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the **JKD** **Professor**



Jeet Kune Do as Seen Through the Eyes of Gary Dill, James Lee's Most Prominent Student

by Paul J. Bax and John T. Bingham

PHOTOS COURTESY OF GARY DILL

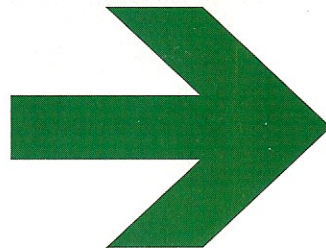
Gary Dill freely admits the reason for his initial attraction to the martial arts: self-defense. He had little interest in the philosophy or discipline the Asian arts offered. "I only wanted to learn how to kick someone's butt," he says.

"But as I grew older and hopefully wiser, I realized that the philosophical aspects were important to my overall development. Now I work on the combat arts, my *yang* side, on a daily basis, but I also work on my *yin* side, utilizing internal energy and *chi* breathing. I try to balance out my warrior spirit with both types of training."

When he started in 1963, Dill's styles of choice were karate and *jujutsu*. He didn't discover *jeet kune do* until three years later, when he spied Bruce Lee portraying Kato on the *Green Hornet*. "My perspective on the classical arts changed when I saw Kato on TV. Then *Black Belt* came out with a two-part series on Bruce, confirming his authenticity in *gung fu*," Dill says. "I found out about James Lee when I was in Vietnam and read about him in the old *Karate Illustrated* magazine in an article titled 'Special Gung Fu Training Devices.' The article indicated that James was teaching a jeet kune do class in Oakland, California, and I knew that was where I was going to be relocated to upon my return."

Once stateside, Dill tracked down James Lee. "My interfacing with James gave me the technical know-how, whereas Bruce's writings had given me the philosophical mind-set," he says. "But let me add this: James Lee's JKD class was so accelerated, so intense and so much in tune with combat [that] one would learn more in a month than many would learn in a year in a classical martial art. When I started training under him, I thought I'd died and gone to martial arts heaven. It was the best training I'd ever obtained."

While he appreciated the no-nonsense nature of JKD, Dill harbored no disrespect for the traditional arts he studied, one of which was *goju-ryu* karate under *Black Belt* Hall of Fame member Lou Angel. "I really enjoyed the hard-core sparring that went down in the 1960s in Oklahoma and Texas," he says. "I hated to do the *kata*, but they were a necessary evil for promotion. In those days, there was no sparring equipment. Everything was bare hand, and if you wanted to score a point, you'd better make some serious contact. I was fortunate to have Lou Angel as my sparring mentor, for he was and still is one mean fighting dude."





↑ Gary Dill holds a photo of his jeet kune do instructor, James Lee.

↓ The jeet kune do training that took place under James Lee's tutelage was accelerated, intense and combat-oriented, says Gary Dill (right).



Having been promoted by Angel to instructor in October 1965, Dill was content to stick with goju-ryu until James Lee accepted him into his Oakland JKD class in 1971. The eclectic art suited him to a T. "JKD was very combat oriented, and I took to it immediately because of my background in the rough karate sparring of the '60s," Dill says. "What was really great about JKD [was that] there were no kata."

Classes were held in James Lee's garage twice a week and typically lasted one hour. Shoes were worn, but uniforms were not. "We started with a formal salutation, spent several minutes loosening up and then jumped immediately into learning and practicing techniques," Dill says. "There were no breaks, no water; it was one hour of concentrated working out. James had no time for tire kickers and slackers. He was a nice guy, but he took his JKD seriously, and he expected you to do the same."

Before class began, Lee always made sure that the garage door was pulled two-thirds of the way down. One reason was that it kept passers-by from peeking in. The other had to do with humility. "To enter the garage, we had to literally crawl in under the door," Dill says. "It helped deflate those of us with egos."

