

“Ed Parker and American Kenpo,” excerpted from *The Journey* (Gilderoy Publications, 2001) and written by Dr. Stevan Walton, D.C. (pg 6)

Edmund Kealoha Parker was born in Hawaii on March 19, 1931, the sixth child in a family of seven. As a great-grandson of King Kamehameha, he was born from the lineage of Hawaiian warriors. By the time he was attending Kamehameha High School in Honolulu, he had studied judo and boxing. Parker’s mischievous antics caused one high school teacher to pronounce, “Ed Parker, you will never be a success in life!” Young Ed took it to heart and developed a deep resolve to prove the teacher wrong.

Parker was raised a devout Mormon, and one day in church a thinly-built friend named Frank Chow related how he had subdued a local bully. Sixteen-year-old Parker was in disbelief until Chow showed him the Kenpo technique that he had used. Parker was immediately intrigued and began to study with Frank Chow.

Street fights were common in the tough Kalihi district of Honolulu. One in particular made a lasting impression on the young developing martial artist; during the fight, one participant had most of his nose bitten off but was so tough that he came back and defeated his opponent. Parker realized what sheer mental toughness and a refusal to admit defeat could accomplish.

After a few years, Frank told Ed that he had taught him all he could and introduced him to his older brother, William Chow, who had just started teaching independently from Mitose at the Nuuanu YMCA (1949). There, Parker would appreciate the benefits of training with a variety of partners and with Chow himself. Parker recalled, “From the moment I witnessed William Chow move and appraised the ability of his students, a strong and spiritual feeling penetrated the very depth of my soul communicating to me that Kenpo would become my life’s work.”

Certain strategies remain consistent in Kenpo from the time of Choki Motobu: an overall emphasis on self-defense techniques utilizing fast hand combinations (with both strikes and joint locks) with low kicks. Parker credits Chow with re-introducing the circular movements of the Chinese arts back into Kenpo and with giving him some “master keys.” Parker developed an appreciation for the combination of circular and linear motion, strong basics, hard training, and common-sense analysis from his training with Professor Chow.

Parker later wrote, “It was William Chow who cultivated the seed of American Kenpo . . . I followed him, questioned him, bugged him, and it paid off. He explained and stressed the need for modifications and additions and introduced me to master key movements, which set me on the road to becoming a creative innovator . . . Chow . . . felt there was a need to change the art to meet the needs of the American people at this time . . . I cannot thank him enough for setting me on a path of logical and realistic thinking.”

In Kenpo, the open left hand covering the closed right fist has several meanings, one of which is the union of the scholar and the warrior. Ed Parker showed amazing prescience when he actualized the Kenpo scholar-warrior ideal by pursuing a college degree at Brigham Young University. He felt that higher education was an essential prerequisite to embarking on his career as a martial arts instructor. During his second year at BYU, Parker began training seven days a week in anticipation of earning his black belt.

Parker's college education was interrupted in 1951 when he was drafted during the Korean War. He joined the Coast Guard and was stationed in Honolulu and was able to continue his Kenpo studies with Professor Chow. By the time he was honorably discharged in 1953, he had earned his black belt from Chow. Before resuming his education at BYU, Parker brought up the idea of opening Kenpo Karate schools on the mainland after he had completed his education. Chow favored the idea, but when the time came, he declined to leave his familiar Island home. Parker resumed teaching in 1953 in Utah, teaching other college students and, after an impressive demo during a UCLA vs. BYU basketball game (1954), local law enforcement officers, including prison guards, police officers, sheriffs, and FBI agents.

During this period, a freak hunting accident took the life of a friend. Parker's hunting companion shot a deer, and when they approached the dying animal it delivered a fatal kick to his throat. This tragedy taught Parker that the failure to consider unintended consequences could snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. Parker began to explore the principle of checking.

Late one night while driving with his wife Leilani, pregnant with their first child, they were cut off by another vehicle. Four men got out of the car, and Parker met them. He dropped two of them within a few seconds. His mind went into overdrive, and he experienced the encounter in slow motion. He had time to consider the deterrent effect of breaking the first man's nose with a hammerfist, covering his white T-shirt in blood. A second assailant hesitated, and a handsword to the back of his neck popped the cigarette out of his mouth and put him out of action. The first man went down hard, motionless on the ground. Parker was actually relieved when the attacker regained consciousness. The assailants fled, and Parker gained a healthy fear of the consequences of utilizing his skills.

