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The main concern of this paper is to highlight how Buddhist and Daoist traditions can be used in new age martial art systems. New age martial arts, as a broader movement, tend to discourage the infusion of nondual traditions into martial arts practice in favor of developing preparatory skills for combat sport exhibition; however, many of the fundamental philosophical traditions of Buddhism and Daoism have not been completely dismantled and done away with altogether. Bruce Lee's *Jeet Kune Do* (JKD) is one such new age martial art whose guiding principles derive extensively from nondual traditions of Buddhism and Daoism. While there are many principles of *JKD* that have been widely influenced by Indian philosopher and scholar Jiddu Krishnamurti, the core of the system is built around concepts and philosophies expressed in Buddhism and Daoism. I will first provide a brief overview of Buddhist and Daoist religion including core traditions that have influenced the history of martial arts practice. I will then define new age and old age martial arts before comparing and contrasting how Buddhist and Daoist traditions are contextualized and understood within *JKD*.

Buddhism

Buddhism is largely centered on Siddhartha Gautama Buddha and knowledge that draws from a set of doctrine known as the *Four Noble Truths, c.* 5th century BCE. This early text is said to have provided the key ideas and concepts from which Buddhism was shaped, particularly the understanding of human suffering (Kripal et al., 2014; Priest, 2013). Throughout its history, Buddhism established itself as a religion devoted to enlightenment achieved though reaching what is known as *nirvana*, or end of cycle, wherein repeated reincarnation stops, and the cycle of

suffering effectively ends. While initially seen as a foreign religion, Buddhist teachings were nearly universally accepted in ancient China, particularly its concepts of life after death and focus on mortality (Teiser & Verellen, 2011; Tong, 2022). In regard to martial arts, most dojos have historically taught their students how to use what they learn effectively and in the "right way" which are guiding principles of the *Eight-Fold Path* which comes directly from the *Four Noble Truths* (Priest, 2013).

Most studies directed towards Buddhism have primarily centered on Chan (Zen) Buddhism, and, as such, Zen Buddhism is the most prevalent of Buddhist teachings associated with martial arts training (Mcrae, 1995). It was introduced in China by Bodhidharma, *c*. 5-6th century CE, and brought an increased focus on the benefits of meditative breathing and clarity of mind through limited activity and thought (Tong, 2022; Watts, 1989). To Bodhidharma, Zen practice was equated with Buddhahood and served a purpose in all daily life not just within traditional monastic lifestyles (Pine, 1989).

Buddhist Concepts

Emptiness

While there are numerous concepts associated with Buddhism, one of the most prominent is the concept of emptiness. Within Buddhist traditions, emptiness is generally understood to be achieved once the mind is cleansed of all factors inhibiting enlightenment. The very inclusion of emptiness in Buddhism comes from Bodhidharma, who, according to legend, introduced the doctrine of emptiness to Emperor Wu's dissatisfaction around 520CE (Pine, 1989). In doing so, a new seed of wisdom was planted and from it grew one of the more common and integral components of future iterations of Buddhist practice. Bodhidharma says, "The essence of its

functioning is emptiness and emptiness is essentially motionless. Motion is the same as the mind. And the mind is essentially motionless" (Pine, 1989, p. 45).

In this respect, Bodhidharma's approach to Buddhist philosophy implies that the best way to truly understand oneself is to empty the mind of all conditioned realities and thoughts. Suzuki (2006) further explains the meaning of this, stating, "If you want to understand Buddhism it is necessary for you to forget all about your preconceived ideas … true existence comes from emptiness and goes back again to emptiness" (p. 135). The retention of previously conditioned ideas prevents the mind from seeking truth, thus impairing the individual from obtaining enlightenment. Through emptiness, the clouds of impairment begin to part, and the truth reveals itself.

Wu-Nien and Wu-Wei

Like many concepts in Buddhism, there might seem to be no purpose behind them when put into practice (reminiscent of Daoist spontaneity and stillness); however, this would be far from the truth. Bodhidharma's approach reflected upon the difficulties of practicing Buddhism, particularly practicing Zen (*dhyana*). As legend tells us, Zen is not an accumulation of knowledge and insight as commonly believed, but rather a direct understanding of emptying oneself of all thoughts, desires, and attachments (Pine, 1989; Watts, 1989). Whereas more traditional schools of Buddhism often require rigorous training in meditative practices, Bodhidharma's approach (and later traditions) was less rigid, adhering to a more open-ended way to becoming empty (Suzuki, 2006; Watts, 1989). Of the Soto tradition, Watts (1989) explains, "The Soto view was that proper dhyana lay in motiveless action (wu-wei)" (p. 107). Ultimately, thinking too much on Zen, or anything else, is considered a wasted effort. Watts (1989) describes this as *wu-nien,* "no thought" or "no second thought," which serves to avoid the distractions and

wasted efforts that come from over thinking. In *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, the author reminds us:

> If your effort or practice does not have the right orientation, it will not work at all. Not only will it not work, but it may spoil your pure nature. Then the more you know about Zen, the more you will become spoiled. Your mind will be filled with rubbish; your mind will be stained. (Suzuki, 2006, p. 96)

There is much commonality between the concepts of emptiness, *wu-nien*, and *wu-wei* in Buddhist tradition as they often overlap and intersect spiritually, but there are key differences. To be clear, emptiness is a state of being that is achieved through processes ridding the mind of conditioned states whereas *wu-nien* and *wu-wei* are distinct, albeit similar, mechanisms that can be used to achieve emptiness. Simply put, *wu-nien* allows the practitioner to remove themselves from any such attachments that affect the mind's ability to perceive and realize Zen, and so too does it serve to facilitate and accompany motiveless actions (*wu-wei*).

