



An Interview with Martin Wheeler

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1. Martin, perhaps you could start off by giving us all an insight in to why and when you originally got involved in Martial Arts?

I started training in the martial arts when I was around nine in Judo at a local YMCA. Some of my friends had started training and I went with them. I really enjoyed the workouts even though I was far to young to really appreciate an art like Judo. The instructor must have had a great deal of patience to have dealt with us so effectively, we were an unruly bunch of kids.

2. What was it that attracted you to Kenpo Karate?

Again a friend of mine Iain Tozer was training at it. He showed me some of the techniques and ideas and I wanted to know more. I was around sixteen at the time. I ended up going to the club in Paignton, Devon and was instantly hooked. I liked the sophistication of the art and was always attracted to it's explosive nature. There was only a few clubs in the country at the time but the level of instruction under teachers like Sean Cross, Mervin Ormand, Jackie McVicar and Gary Ellis was very high. Ed Parker, the arts founder, visited England and taught seminars periodically, when I saw him teach and move I knew that was what I wanted to do with my time. I was not a personal student of Mr. Parker, just one of the many students in a seminar, but I studied everything I could on the man by reading books and watching videotapes.

3. Did working as a doorman/bouncer help your understanding of a Kenpo?

Yes, definitely. I started working as a doorman at 17 in the local clubs (and continued on and off for the next ten years working in London and the USA) which forced me to look at Kenpo in very practical terms. For what appears at first to be a rather eclectic system the more practical my requirements of it became the more it seemed to have to offer. Torbay proved to be surprisingly violent for a beach town, with a mix of high unemployment in the winters and a summer influx of young holiday makers, football supporters (or pretty well just hooligans) and anyone else who decided to turn up, all thrown together at the night clubs. Many of the lessons I learned on the door showed me that even a "street fighting" designed system like Kenpo is fairly stylized compared to the reality of fighting.

3. Would you agree that Kenpo Karate is a well-balanced martial art?

It depends on what you mean by well balanced. Kenpo is one of the best Boxing-Jujitsu systems devised and is probably one of the most logical ways of looking at a martial art as a mechanical egression. Mr. Parker developed it by taking the most logical ways that you can strike by using the body's natural weapons (i.e

hands, elbows fingers, knees, feet and so on) along with joint manipulations and assembled about 150 interrelated base techniques. These techniques are designed to correspond to natural bio-mechanical power, combat and motion principles which in turn are examples of the rules and principles developed in the nine Kenpo forms. If you look at it from this point of view it is well-balanced because the system completely contains itself. Kenpo is devised to be understood much the same way as you would learn a second language. The basics as the alphabet, the forms could be seen as a dictionary and reference books describing the grammatics and structure of the language and the techniques as specific examples of the language. All these components combine to encourage the practitioner to speak from a mechanical stage to a level of fluency and spontaneity. This could be seen as a very well balanced method of learning and understanding an art. But from another point of view Kenpo is really not primarily designed for weapons fighting or grappling. It does contain some of these aspects but more as peripheral ideas. The central theme of Kenpo is a hand-to-hand system. I am not saying it would not work in these situations, it definitely would, but it would be up to the practitioner to understand the types of environments they are working in for it to be genuinely effective. As Huk Planas often points out Kenpo is not magic you have to make it work. I think this was part of the brilliance of the founder Ed Parker that he created a conceptually based fighting system rather than a purely technique based system (even though it appears to be technique based on the surface). This method encourages the student to develop using bio-mechanical, combat rules and principles then applying them to the situation rather than relying on a specific technique. So if you can become comfortable with a specific environment, for example grappling, then you only need to adapt the concept of the rules to that environment rather than relying on having countless techniques to deal with these situations. The only thing I would say Kenpo really lacks is an internal health system which is probably required of any art to be truly balanced. Kenpo is designed as an external boxing system.

4. Over the last ten years or so compared to many other mainstream styles Kenpo in Great Britain has seemingly received little if any media attention, why do you feel this is the case?

I didn't know that it hadn't. I haven't lived in Great Britain for over seven years so it is difficult for me to comment on this. I would guess that it is maybe because Kenpo still requires a very full syllabus of study before a practitioner can reach the level of black belt. This can take a considerable amount of time and even then the practitioner needs to be around a quality instructor to genuinely understand how the system works. If you are training in Kenpo in the UK then you are probably well established in the area that you earned your black belt. This probably contributes to a slow expansion of the system and lack of media exposure.

