

## **Ed Parker's Kenpo Karate: Part 1 - Discovered in America**

*Discovered in America, Its Karate's Gold Mine of Motion*

by Loren Franck



*This three-part story on Ed Parker and the American Kenpo karate system he created is long overdue. A native of Honolulu, Hawaii, who graduated from Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, and settled in Southern California, Parker has devoted more than 30 years of his life to the martial arts and is recognized world-wide as one of the martial arts; most important contributors. However, Parker's concepts have been so innovative (some say revolutionary) that he has come under fire*

*by critics who have labeled him as everything from eccentric to insane. But ask the thousands of students who study his system – especially those confidants who know him best – and they all describe Parker very positively. Their consensus: The man's a genius.*

*Whether that's true or not, we at KKI thought you, the reader, should study the facts about Ed Parker for yourself, not rely on testimonials. Ponder the man and his fighting system; then make your own decision.*

*Part one of the three-part series will deal with Kenpo's origin and philosophy, while the second installment will investigate the principles of Parker's martial art. Finally, part three will detail the benefits of training in American Kenpo. - Ed*

### **Birth of a System**

One Sunday over 30 years ago, Parker attended a Mormon Sunday sacrament meeting in Hawaii and met Frank Chow. Chow looked pathetically thin, but bragged to Parker that he recently beat up the local bully. "I couldn't believe it," Parker recalls. "I thought this guy was lying to me – right in church." But Chow was telling the truth and later took the young Parker to see his brother William, who was the first to introduce Parker to the essentials of Kenpo.

Having a few Judo and boxing skills, Parker began investigating the martial arts more thoroughly, but was dissatisfied with what he saw. "I felt that a lot of the systems weren't applicable in an American environment," Parker says, "even though they appeared to be on the surface. So when I started to talk with William Chow and listened to what he did to intermix innovations to cope with the type of fighting we find in our environment, that's what really led me on to develop thoughts, principles and ideas of my own."

One thing that especially intrigued Parker was Chow's balance between linear and circular movements. Chow was leading Parker toward the goal of logical and practical motion, which was where Parker was searching for.

### **Pure Intelligence**

The more Parker pondered the principles of motion, the clearer those principles became. In fact, he refers to his learning experience (which continues today) as "inspiration" – pure intelligence flowing into the mind.

Then came a major breakthrough, perhaps the single most important episode in Kenpo's creation. One night while watching a film, Parker ran it backwards rather than change the reels. And that's when it hit him: Reverse motion is the other half of motion. It was so simple, yet so crucial.



*The study of target areas is important in Kenpo. One principle of this theory is to observe zones instead of target areas. Taking this approach teaches you to encompass the whole and discourages target fixation. Thus, specific areas are automatically checked. Observing zones teaches you how to control your opponent's natural weapons and targets. These photos represent imaginary dissections of an opponent's anatomy and the space surrounding him. The types of zones include: height zones, which encompass protection of three top-to-bottom levels.*

With that, American Kenpo was well on its way. The principles of motion as they applied to 20th-century American fighting were being incorporated into one of the martial arts; most earth-shattering systems. And because Parker, a devout Mormon, regularly read the scriptures, he couldn't help but discover how Christ spoke in parables, which caused Parker to receive another blast of inspiration. "Wow," he said to himself. "Is it possible that I could do the same with Kenpo that Christ did with the teachings of the scriptures?" It was not only possible, but was inevitable.

Why the name American Kenpo karate? Kenpo was a mother art in Okinawa, and most Okinawans referred to karate as Kenpo. "Karate is a form of Kenpo," Parker explains. "Kenpo is what your last name is to your first."

### **Father of American karate**

Because of his tailor-made system, Parker had long been known as the father of American karate. "I am the father of American karate," he modestly proclaims. "I'm not the father of Japanese karate placed in America. I devised an American system of combating those things we find in our environment. I'm the first one to create an American system of martial arts."

Parker eventually discovered that the martial arts closely resemble language. "We have a written as well as a spoken language," he often teaches his students, who now number almost 20,000 worldwide. "But in the written language - in our case, English - what do we do in terms of the individual? Well, we can print to convey our knowledge, we can use script to convey the knowledge we're writing, or if you're a secretary, you can write in shorthand."