Zen

The concept of Zen existed long before Bodhidharma; however, his approach signified a fundamental change in the very nature of how it was practiced, and how it began to be understood in the day-to-day (Pine, 1989). Bodhidharma writes:

> Not thinking about anything is zen. Once you know this, walking, standing, sitting, or lying down, everything you do is zen. To know that the mind is empty is to see the buddha. … To see no mind is to see the buddha. (Pine, 1989, p. 49)

Similar to the Dao (The Way), Zen cannot be fully understood through texts alone. Arguably, to even speak of Zen is the stink of Zen (Watts, 1989). Thus, Bodhidharma's approach to Zen was not bound to previous constructs of traditional Buddhist thinking. Instead,

Bodhidharma sought to provide a deep reflection of Self for any practitioner, be it amateur or adept. Suzuki (2006) explains that Dogen-Zenji, a well-known figure in Buddhist teaching, often encouraged practitioners to comprehend each spiritual teaching as "all Zen teaching—to make you wonder and to answer that wondering with the deepest expression of your own nature" (p. xiii). Therefore, Zen is as much a mechanism for calmness and stillness as it is a practice of mindfulness and self-reflection.

Daoism

Unlike in the Buddhist religion, there is no clear founder of Daoism (known as Taoism in the Wade-Giles romanization). It is largely centered on the philosophical writings of the *Dao de Jing* (also referred to as the *Tao te Ching*) by Lao Tzu (Laozi), c. 5th century BCE (Lin, 2020; Needleman, 1989; Tong, 2022; Verellen, 1995; Watts, 1989). Some scholarship has noted that an earlier lineage of Daoism began in the 5th century BCE; however, there was no clear authoritative scripture at this time (Kripal et al., 2014) Regardless, scholarship has noted that Daoism grew alongside Buddhism, the latter being referred to as "foreign Daoism" (Tong, 2022). Unlike Buddhism, Daoism focuses on the perpetuity of life, which means finding balance in the growth of life and achievement rather than breaking the life cycle by achieving nirvana (Qiang, 2006). And, while there are numerous similarities between both religions, there are distinct interpretations and practices that distinguish Daoism from Buddhism.

One such example involves the understanding of achievement. In Daoism, Buddhist practices of Zen parallel the concept of Gong Fu or "one who masters the craft through hard work" (Moenig et al., 2023; Tong, 2022). In the context of martial arts, the achievement of Dao occurs when the martial artist has learned to incorporate their knowledge of the arts in a deep but balanced way that brings about clarity and peace of mind. This is the "mastering" of their craft

through hard work. Thus, the achievement of Dao is a "way of liberation" and not to be concerned with desiring or obtaining clout from one's own achievement or attempting to reach nirvana (Watts, 1989, p. 11). Daoism is not concerned with such things.

Daoist Concepts

Self and "Ego"

One of the central teachings of Daoism is knowing the Self. In Daoism, the concept of the Self can be understood as illumination through self-awareness which allows for the returning of all energies back to the "central self." This is Dao. This process is often difficult as the Self is frequently described among Daoist experts as elusive, constantly being overwhelmed by self or the ego which thrives on personal achievement thus conflicting with one's ability to experience illumination (Needleman, 1989). Lao Tzu says, "Those who are self-righteous are not respected. Those who boast achieve nothing" (Tzu, 1989, ch. 24). To Lao Tzu's point, the perpetual conflict between the Self and self can be quelled by being in the now, thus allowing all outward energies to return back to the Self (Needleman, 1989). To live and be present in the now means that there can no longer be conflict between the Self and the ego. Knowing the Self is to have awareness of the ego and all its illusions.

Spontaneity

Like the Self, spontaneity is another central teaching in Daoism. It is perhaps easiest to understand spontaneity by understanding its relationship to the Tao. Of the Tao, Watts (1989) states, "It operates according to spontaneity, not according to plan. Lao-Tzu says: The Tao's principle is spontaneity" (p. 17). Spontaneity specifically pertains to being in the moment as each moment arises. Watts (1989) describes this as the "naturalism of Taoism" (p. 12). To highlight this principle, Lao Tzu uses the analogy of water, writing, "The highest good is like water. Water

gives life to the ten thousand things and does not strive. It flows in places people reject and so is like the Tao" (Tzu, 1989, ch. 8). Water does not intend to flow, it just flows. Should a branch fall into the water, it would naturally and immediately go around it. Water does not think on what it must do in the moment. It just does. In the *Dao de Jing* it is written, "Stay with the ancient Tao, move with the present" (Tzu, 1989, ch. 14).

