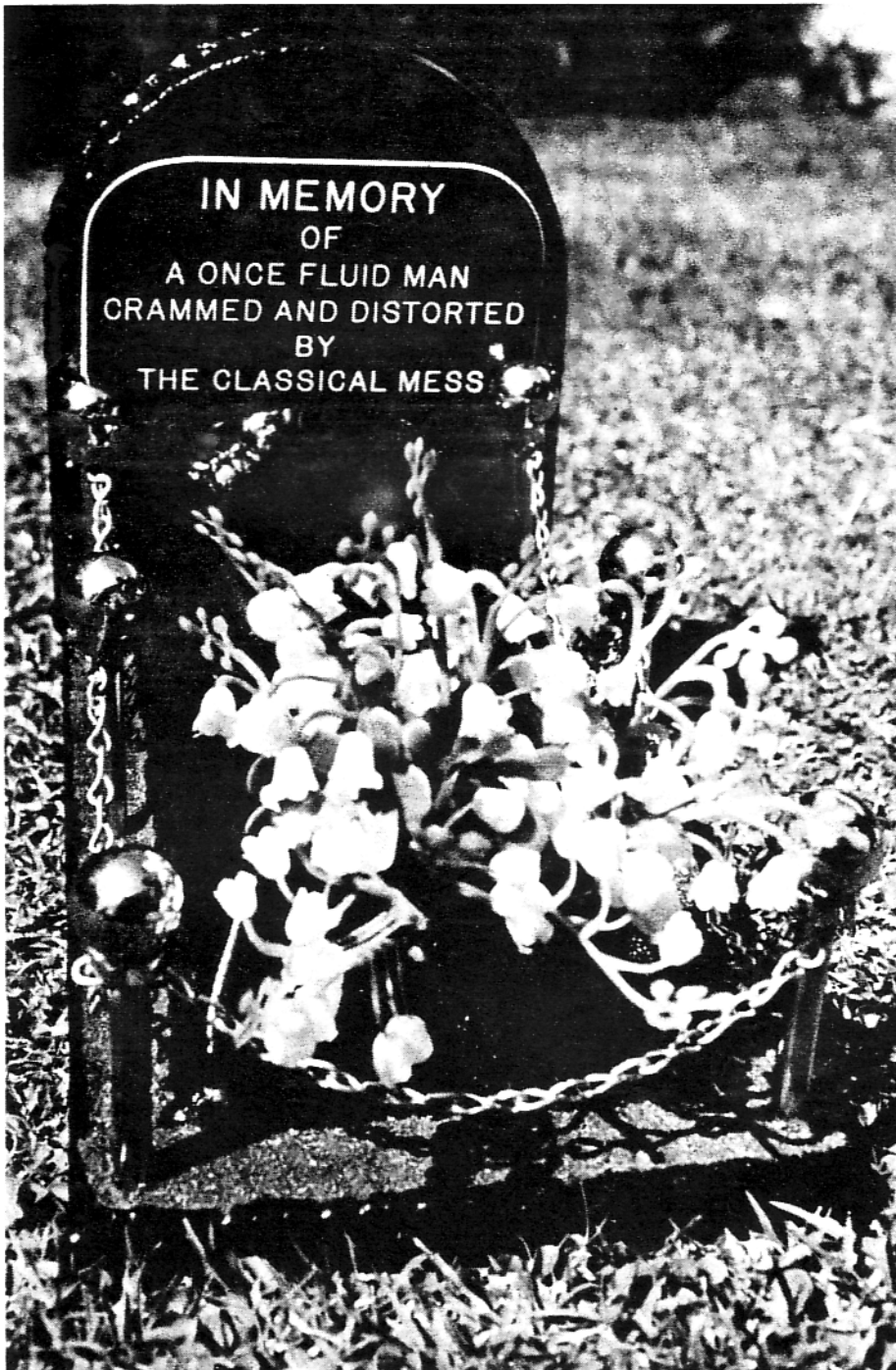


"The Classical Mess and Organized Despair"

Bruce Lee's criticisms of styles and forms

Photos by Joe Bodner



by Richard D. Smith

The martial arts school was hard to find, practically hidden away in Los Angeles' Chinatown. It had a small sign near the door which read, "In memory of a once fluid man, crammed and distorted by the classical mess."

The sign was in the shape of a tombstone. The instructor of the school was Bruce Lee.

Bruce Lee was a critic of classical systems and form training. He was an outspoken critic, and a good one—so far, the best. Even traditional martial artists owe it to themselves (and their students) thoroughly to understand his criticisms. Whether this changes their training or opinions is really not important (the author personally remains in favor of form training). Let us simply "take what is useful."

