

What Should I Look for in an Instructor?

It can be difficult to find a Jeet Kune Do instructor and when one does, how do they know they have found a good instructor? After all, the Jeet Kune Do world has been confused by people wanting to cash in on Bruce Lee's name, debates over concepts vs original jkd, and questions about whether Jeet Kune Do is even an art at all or whether it is really just MMA with a helping handful of philosophy. Because of the confusion, it has been difficult to put together a list of instructors that meet all the necessary criteria especially when there is such a debate over what that criteria is. We at the Bruce Lee Foundation are working to bring clarity to these issues over time but in the meantime, we have provided some guidelines for those of you seeking jkd instruction so that you may be able to discern for yourselves whether or not an instructor you have found is a good fit for you and for what you want out of Jeet Kune Do.

This discussion on what makes a good instructor does not include a list of core techniques. We suggest that to be sure you are getting the best technical instruction you can, you purchase and refer to the books written by Bruce Lee or derived directly from his writings from our reading list to best discern for yourself if your instructor seems to know the basics. Also, the BLF will be putting together a core curriculum Manual for publication next year, so please check back for information about that.

We feel that there are several different types of qualities that a jkd instructor should possess. The first are Technical/Physical qualities. These qualities relate to the skill level of the instructor.

Technical/Physical Qualities

- Lineage

Does your instructor have a direct lineage to a first generation instructor of jkd? In other words, did he ever study for a good length of time with one or more original students of Bruce Lee or one of the direct second generation students? This is important because this is one way to be sure that the instructor you are studying with has some basis for his knowledge other than books and movies. In fact, if all you are learning is moves from films of Bruce Lee, then you should have some concern as the moves performed by Bruce Lee in his films were mostly for entertainment purposes only and not relevant to actual combat or jkd. Also, there could be concern if all your instructor has to show for his jkd training is seminar participation certificates. Most seminars are one or two days long and not truly sufficient for attaining a level of mastery or instructor certification. An instructor should have trained directly for a significant amount of time with an instructor of direct lineage to attain certification.

- Core Techniques

Does your instructor seem to have a firm grasp and a skilled expression of the basic techniques of jkd? One way you can discern this, as discussed above, is to look through the books on the reading list on this site. Does he seem to know what he is talking about? Do his techniques work? Do they have solid scientific and physical backing that can be demonstrated to you?

- Philosophical Content

Does your instructor know the basic philosophical tenets of Bruce Lee and can he explain them clearly and well? Can he relate these philosophies directly to the physical techniques?

- Physical Fitness

Does your instructor have a relative level of physical fitness? Can he perform the moves accurately and well? If he cannot (because he is older or not in as good shape as he used to be), does he have an assistant who can and who does? (Note: Many of the original students of Jeet Kune Do are older now but it does not make their knowledge or instruction any less valuable. Through the use of assistants, the technique can still be imparted clearly.)



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Next are Structural qualities. These are qualities that relate directly to the instructors' school, organizational structure, certification process, etc.

Structural Qualities

- Teaching Materials

Does your teacher have a methodology for imparting his teachings? Do the lessons build on one another? Does the teacher make sure that you have a certain mastery of the material before moving on to something new? Does the instructor quote directly from Bruce Lee in his teaching? (This is important if the student is to be sure they are getting enough philosophy mixed in with their physical technique.) [See below for a discussion about JKD vs MMA.]

- Certification

How long does it take to move through the levels the instructor has set up and how long does it take to become a certified instructor? This is, of course, subjective on the part of the instructor; however, you should not be able to receive an instructor certification in a weekend, a week, a month, or perhaps even a year. If your instructor has care about what he is passing on, he or she will want to be sure that you have a solid grasp and are able to perform in combat with a level of calm confidence so that the weapons you possess are at your disposal when you call on them. There should not be a direct correlation to the amount of money you spend and the amount of time it takes to move through the levels and/or receive your certification rather, certification should be based on the mastery of skill, confidence and comprehension.

- Individual Attention

Bruce Lee believed that class sizes should not be too large (another reason why seminars are not the best learning environments) and that individualized attention should be given to each student during the lesson or in additional private lessons for the student to really benefit and grow. Does your instructor give individual feedback during lessons and/or will he/she set time aside to work privately with you from time to time?

- Transparency

Is your instructor transparent about his lineage and training? Is he clear about what he calls jkd as having originated from Bruce Lee and jkd as having originated from himself or others? Is your instructor open to questions about his background and/or teaching materials? Is there a sense of accountability, good communication, fairness and respect within the school?

- Ethics

Does your instructor put down other instructors and their methods in their classes, in their written materials or on their website? Does your instructor believe in an exclusionary policy rather than an inclusionary policy when it comes to the Jeet Kune Do family? Does your instructor foster bad feelings in his students about other practitioners and ask his students to participate in negative campaigns against other instructors? The BLF believes that negative behaviors such as these only serve to rip apart our community and create a negative personal practice and attitude for the people involved.



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The last are personal qualities. These relate to the instructor himself – his attitude and self expression.

Personal Qualities:

- Representation of the Spirit of Bruce Lee (his methods and his practice)

It is hard to precisely describe what the spirit or essence of Bruce Lee is. In fact, it is many faceted and includes physical, mental, philosophical, and spiritual aspects, some of which have already been touched on above. But, when trying to have an understanding of what we mean when we say the spirit of Bruce Lee, think about these questions: does your instructor have a passion for teaching that involves active learning that never ceases? Does your instructor practice what he preaches? In other words, does your instructor merely recite the teachings of Bruce Lee or does he practice them in his own life? Does your instructor seem to exhibit a true love and passion for the martial arts? These notions coupled with the other qualities discussed throughout this section will help you to discern for yourself if your instructor seems to embody the spirit of Bruce Lee.