Stillness

The concept of stillness is another familiar pillar in the Daoist tradition. Wong (1992) states, "Stillness is inaction and movement is action," and reminds us that "movement is the foundation of stillness" (p. 23). Any unnecessary action disrupts naturalness, thus also disrupting the mind from obtaining stillness; however, non-deliberate movement can give way to stillness much like yin to yang. Ultimately, there is no point in the mind trying to let go of its conditions or trying not to try (Watts, 1989). Simply put, the purpose of stillness is to embrace it, not overthink it. As Lao Tzu explains, "Empty yourself of everything. Let the mind become still. The ten thousand things rise and fall while the self watches their return. They grow and flourish and then return to the source. Returning to the source is stillness, which is the way of nature" (Tzu, 1989, ch. 16).

Yin/Yang

Arguably, yin and yang are perhaps the most recognizable concepts attached to the Daoist religion. They are characteristically described as continuous oppositional forces. Wong (1992) states, "It is like the t'ai-chi symbol, with yin and yang intertwined. … Yang energy is always moving. Yin energy is static. The pure energy of heaven is yang. The impure energy of earth is yin" (pp. 11–12). While yin and yang are perhaps the most widely known of all concepts within Daoism they are not universally described in the same way in every context (Kripal et al., 2014;

Wong, 1992). Depending on source and interpretation, a common theme of yin and yang is that they are characterized as fluctuating interconnected energies. In his introduction to the *Tao te Ching*, Needleman (1989) clarifies the contrasting nature of yin and yang by stating:

> Yin accords as little with historically conditioned concepts of the feminine as yang accords with historically conditioned concepts of the masculine. … It requires a precise practice of meditation to become aware of energies as such, and to observe for oneself the laws of their interaction and unfolding movement. (Introduction)

Origins of Martial Arts: Definition, History, and Legend

Buddhist and Daoist traditions are commonly associated with many traditional martial art systems (Cynarski, 2018; Moenig et al., 2023). But in order to understand the history of marital arts, one must first undertake the difficulty in defining it. What has this term been understood to mean and how has that changed over time? Historically, there has been great mobility in defining *martial arts* as well as its general application as a cultural practice (Bowman, 2017; Bowman, 2019; Moenig et al., 2023; Tong, 2022). Because of this, the term itself is quite difficult to articulate, in no small part due to its broadness, but also because there still tends to be a preponderance for viewing it through a Western lens which leaves out much of its cultural and intercultural history (Bowman, 2017; Hong, 2019). If the terms are separated, “martial” is, more often than not, related to self-cultivation whereas “arts” refers to a “set of fighting skills” (Moenig et al., 2023, p. 42). The term has been further argued as pertaining to a specific category of martial activity, sitting in the center between warrior art and the martial path (Holt, 2023). In a manner of speaking, martial arts exists as a synthesis of both activities. Contemporary research has even explored how the dialogue of martial arts training has split into two distinctive camps;

one favoring the physical and the other the spiritual (Cynarski 2018; Holt 2023; Moenig et al., 2023).

Bowman (2019) vehemently highlights that martial arts represents a cluster of familiar ideas, images, and motifs that have stabilized in contemporary times despite the seemingly impossible task of operationalizing it. This applies to the study of martial arts as well. As such, it is equally important when looking at the history of martial arts to recognize its typological variety, and while scholars and practitioners alike continue the trend of drawing lines over what "is" and "is not" considered martial arts, the reality is much opaquer. There is no "one size fits all" classification for martial arts, no matter the cultural lens. This is especially true when it comes to an individual's private interpretations of symbolic systems whose systems are shaped by all manner of ideas, myths, and symbols (Hanegraaff, 1999). Martial arts is nothing if not a cultural manifestation of symbolic systems in action. Therefore, symbolic systems are vessels providing an individual with tools for finding and achieving self-growth. Symbolic systems serve as teaching modules which provide a framework that compartmentalizes smaller ideas from the larger whole. With this in mind, I argue for a more inclusionary definition. I suggest viewing martial arts as a broad, cultural practice composed of smaller, interconnected practices that offer deep reflection of oneself through self-defense training modalities. These modalities can be derived from mental, physical, or spiritual related activities but all are interconnected and thus lead to self-growth. The "style" or "art" does not matter so long as the individual embraces and explores the interconnectedness of these modalities through rigorous self-defense training and application.

Regardless of definition, martial arts has a long history associated with the Far East. Tong (2022) explains that while some legends say martial arts can be attributed to the Xia Dynasty

nearly 4,000 years ago, traditional styles can be more conclusively dated to China in the 6th century CE. The earliest of martial art teachings where of Shaolin and Wudang traditions. These two distinct forms existed on opposite sides of the Wudang mountain range, but political turmoil resulted in the diffusion of these teachings into periphery regions thus becoming derivatives of styles listed in the pseudo-historical monography *Essence of the Five Fists*, c. 1260-1368 (Bowman, 2019; Cynarski, 2018; Moenig et al., 2023; Tong, 2022). Many of these early traditions are said to have primarily focused on self-defense and combat whereas the development of martial art systems in other regions, such as Japan, are said to have occurred (and at much later times) during periods of relative peace (Moenig et al., 2023).