Lee's philosophy of fighting arts, his criticisms of them—even his entire outlook—found a center in his quest for the totally personal, the liberating, the pragmatic and direct.

Bruce Lee—Never Rigidly Bound to Tradition

His insistence on personal experimentation, not rigidly bound to established systems, is well known. Only by such inquiry, Lee believed, with one's total being, could the liberating truth of martial arts be experienced. "Truth cannot be structured or confined," he wrote. "I hope to free my comrades from bondage to styles, patterns and doctrines."

The practicality and directness he sought, permeate every record of his thoughts. It is demonstrated in the material newly released as *Bruce Lee's Fighting Method—Self-Defense Techniques*, which he compiled in 1966. Where a hundred other instructors would teach a complicated sequence of break holds and arm twists against a

wrist grab, Lee simply decks his attacker with a left cross.

The name of his art represents this. "Jeet Kune Do—the way of the intercepting fist." The essence of his quest for ultimate, Zen-like directness is beautifully expressed in a quote from his *Tao of Jeet Kune Do*. "Would that we could at once strike with the eyes!" is Lee's lament. "In the long way from the eye through the arm to the fist, how much is lost!"



THE LATE BRUCE LEE, in a typical pose which demonstrates his famous side-kick.

It is not surprising that forms—kata, hyung, patterns, sets—should invite Lee's special disdain. They seemed almost symbolic of what was wrong with organized systems. "Instead of going immediately to the heart of things, flowery forms (organized despair) and artificial techniques are ritualistically practiced to simulate actual combat. Then instead of 'being' in combat, these practitioners are 'doing something' about combat."

Styles Created By Individuals

Lee had an interesting theory about the development of classical martial arts. He stressed that in spite of colorful

legends surrounding their origins, styles are created by individual human beings. "After [a master's] death," wrote Lee, "his students took 'his' hypothesis, 'his' postulates, 'his' inclination, and 'his' method and turned them into law."

Forms, then, represented the petrified remains of the initial techniques, handed down over the years as prearranged patterns. Lee saw these as a distortion of the master's original personal truth.

"But the distortion does not necessarily end here," his historical theory continues. "In reaction to 'the other's truth,' another martial artist, or possibly a dissatisfied disciple, organizes an opposite approach . . . Soon the opposite faction also becomes a large organization, with its own laws and patterns." Thus the organized despair gives rise to reorganized despair!

The fact that Lee was Chinese, raised in Hong Kong, is in no little way significant in his reaction against classical systems and their forms. Among Chinese gung fu styles are found some of the most elaborate and esoteric systems in the whole of Asian fighting arts. Many kata are based on the movements of animals (both real and mythical), demanding years of practice to master their long, ornate sets. It's no wonder that an energetic, direct and philosophically rebellious young man reacted against classical form practice.

"Just as yellow leaves may be gold coins to stop the crying children, thus the so-called secret moves and contorted postures appease the unknowledgeable martial artists," Lee said.

Kata Patterns Not Practical In Street

Lee also made the usual criticism of forms, saying in an interview, "How can you fight by doing kata? There's no way a person is going to fight you in the street with a set pattern."

But practicalities are only the skin of his criticism. It is the philosophical/psychological aspect that is at the bone marrow of it. Not so much that form techniques are no good, but more crucially that they are enforced repetitions of a portion of someone else's ideas. Hence their practice closes a student off from total experience—in this case, the total experience of combat. Lee seemed more concerned that martial artists would become narrow-minded through forms than that they would not learn any fighting.

"If any style teaches you a method of fighting, then you might be able to fight according to the limit of that

method," he admitted, "but that is not actually fighting.

"Classical forms dull your creativity, condition and freeze your sense of freedom. You can no longer 'be' but merely 'do,' without sensitivity.

"If you follow the classical pattern, you are understanding the routine, the tradition, the shadow—you are not understanding yourself."

And so Lee devised no forms for his jeet kune do. "There are no fixed patterns because the truth is outside of all fixed patterns . . . There are no prearranged sets or 'kata' in the teaching of JKD, nor are they necessary. Consider the subtle difference between 'having no form' and having 'no-form.' The first is ignorance, the second is transcendence." "No form" meant anarchy, lack of discipline. But the Zen-like "no-form" meant to have no preconception that narrowly channels the intellect and inhibits the smooth, unselfconscious reactions of the body. In his distrust of classical training, he showed a deep concern for people's potentials—potentials that were, in his view, all too often smothered by slavish, enforced devotion to a "style."

