

DAN INOSANTO ON: Bruce Lee -- The Public -- Jeet Kune Do (Part 1)

Interview conducted by Chris Kent

Dan Inosanto is leading the group of students through focus glove training drills at a public gymnasium in Dallas. In some of the drills he counts off a certain number of repetitions, while in others he allows the students to freelance. He stops the class momentarily to emphasize a particular point, then lets them continue as he moves about the group, answering questions and working with individuals one-on-one. He checks his watch as he moves the class into basic jun fan trapping hands, then some kali empty hands, then back to the jun fan. "The main point ...• " he explains, "... is not to concentrate on the technique he is using, but on the concept or principle behind the motion. The technique is merely to teach you body mechanics ... but sensitivity is the highest point.

From there the students move into a quick review of double-stick (siniwali) drills before working with a single stick. There is so much material to cover, and though he teaches very quickly, he never seems to cover everything. Checking the group, he notices the point he is trying to teach is not coming across, so he switches to another method. This time it works. And you can see the students understanding. It is a rapid pace of continually shifting from empty hands to weaponry and back again. Six hours later the students are exhausted but happy with the knowledge they have gathered. They have not spent hours being drilled on one or two moves. Instead they have been given a broad overview of the incredible diversity and functionality of both the jun fan and Filipino martial arts.

Dan Inosanto is a martial artist who seeks to educate rather than indoctrinate, who allows an individual to make up his own mind about what he has to offer. Born in 1936 in Stockton, Calif., Inosanto grew up in an area featuring many heritages. His father's occupation as a farm labor contractor exposed him to Filipino martial arts and other arts as a child. At the age of 10 he was exposed to Okinawan Te by an uncle who was also an escrimador. He studied judo as a youth, and at college was a standout track star. In the armed forces he encountered a potpourri of styles, and when he returned to civilian life, earned his black belt under Ed Parker. He became one of Parker's better instructors. In 1964, he was introduced to Bruce Lee, and the rest is history. Upon Bruce Lee's sudden passing in 1973, the future of jeet kune do was placed squarely on Dan's shoulders. He not only has held the art up very well, he has lifted it to new heights.

Here is his story:

INSIDE KUNG-FU: Let's get a little background history first ... When you came up through the ranks, wasn't it considered almost a "sin" to make a successful living teaching martial arts?

INOSANTO: Definitely. That was the prevailing thought at that time period.

IKF: Have your perceptions altered on that outlook or do you still have trouble dealing with it?

INOSANTO: I have a little trouble dealing with it, if I'm honest with myself. But for the most part, I would say that I don't think it's bad for one to make a living off martial arts.

IKF: Do you think people have double standards, when every other profession has people who have become famous and/ or wealthy thanks to their talent and hard work?

INOSANTO: Definitely. It's the only field where there is a double standard. If Frank Sinatra were to make a living by singing, it wouldn't be commercializing it ... but in martial arts they have this kind of antiquated thought that if you made a living teaching martial arts, you are commercializing the art because a good martial art teacher never takes money for teaching. And I think it's passe now. I think it's coming to the point where ... why shouldn't a person be paid if he's good? Like a doctor gets paid, or a dentist gets paid. A lawyer gets paid for his services. You don't say, "Well he's not a good lawyer because he's commercialized his law practice, he gets money from his job. Well it's the same thing in martial arts. Somehow it's a carryover from past times when you didn't charge for martial art services.

IKF: You've stated you never thought you were the most talented of Bruce's students, yet the mantle of JKD was given to you. Any ideas as to why Bruce did this?

INOSANTO: One, I thought, and this is pure conjecture on my part, he probably just appointed me because he felt that I had a way of sharing the knowledge, and presenting it. Plus, I was a schoolteacher and he probably felt I'd be a good guide and a good teacher. So that's one of the reasons I think he gave it to me.

IKF: Did you and Bruce have markedly different personalities?

INOSANTO: Oh yeah, there's no doubt about it. At that time his personality was much more aggressive. Some people would say "cocky." And he was cocky. And it's no big secret that when I studied under him I wasn't used to his personality because he was cocky. But as I grew to understand him I realized that he was just impatient to share with other people and to show his perception of the martial arts. That's why he was so cocky. He was quite sure of himself, and what he could do and could not do.

IKF: Do you think this is one of the reasons you two got along so well?

INOSANTO: I think so, because I used to like to listen to different people and learn from different people. And Bruce was one of the people I think I really respected, there's no doubt about it. He has to stand out as probably one of the most outstanding martial artists who ever lived.

IKF: When Bruce passed away so suddenly, you were confronted with what to do with JKD, whether to carry it on or let it alone. You almost let it alone, didn't you?