5. What was it that prompted you to up sticks and move to the USA?

I was training in London with Diane Wheeler when my friend Mark Waldron returned from living and training in the States. We both decided to try training over there. Even though Ed Parker had sadly passed away about two years before we left Kenpo is basically an American designed art and the best practitioners of it live in the U.S. Teachers such as Frank Trejo, Lee Wedlake and others. Luckily we both managed to meet and start training under an amazing teacher and who is in my opinion the leading authority in the art, Richard "Huk" Planas. From all of the great instructors of Kenpo I have had the privilege to be around I would have to say that Huk's intellectual and physical grasp of the art is second to none. He is one of the world's genuine masters of the arts, even though he would cringe to hear me say that. He has had a tremendous influence on my training. Meeting and training under Huk was definitely worth moving for.

6. Already having what many would describe as a fast and dynamic system why did you feel the need to begin studying other systems such as Judo and Eskrima?

No pure fighting system has everything, I believe a smart practitioner should recognize a systems weaknesses along with it's strengths. As practical as Kenpo is as a combat system it is also highly conceptual. Kenpo can be weak on it's entry and trapping skills especially against a weapon, the Philippine systems are excellent at these. Huk introduced me to Eskrima and showed me how the Philippine concepts of weapons fighting (and indeed fighting in general) merged perfectly with Kenpo's sequential movement and combat principles. The Philippine and Indonesian systems are some of the most sophisticated and practical fighting methods that I have come across. A practitioner from any art would do well to develop along the path pioneered by the Filipino fighters. A Kenpo practitioners knowledge of weapons fighting is usually pretty stunted and there are few (if any) timing and sensitivity based Kenpo flow drills, the Philippine systems excel in these types of training methods. Knowledge of these types of approaches to training can greatly enhance a Kenpo practitioner's practical understanding of their art. Kenpo practitioners in general are training as stand-up fighters, and stand-up fighters tend to fair badly against grapplers unless they have some knowledge of grappling so it seemed logical to study Judo and Jujitsu. The more I got into these arts the more they influenced my concept of Kenpo and fighting as a whole. Understanding Kenpo conceptually and applying the art in reality is a major leap which can only be bridged in my opinion by experiencing actual combat, grappling is an excellent and relatively safe way of achieving this goal. I also studied boxing and Thai-boxing to try and understand Kenpo better. Kenpo is basically a boxing "combination" type system in application with the exception of any rules as to the targets and weapons used. You cannot genuinely fight using Kenpo in a training situation without seriously damaging or killing your opponent so you need a spontaneous free-flowing boxing application to understand how to read an opponent's intention, ride blows

and throw combinations in a real fight, however those combinations are structured. Understanding how to fight in these systems and then applying that intrinsic knowledge to your Kenpo is an extremely effective training regiment.

7. Do you feel that crosstraining is just another fad?

I hope not. I believe it is the most insightful way forward for students to understand a system like Kenpo. Even Mr. Parker apparently cross-trained in Boxing, Judo and various other systems before he developed the full system. Cross-training is a superb way of understanding combat. I think your body, mind and spirit has to have a good understanding of combat before it can relate to a system with that level of sophistication. One of the main problems with Kenpo as a whole is not the art, the art is a proven way of combat, but the training methods employed by many schools in understanding the art. When an art is developed which cannot be used in a full contact training situation such as Kenpo, then the art ultimately suffers. Obviously you should not have to "prove" yourself as a fighter to practice Kenpo but you should at least understand within yourself how to fight in a genuine and spontaneous manner, this is very difficult without rigorous cross training in a "boxing" system, a "weapons" system and a "grappling" system. Personally I would like to see Kenpo schools introduce cross training into their syllabus of teaching, this would dramatically improve the level by which students and instructors alike understand the art and themselves as the martial artists. Learning Kenpo the way it is currently being taught would be the same as learning boxing for say five years, using combinations on the bag as "techniques" and understanding all the theory and principles behind the action but then sparring only using point fighting semi-contact rules. I think most people would agree that this would be a fairly pointless exercise. The mind and the body is simply not designed to be able to make the kind of leap needed to suddenly have the awareness and fortitude to be able to use the combinations and spontaneously read the language of a fight in a real situation without having trained that way. Cross training would also encourage a leap of innovation in the art as practitioners develop there own new ways of applying the combat principles in reality. At the end of the day it is all just theory until you put it into practice.

