?

Chris: Do the research. Take the time to look around and see what is available for you. It’s important for the person to have some idea of what they are looking for as well. Why are they looking into Jeet Kune Do? What is it that they want to achieve through training? Is it to get in good physical shape? Is it to learn how to fight, or to develop the ability to protect themselves and others? They should find out the teacher’s qualifications. If any instructor refuses to honestly discuss their background or teaching qualifications with them, they should run for the exit as fast as possible. They should also find out what the focus is at the school they are considering. For example, is it a competition-oriented training facility where they specialize in developing people interested in fighting? I wrote an article several years ago entitled, “Jeet Kune Do -- Why it’s not for everyone?” in which I stated that while I think JKD has something to offer everyone, I don’t think it’s the art for everyone. And I still feel the same. I am not going to compromise the integrity of the art just to suit the masses or to fit in with the martial art industry.

Combat: You’re well known for being a luminary in Bruce Lee’s art of Jeet Kune Do. How has your personal JKD developed over the years?

Chris: I have always followed two main guiding principles in everything I do related to JKD, and they are both quotes made by Bruce Lee. The first is, “We have two arms and two legs. The question becomes how to use them with maximum efficiency and effectiveness?” The second, and perhaps more important, is, “How, in the process of learning how to use my body, can I come to understand myself?” Everything I do revolves around those two things. For me it is about seeing the bigger picture, to see what Lee was pointing at. To understand how I can use the art to become a more evolved human being.

Combat: What is your weekly personal training routine like?

Chris: I try to stay in as good a shape as possible by working out everyday at the school. I do different things on different days. Some days I’ll work the bag. Other days the wooden dummy. And I’ll get together with some of my senior guys and train with the gloves, or on other aspects of training that require a partner.

Combat: I know you have written articles on JKD Concepts V’s JKD Original’s, Is there a difference? And where do you stand?

Chris I don’t waste the mental calories required to even think about it. I went through that stuff years ago and honestly am tired of it. It bores me. Jeet Kune Do is probably the biggest political hornet’s nest in the martial art world today. Who knows, I might be wrong. To me those arguments are really all about who has the most “real estate” and who controls the market. As I said before, to me, Jeet Kune Do is Jeet Kune Do. There is no need to add any prefixes or suffixes to it. You

either get it or you don't. I just do what I do. I don't ask people to agree with me. All I ask them to do is to think for themselves on the subject.

Combat: What would you say were your future goals for martial arts, especially JKD?

Chris: My goal is to continue growing as a martial artist and to help people actualize their potential in martial art and life by sharing the art and philosophy of Jeet Kune Do with as many people as possible without regard to faction or camps. That's about it, really.

Combat: 2009 Saw your return to the UK after a 10 year absence, what has been keeping you so busy?

Chris: From 1997 thru 2002 I was heavily involved with the original Bruce Lee Educational Foundation (recently re-vamped as The Bruce Lee Foundation). I had moved my family to Boise, Idaho in 1998. Linda Lee Cadwell was already a resident there, and John Little had recently relocated there in order to work with the Bruce Lee estate on a series of books. I worked closely with both John and Linda and we all put a lot of time and energy into the formation and development of the organization. Besides being elected to the task of putting together all the physical, technical, and philosophical material for what was to become accepted as the "core" curriculum of Jun Fan Jeet Kune Do, I also wrote numerous articles for the Bruce Lee magazine we had at the time. At the same time, my wife and I were raising our daughter, Sarah, and I opened a training facility there. There was a huge backlash against the Foundation from certain groups, and again, I think this all had to do with power and real estate. Anyway, that's all water under the bridge and I don't care to waste my time and energy re-visiting it anymore. When I resigned from the organization in 2002, I was really kind of burned out with everything to do with the JKD world, so I put my energies into raising my kid, teaching, and developing other projects. I did a few seminars during that time, but mostly I focused on the school and writing.

Combat: In recent years, you have stated both in articles and while teaching seminars that in some ways, the term Jeet Kune Do has in itself, become limiting. Could you please elaborate on what you mean by that?

Chris: Sure. The point is that, due to the way much of the public now perceives Jeet Kune Do and automatically places it into certain categories with certain predictabilities, the name or term has in some ways become restrictive or limiting. I'm not talking about my own understanding of it. I'm talking about the public's various perceptions, or to be more accurate, misperceptions, of what JKD is all about.

Combat: Can you give me some examples of these misperceptions?

Chris: Okay. When some people ask me what I teach and I tell them Jeet Kune Do, their response is, "Oh, yeah, I've heard of that. It's mixed martial arts isn't it?" The reason they have this perception is that in the martial art world today, many people equate the term Jeet Kune Do with the idea of a martial artist simply doing whatever they want, grabbing whatever techniques or actions they want from this style or that style, and tossing them loosely together to create some kind of "chop suey" martial art system. To me, the problem with using the term "mixed martial arts" to define Jeet Kune Do, is that it violates one of JKD's fundamental tenets, which views "martial art" as a single, unified "whole", a totality without separation. This is not to denigrate MMA in any way. But JKD is not about simply combining a bunch of separate, different arts such as Muay Thai, Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, and Boxing together. It's not about a person taking what they consider to be the "best" of each style and building their own style. It's about removing the whole notion of "style" altogether. I know that some people might argue that this is a philosophical viewpoint. But any martial art is built upon a philosophy. And the philosophy of JKD is what makes it what it is.

Other people believe that if it's not about "kicking ass" or "all-out street combat", then it's not really Jeet Kune Do. This makes me smile, because this perception completely ignores Bruce Lee's belief that, at the highest level, the art should serve as a prescription or vehicle for personal growth, physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. While functionality in combat is definitely an integral and important component of the overall Jeet Kune Do training, to say that JKD is merely about fighting is, as I said, like holding up a single grain of sand and saying, "This is the entire beach."

You've got JKD people who subscribe to the belief that if it's not written in Bruce Lee's notes, or if he did not specifically use a specific technique or action, then it cannot be Jeet Kune Do. Then you've got others who will tell you that Jeet Kune Do is just a "concept" or an "idea". Each of these various groups believe that they truly know what Jeet Kune Do really is, and their members simply repeat the party line espoused by their camp.

And if you say that you teach Jeet Kune Do, then, depending upon the perception of the individual you're talking to, you are automatically associated with a particular group and labeled or pigeon-holed. If somebody wants to do that, that's their choice. But frankly, I prefer not to buy into that.

Combat: I have been given the privilege of organizing your UK JKD TOUR in June 2010. What material can the UK martial artist expect at your seminars?

Chris: I'm not really sure yet, because I don't like to plan that far in advance, especially with regard to teaching -- All I can tell you is that I will openly share my knowledge, experience and insights with anyone who is willing to listen, without regard to whatever so-called JKD group they belong to or are affiliated with. If I can act as a bridge between various factions or camps, great -- If not, well there's nothing I can do about it -- I decided years ago that if I was going to teach JKD for a living, my goal wasn't going to be to change people's minds about things but rather to at provoke people to think for themselves, and offer them a different way of looking at things --

Combat: Thank you Chris for your time.