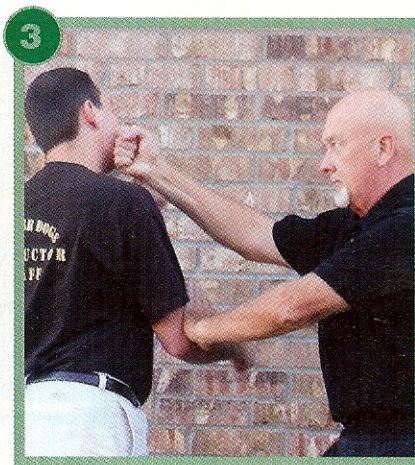
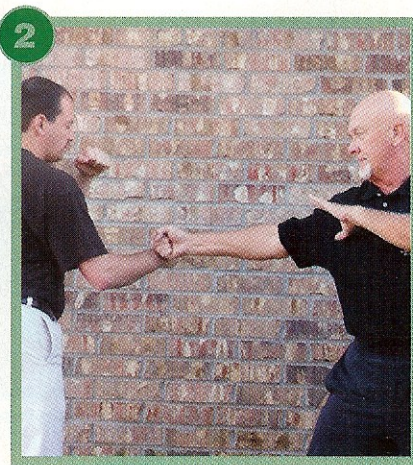
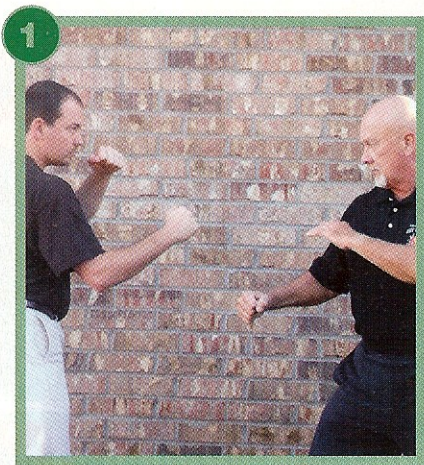
When Dill left Oakland, he spoke with Lee about carrying on the art and was given a lesson plan. "He sent me a three-page typewritten outline of JKD training and wrote on it that it was a good 18 to 24 months of training if taught properly," Dill says. "He also included 12 of his small, red *Introduction to JKD* booklets, which he gave new students when they were accepted into his garage class."

Despite Lee's low-profile approach to JKD, Dill says that his teacher wasn't overly protective of the art. "There were no secrets. He was just very cautious about who he taught. He was looking for serious, open-minded students who would give him 100 percent during the JKD workout."

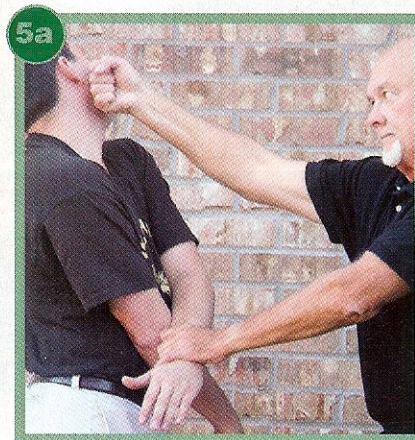
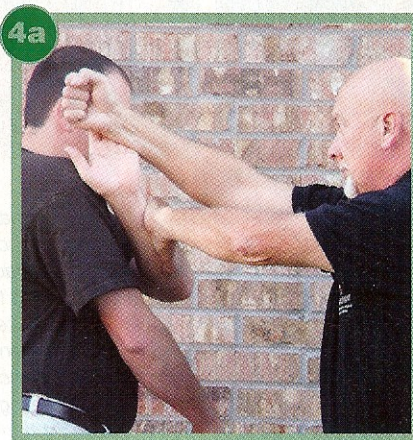
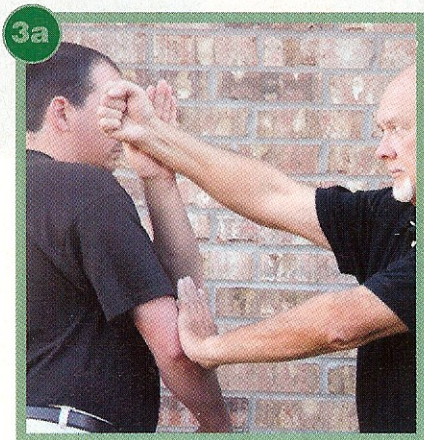
And for Lee, it was the workout that mattered. Philosophy and meditation played no role in the training sessions. Any intangibles that were taught were combat oriented. "James frequently spoke of the importance of developing a killer instinct," Dill says. "He said that one could never become a true JKD man unless he had it. I'd just gotten back from Vietnam, [so] I understood what he meant."

