

JEET KUNE DO

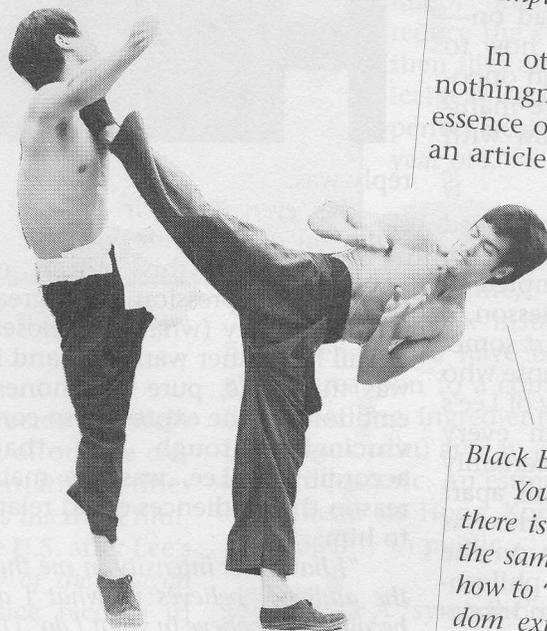
THE ART OF THE INDIVIDUAL



By John Little

In a letter drafted to a friend and student named George Lee (See "The George Lee Letters" starting on page 54.—ED.) during the mid 1960s, Bruce Lee asked his friend create for him three signs that could be hung on the wall of his Los Angeles' kwoon. The signs were intended to illustrate the thought behind a philosophical precept that Lee had created known as the "Three Stages of Cultivation." The first sign consisted of one red half and one gold half of the Yin/Yang symbol with no dot in either half. This

monly rendered, only in Lee's chosen colors of red and gold with a dot of gold in the red half and a dot of red in the gold half.



one whole.

The third sign was simply a blank board with nothing on it except the phrase:

Emptiness—the formless form.

In other words, the return to nothingness. Lee expressed the essence of this symbolism during an article he wrote on his art for

served to illustrate extreme partiality where not even the suggestion of a component's opposite was present in either. The two halves, to further underscore this point, were not attached but separated from one another. The caption to this sign, Lee indicated, should read:

Partiality—the running to extremes.

The second sign consisted of the Yin/Yang symbol as it is com-

Lee then added the arrows around the parameters to indicate that the process of returning to one's original state of first innocence had already begun. The caption on this sign read:

Fluidity—the two halves of

Black Belt magazine in 1971:

You must accept the fact that there is no help but self-help. For the same reason, I cannot tell you how to "gain" freedom—since freedom exists within you—I cannot tell you how to "gain" self-knowledge. While I can tell you what not to do, I cannot tell you what you should do, since that would be confining you to a particular approach. Formulas can only inhibit freedom, externally dictated

prescriptions only squelch creativity and assure mediocrity. Bear in mind that the freedom that accrues from self-knowledge cannot be acquired through strict adherence to a formula; we do not suddenly "become" free, we simply "are" free.

Such an approach meant that Bruce Lee did not award colored belts—as other martial arts schools do—as an indicator of progress in his method of martial philosophy. Doing so, he believed, would only be rewarding and encouraging an individual's ability to "accumulate knowledge"—which was definitely a step in the wrong direction:

Learning is definitely not mere imitation, nor is it the ability to accumulate and regurgitate fixed knowledge. Learning is a constant process of discovery—a process without end. In JKD we begin not by accumulation but discovering the cause of our ignorance—a discovery that involves a shedding process.

The key to this shedding process lies in the pragmatic intuition born of the "Three Stages of Cultivation." If, for example, a specific way of doing things was found to work well for an individual, then he should incorporate it into his own interpretation of Jeet Kune Do. If it didn't work, then it should be discarded. This principle can be applied to anything, from combat to successful job hunting. If you find something that you like or, more importantly, that is functional for you, reduce it down, component by component, until you discover the root essence or axiomatic primary of what made for its effectiveness. Once this is discovered, you are in a position to improvise

within these parameters of effectiveness and, ultimately, refine the component to better suit your own individual temperament and natural flow.

Bruce Lee worked over time to quantify and formulate this process into a four-step guide to self-enlightenment that would ultimately come to define the very essence of Jeet Kune Do:

- 1) *Research your own experience;*
- 2) *Absorb what is useful;*



"While I can tell you what not to do, I cannot tell you what you should do, since that would be confining you to a particular approach. Formulas can only inhibit freedom, externally dictated prescriptions only squelch creativity and assure mediocrity."

