

Tailoring the Art of Kenpo

By Rich Hale

When we're describing the difference between Kenpo and other martial arts we inevitably talk about how we tailor the art to the individual and not the other way around. As a selling point, tailoring is one of the best features we have to offer potential students. They may not understand the difference between borrowed force and opposing forces, but telling them we'll alter the art to fit them, instead of altering them to fit that art – now there's something everyone can understand. Unfortunately, many practitioners don't understand that tailoring is just a principle, not a license to do anything they want, because it "feels right" or "works for them".

Defining the term: Tailoring

Mr. Parker, in his *Encyclopedia of Kenpo*, defines tailoring as one of the key principles of Kenpo, entailing two major aspects:

1. Adjusting your physical as well as mental and emotional attitudes to fit each given situation.
2. Fitting moves to your body size, makeup, speed and strength in order to maximize your physical efforts.

In Volume 1 of *Infinite Insights into Kenpo*, Mr. Parker also introduces us to the principle of tailoring by saying:

"The martial arts should be made to suit the individual and not the reverse. Each practitioner should learn to alter moves so that they produce maximum results for him."

I think people get to that point and they're so happy with what they've just read, they quit paying attention to the rest of what Mr. Parker had to say, which is:

"Interestingly, the **basic principle** of a move invariably remains unchanged. It is generally the timing of the move that is changed, or weapon, or angle, not the **underlying principle** contained within. Very seldom, if ever, does the **underlying principle** change. Therefore, if a move changes in appearance yet gives an individual maximum effectiveness without changing the **underlying principle**, it is correct."

Notice that he said it's generally just the timing, weapon or angle that's changed. He doesn't give free license to change the technique itself. The reason is; techniques are designed to teach and reinforce principles. If you change the technique to the point that it no longer teaches, or reinforces, the specific principle intended, the entire technique becomes just another what-if scenario. And above all else he emphasized four times in a single paragraph that the "principles" don't change. This is because tailoring a technique is done in order to apply principles – not avoid them. This goes back to another of Mr. Parker quotes, "I teach these techniques not for the sake of teaching the techniques, but for the principles that are involved in the techniques." *Black Belt Magazine Nov. 1985*

Here's another quote from Mr. Parker in regard to tailoring:

"I'm a strong advocate of what we might term "tailoring." I believe systems are for individuals, not the reverse. When a person finishes, he should have the art designed to meet his own specific needs. I emphasize that although a sensei begins teaching a technique a certain way, he is offering a student a point of reference so that he may tailor the technique to fit him tightly. Even if a person alters the technique, so long as it is for his own good, I say, so much the better."

"Now that I have said that, I should add that I do not advocate the helter-skelter approach. You must have a base to start off with or you have nothing. After you're firmly versed, you can prefix the move; that is, put another move before it. You can suffix the move, or put one after it. Or you can insert another move within it. Once you have done this, you can put several moves together. You can alter the moves so they fit a particular offensive or defensive design. From there you might adjust the particular angle of offensive or defensive execution, without changing the essential strategy. On and on you can go, using force and speed as variables for your overall purpose and intent." *Official Karate Nov. 1975*

Again the first paragraph emphasizes the benefits of tailoring while the second paragraph sets the parameters in which tailoring should be used to be effective.

Being allowed (even encouraged) to tailor the art of Kenpo has to be one of the greatest gifts Mr. Parker could have given us. People come in all shapes and sizes and we certainly do have different physical, mental and emotional

attitudes as well as different body sizes and makeups. So, let's take another look at tailoring and see if we can clarify it further.

Differences, Weaknesses, & Strengths:

On its most basic level tailoring is used to make adjustments, to our art, in order to compensate for anatomical differences or weaknesses, and in some cases our strengths. A good example of tailoring, for anatomical differences, is the self defense technique *Twirling Wings*. When executing *Twirling Wings* tall people should aim their spinning elbow strikes for the head and short people should aim for the ribs. But, when teaching this technique we have to keep in mind that tall and short are relative and always changing. So, we shouldn't simply tell a shorter person to hit us in the ribs, as if we've fixed the technique for them. We should tell them that in order to make this technique work better against a taller opponent we can tailor the technique and strike to the ribs instead of the head. Then remind them that when they're working with someone of equal, or lesser, height they should tailor the technique back to a head strike again.