Martial arts have continually been shaped by spiritual developments throughout Greater Eurasia. In this context, practitioners are often said to undergo intensive training of the body to develop a deep spiritual connection, which is an endeavor to connect the body, mind, and spirit. The most prominent religious influences are Zen Buddhism and Daoism, whose teachings have been incorporated into various disciplines from traditional styles to many modern-day systems (Cynarski, 2018; Lee, 1975; Priest, 2013; Sukhoverkhov et al., 2021). While there are similarities in traditions among other nondual religions, there are a few key concepts that stand out as uniquely Buddhist and Daoist in nature and provide a quintessential foundation that can be applied to the martial arts.

As Cynarski (2018) states, “Most of the ideological content of today's Asian martial arts comes from the philosophy of Taoism. The very idea of The Way (*Dao/Tao*) comes from here, and the principles of flexibility and energy balancing, too” (p. 20). In actuality, many Daoist concepts are also commonly associated with traditional forms of martial arts, including low intensity of effort, behavior in accordance with nature, the importance of softness and elasticity,

as well as devotion to physical regiment of the body (Cynarski, 2018; Qiang, 2006). The martial artist is naturally geared towards rigorous diet, exercise, and deep connection to the environment in which they train, and this is one of the most defining reasons why Daoism is so closely associated with martial arts (Cynarski, 2018; Moenig et al., 2023; Tong, 2022).

Zen Buddhism is another religious cornerstone for traditional styles including the practice of the Moving Zen. This has been described as "martial arts practice for the betterment of mind, body, and spirit" and has had a clear place in Buddhist beliefs and martial arts practice since the 13th century (Tong, 2022, p. 191). This is somewhat striking as Buddhist practice has historically been known to primarily foster the principles of non-violence and aggression which has posed particular puzzles for martial art scholars as various martial art systems engage in what can be considered or construed as aggressive or violent behavior and thus are in direct contradiction of Buddhist teachings (Priest, 2013; Sukhoverkhov et al., 2021). Regardless, Buddhism, like Daoism, has remained a cornerstone of philosophical guidance for traditional styles even when practiced in modern times.

New Age or Old Age: Whose Side Are You On?

As with the term martial arts, defining "new age" from "old age" can be an equally daunting task. What is a new age martial art? What is an old age martial art? There is genuine confusion on what constitutes a new age martial art from a traditional or "old age" martial art. The first step requires a deconstruction of the term "new age" from its academic and cultural accoutrements before one can operationalize it in the context of martial arts practice. The term "new age" is ambiguous, broad, and contextually specific (Hanegraaff, 1999, 2018; Holloway, 2000). Its understandings and practices are equally varied and eclectic in interpretation. In the cataloguing of ages, new age is a relatively recent phenomenon supplanting the "old age" in

which people began to challenge what beliefs and values are important both communally and individually (Hanegraaff, 2018; Holloway, 2000). More often than not, new age thinking commonly places the needs of the individual at the center of all inquiries.

Hanegraaff (1999) specifies this to mean that "whatever is, is right" for the individual so long as illumination of Self is the logical center. In a manner of speaking, the new age moniker represents a consistent belief in the divinity of humankind; i.e., body, soul, and spirit are active spaces in which people and ideas come together spurring change away from any and all restrictions that impede the Self or discourage the importance for significant spiritual experiences and events (Holloway, 2000). It is a way of challenging how we think about and reproduce symbols in our daily lives. Most new age thinking acts on the belief that the individual prepares for a "shift in human spiritual consciousness" (Holloway, 2000, p. 556). But this is not always the case. As a broad movement, new age has approached the very concept of spirituality and or religion in different ways. For example, the 1980s saw the term refer to a more general definition as opposed to the more psychedelic, alternative approach to spirituality as seen in the 1960s counter-culture (Hanegraaff, 1999, 2018). For the purposes of this research, I delineate the term "new age" to refer to any symbolic system that challenges traditions embodied in modern social institutions through the integration of holism. Holism implies a broader way of thinking which commonly pervades new age thinking (Hanegraaff, 2018).

Returning to the inspection of what defines a "new age" martial art from an "old age" martial art, traditional martial art systems, generally speaking, have a long history associated with such styles as the dragon, tiger, crane, snake, and panther passed down through East Asian cultures with the earliest styles geographically confined to ancient China (Tong, 2022). Traditional styles place an increased emphasis on spiritual development through physical

training, wherein the individual, usually through communal participation, seeks to find and cultivate spiritual enlightenment and not just physical prowess in competition; although, some traditional styles have historically done so (Cynarski, 2018; Moenig et al., 2023). Community-based training methods propel spiritual enlightenment and are historically associated with internal schools, like those of the Wudang tradition, wherein the internal spirit is nurtured through group-directed self-defense training (Moenig et al., 2023; Tong, 2022). Thus, "old age" martial arts empower the spiritual development of the individual within a community of learners while embracing a more rigid approach to martial arts training that insists upon traditional ways of knowing derived from a much older time and place.