INOSANTO: Yes. At the time of his funeral I had decided to drop the name jeet kune do and to drop the name jun fan kung-fu and go strictly with the Filipino martial arts.

IKF: What prompted you then to carry it on? .

INOSANTO: A lot of people. Namely Richard Bustillo who prompted me and led to ... it was after talking to him at the funeral. He said that I should carry it on, and that if Bruce were alive he would definitely want me to carry on the teachings. And I wasn't quite convinced, but Daniel Lee convinced me, and then I received a letter from Steve McQueen. And that was sort of the straw that broke the camel's back, and made me more convinced that I should carry on Bruce's teachings.

IKF: What exactly is JKD then - a fighting system, a frame of mind?

INOSANTO: JKD is for me, merely a vehicle for growth. JKD is not only a vehicle for physical growth, for mental growth, emotional growth, spiritual growth, but it's kind of a

problem-solving art. It is highly individualized for each person. Therefore, it has to be different for each man. Like, a tiger cannot fight like an eagle, and an eagle cannot fight like a tiger. So you have to find out what are your pluses and minuses and go from there. We have a standardized progression in JKD in the beginning stages to a degree, and we go through some basic things like agility, balance, coordination, dexterity, learning economy of motion, flexibility, grace, getting muscular strength for your activity and stamina. And for each person, of course, it would be different, right?

IKF: So your JKD would be different from, let's say, Richard Bustillo?

INOSANTO: Yes, it has to be different. But I think one should be well-rounded. So that's the object, to be well-rounded in all areas, but to still know your pluses and minuses. If a guy prefers to go inside, that's his preference. If he prefers to stay outside, that's his preference. But the guy who goes inside must have an understanding of the outside, and vice versa. A puncher must have an understanding of grappling and a grappler must understand punching and striking.

IKF: You feel that JKD cannot be shown during a demonstration, but that it can be taught during a seminar. Why is that?

INOSANTO: Yes, that's why I don't like demonstrations (of JKD). What can you show? I'll use this term. It's like saying, "We have a seminar on relaxation." You cannot really show relaxation, but you can explain it. Some people relax by watching Monday Night Football. Or let's use the word "vacation." If you had *schools of vacation* some people would say, "I'm from the school of vacationing in Hawaii." Another person would say, "No, I'm from the school of vacationing right at your own home." Others would say, "I go to the mountains" or "I go to the beach." So it's a state of being, it's a state of mind. So basically, JKD is like that.

IKF: What can you show then in a demonstration?

INOSANTO: Different training methods to improve a person's different attributes. Different skill levels, even techniques from different disciplines. You know, to show that they all have their place, that one is not superior to the other. Just like you say "Where's the best place to live?" Each will have a plus and a minus, whether you lived in Europe or America. There's just not one way; it's according to many different factors. And that's the way martial art is.

IKF: So even when Bruce did' demonstrations, and did things like two-finger pushups, he was showing attributes like finger strength, as opposed to JKD techniques?

INOSANTO: Correct.

IKF: What would you consider to be the major differences between JKD and most martial arts today?

INOSANTO: Well, in most martial arts you're locked into a system that was set up by an individual. You must do this for this rank, you must do this and this for that rank. JKD is kind of a thing where, although there is an organized program, you more or less try to find something that you like to do, or what you like to practice, and go from there. Like I said, you're always going to be good in some areas and weak in others. You go to the area where your strengths are, yet you practice where your strengths are not. . .

IKF: What changes have you seen in the martial arts world since Bruce's death?

INOSANTO: I think that people are probably a little bit more open-minded than they were, let's say, back in the early '50s and '60s.

IKF: Do you feel Bruce's influence accelerated these changes?

INOSANTO: Oh definitely. Look at the full-contact movement. I think that the only three groups that were doing full-contact in that early time in the U.S. were kali, but that was underground, and bando. The third group would be the jeet kune do group, or the jun fan clan, or whatever you want to call them. They were into that before even full-contact karate or kickboxing came on the scene in the States. That's why one of the big misconceptions was that Bruce's students didn't enter tournaments, because to a lot of them it was a big, big joke. But then again, as I look back on it, tournaments have their place. Just like there's different ways of playing football. If you want to play flag football, you play flag football. Or two hand touch football, or roughhouse sandlot football. If you want to play organized tackle football, whether it be high school, collegiate or professional, there are different levels available to you. And it would be like a guy who's already played tackle football, and then going into a two-hand touch league. He is not interested in that, he's seen something else. And that's why a lot of Bruce's boys didn't enter tournaments as early as 1966. I think that's one of the biggest fallacies about jeet kune do. And people went around saying they didn't spar.