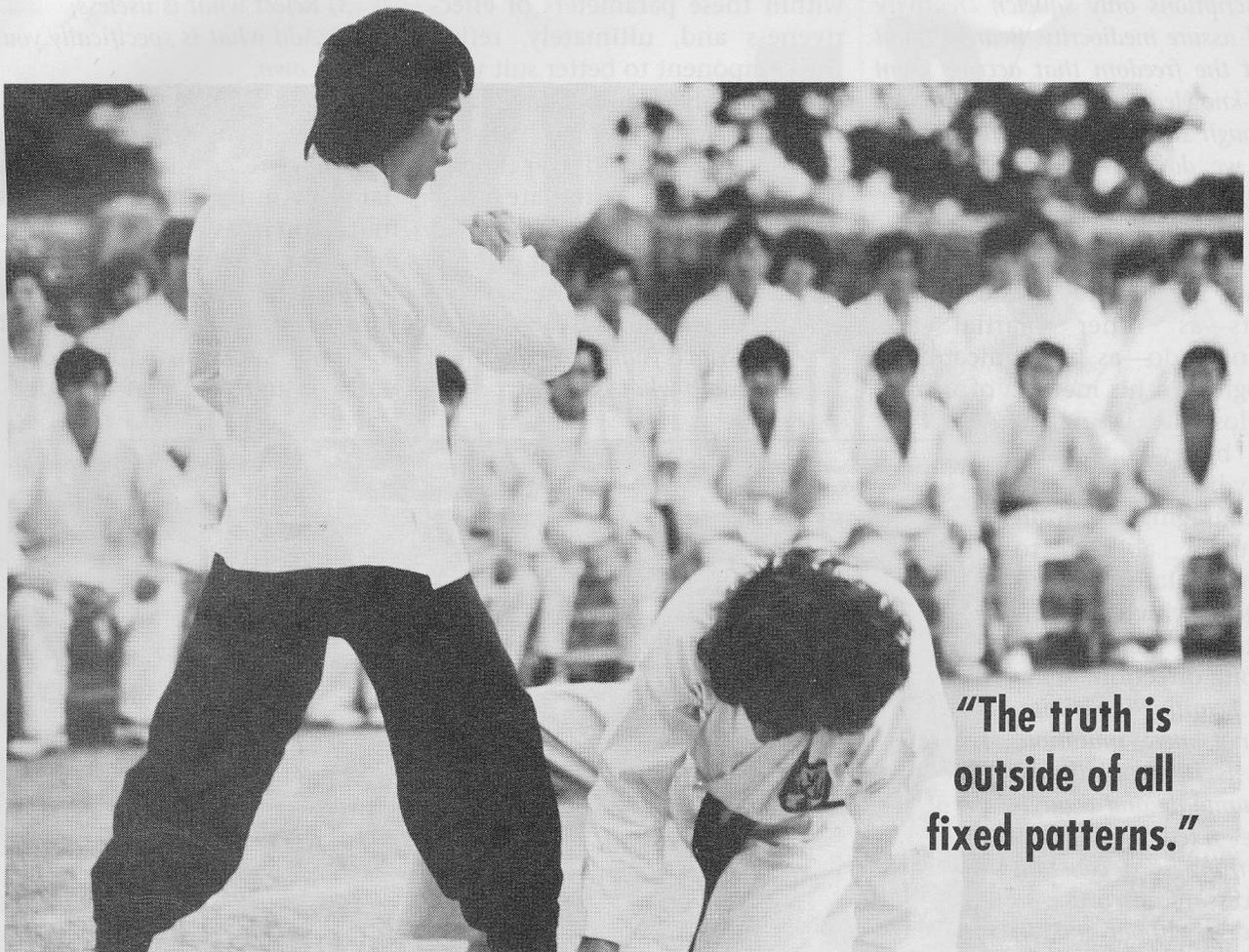
- 3) *Reject what is useless;*
- 4) *Add what is specifically your own.*

This, then, was Bruce Lee's personal prescription for individual growth. If we can apply these four principles to any activity or endeavor we engage in, we will be far richer, both creatively and spiritually. The ability to be able to apply such principles to the daily situations we encounter

cultivates a unique perspective that ultimately leads to the creation of significant and productive human beings, people who are contributors to art, literature, the sciences—to culture. And this was not to imply that what worked well for one man would necessarily work equally well for another. Lee offered no "cookie-cutter," one-size-fits-all philosophy. He did not believe that there existed but one single route to self knowledge:

Learn the principle, abide by the principle and dissolve the principle. In short, to enter a mold without being caged in it, and OBEY THE PRINCIPLES WITHOUT BEING BOUND BY THEM.