Lee Influenced by Zen

Yet it is interesting to note the influence of Zen on Bruce Lee. At no time does he suggest the practice of its usual meditative sitting, so well known in the classic martial arts, but again and again he makes reference to Zen as an important philosophy.

This represents much about Lee's philosophy. Though he criticized classical training, he drew heavily from its techniques and traditions. At times, he demonstrated great respect for organized systems. He had mastered one himself and later taught it, along with its kata, to others. It left its mark on Lee. In fact, he wrote in his *Tao of Jeet Kune Do*, "Do not deny the classical approach simply as a reaction, for you will have created another pattern and trapped yourself there."

The system Lee studied and mastered was the 400-year-old Chinese gung fu system of wing chun. He taught it for a while in California, and went on to ghostwrite the 1972 Ohara Publications book on the art (Lee finally gave the credit and the proceeds to his student, James Yimm Lee, who was terminally ill with cancer).

More than a third of the book is devoted to the first wing chun kata, sil lim tao. Interestingly, Lee is quite favorable to form practice in his introduction to sil lim tao. "[It] teaches correct elbow



BRUCE LEE ENGAGES in a moment of lightness and fun with his friend, James Yimm Lee (back), to whom he gave credit and proceeds from his book on wing chun.

placement, protection of center-line, and economy of movements in attack and defense," he wrote. "The hand movements will later be put to good use in the practice of *chi sao* (sticking hands). *Sil lim tao* is also applied effectively in a combat situation."

He concludes by saying, "*Sil lim tao* plays such an important part in wing chun training that you should start each practice session with this form before going on to more advanced techniques."

Besides the concept of sticking hands, wing chun gave to jeet kune do the theory of quadrants (high/low, inside/outside) or "gates" with which the practitioner organizes his defense. JKD's directness and economy is that of wing chun.

Will the real Bruce Lee please stand up? No, they are all the same man, not

contradictory but merely different facets of the same crystal. Note that wing chun style has little in common with the complicated, flowery, classical gung fu systems that Lee so despised. Even the *sil lim tao* form is far removed from forms like "Nine Dragons at Sea" or moves called "Embrace Tiger, Return to Mountain." Robert Lee has said that his brother investigated other styles before deciding to study at Yip Man's wing chun kwoon. Also, Bruce began the wing chun book under a pseudonym, feeling that he no longer gave the system total allegiance.

First A Martial Artist— Then An Actor

Linda Lee tells us that her husband considered himself first a martial artist, who worked as an actor. As such, he

respected many followers of organized martial arts systems. Though the story is told of the Japanese sensei who challenged Lee to a fight and was quickly defeated ("He was too slow and stiff"), Lee had praise for Japanese classical training methods (although he is seen beating up Japanese karateka in *Fists of Fury!*).

"I have to give the Japanese credit for installing regimentation in their schools," he said in a rare turnabout. "The Japanese sensei is revered and his command is law; but not the kung fu instructor . . . If we didn't like what he wanted us to do, we used to say, 'God-damit! We have to do that crap again?'"

Lee also put on a few co-demonstrations with Korean tae kwon do men. They would demonstrate techniques and he would lecture, interspersing his remarks with numerous funny stories and anecdotes.

The funny stories are unfortunately heard no more. Nor is the sharp report of the man's side kick. His one-inch punch no longer knocks volunteers backwards, but his ideas still can.

For those of us left to read the words, view again the image captured on film, see all the Bruce Lee T-shirts and decals for sale, and ponder it all, there is a deep responsibility. In Lee's view, enshrinement of ancient masters meant entombment of their truths. And from behind the tombstone rose the distorted specter of the Classical Mess. So let it not be with Bruce Lee, and his jeet kune do. It means we must see him as a human being with many sides, even contradictions. He would have wanted it that way.

With a free mind, even the most traditional martial artists can benefit from his criticisms of classical systems, being aware of the influence the systems had on him. When his finger points to the moon of total liberation, let us remember that he walked on this earth as we do. The Bruce Lee who (inspired by D.T. Suzuki's commentaries on Zen) would write of the aims of his martial art, "Jeet kune do teaches us not to look backward once the course is decided upon—it treats life and death indifferently," was also the Bruce Lee who climbed into a sports car with his friend Steve McQueen and soon ". . . was holding my seat and praying for my life. I kept thinking, 'What if he hits a stone? There's no tomorrow.'"

Perhaps the yin and yang of those two quotations hold an insight into the classic, nonclassical man named Bruce Lee.