8. You've recently have begun to get pulled towards the fascinating art of Systema (The System). How did you discover this amazing art?

I met a master of the art Vladimir Vasiliev at a seminar organized by Lee Wedlake and was further encouraged to study it by my friend Al Mcluckie. After what I saw I started training under him in his school in Toronto whenever I can. I would have to say I am blown away by the concept of Systema which is an internal Russian martial art. Vladimir and Mikhail Ryabko, who I was lucky enough to meet recently, are incredible teachers of the martial arts. Their concept of the art and teaching methods are quite simply amazing. I am not even entirely sure how they do what they do, I just know that it works. In a way I was

searching for Systema without really knowing what I was looking for, the training regiment I was following was telling me to relax, stay in contact with the opponent, steer away from specific technique, keep in motion, allow my weapons to follow their own paths and let the bodies fluidity work for itself while encouraging the mind to intuitively strategize. But saying all that I think if I had carried on down the path I was taking for the next 20 years I still doubt I would have learned as much as I did in only my first week of training in The System under a teacher such as Vladimir.

9. From what I've seen of Systema it appears to contain just about every real art I've ever had the pleasure to encounter. What in your view, Martin, makes it so special?

My view of the System is still rather limited as I have only been training in it for a relatively short period compared to the other arts I have studied, although the training I have had so far has made a profound difference to my martial arts and more importantly to my life. I am convinced that any training in The System will change a person's perception of a martial art. The System is special because it seems to work as much on a person's consciousness as it does on their body. There are no techniques just exercises, concepts and spontaneous work, which develop a profound sensitivity and relaxation into a practitioner's movement and awareness. A student training in it is encouraged to teach the body to think for itself using natural reactions as a base rather than mechanical blocking, parrying and slipping skills. Out of this total freedom of movement and lack of a defining framework a student's consciousness, energy and physical structure learns how to blend and effect the consciousness, energy and physical structure of the opponent. The system works on all levels of human ability, the psychological, the physiological and the psychic. I think the body can be considered to be constantly out of balance and only in "balance" for an instance both mentally and physically on a moment-by-moment basis. It is dealing with a tremendous amount of internal and external information. It is quite an achievement for an animal to stand on two feet and deal with the information that a human does, this fact it seems can as easily work against us as for us. It seems that it is not difficult to control this balance when you work at a body's subconscious level. The subconscious, after all, is the level at which we naturally move. I think to contrive a movement such as moving into a pre-determined technique takes a logical act of will, which guides the subconscious into a specific type of movement. This must imply that thought at some level is creating a logical sequence of events. This type of training can be honed to an extremely high level of spontaneity, which can develop into a practical sequence of ideas that develop a system of martial arts. But it seems if you work slowly and very softly and with positive intention you can teach your body to act and react extremely smoothly out of its own natural reactions allowing "logical" intuition to guide your nervous system into action. Using your senses and ?energy? system to guide the body without a perceivable "lag" time created by a conscious thought process. A practitioner of The System is never searching for technique to apply

instead they are taught to enhance the body's natural sensitivity beyond that of physical contact into more of a state of intuitive driven empathy to create spontaneous defensive (or offensive) movement. We are energetic beings and our energy fields reach out way beyond what we would consider to be our "physical" body. I think the best way I can describe this is the feeling you get when you enter a room and know that someone is looking at you with an intention of some sort, instinctively you turn and look to see who it is because you want to rely on the senses that you are most familiar to you in society, looking, touching, smelling, hearing. But if you allowed yourself to relax and "feel" the intrusion then you would possibly start to develop the innate human ability to be intuitive with your senses. The training methods are designed to develop your intuitive nature with and beyond what you would consider to be the physical senses. A practitioner of The System is encouraged to see an opponent rather than just look at them and allow the body to act and react intuitively. The body is instinctively designed for the best methods of fighting, but we generally train to fight by imposing "techniques" upon it and relying on logic to apply these techniques at the appropriate moment. For this to become "instinctual" takes many years of training and even then only a few are capable of achieving this level of freedom. Most every martial artist trains with the goal of freedom of movement and reaction but even for those who manage to gain this they are still in some way maintained by the framework of their system in some way which possibly creates a level of "blockage". I hope this is not construed as condescending in any way towards any particular system or martial artist, it is certainly not intended that way as I am just making a conceptual observation. The System seems to be designed to work out of a level of profound relaxation and total freedom of movement. By working at a level of sensitivity by enhancing a practitioner's natural reactions allows the Systema practitioner to create a state of neuro-muscular blindness in an opponent. This state is achieved when an opponent enacts some form of attack be it punching, kicking, grabbing, throwing etc. When an attacker attacks they are no longer in control of the attack the movement is as instinctual as throwing a ball once you release into the toss. I mean you could not stop yourself from throwing the ball half way through the movement if you have committed to the action, the conscious part of the brain does not work that fast. Nor does it the in a fight, when someone genuinely commits to an attack such as a punch then they only really react again once that punch is blocked or lands. The contact tells the body to do something else, if that contact never comes then the body goes into a temporary state of "neuro-muscular" blindness. A Systema practitioner practices to develop a level of freedom with his reactions that create this sensation and produce spontaneous techniques based on moment by moment information being introduced to the nervous and physic system. This leads to a very unusual and extremely effective defense system which capitalizes the opponent's tension, "blockages" and anatomical structure and requires no real knowledge of the opponent's martial arts or combat background as the practitioner is only reacting out of what he or she feels. In fact the more unusual the defense the better as this also effects your opponent on a psychological level. Then there is the energetic level where a