A good example of a tailoring for anatomical weaknesses is the middle knuckle fist in step No. 4 of *Parting Wings*. Have you ever actually delivered a full power middle-knuckle fists against an opponent, a heavy bag, or a makiwara board? It can hurt, and I don't mean the opponent, the bag, or the board. It can be especially painful if you miss the solar plexus and hit the breast bone. So unless you've properly conditioned your middle-knuckle fist, you may decide to tailor that particular strike into a vertical punch. Note that I said "tailor" and not "change". To permanently remove the middle-knuckle fist and teach a vertical punch instead would be short-changing the student, because you'll have neglected to teach the value and effectiveness of the pin-point effect principle. And undeniably, weapons with a smaller surface area have a greater penetrating effect than those with a larger surface area. Individual anatomical weaknesses don't negate principles, and techniques are designed to teach principles. Tailoring a middle-knuckle fist into a vertical punch is a viable alternative for someone who hasn't properly conditioned their knuckles, but unnecessary and counterproductive to those who have.

Tailoring to take advantage of our strong points is not that different from tailoring to compensate for a weakness. While tailoring for a lack of flexibility, we may kick to the knee instead of the kidney. While tailoring to take advantage of our flexibility, we may kick to the head instead of the kidney. Not because we have to, but simply because we can. Of course, not everyone is flexible enough to effectively kick to the head, so head kicks to a standing opponent should generally be considered tailored and not changed.

Mental and Emotional Attitudes:

As mentioned earlier, tailoring can also be used for mental and emotional attitudes. Take for example the finger thrusts to your opponent's eyes in techniques like *Five Swords* and *Circling Wing*. I was teaching a woman's self defense class once, when I said, "If attacked, you should go straight to your attacker's eyes." Most of the women cringed at the thought of gouging someone's eyes out, and one woman even blurted out, "I could never do that!" I said, "But what if it's a choice between being raped or digging a thumbnail into the attacker's eyes?" Without hesitation, she repeated, "I could just never do something like that." By now other women started to agree, saying it all sounds good on paper, but in an actual attack they would, more than likely, hesitate to gouge an attacker's eyes. So I said, "How about a head-butt to the attacker's nose? Could you violently smash an attacker's nose with your forehead?" Amazing, not only could every woman in the room do it, most of them were smiling big-time when they said, "Sure no problem!"

Being an avid hiker, I was in training for the most difficult hike I had taken on to date. It's called *The Death March*, which is a 48 mile, non-stop hike across the Grand Canyon and back again. You start on the South Rim, hike down to the bottom, across the canyon floor, up the other side to the North Rim, and then back again. There's no camping and you rest as little possible, because in order to have done *The Death March* you have to complete the task in less than 24 continuous hours – hence *The Death March*. In preparation for the event I read everything I could find on how to train for a 48 mile day hike, with ten thousand plus feet of elevation gain and loss. I also needed to know what, and how much, I should eat while I was doing it. How to train was no problem; the available information was plentiful and consistent. Everything I read about what to eat, on the other hand, was extremely frustrating. Some people said to eat candy; others said to eat meat and cheese. One guy said he had taken a tuna sandwich and big bag of M&Ms. Then I read a single sentence that put it all into perspective. "Anything you will eat is better than anything you won't eat." The bottom line is this; all you need is calories, sodium, electrolytes, and water, and there's no accounting for what the human stomach will tolerate under the stress of an ultra. You can figure out the perfect proportion of nutrients packaged into the lightest possible food source, but if it's not palatable while experiencing physical exertion nausea – you're not going to eat it!

Tailoring a self defense technique to an individual's mental and emotional attitude is the exact same thing. Anything someone is willing to do during an attack is better than anything they're not willing to do. If someone is so repulsed

by an eye gouge that they won't use it to save their life, then we should tailor the technique into something they are willing to do. After all, we've still taught the eye gauge and who knows, maybe in a moment of need, the victim of an attack will change their mind about using it.

The Ever-Changing Nature of Tailoring:

All practitioners should be aware of the ever-changing nature of tailoring. Early in our career we may need to tailor a technique to compensate for a lack of flexibility, later on we may tailor the same technique to take advantage of our exceptional flexibility, and later still we may need to tailor it back again.

Many new students may find it necessary to tailor techniques due to a lack of speed, flexibility, coordination, etc. This is to be accepted as part of the learning process. It's like running a marathon. The best runners seldom, if ever, walk during the 26.2 miles, but beginners may take frequent breaks in order to drink, eat, rest, stretch, etc. They're tailoring the run to fit their inabilities and lack of experience. The only problem would be if they were to limit their entire careers based on how they had to run their first six or eight marathons.