IKF: A lot of people may not be aware of your contributions to Bruce in the development of JKD. I feel it's time, and that it won't diminish Bruce in any way, to discuss some of these. Let's start with Bruce's use of the nunchaku.

INOSANTO: Ah yeah, I taught him the use of the nunchaku. Or let me put it this way, shared with him the knowledge of them as early as 1964.

IKF: The use of the football, or kicking shield.

INOSANTO: The use of the air shield and the foam football shield I introduced to Bruce in about December, 1965. I thought it would be good for kicking and punching. And at that time it was not for sale on the market.

IKF: How about developing a basic teaching format for the Chinatown school?

INOSANTO: We did that together. And it was sort of input back and forth. You see, he didn't like anything organized and according to him JKD was not to have a blueprint. It was not to have a lesson plan. I said it needed to have some format, and of course Bruce was from the school of finding the cause of your ignorance. That was his whole philosophy at that time. So during that time period we went round and round as far as the curriculum. I said, "Well you have to start someplace. Even a child has to be taught something before he can express total freedom." And so being a schoolteacher, I thought some things should be organized. So that's the way we pursued the course. But it was both of us. And he allowed me freedom in teaching, and then he put his own input in, and

gradually, kind of a standard appeared. But he often stressed that we shouldn't be bound by it. And that's what might happen in the future.

IKF: How do you feel you may have aided Bruce in his development as a human being?

INOSANTO: I asked a lot of questions, and more or less played the devil's advocate.

IKF: What about his influence on you?

INOSANTO: I think that in going around with him my personality became more gregarious, because he was more of an extrovert and I was more of an introvert at the time. So I would say he took a little bit from me and I took a lot from him. It sort of blended.

IKF: Are JKD principles interchangeable with other endeavors?

INOSANTO: Yes. I think you can use them for business or almost any occupation. It's interchangeable. All knowledge is interchangeable.

IKF: If JKD must keep growing and evolving, how does JKD of 1967 differ from JKD than say, 1974?

INOSANTO: It's like comparing an old-time boxer like Jack Dempsey with Muhammad Ali, or Dempsey and Joe Louis with guys like James J. Corbett or John L. Sullivan. These people have to be respected because they were good at that time period. Just like my first JKD bunch were fighters, but technology-wise the 1974 group had more knowledge than my original Chinatown group.

IKF: And your 1985 group?

INOSANTO: My 1985-86 group has the potential to be better than even my 1974 group. Our whole philosophy is different. A lot of people say, "Where are the JKD people? Why don't they enter tournaments?" A lot of things people don't know, and maybe I shouldn't be bringing it out, but there's a lot of people who have trained with us but don't want their instructor to know they have trained through us. But they have gotten the technology and the techniques and used them to train their students to become champions. And a lot of the people in our organization are content just to learn and train and spar just for the fun of it. I think that's a major thing with the JKD group; they're not really interested in it ... they have competition. In fact, it was quoted to me by some of my people that sparred in stick fighting or kickboxing that their hardest matches have not been in tournaments; they have been in their own school. So it's kind of a thing where they get a good enough workout and they sort of progress on their own. They know where they are at all times.

IKF: With all the articles appearing about JKD, do you feel some of the information has been misinterpreted, or that the writers are not correct in what they are writing about?

INOSANTO: I think a little bit of both. Sometimes the information is misinterpreted, and sometimes the writer usually doesn't know what he is talking about. It's obvious. Just like if you were to write on a foreign country and you only stayed there a week. That does not give you an accurate point of view on what's happening in that country. You can't even know Los Angeles after living there let's say, a year, because there are many different areas of L.A. and the lifestyles are different in different areas. So it is with JKD.

IKF: There is a large group of people who were not around when Bruce was alive. Many articles are written supposing what would have happened if Bruce had fought this martial artist or that one. Is there any validity to these arguments?

INOSANTO: In my opinion it really doesn't matter if one person was better than another person. It is pure conjecture; like if you were to try to compare a quarterback from 1986 with one from 1979. It's purely academic who is better than whom, and it really doesn't matter. It's like comparing singers.

IKF: But a large group of young people have grown up reading articles and seeing things about the man that might be distorted, misinterpreted or out-and-out incorrect. What about the claims he was just a movie actor, for instance?

INOSANTO: Let me just say that if I had a pet peeve, that would be the biggest. I never considered Bruce to be a movie star. I'm sorry but he was not a movie star in my opinion. A martial artist, yes, but a movie star, no. It would be like saying that Johnny Weismuller was only "Tarzan," and not really a great swimmer. He was a swimmer before he became a movie actor. Bruce was a martial artist first, and movie actor second.