In fact, another sign that Lee had made up addressed this very



**"The truth is
outside of all
fixed patterns."**

issue even more specifically:
*The truth in combat is different
for each individual in this style.*

And again, he warned about
the dangers of simply aping suc-
cessful individuals in other styles

***"A true Jeet Kune Do
man never opposes
force or gives way
completely. He is pliable
as a spring and comple-
ments his opponent's
strength. He uses his
opponent's technique
to create his own."***

or, in the final analysis:
*My followers in Jeet Kune Do, do
listen to this...all fixed set patterns
are incapable of adaptability or plia-
bility. The truth is outside of all
fixed patterns.*

The linchpin underscoring
the entire conceptual framework
of Jeet Kune Do (or JKD, as Lee
would acronyistically refer to it)
was, is and shall remain pragmat-
ism. Will it work for you? Will it
lead to a benefit? If the answer is
"no," then move immediately to
Principle Three and reject it as
useless. If, however, there's some-
thing in what you are beholding
that you feel has potential,
absorb it as being useful and
move on to Principle Four by cul-
tivating it, carefully examining
its various applications until
you've adapted and modified it
into something that is your own
creation and usable for your own
personal benefit.

If you recall Bruce Lee's
account of the lessons learned at
sea while sailing on a junk, he dis-
covered the true nature of *Tao*, or
the spontaneous natural workings
of the universe as a whole. He car-
ried this lesson into everything he
did, including the formulation of
his own personal form of self
expression, Jeet Kune Do:

*Jeet Kune Do is training and dis-
cipline toward the ultimate reality
in combat. The ultimate reality is sim-
ple, direct and free. A true Jeet Kune
Do man never opposes force or gives
way completely. He is pliable as a
spring and complements his oppo-
nent's strength. He uses his oppo-
nent's technique to create his own.*

*You should respond to any cir-
cumstances without prearrangement,
your action should be as fast as a
shadow adapting to a moving object.*

Lee held that the best way to
allow this natural way to flow
through you was to relax and ease

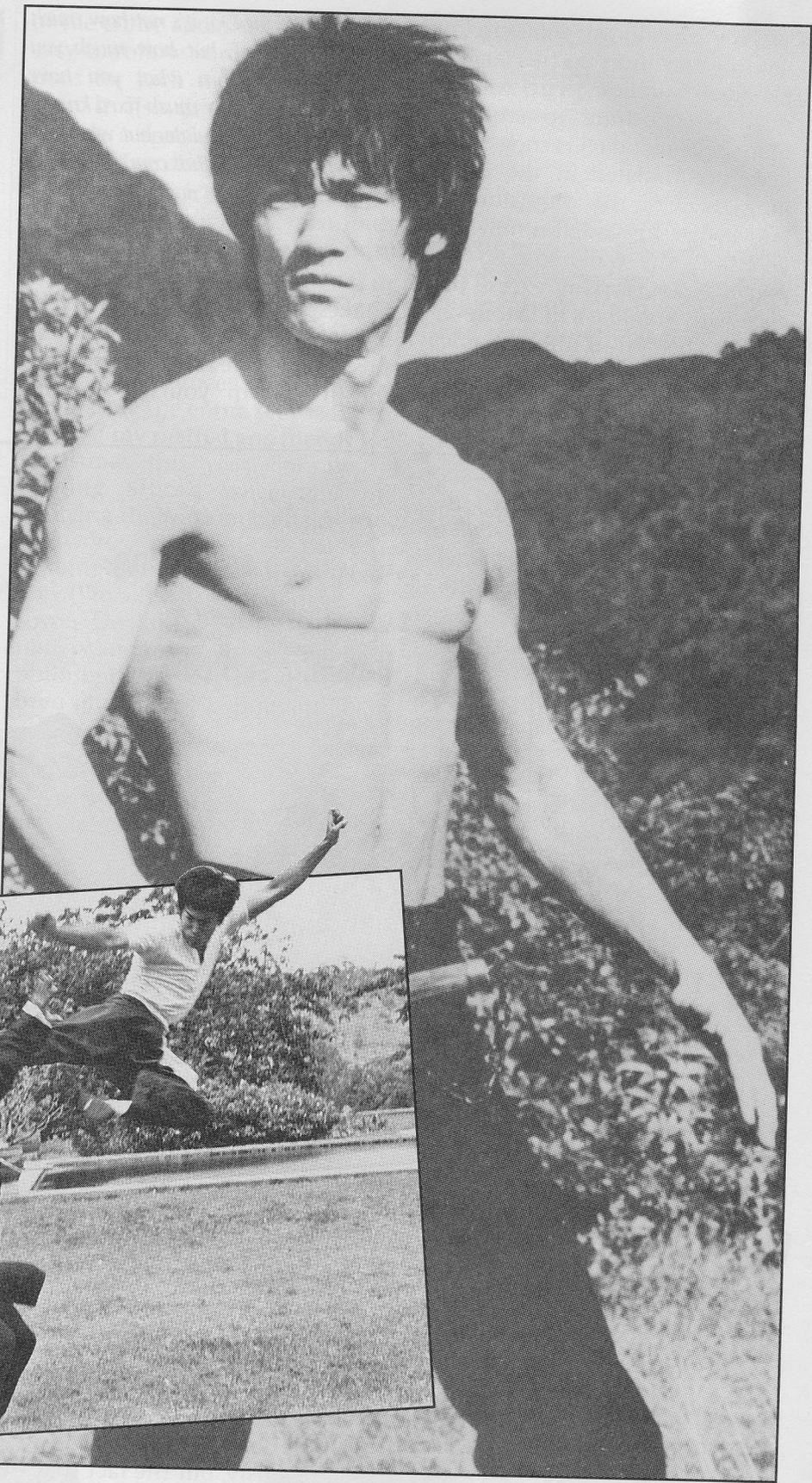
the burden of intense concentration and focus:

Not being tense but ready. Not thinking yet not dreaming, not being set but flexible—it is being “wholly” and quietly “alive,” aware and alert, ready for whatever may come.

According to Bruce Lee, to practice Jeet Kune Do successfully required one to have an empty mind. Not just thinking about nothingness, which still implied thinking. He held that everything in the universe had two parts (à la Yin/Yang) which, collectively, made one whole. In Jeet Kune Do there was always give and take, with the understanding that both were necessary and mutually dependent components of the whole and greater scheme of things.

He said the fluidity a Jeet Kune Do student sought could best be described by the story of the centipede:

The many-footed creature was asked how it managed to walk on all of its feet without getting them tangled up. When the



centipede stopped to consider how it managed this daily function, it tripped and fell. And so, life should be a natural process, in which the

development of the mind is not allowed to throw the natural flow of life out of balance.

Once one has reached a level

where one is in touch with the working of their innermost soul, their movement appears effortless, enabling the individual to perform many complex maneu-

vers at an almost subconscious level of operation. At this stage of personal evolution, there exists no need to continue to stockpile more basic maneuvers such as had been accumulated at the beginning stage of the acquisition of knowledge. Instead, it is now time to empty the warehouse so that you are not carrying excess baggage with you like a millstone—as you climbed on to still higher levels in your personal evolution.

The true *Tao of Jeet Kune Do* then, according to Bruce Lee, lay not in a process of accumulation, of the adding to your inventory of more and more factual knowledge, but rather in its elimination. To seek for the root or common denominator in all things—as they are revealed to you, personally—and then employ this knowledge as you see fit and of its own accord, like echo following sound or shadow following subject:

In Jeet Kune Do, it's not how much you have learned, but how much you have absorbed from what you have learned. It is not how much fixed knowledge you can accumulate, but what you can apply "alively" that counts. "Being" is more valued than "doing."

Lee's point is well taken. You may well be able to read Shakespeare's plays, you may be able to quote Voltaire or Bertrand Russell or some new philosopher; but if you in yourself are not