"New age" martial arts challenge the status quo of tradition in any context, placing emphasis on approaching martial arts as less of a "spiritual only" endeavor, and more of a "mixing of arts" to meet the practitioner's specific wants, needs, and desires. Many new age martial arts are commonly referred to as mixed martial arts (MMA). Holt and Ramsay (2021) explain that MMA can be understood as unarmed fighting games derived from varieties of martial art systems and combat sports. But even so, the term MMA can be rather broad much like the term *new age* itself. Strictly speaking, MMA is an understanding that modern martial arts are essentially made of athletes who "mix" their arts together; this bears a striking similarity to Alex Tong's construction of the martial artist—a highly skilled performance athlete (Holt & Ramsay, 2021; Tong, 2022). Make no mistake, MMA is primarily concerned with what "actually works" in a fight scenario, particularly in the combat sport arena, but this does not exclude the betterment of mental composition, but rather highlights that training to elevate the spirit is no longer the primary motivator. In a very real sense, new age martial arts are an explicit representation that the values and beliefs of modern martial arts practice have changed beyond

what once was. New age martial art systems are also closely linked to their creator, usually an innovator that adapts, challenges, or completely goes against the grain of traditional ways of thinking, including philosophy as well as practice. Essentially, new age martial arts thrive on approaching the practice of martial arts holistically and individualistically, thus challenging any, if not all, preceding traditions. Developmentally speaking, new age martial arts are still in their infancy and will no doubt continue to change.

Jeet Kune Do: A New Age Martial Art With Buddhist and Daoist Roots

As a new age system, *Jeet Kune Do* is mostly associated with its creator, Bruce Lee, who developed the system under the pretenses of practical effectiveness in real-life defense. In doing so, Lee challenged not only traditional martial arts practice, but also how martial arts were being broadcast in the time in which he lived. By the late 1950s, traditional martial arts, like karate-do, had already begun to circulate in Western society, particularly the United States, but these representations of traditional martial arts merely reinforced assumptions that martial arts were an expression of exotic orientalism and not the holistic, flexible approach to self-defense and self-growth that Lee sought to employ in his own system (Bowman, 2019; Lee, 1971; Tong, 2022). Lee believed that the very values of practicing martial arts had changed beyond those of traditional systems. Bruce Lee's martial art system dubbed *Jeet Kune Do* was a challenge to traditional approaches to martial arts, highlighting his own individual identity as a growing martial artist through a combination of modern sports training and nondual philosophies geared towards self-improvement. In his seminal piece, *Liberate Yourself From Classical Karate*, Lee wrote that martial arts "is primarily concerned with the blossoming of a martial artist—not a 'Chinese' martial artist, a 'Japanese' martial artist, etc. A martial artist is a human being first," and argued that the martial artist must be flexible otherwise they are just "a tomb in which they

have buried the founder's wisdom" (Lee, 1971, p. 25). In many respects, Lee was less concerned with how his system should be defined and more with how it should be practiced. In his posthumous work, *Tao of Jeet Kune Do*, it is stated:

> Jeet Kune Do is not a matter of technology but of spiritual insight and training … the more aware you become, the more you shed from day to day what you have learned so that your mind is always fresh and uncontaminated by previous conditioning. (Lee, 1975, p. 200)

Bruce Lee explained that it is better to state what *JKD* is not rather than what it is (Lee, 1971). *JKD* is not a purely "combative only" art nor a collection of religious and spiritual philosophies that preach of a "right way" or "wrong way" of practicing martial arts (Lee & Little, 1997). Much like the new age movement itself, the *JKD* system is not bound by Eastern or Western religions and spiritualities, but that does not mean that it is devoid of such traditions, nor is it overwrought with modern embellishments that forgo their usage. In his own words, Lee wrote, "Unlike a 'classical' martial art, there is no series of rules or classification of technique that constitutes a distinct 'jeet kune do' method of fighting. JKD is not a form of special conditioning with its own rigid philosophy" (1971, p. 27).

In many regards, *JKD* was originally Bruce Lee's interpretation of *Wing Chun*, a close-range fighting system derived from ancient Chinese martial arts which gained notable popularity under Grandmaster Ip Man in the early 20th century (Bowman, 2014, 2019; Jennings et al., 2010; Judkins & Nielson, 2015; Lee & Little, 1997). There is an inconsistency on the origins of *Wing Chun* although its philosophies are closely aligned with Buddhist and Daoist beliefs (MacFarlane, 1989; Jennings et al., 2010). Unlike the *Wing Chun* system (which Lee did not complete), *JKD* is not a close-quarter fighting system that adheres strictly to its forbear's philosophical traditions.