In Utah, Parker's assistant instructor at Roy Woodward's Body Building Gym, Charles Beeder, became his first official black belt. Parker graduated from BYU in 1956 with a Bachelor of Science degree in sociology and psychology, and a minor in political science. After Parker graduated from college, Wally Jay, a Hawaiian jiu-jitsu practitioner from Parker's old Kalihi neighborhood, asked him, "You're teaching martial arts. Did you go to college for that?"

Parker replied, "No, I went to college so I could talk to people on any level."

Roy Woodward also managed a gym in Pasadena in Southern California and offered Parker the opportunity to move there and teach. Parker accepted, but after he had relocated to California, the gym was sold and Parker found himself unemployed.

Ed Parker's 1956 move to Pasadena was a providential turning point. Being thousands of miles from Hawaii reinforced his independence, while the challenges of a new environment stimulated his creativity. Southern California was, and still is, a major center of the entertainment industry. In addition, California has large Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino communities, each with its own traditional martial arts. All three cultures are well represented in Hawaii, and many of these martial artists had immigrated to the mainland through the Islands. This nexus of the entertainment and martial arts communities required someone who could bridge the gap and relate equally well in both arenas; Ed Parker was that man.

Parker's intelligence, education, and charisma enabled him to move well in Hollywood circles, while his Hawaiian heritage, Chinese instructor, and skill opened the traditionally closed doors of the California Chinese martial arts community. He could satisfy his drive to learn more, to go deeper into the martial arts, and then expose what he had discovered to a wider audience. Ed Parker was the right man, in the right place, at the right time.

When the gym job fell through, Parker was motivated to open his Pasadena Kenpo Karate Studio. Also, in line with the vision of opening a number of Kenpo Studios, he laid the organizational foundation by forming the Kenpo Karate Association of America (in 1960 the KKAA became the International Kenpo Karate Association, with the new crest showing the increased Chinese influence on the art).

Woodward invited Parker to a Hollywood gym to meet Terry Robinson, physical director of the Beverly Wilshire Health Club. Terry Robinson had taught "kill or be killed" techniques during WWII, but when he saw Parker's Kenpo, he immediately acknowledged its superiority.

Robinson, who became Parker's lifelong friend, invited the young Hawaiian to the Beverly Wilshire Health Club and introduced him to his elite clientele. Soon Parker began to meet and teach businessmen, professionals, and celebrities, including television and motion picture actors and directors, thereby gaining exposure in the entertainment and print media.

In 1960, Terry Robinson arranged for Parker to demonstrate Kenpo at the Beverly Wilshire Hotel. In Parker's words, "The demonstration was exceptional. Energy flowed with all of the intensity of a life or death combat." Elvis Presley was staying at the hotel and humbly introduced himself to Parker after the demonstration, beginning a long friendship and association between the two men. Around that same time, Parker also published a series of articles in *Iron Man*, a prominent bodybuilding magazine.

The series in *Iron Man* led to the publication of his first book in 1960, *Kenpo Karate; The Law of the Fist and Empty Hand*. Parker's open mind and progressive attitude toward training methods are evident in his first book. In addition to traditional training (makiwara), he devotes much of the first part of the book to modern physical conditioning methods, including progressive resistance weight training, even in light of the prevailing "wisdom" among athletic trainers of that era that weights should be avoided because they would cause the athlete's muscles to be tight. Today every sport has a supplemental weight-training regimen.

This text also contains what is still one of the best charts of vulnerable areas of the human body, and a wide variety of natural-weapon hand formations demonstrating the increased Chinese element of the art. The base moves of many techniques still practiced in American Kenpo (through Form 6) are contained in this first book. Following Chow, who had replaced much of Mitose's idealistic philosophy with a pragmatic attitude, Parker replaced religious creeds with a simple ethic of self-defense, summed up in the Kenpo Creed:

“I come to you with only karate—empty hands.
I have no weapons.
But should I be forced to defend myself,
my principles or my honor
should it be a matter of life or death,
or right or wrong, then here are my weapons
karate-my empty hands.”

This was backed up by the observation that when one has confidence based on self-defense skill, he can walk away from trouble, not because he is afraid of what an assailant can do to him, but of what he can do to his assailant!