How does that analogy relate to motion and American Kenpo? Parker explains: "Those who strictly use linear moves are using printed matter, so to speak. You have to stop one action before you can begin another. With what I was doing, however, you could retrace a path and the motion was continuous. Now if a punching was to come and I blocked it, and then retraced it going back to the face, its script. But when a punch comes and I blocked it to as I punch - all in the same move - that's shorthand motion. It's a single action of a defense along with my offense."

In another analogy, Parker likens motion to the alphabet and our numerical system. For instance, he says that with numbers, once you learn zero through nine, that's it; those are all you need. From there on you just rearrange them. Parker was quick to apply this numerical rearrangement system to the martial arts.

So, Parker asked himself, "What is the numerical system of motion? What's the alphabet of motion?" It took him years to learn the answers to those questions. Now he knows and he's written it all down. In fact, he's probably broken the anatomy of the martial arts down better than anyone else has.

### **Tailored Motion**

So, what's the underlying philosophy of American Kenpo? It's that motion should be tailored to the individual. Parker reasons that if shoes and clothes are made to fit individuals, why shouldn't martial arts be tailor-made? He argues that the arts should fit individuals, not vice versa. In fact,



*Width zones go from side to side of your opponent's body.*

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Parker is known as a tailor of motion because of this belief. "The secret of Kenpo," he explains, "is that you must have enough knowledge of motion to tailor it to the individual.

"One of the reasons why our school systems are failing is that they're teaching students to be robots. School systems aren't considering individual differences students have. Furthermore, schools should teach students to be good teachers not robots. When you teach students to become teachers, their knowledge increases twenty-fold, because to teach is to learn. This directly applies to Kenpo."

### **Is Kenpo Style?**

Basic to American Kenpo philosophy is the word "style." To many it means Shotokan, Goju-Ryu and so forth, but such applications have little meaning to Parker and those devoted to his system. "I've developed a system," he says, "and my system is structured to bring out a style of an individual. After that, his style will be determined on his anatomy."

According to Parker, a style in the martial arts is much like his style in painting. One of his favorite analogies is to imagine three paintings on the wall. One is a Michelangelo, the second is a Picasso and the third is a Rembrandt. What makes them different from each other? Style. Each painter uses the same principles of painting, but applied them differently.

There is no one correct way for everybody to do a certain martial art move, Parker asserts. Further illustrating the Kenpo concept of style, he says, "Four plus four equals want? Eight. Now, what's six plus two? Right, eight again. And five plus three? Seven plus one? Now, did I use the same numerical combination each time to get eight? No. And it's the same in Kenpo. Each Kenpoist can arrive at the same result a little differently, depending on his or her own style."

Beyond Phonics "can you remember when you were in the second and third grade?" Parker asks. "You remember when you learned to speak and write English language? How did you learn to speak? Did you not break words down into syllables? And when you broke the language down, what were those parts of speech called? Phonetics. So, we learn speech and language phonetically. It was ca-at, ra-at. Consequently, when I start teaching Kenpo to someone, I teach him the phonetics of motion.

"But when people speak to each other, they don't speak the phonetically. And in time, the fact that you know how to phonetically do a movement in articulating your actions and know what it's like to get maximum force, can be used as a gauge to get maximum force from the hip. That eliminates the phonetics and goes right to the motion itself."

### **Three States of Motion**

Parker looks to Kenpo much like three states of matter: solids, liquids and gases. You can freeze water and turn it into ice; water will still be liquid at room temperature; or you can heat it to the point where it turns into vapor. "Solid is solid," Parker says, "and whatever shape you solidify



*Depth zones consist of seven zones from the front to the rear of your opponent's body.*

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something in, that's the shape in which it will remain. Liquid seeks its level and flows down the path of least resistance, that gas seeks its volume.

"And that is the way I look at Kenpo," Parker continues. "The end result is that I can kick one opponent and back knuckle two other guys off to my side. That's using Kenpo in a vapor state, where I'm seeking my volume. But unfortunately, a lot of people haven't thought of this analogy; yet, it applies to the martial arts. There's a place for all three types of motion in Kenpo."

### **The Essence**

In short, Kenpo philosophy is revolutionary - in a good way. It says that anyone can master the art, no matter what their height, weight or body dimensions. The art is fit to the individual, something that few - if any - other arts can claim, and Kenpo exists to serve those who study it. It makes them great fighters who are highly skilled in self-defense, and it's hard to imagine a martial art that can offer anything more.