If *JKD* is not a traditional fighting system nor a system that completely does away with nondual traditions, then what exactly is *JKD*? As Bruce Lee described, "I call it jeet kune do just because I want to emphasize the notion of deciding at the right moment in order to stop the enemy at the gate. … Jeet Kune do is only a name" (Lee & Little, 1997, pp. 49, 56). If we deconstruct *JKD* history, we can see how this statement is fundamentally true. As his art transitioned from *Jun Fan Gung Fu* to what would become *Jeet Kune Do*, Lee homed in on the philosophy of using minimum effort with maximum efficiency. Like *Wing Chun, JKD* is about using minimum effort, but this, too, is modified to find balance between states of strength and sensitivity (Jennings, 2019; Jennings et al., 2010; MacFarlane, 1989).

Like other new age martial arts, *JKD* is a fighting system designed to be used in real-life fighting scenarios, but unlike most other new age systems, it is more than a mere fighting system challenging the "old ways" through taunts proclaiming real-life self-defense. It is a new age martial art with a deep philosophical system aimed at transforming the individual mentally, physically, and spiritually through intense self-inquiry. Under the *JKD* system, martial arts training is a matter of self-realization through liberation of self (Bowman, 2014). Liberation comes by way of self-inquiry in which the martial artist becomes self-aware of who they are while simultaneously developing a deep understanding of the Self.

In essence, the core of *JKD* is a modified (albeit simplified) *Wing Chun* derivative with greater breadth. From a self-defense standpoint, it was designed based around adaptability, so it could be applied effectively at any attack range. From a philosophical point of view, *JKD* was designed so the individual could find their own way without being hindered by past perspectives; but even as *JKD* evolved, the philosophical and religious influences of *Wing Chun* remained at the core. Lee continued to use *Wing Chun's* Buddhist and Daoist roots in developing his own

system while simultaneously pushing beyond the restrictions of its predecessor, both physically and spiritually. *JKD* was Lee's reaction to traditional martial arts that he felt were limiting.

Integrating Ideas

Self-Awareness and Self-knowledge Through Self-Improvement

If we strip away the self-defense coating of *JKD* and focus purely on the philosophy of the system, we can see that understanding the Self is both a key to successful martial arts training and also in becoming a better human being. This point was well understood by its founder: "Self-knowledge is the basis of Jeet Kune Do because it is effective, not only for the individual's martial art, but also for his life as a human being" (Lee, 1975, p. 208). This is the very essence of self-inquiry, which is to look inward and be able to allow all energies to return back to oneself. When embracing this return, one becomes self-aware of who they are in the moment of every moment. In other words, experiencing the Self in martial arts comes from balancing spontaneous action and thought with stillness of mind and body. The successful martial artist will obtain liberation from all self-doubt and dissatisfaction and experience self-awareness and self-improvement.

In *Tao of Jeet Kune Do*, it is stated that "the very people who are most self-dissatisfied, who crave most for a new identity, have the least self-awareness" (Lee, 1975, p. 205). For the martial artist, experiencing the Self is often compounded by self or "ego" which disrupts self-awareness and prevents self-improvement. The writings of *Tao of Jeet Kune* reflect this by stating:

> We are proud when we identify ourselves with an imaginary self. … The less promise and potentiality in the self, the more imperative is the need for pride. … When pride releases energies and serves as a spur to achievement, it can lead to a reconciliation with the self. (Lee, 1975, p. 205)

In other words, one must not seek to achieve or attain that which does not improve the Self; such desires lead to obtaining "superficial things" which only inflate the ego by way of pride and thus provide no self-growth and improvement. If one cannot see the ego for what it truly is, then neither self-awareness, nor self-improvement, can be obtained. While it might seem that martial arts training serves only to enhance self-defense skills, in reality, "punches and kicks are tools to kill the ego" (Lee, 1975, p. 13). In *JKD*, the ego must be defeated, otherwise self-improvement will never occur.

Spontaneity in Practice

If we recall, the spontaneity principle in Daoism specifically pertains to being in the moment as each moment arises. Similarly, Bruce Lee's philosophical approach to martial arts is much the same. In a self-defense context, the practitioner must be able to immediately respond (attack and defend) without hesitation and without precalculated intentions, otherwise they perform sluggishly and will most certainly face defeat. *Tao of Jeet Kune Do* expands upon this concept by contextualizing spontaneity as a mechanism in which the martial artist is "capable of following "what is," because "what is" is constantly moving and constantly changing. If one is anchored to a particular view, one will not be able to follow the swift movement of 'what is' " (Lee, 1975, p. 18).

Presence in the moment allows the individual to react to anything that happens without artificiality or premeditation; thus 'being' is never diminished so long as the individual is present in every moment as each moment unfolds. In *Tao*, it is explained that the martial artist should practice "continuous awareness, a continuous state of inquiry without conclusion" (Lee, 1975, p. 19). This means that the mind of the martial artist is reacting to each moment as it is presented,

indefinitely. Simply put, spontaneity in *JKD* means being present in the moment as things arise whether mentally, physically, or spiritually.