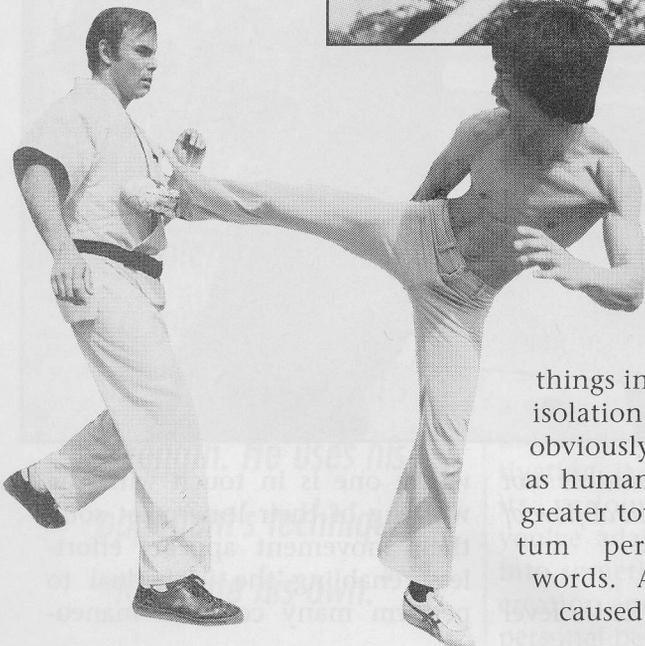
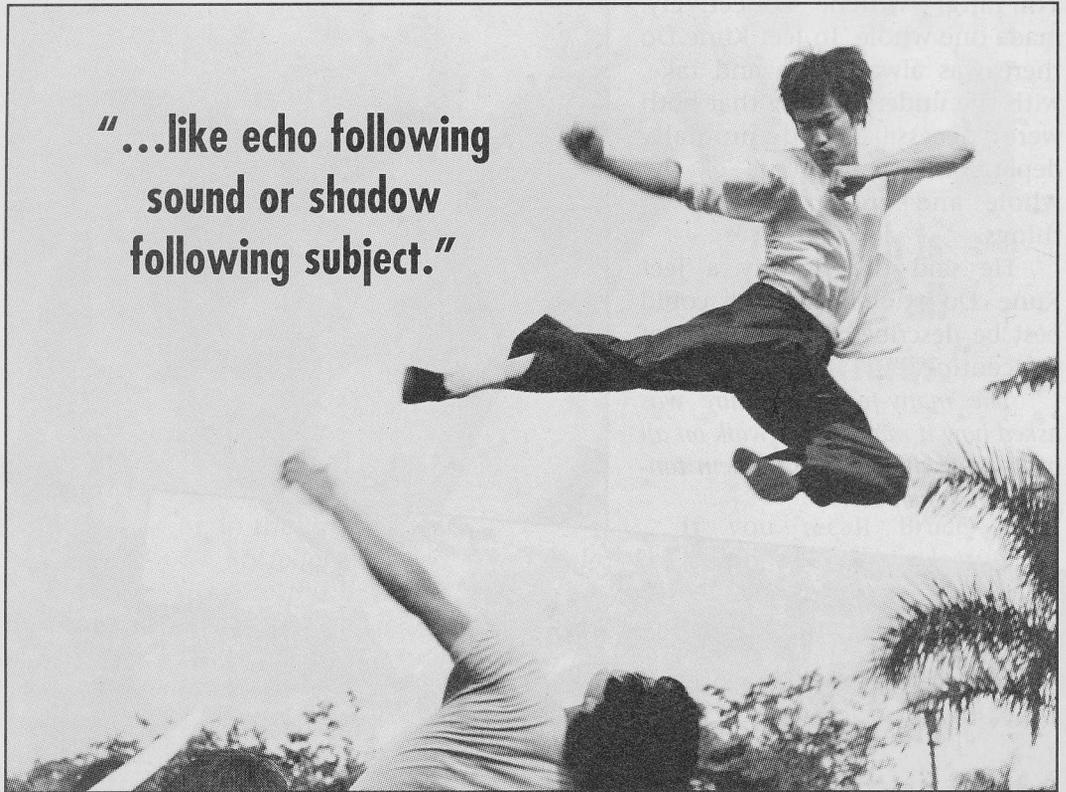
the martial arts world of the late 1960s was a very revolutionary conclusion indeed:

Man, the living creature, the creating individual is always more important than any established style or system.

When asked in 1972 to explain this statement, Lee provided the following answer:

I mean this: I mean that man is always in a learning process. Whereas "style" is a concluding,

"...like echo following sound or shadow following subject."



intelligent, if you are not creative, then what was the point of this education? Lee believed that the core of intelligence was to see things in their totality—not in isolation. Not just martial arts, obviously, but the fact that we, as human beings, are part of a greater totality as well. A quantum perspective, in other words. And this perspective caused him to draw what, in

established, solidified something, you know? I mean you cannot do that, because you learn every day as you grow on, grow older. Each person must not be limited to one approach. We must approach it with our own self; you know? Art is the expression of ourselves, whereas if you go to, say, a Japanese style then you are expressing the Japanese style—you are not expressing yourself:

And self-expression was the top of the martial arts mountain, as far as Bruce Lee was concerned.