Things began to happen fast. In 1961 the first issue of *Black Belt* magazine included a big article on “Ed Parker, the Black Belted Mormon,” featuring Parker teaching actor Nick Adams. That same year, *Time* magazine ran an article on the growing popularity of the martial arts and referred to Parker as the “High Priest of the Hollywood sect.”

The increased popularity of Kenpo and a broader and more sophisticated clientele stimulated innovations in Parker's approach to teaching. Parker began developing his unique teaching tools: the clock principle, the three stages of learning (primitive, mechanical, and spontaneous), the printing/script/shorthand sequence of development, analogies, and terminology in the English language, all of which facilitated the learning process of Kenpo students.

While Kenpo was gaining more public exposure, Parker was taking advantage of the opportunities in California to increase his knowledge and skill. He was always looking for ways to refine his art, and he would travel throughout California seeking other martial artists to work with. During the early Sixties, Parker exchanged ideas with martial artists of the caliber of James Lee, James Wing Woo, Bruce Lee, Ben Largusa, and Gene LeBell.

In 1960, Parker took a road trip to San Francisco's famous Chinatown to visit martial art schools. While there, he met a young kung fu master, James Wing Woo, who taught both Tai Chi Chuan and Shaolin. Woo was born in San Francisco, and his father was a Tong member; the family returned to China in 1928 where he began his training in martial arts. Years later, Woo returned to Northern California, where Parker found him.

Parker recognized Woo's talent and invited him to Los Angeles to work together. The two men had an ill-fated martial arts partnership; it was probably inevitable that Parker, the creative, innovative rebel, and Woo, the traditional Chinese master, would have conflicting approaches. After a year, they dissolved their partnership. Most of the advanced students (with the exception of Chuck Sullivan) went with Woo because they felt he had more to teach. Dave Hebler and Dan Inosanto also stayed with Parker. While this was a painful experience, Parker used it to motivate himself to further develop the depth and breadth of his Kenpo curriculum. This initiated a period of explosive creativity in the development of Parker's Kenpo system.

Parker had a better relationship with another northern California Kung Fu man, James Lee. Lee had a healthy skepticism regarding the mysticism prevalent in the Chinese arts. He began weightlifting in 1938 and developed a non-traditional approach to kung fu training. He published a book in 1957, *Modern Kung-Fu Karate*, detailing his basic training methods, emphasizing the development of "iron hand" breaking techniques. The 1963 edition has classic photos of Parker, referring to him as the "well known Black Belt Kenpo Karate instructor from Pasadena, California." Parker and Lee would frequently get together and compare notes. Parker describes these sessions: "James and I continuously discussed, compared, analyzed, and dissected the martial arts whenever we were together. He often asked me to interpret his Kung-Fu sets, and he was always excited when I would offer two or three interpretations to their meaning."

An excited James Lee called Parker one day and invited him to fly to Oakland to meet a new Kung Fu acquaintance, saying, "This guy is fantastic! You've got to meet him."

Parker traveled to Oakland where he was introduced to Bruce Lee (no relation to James). Like everyone present, Bruce's demonstration of speed, power, and exotic technique, as well as his intelligent command of Chinese philosophy, impressed Parker. Moreover, Parker gained an appreciation for centerline theory, and Lee gained an appreciation of the limitations of his Wing Chun stance.

The two men developed a mutual respect, and Bruce asked Parker to write an introduction to his 1963 book, *Chinese Gung Fu, the Philosophical Art of Self Defense*. Even at that early date, Parker noted, "He is one of the very few that I have seen that is gifted with natural ability, a gift which he undoubtedly has put to work evidenced by his superb skill."

Parker collated the knowledge gained from the Chinese arts, filtered it through his creative and analytical approach, and integrated it into his Kenpo. His 1963 book, *Secrets of Chinese Karate*, (with an introduction by Joe Hyams) records this evolution. Kenpo gained long elaborate forms characteristic of Chinese systems. Parker also added the variety of detailed stances (bows, kneels, twists, etc.) utilized for power generation and as checks and attacks in themselves. The tiger and dragon symbolism (typical of Taoism) surfaces, and the Universal Pattern became part of Kenpo symbology. In addition, the relaxed explosive quality characteristic of some internal arts became an attribute of high level Kenpo.