"What is killer instinct? It's the ability, the desire, to take out a person who's threatening you and do it without hesitation, without any afterthought. To take care of business without any remorse. That's my definition. James never defined it. He would say that you must find your own definition and when you did, you would know it."

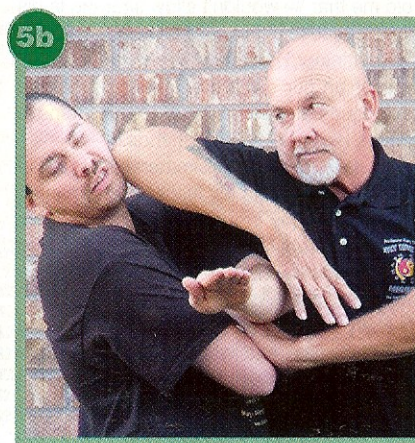
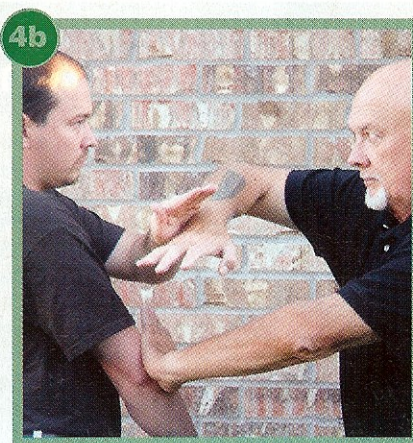
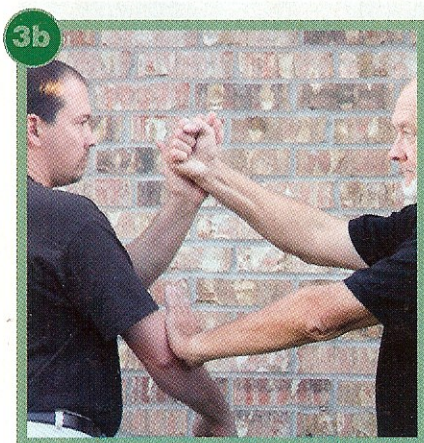
Surprisingly, sparring wasn't part of the curriculum. "I don't know what happened