- Humility

Does your instructor display a certain amount of humility or does he display a fair amount of ego and self-importance? (remembering that confidence and arrogance are two different things) Does your instructor foster idolatry of himself or his methods and foster negative attitudes about others?

- Adaptability

Is your instructor rigid like a board or is he pliable like bamboo? Can the instructor adapt to the needs and strengths of his individual students? Does the instructor have the ability to deconstruct, test and apply thoughtfulness to his teachings? Does the instructor have an open mind?

- Loyalty, Sincerity, Honesty

Is the instructor changing his position and his point of view to keep up with new trends in martial arts? Is he respectful of his seniors in the arts? Does he answer questions honestly and openly, saying “I don’t know” when he doesn’t know something? Is your instructor sincerely trying to help you better yourself as an individual?

- Attitude

Does your instructor have a good attitude? Does your instructor foster a positive attitude among his students and classes? Is your instructor encouraging and optimistic while challenging you to be your best?

- Continuous State of Learning

Is your instructor himself a student of the arts? Does he seem to dig deeper with time in terms of his understanding of the art? Does he continuously strive for and attain simplicity?

- Communication Skills

Does your instructor communicate clearly? Do you understand the lessons and what is being asked of you as a student? Do his lessons make sense?



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JKD vs MMA

We at the BLF wanted to take a moment to have a discussion about Jeet Kune Do and whether or not it is the same thing as MMA. It is important to discuss this here because Jeet Kune Do is often described as a mixture of several different arts, much like the contemporary MMA. It is the belief at the Bruce Lee Foundation that Jeet Kune Do is NOT MMA. However, we also believe that while JKD is not MMA, Bruce Lee IS the catalyst for MMA. Bruce Lee has often been described as the godfather of MMA. We support this opinion as it was Bruce Lee's departure from the classical and traditional arts and his promotion of the complete fighter more than 35 years ago that was the impetus for movements such as MMA.

So why then is JKD not MMA? When someone speaks about an MMA fighter, they refer to what arts he/she has in his arsenal, such as kickboxing, jiu jitsu, muay thai, etc. But to us, JKD is its own art. Therefore, one could conceivably be an MMA fighter whose arsenal includes JKD training.

Further, although JKD is often described as an amalgamation of several different arts, this is also untrue. There is a lot of confusion about what JKD is because Bruce Lee was himself a student of the arts. He looked at, studied and exchanged information about various arts. His library contained volumes of books on many different arts and he had a great appreciation for many martial arts generally and historically. But JKD is not made up of the best ingredients from 26 different arts. In fact, JKD as an art consists of a very small arsenal of weapons and prides itself on simplicity and economy of motion. If we look at the most direct influences on JKD, we see the influence of boxing, fencing, and wing chun. But JKD certainly cannot be called boxing. And it most definitely cannot be called fencing. Nor can it be called wing chun. So at what point does a thing become different enough that it becomes its own thing? If we put flour, water and eggs into a bowl while making a cake, can we also call the finished product pasta? Simply, no. JKD has its own core techniques and its own philosophical base that is different from any other art out there.

Further confusion comes in because the philosophy can be applied very liberally - to many different arts or to life in general. This has led to the notion that JKD is really just a philosophy that if applied properly can enhance any action you may choose to undertake, whether it is tae kwon do or fishing. But, this line of thinking discards entirely the core physical techniques that Bruce Lee himself developed and tested.

There is also a belief that Bruce Lee would have changed his JKD if he had lived to see movements such as the UFC and that he himself promoted exploration and evaluation and throwing out what is useless and adding/keeping what is useful. There is some truth in these statements but they must be properly evaluated.

Bruce Lee was brilliant and relentless and the master of his domain. He was passionate about the arts and about teaching. He definitely died in the midst of his process (but that can be said of anyone I suppose). He most definitely might have made changes to JKD had he lived but it is our belief that only he could have made those changes. Too often, people make assumptions and make changes to JKD without really having a true and real understanding of the art or its founder. This has led to the ongoing debates about JKD and what it is by those who have decided that they know best what Bruce Lee wanted. We don't take this position at the BLF, which is why we provide a historical snapshot of JKD, which also includes guide posts to follow as you mature to a level where you can begin to make JKD your own. But, too often, people diverge from Bruce Lee's JKD but continue to call it "Bruce Lee's JKD" which only adds to the confusion. So, yes, there was a certain amount of individuality and personal exploration promoted by Bruce Lee in JKD but it was within the framework of the foundation he had already himself laid down. Anything that diverges too abruptly from that path (such as, teaching other arts and labeling it JKD, or altering the basic stance and front lead, or adding weapons training into JKD, etc) should be classified as someone else's take on JKD and not ascribed to Bruce Lee. To think we know best what Bruce Lee wanted or who Bruce Lee is is pure hubris. Rather if we come up with our own innovations, we should stand proudly by those and label them with our own name, but keep Bruce Lee's JKD pure.

The Manual that the BLF is putting together will further delve into these issues so keep an eye out for that publication but we hope that this discussion has been helpful in your understanding of JKD and how to choose an instructor.

In the spirit of Jun Fan Jeet Kune Do©



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