While there is an undeniably strong Chinese influence in American Kenpo, Parker didn't limit himself to the realm of Chinese arts in his quest for knowledge. Parker made the acquaintance of another well-known martial arts maverick in Los Angeles, Gene LeBell. Parker rightly regarded "Judo" Gene as one of the most dangerous men around.

It's noteworthy that Parker's first book contains, in addition to counters of typical jiu-jitsu holds like those addressed by Mitose (wrist grabs, chokes), counters to more typical wrestling holds like the hammerlock, headlock, and full nelson.

In 1963, author Jim Beck wrote an article declaring, "Judo is a complete fraud" and asserted that "any boxer can beat a judo man," offering a thousand-dollar reward to any judo man who could successfully take up the challenge. Parker called LeBell, and the match was set up in Salt Lake City, Utah on December 2, 1963. When LeBell arrived, he learned he was facing #5 ranked boxing heavyweight, Milo Savage. Unscathed, Gene choked Savage out in the fourth round.

In 1964, Parker inaugurated his first International Karate Championships which were initially called the Long Beach Internationals. The tournament was open to all practitioners of any style and ran continuously for more than three decades as arguably the most prestigious martial arts tournament in the world. Notably, Parker flew Bruce Lee to L.A. for the event and asked one of his black belts, Dan Inosanto, to show Lee around.

The entire event, including Lee's electrifying demonstration, was captured on film. Famed Hollywood director and kenpoist Blake Edwards helped Parker award the trophy to winner Mike Stone. Also demonstrating at the first Internationals was another Islander, Ben Largusa. Largusa showed the techniques of Villabrille Kali, impressing even Bruce Lee. Parker admired the fundamental Kali strategy of "parry, check, strike" and asked Largusa to share his information. In early years, Largusa said Villabrille forbade him from showing Parker his techniques, but more recently he has admitted that they frequently worked out together.

When one of Parker's Hollywood contacts asked for recommendations for the role of Kato in an upcoming TV series, *The Green Hornet*, Parker first called Ben Largusa. Largusa turned down the role, and then Parker called Bruce Lee. Though the series lasted only one season, Lee's dynamic presence launched his Hong Kong film career, and also the Kung Fu craze and martial arts boom of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Any good teacher learns from his students, and Parker was no exception; during this period, many of Parker's students would explore new strategies, combinations, or modifications to techniques and forms, and Parker would evaluate them. If the modification fit within the context of Parker's overall vision of Kenpo, it would be incorporated into the art.

A good example of this collaborative process is Chuck Sullivan's role in streamlining the classical Staff Set that he'd learned from Parker. Parker recognized the improvement and the

modified set became part of the system. To further simulate the intellectual and technical creativity of his students, Parker required that candidates for black belt write a thesis pertaining to the art and create their own form. Brian Adam's book, *The Medical Implications of Karate Blows*, and Gil Hibben's *Parker Fighting Knife* are two well-known results of this long-standing requirement.

In addition to knowledge gained from others, intense study led Parker to many personal revelations. While looking for more creative ways to expose the art to a wider audience, Parker foreshadowed the current video boom by working with Chuck Sullivan to put a dozen Kenpo techniques on 8mm film. Watching the art on film gave Parker one of his basic analytical tools: evaluating techniques from the "three points of view" – attacker, defender, and bystander. One day, while running a film backwards to rewind it, Parker had an epiphany: he realized that the reverse motion that he'd previously overlooked as merely a rechambering could also be useful in self-defense. This realization led him to even deeper personal explorations into theories of motion.

It is difficult to pinpoint the exact moment when all of these *quantitative* changes and refinements added up to create a *qualitatively* new and unique martial art. The essential theoretical structure, base techniques, training system, symbolism, and qualities of Parker Kenpo were well established by the mid-to-late 1960s. Years earlier, James Mitose had expressed the hope "that eventually Kenpo will be Americanized." William Chow had planted the seed, but it was Ed Parker who nurtured the vision to full fruition.

The art had grown and blossomed to the point that less than ten percent of the system could be attributed to Chow's instruction. Applying logic to traditional knowledge drawn from a mixture of cultures, Parker blended methods and techniques that could be tailored to the needs, goals, and abilities of each practitioner. Edmund Kealoha Parker had created a martial art system shaped by the twin values of pragmatism and individuality. American Kenpo was born!