Stillness in Action, Mind, and Thought

Stillness can be understood as inaction or the ultimate action, allowing the mind to be quiet and still. It can also be interpreted to mean action that does not go against one's own nature or harmony. To wit, stillness comes not only from being in the moment, but also being in harmony with one's inner self; however, if there is too much duress of the mind and spirit, stillness will not be achieved. Therefore, it is imperative to be aware of one's own mental, physical, and spiritual acuity, otherwise distractions will no doubt occur. We can see from Bruce Lee's writings that stillness was a cornerstone of the *JKD* philosophy put into practice. If we look closely, we see that Lee's interpretation of stillness bares similarity to the Zen practices of *wu-nien* (no thought) and *wu-wei* (motiveless action or action without deliberation).

In *Tao of Jeet Kune Do*, it is expressed, "The mind is originally without activity; the way is always without thought. … One should seek good balance in motion and not in stillness" (Lee, 1975, pp. 21, 49). When it came to self-defense, Bruce Lee believed that a balance of the body and mind was essential, an internal stillness should reside over the individual no matter their level of physical activity. Accordingly, this "does not mean to do nothing at all, but only to have no deliberate mind in whatever one does. … To be without deliberate mind is to hang no thoughts" (Lee, 1975, p. 19).

To find truth, Bruce Lee believed that the martial artist should be "constantly moving, living, never static. Truth has no path. Truth is living and, therefore, changing" (Lee, 1975, p. 18). To "act" implies change is needed in order to restore balance. In the *Tao of Jeet Kune Do*, it clarifies, "The propensity to action is symptomatic of an inner unbalance. To be balanced is to be

more or less at rest" (Lee, 1975, p. 206). Under these pretenses, training in the martial arts becomes a balance between active states of the body and stillness of the mind; never thinking too much so that the mind can be at rest yet never too distracted physically so that the body can react out of necessity. This fluid interpretation of stillness is not unlike the very nature of the Tao itself. Wong (1992) reminds us that the "Tao has pure and impure aspects. Sometimes it is still. Sometimes it is moving" (p. 11).

Totality and "The Way"

If we look at Bruce Lee's notes in published form, we can see a direct correlation between what he called the "totality" and the Buddhist concept of "emptiness" and how achieving both leads to "The Way." This is a relatively abstract process that can be a challenge to even the most seasoned martial artist; however, the very essence of self-growth in *JKD* lies in the totality. Of the *totality*, Lee wrote:

> There is no such thing as an effective segment of a totality. By that I mean that I personally do not believe in the word *style.* … Jeet kune do rejects all restrictions imposed by forms and formality. … One must have the awareness and flexibility of the styleless style. When I say 'styleless style,' I mean a style that has the totality without partiality; in short, it is a circle without circumference where every conceivable line is included. (Lee & Little, 1997, pp. 28, 49, 56–57)

Bruce Lee was deeply concerned with gaining new knowledge and applying it to the martial arts without limitations or restrictions. In *Tao*, Lee further explained that true knowledge "implies *boundless expansion* and, indeed, emphasis should fall not on the cultivation of the particular department which merges into the totality, but rather on the totality that enters and unites that particular department" (Lee, 1975, p. 7). In these writings, there is a clear emphasis on achieving personal growth by way of balance without imposed restrictions. If emptiness

represents the desired state of being, then totality is an embodiment of that state in which all things are now possible. To be clear, emptiness does directly lead to totality; however, totality cannot be assumed, let alone experienced, without experiencing emptiness. It is a matter of inward recognition wherein the martial artist, knowing they have reached a state of emptiness, can then move beyond this state to something even more profound. Essentially, totality allows conditions to reenter the body, mind, and spirit. Having been emptied of all pre-conditions, the whole body is now able to obtain new, enlightened beliefs, whatever those may be. These strands of thought parallel concepts seen in Lao-Tzu's *Dao-de Jing*:

> To yield is to have the whole.
>
> To be crooked is to be straightened.
>
> To be hollow is to be filled.
>
> To be worn out is to be renewed.
>
> To have a little is to get more.
>
> To have a lot is to be confused. …
>
> The Tao of nature is like a tree. Turning too much will make it go far away from its roots. Turning less will make it obtain its roots. Turning too much is far from its truth; hence it is confused. Turning less, it may obtain its roots; hence it is called "to obtain." (Lin, 2020, pp. 40–41)

This is the very essence of yin and yang as expressed in Daoism. It is a push and pull, a bending and straightening of all things—a proper balance. So, too, is the relationship between totality and emptiness. If we refer back to what Bruce Lee called the "styleless style," totality comes without partiality. Accordingly, the body, mind, and spirit have let go of all preconditions yet retain the ability for reconditioning through an enlightened state of being. These are concepts

not dissimilar from Bodhidharma's approach to Zen practice. In Bodhidharma's *Wake Up Sermon*, it is written, "No vehicle is the vehicle of buddhas. … Not thinking about anything is zen. … To know that the mind is empty is to see the Buddha. … Nirvana is an empty mind" (Pine, 1989, pp. 49, 53). Here, we can see that enlightenment comes from emptying one's mind of all presumptions. In the context of *JKD*, this is taken a step further. Once empty, the martial artist is total (a state in which the individual can be whole and see the circle without the circumference). In doing so, the martial artist can begin to see beyond what the eyes neglect to see. Plainly speaking, emptiness is the state in which all restrictions have been stripped away. When all restrictions are gone, the practitioner is able to experience totality, pure enlightenment. It is in this moment that newer ways of thinking reveal themselves and can be embodied without limitation. Thus begins the journey towards The Way.