A good example of tailoring a technique back and forth is in step No. 8 of *Obscure Wing*. At this point we have flipped our opponent onto the floor, with him landing face-up at our feet. We have just done a left front crossover, towards 12 o'clock, sweeping our left foot across his head and face and our left foot is still in the air. Now, at step No. 8, with our left foot still in the air, we whip our right foot into the air, turning counterclockwise and deliver a right downward looping roundhouse kick to our opponent's solar plexus. The timing, as written, is to deliver the right downward looping roundhouse kick simultaneously as we plant our left to the ground. But, not everyone has the physical dexterity to perform this maneuver effectively, so a tailored alternative is to execute your left front crossover, sweeping through your opponent's head and face, plant your left foot on the ground and then execute the right looping roundhouse kick to his head. Note that I have used the dreaded word "and" instead of "with", but that's what tailoring is all about and why it's ever-changing. Eventually, with training, you should be able to perform this technique sequence in a single uninterrupted move, planting with the kick. Then, eventually, you may need to tailor it back to planting your foot on the ground first and then kicking as a separate move again. But that's only if you choose to continue with the art into your golden years.

What is vitally important, in regard to tailoring, is to continually revisit what we've tailored and make sure the tailoring we did yesterday is still relevant today. Let me ask all the more experienced practitioners a question. If a yellow belt came up to you and said that he had tailored one of his techniques in order to make it work better. What would your fist thought be? I suggest you may question if a yellow belt was qualified to make that decision. But I also suggest that many of the orange belt techniques you and I do today were tailored, by us, when we ourselves were yellow belts. This is why I say it's vitally important to revisit yesterday's decisions with today's knowledge. I can't begin tell you the number of times people have argued the validity of their technique based on how long they've done it that way. All I can say if you've spelled car as "kar" for the last forty years, all you've done is become very good at spelling it wrong.

Custom Tailoring:

As our skill sets and overall abilities increase it's perfectly acceptable to spice up some of our material with a little custom tailoring. This is when term *variable expansion* is at its best. But, I would also like to add a word of caution. It's at this point that tailoring tends to become change. For example, in the first sequence of *Circles of Protection* we're instructed to simultaneously deliver a right upward parry under and outside of your opponent's right punch as you deliver a left upward ripping claw to your his face. In my case, as I practiced this technique, I found it very easy and natural to add a left outward elbow to the inner biceps of my opponent's right arm en route to delivering the left upward ripping claw to his face. To experience this little insert for yourself, make a left middle-knuckle fist and punch yourself on the inside of your right biceps. (Be sure to punch really hard, or you might not fully enjoy the experience.) Now, I could easily decide this is simply a better way to do the technique and change how I teach it to include the additional strike. But not everyone has the flexibility to perform the technique in this way, so for me to change the technique, just because I can do it, would be a disservice to my students. What I've found to be a good alternative to changing a technique is to first, teach the technique as written. This way we have the base Mr. Parker referred to and have avoided what he described as the helter-skelter approach to teaching.

Then, if it's a technique I've tailored, I show them my personal version of the technique, explaining the differences and my reasoning behind the differences. I don't always tell them to do it my way and I don't always tell them not to. Eventually, any alterations they end up making to a technique should be their decision based what works for them, not what works for me.

A Simple Suggestion:

If you haven't already done so, I suggest you consider replacing words like "change" and "fix" to the words "tailor, tailoring and tailored". Consider some of the below examples of tailoring verses changing and fixing.

*I changed the technique to make it work better.
I tailored the technique to make it work better for me.*

*That technique could work better if you changed it.
That technique could work better, for you, if you tailored it.*

*Here, let's fix that technique so it works better for you.
Here, let's tailor that technique so it works better for you.*

*If Mr. Parker were here, he would thank me for fixing this technique.
If Mr. Parker were here, I don't think he would mind me tailoring this technique.*

*Mr. Parker wanted us to make changes to the system.
Mr. Parker wanted us to tailor the system to meet our needs.*

*Mr. Parker always changed the system and taught everyone differently.
Mr. Parker always tailored the system and taught everyone individually.*

Tailoring is truly a great and innovative concept that separates our system of Kenpo from most other martial arts, but it must be used intelligently and responsibly if we want it to add to, instead of take from, our art.