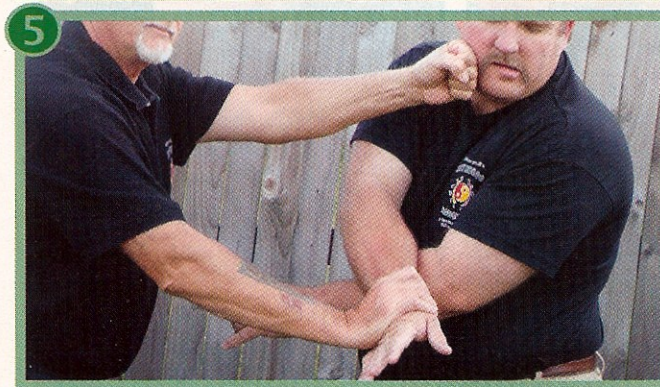
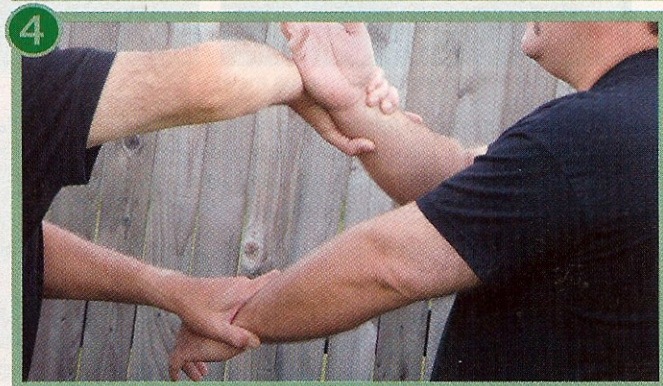
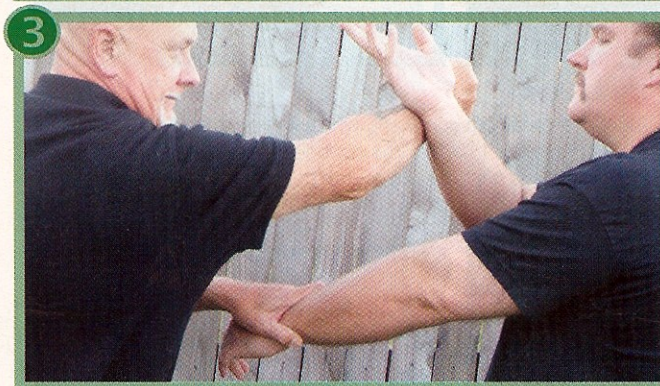
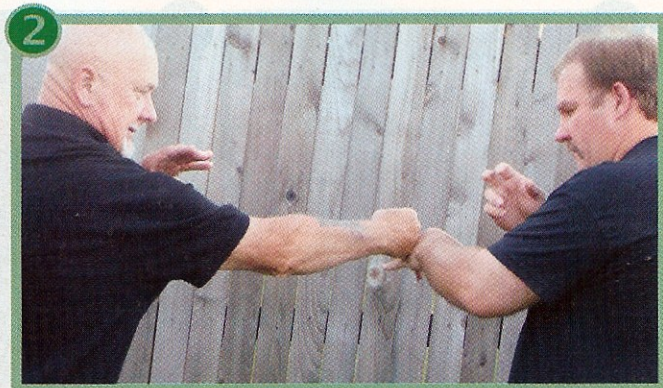
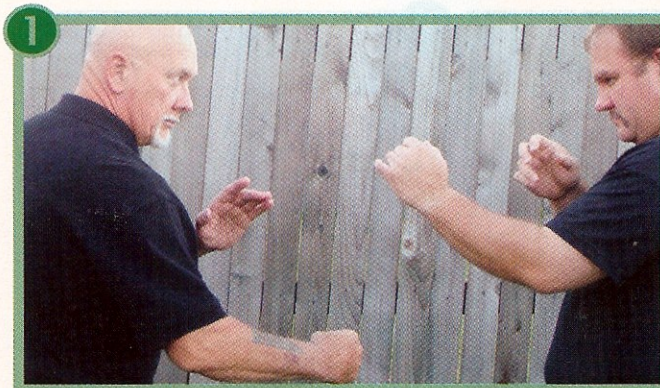
↑ *Basic entering to trapping: From the JKD fighting stance, Gary Dill (right) faces his opponent, who's in a right lead (1). To begin the entering phase, Dill executes a right backhand strike that uses his closest weapon to attack the opponent's closest target (2). He then closes the gap with a right step, making sure he stays on the outside, and uses his left hand to trap the man's right elbow so his right fist can be launched at his face (3).*



↑ *What-if scenario, right lead: Dill attempts the combination depicted on the first photo sequence, but the opponent parries the face punch with his left hand (3a). In response, Dill removes his left hand from the man's right elbow and uses it to grab his left forearm (4a). Once the limb is out of the way and restricting the movement of the man's right arm, Dill effects a snap punch to the face (5a).*



↑ *What-if scenario, right lead: Dill tries to counter with the same punch, but the opponent stops the blow with a left open-hand block (3b). He overextends his movement, pushing his arm past his own centerline (4b). Following the man's energy flow, Dill sends an elbow strike over the limb while making sure his arms are pinned against his chest (5b).*



← What-if scenario, left lead: Gary Dill (left) and his partner, who's in a left-lead stance, square off (1). To facilitate his entering move, Dill uses his lead hand to strike the man's lead hand (2). He then executes a right step, grabs his lead arm with his left hand and attempts to strike his face with a right backhand, but the opponent blocks it (3). Feeling the man's energy, Dill rotates his right hand and transitions to a wrist grab (4), after which he pulls the man's right arm down and across his body to pin his left limb. The JKD instructor then hits him in the face with a straight punch (5).

before I got there in June 1971, but James told me that he wouldn't allow sparring in his class because of the possibility of lawsuits in case of injury," Dill says. "We were expected to spar on our own time. James taught the techniques; it was up to us to put them together. He didn't hold our hands."

