

A Case for Consistency

By Rich Hale

In some ways, I think Mr. Parker was his own worst enemy, when it came to creating a martial art that was based on consistency. On one hand he created a standard practice manual - then he personally taught many of his students to do the material differently.

On a personal note, I spent years searching for "the" way to do our techniques and forms. Then one day, in the early eighties, Mr. Parker sent me a thick packet of his most recently revised technique manuals and a videotape of Jim Mitchell performing all the material from yellow through black. Now, although Mr. Parker isn't seen on the video, he can be clearly heard calling out the basics, techniques, sets and forms. You can hear him telling Jim to do the techniques slowly and at full speed. He asks that the camera zoom in to show detail and asks for additional angles. I was so excited to, at long last, have the final authority on Ed Parker's Kenpo.

Then I noticed Jim doing unfamiliar moves within well documented techniques and forms. I would freeze the video and scramble to look up the moves in question. Sure enough, Jim was doing a fair number of things differently from how they were outlined in the manuals. How could this be? I had the most recent manuals available and a video tape that came in the same envelope - but the material already didn't match. Damn, so much for "the" way of doing things.

Some time after that, when I'd had the opportunity to spend more time studying with Mr. Parker, I realized that he wasn't teaching everyone how to do things differently, but teaching everyone how to do "the same thing" differently. It was never about the techniques, but the principles that the techniques are based on that was important. I understand that now, but even with this realization in mind, I still teach "by the book". Not the one I got in the mail back in the early eighties, but the one Mr. Parker gave us just before he passed away. I find it to be consistent with earlier manuals, but more descriptive in terms of how techniques are executed and how the principles are applied.

But there's also another reason I teach from the book. I like knowing that I can visit other "Ed Parker" Kenpo schools and their material will be very similar to my own. To me, Kenpo is more than a fighting art, it's what I enjoy doing and sharing with other people. Having consistent material among schools makes it easier to share and interact with one another.

When Larry Tatum ran the West Los Angeles studio, we had a constant stream of Kenpo men, and women, from all over the world coming in to work out with us. The same thing was true for Mr. Parker's Pasadena studio, which was run by Frank Trejo. Although Larry and Frank are very different when it comes to their individual style of Kenpo, they were both teaching from the same manuals, making interaction between us and our guests not only possible, but enjoyable.

On the other hand, I recently visited a school where the material was so vastly different than what I teach, that it wasn't even like being in a Kenpo school. I never went back, because the only thing we had in common is how we spelled Kenpo. I'm not saying they weren't teaching Kenpo, because they were. But because they had chosen to deviate so far from the manuals, our two versions of Kenpo just weren't compatible.

Mr. Parker wanted to create an internationally uniform system of Kenpo that you could start learning in California and continue learning in Texas, New Jersey, or Ireland - without having to relearn your material every time you moved to, or visited, a new school. This doesn't mean we can't go beyond the base material, as outlined in our manuals. Of course we can, and we should. Mr. Parker said many times that we should expand our knowledge and grow individually. When someone asks me how a technique is done, I sometimes say, this is how it's done, and this is how I do it. What I keep consistent is the curriculum I teach, not the way I personally perform every move. I believe that Kenpo is in the principles, not in the specific techniques we use to learn those principles, so a person could make up all new techniques and forms and still be teaching Kenpo. I just don't see any reason to do so.

To me it's like playing baseball; you could give someone four strikes instead of three and it would still be baseball. But it would also be more difficult to play with other teams, who have chosen to stick with the standard three strikes and you're out rule. I don't think adding more strikes to baseball would make it better. I think it would just make it different. To me, changing the system all around, without really creating anything new, is like rearranging all the letters in the alphabet and calling it a new language.

So, until someone really comes up with a better system of teaching the principle of Kenpo, than Ed Parker did, I guess I'll just keep doing what I'm doing.