practitioner develops a sense of the opponent's energy and learns to effect the opponent at that level. This is also extremely effective as seems possible to me that we negotiate the world on a subconscious level using this part of our senses, and when people fight they do so at a subconscious level. Subtle manipulation of the subconscious means controlling the action. The System works with multiple opponents, on the ground, against or with weapons, the applications seem limitless. Even though it appears to work on all human levels of movement and perception it tends to work as a whole system, like an intricately woven ball of silk it would be pointless to try and define one layer from another, it's true beauty being accepting it as a whole. To me, so far, it seems to be like moving using a single concept rather than applying technique to a specific situation. The System allows a practitioner to let his or her physical and energetic movement ride a wave of a developed intuition rather than a more logical process. I am simply amazed as to how much information you give away about yourself just by the way you naturally stand. When you work out with someone like Vladimir or Mikhail it becomes abundantly obvious how much information you are projecting about yourself and how it can be manipulated, mainly when you realize you are on your back when you could have sworn you were just standing a moment ago. Strangely enough it appears that if you apply the concepts of the system to your life it seems to have the same effect of relaxing you and actually healing you and your training partners body's and fortifying the spirit. They say when they punch you they heal you, and trust me they can strike with incredible power, but it is done with such a positive and natural energy that they are working to heal you by eliminating the tension from your body. No tension, no blockages of the energy flow through the body. You always come away from a workout feeling better than when you started. It is a simply amazing art. Also it has a very strong psychological, spiritual and physical health component, in fact these factors, I think, are more important than the purely physical components. Without a loss of ego and an understanding of how to develop positive energy in your life it is hard to see how one could do more than scratch the surface of Systema. I know that these are the things that I struggle the most with. But even just "scratching the surface" would still go far beyond most martial arts I have encountered on a physical level. The art itself, as Vladimir explained, is not really a martial art at all but a method of cleansing yourself and allowing the art (and your life) to come out of that. The intuitive method and training regiment presents a very fast learning curve and because you are working out of natural reactions it is extremely hard to forget. The System stands alone as a work of genius in my admittedly limited opinion, but just the concept of it can be used as a great enhancer for any art that you study. As you may have guessed I highly recommend it.

10. You have some videotapes and a book, which you produced last year, could you explain what they are about?

I have produced a fourteen tape series on Kenpo as a fighting system called the "Kenpo Fighters Videotape Series" that I produced before I really got into The System. They cover from the basics through technique application of the concepts and principles of combat. Also they cover weapon defense, multiple attacks, locking and controlling, stand-up grappling and Kenpo and ground fighting and Kenpo. The series really covers a lot of ground with full contact demonstrations. Everyone who has seen it so far has really liked it. I have also written a book called "The Kenpo Fighters' Handbook" which is a companion piece, I am still deciding how to publish that. If any one is interested in the tapes they can see a full review of them by many of the top kenpo practitioner's at my web site www.ironmonkeyma.com. I must also give a plug for Vladimir's tapes on Systema which are superb and I highly recommend at www.russianmartialart.com.

11. Have you any future plans to visit the UK to conduct seminars?

I shall be coming over in April to do some seminars but don't have anything planned beyond that at this time, but would be happy to share my experiences of the arts with any one who is interested if they wish to contact me. I would also like to thank you for the opportunity to discuss some of these incredible arts with you and the great time I had at your school.