Outside of class, Dill immersed himself in fighting but not with his fellow JKD students. "The guys in my group never interfaced; we all had different lifestyles," he says. "I trained in JKD while I was in the Navy. I also had my own martial arts class comprised of primarily Navy and Marine Corps personnel. I had my own office and would work out several hours every day using my own students as my partners. Thanks to the U.S. Navy, I was practically a full-time JKD practitioner all the time that I trained under James. After every class with him, I made detailed handwritten notes on each technique and drill he taught that night."

Prominent in his notebook were Lee's

Harmony and Unity for All

The *jeet kune do* world always seems to host more than its fair share of controversy. For a variety of reasons, practitioners and instructors had a tough time getting along after Bruce Lee passed away. "I've tried several times during the past five to six years to do my part to promote the concept of harmony and unity within JKD—as it was most aptly phrased by Taky Kimura, who is the true gentleman of JKD," Gary Dill says. "But after a while, one just gives up and moves down his own path, with his sword unsheathed. I will do my thing, my JKD, and they can do their thing. In all fairness, this type of political infighting is prevalent in all martial arts; the JKD community didn't invent it."

To further his efforts to do his thing, Dill formed the Jeet Kune Do Association in 1991. Its mission is threefold: "To preserve and maintain original JKD; to provide a structured, organized training format for JKD; and to utilize a professional certification and instructor-development program," he says. "We have 27 schools and 40 instructors, and we host seminars from coast to coast, as well as three Oklahoma training camps every year."

—PJB, JTB

lessons on being nontelegraphic. The term "telegraphic" describes pre-technique movements such as chambering a foot or fist before the attack, Dill says. When you telegraph a technique, your body language warns your opponent that you're ready to strike. The JKD classes emphasized developing the ability to attack without tipping off your opponent.

Students at the Oakland school engaged in sensitivity training—many of the hand techniques were presented from a one-arm, wrist-touching position, Dill says—but traditional *chi sao* wasn't part of the picture. "Here's an interesting story: James taught my group two-hand *chi sao* for about two to three classes. He asked us if we understood the concept. Of course, we all said yes. Then the surprise statement: 'Good, because you'll never work on it anymore.'"

James Lee said Bruce Lee had concluded that *chi sao* wasn't an efficient way to spend the students' time and that it had insufficient combat applicability. "He had told [James] to phase it out of the Oakland curriculum," Dill says.

One familiar face in JKD schools—the *mook jong* wooden dummy—wasn't phased out. "He definitely had one in the garage school," Dill says. "He used old-fashioned car springs across the back of it to give it bounce. He had us work on it frequently, along with other JKD training equipment he'd made."

The presence of the wooden dummy points to the importance of one of three arts that contributed to the JKD gene pool. According to James Lee, they were *wing chun* kung fu, Western boxing and fencing. Was there any talk of the art being composed of 26 or 27 styles, as some practitioners claim? "Never," Dill says. "To my knowledge, he had no interest or training in arts [such as *kali*, *escrima* or *silat*]. Remember that those arts didn't begin to get noticed on a large scale until years after Bruce and James died. From my observations, James was only into JKD as it was developed by Bruce from *wing chun*, boxing and fencing."

Like all good things, Dill's time with James Lee would come to an end. "I knew his days were numbered when I left Oakland and returned to Oklahoma; I knew I'd never see him again," Dill says. "I didn't know [about his death] until I read about it in *Black Belt*. I wasn't surprised, but still I was upset because he did so much for me. He was a great guy and a true warrior." ❧

About the authors:

Paul J. Bax is a freelance writer and Bruce Lee historian. John T. Bingham is a freelance writer based in Los Angeles. For information about them or Gary Dill, visit www.blackbeltmag.com. To read more about James Lee's interpretation of wing chun, visit www.shopblackbelt.com/wingchun.html.