JKD foregrounds its philosophy of practice on the sheer notion of discarding the unnecessary; it is a daily decrease—a hacking away at the unessential (Lee & Little, 1997). It is a cleansing of the mind, an emptying. In a manner of speaking, this is a process that can lead to a state of being in which the whole body is now fully open to new experiences and understandings without restrictions from all previous conditionings. Suzuki (2006) illustrates this point by stating:

> Each one of us must make his own true way, and when we do, that way will express the universal way. … We have to forget everything which we have in our mind and discover something quite new and different. … We say true understanding will come out of emptiness. (pp. 136–137)

Emptiness it the first step in finding one's way within the system of *JKD*. In the book *Tao of Jeet Kune Do*, there is the explicit use of a Taoist story, *The Taoist Priest*, which speaks to this process:

Into a soul absolutely free
From thoughts and emotion,
Even the tiger finds no room
To insert its fierce claws.

One and the same breeze passes
Over the pines on the mountain
And the oak trees in the valley;
And why do they give different notes?

No thinking, no reflecting,
Perfect emptiness;
Yet therein something moves,
Following its own course. (Lee, 1975, p. 2)

It is true that many Buddhist and Daoist concepts often begin to blur, overlapping and intersecting through story and this becomes more pronounced when looking at concepts of "The Way." Bruce Lee articulated, "Where there is a Way, therein lies the limitation. … The highest art is no art. The best form is no form" (Lee & Little, 1997, p. 61). In this example, Lee is once again referring to the "styleless style" as a way of formlessness, beyond all restrictions of body, mind, and spirit. The best Way is to have no Way. Much like Zen practice, to speak of The Way is

to misunderstand it, foregrounding it in restrictions outlined through definition. In the *Bloodstream Sermon*, it is written, “The ultimate Truth is beyond words. Doctrines are words. They’re not The Way. The Way is wordless. Words are illusions” (Pine, 1989, p. 31). Like Bodhidharma’s teachings, The Way is best understood to exist beyond all such classifications. This is equally true within the *JKD* system.

Whether Bruce Lee personally read this sermon is unclear, but the Zen teachings of Bodhidharma, however disseminated, are evident in *JKD* philosophy. Lee was actively interested in nondual philosophies and experimented with Buddhist trains of thought such as those represented in the *Eight-Fold Path* (Lee, 1975). Under Lee’s philosophy, a martial artist must learn what is “right” mentally, physically, and spiritually in every moment. So, too, must they find their own Way whatever it may be and wherever it may lead. It is a balance.

Concluding Thoughts: What Does It All Mean?

The purpose of this paper was to analyze how Buddhist and Daoist traditions contribute to new age martial arts. Both of these nondual religions hold philosophical wisdom that can be applied to martial arts, allowing the practitioner to become truly self-aware of themselves as they work toward becoming the *martial artist*. One cannot ignore how martial arts have been heavily influenced by nondual religious philosophies and even romanticized by philosophers, practitioners, and scholars, and for good reason; however, new age martial arts are assumed to shy away from such philosophies despite many of their guiding principles often drawing from them (Cynarski, 2018; Holt, 2023; Moenig et al., 2023; Sukhoverkhov et al., 2021). While new age martial arts tend to favor physicality over spirituality, not all completely do away with these ancient wisdoms. *Jeet Kune Do* is an illustration of this assertion.

While Bruce Lee sought to break away from traditional martial art systems, he did not completely separate himself from the nondual philosophies and traditions associated with them (Cynarski, 2018). If reduced to its bare essentials, *JKD* can be understood as a new age martial art system developed through careful utilization of traditional Buddhist and Daoist concepts serving to both increase efficiency in hand-to-hand combat and to promote self-awareness and self-growth through self-improvement. As the *Tao of Jeet Kune Do* reminds us, "Jeet Kune Do is not to hurt, but is one of the avenues through which life opens its secret to us. … Jeet Kune Do is a step toward knowing oneself" (Lee, 1975, p. 208). Training in *JKD* is an exercise in self-inquiry and, if followed, leads to self-awareness. This is the very essence of Dao.

Likewise, Bruce Lee was fundamentally concerned with finding emptiness and combating the rigidity of traditional martial art systems that existed in his time as well as seeking solace from bad thoughts that could impede self-growth. These are understandings that come from nondual concepts, philosophies, and traditions established in Buddhism and Daoism. Lee crafted his system of martial arts with the support beams of these two religions and their philosophical tenets. As Lee once wrote, "Jeet kune do is not a method of concentration or meditation. It is being. It is an experience, a Way that is not a Way" (Lee & Little, 1997, p. 61). It is a balanced state of body, mind, and spirt.

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