

The Importance of Knifework to Becoming Kunja

HapKiDo as a martial art is more than just the application of martial techniques and forms. With time and training, these martial concepts become crucial to the development of kunja, the gentleman scholar or “prince” imbued with wisdom and knowledge. This concept of kunja is not only critical in the dojang, but it becomes an integral part of the HapKiDo practitioner's daily life. In my experience, no aspect of martial training teaches this better or had greater impact on my understanding of kunja than knifework.

A. Kunja

Don Burns, in a message to the IU martial arts program, once said that kunja is “a person who is a model of virtue, a person with wisdom, courage, and understanding of natural laws with a deep appreciation for humanity” and a person that understands “constantly striving for excellence and balance, not only with physical technique but in the entirety of [his or her life].” This is a seemingly long list of requirements, but I believe they arise from three aspects of life, introduced by the martial arts journey of HapKiDo: learning, respect, and action, as shown in the works of Confucius and Machiavelli.

Section I. The Need for Learning

As a kunja martial artist, we are asked to strive constantly for perfection and to achieve wisdom and understanding; these factors logically imply a constant state of learning in the mind of the martial artist. If any ancient text discusses this concept, it

must be the *Analects* of Confucius with his concept of the scholarly prince or Chun-tsze.

In the *Analects* Book 2 Chapter 15, it is written that “[the] Master said, 'Learning without thought is labor lost; thought without learning is perilous'”. This quote is meant to solidify the connection and balance between wisdom and understanding, respectively dependent on learning and thought. Being able to think logically without learning means that the mechanism for understanding is present, but without learning, these processes may yield fallacious, naive, or foolish conclusions, as they lack the necessary experience to discern these qualities in the understanding so achieved. Likewise, learning without thought is a waste of effort, as the learning is not internalized and simply becomes a record of another's knowledge, never employed or truly understood. Thus, learning must be balanced with the appropriate amount of thought to become truly integral.

To the kunja martial artist, this balance of learning and thought is the gateway to positive change. He or she, in the striving for perfection and excellence, identifies those areas where he or she is naïve, ignorant, or in error and then seeks out ways to learn otherwise. Once exposed to the learning, these concepts are applied not only to the immediate solution but reflected upon and used across the kunja's life. This is the connection between kunja martial learning and lifestyle – the martial arts the kunja learns is not merely used for combative application. The concepts and principles of this training are applied in every day life as well, making the martial aspects and character developed through the training the basis for how the kunja approaches any situation.

Within martial arts as a learning paradigm, learning can serve a very specific

purpose. Martial arts as a practical skill-set bears the possibility of very real consequences, both for the martial artist and their would-be attacker. Therefore, a martial artist must seek moral and ethical learning from his or her teacher. One cannot be a model of virtue and always be causing harm to others. A martial artist and particularly a kunja learns his or her moral and ethical paradigm from his or her teachers and thus acquires an outlook that affects the rest of their life.

However, I do not feel that the learning a kunja does is only directed inward. In Book 2 Chapter 11 of the *Analects*, Confucius says that “if a man keeps cherishing his old knowledge so as continually to be acquiring new, he may be a teacher of others.” Taken literally, this may mean that the man has achieved the wisdom and understanding necessary to be a teacher, and he can thus be considered a wise scholar. However, I am drawn to the word “teacher,” especially in light of the fact that in our black-belt curriculum we are required to be capable of teaching demonstrations. These demonstrations, to my mind, are an aspect of martial learning that a kunja should project into his life – that the wisdom a kunja develops should not be kept solely to himself, but that he is obligated to try to share that wisdom with others. Confucius seems to agree with this in Book 6 Chapter 28 Part 2: “Now the man of perfect virtue, wishing to be established himself, seeks also to establish others; wishing to be enlarged himself, he seeks also to enlarge others.” In this way, not only is his own knowledge he improves his community and those around him in a way befitting the “model of virtue” Don Burns mentioned.

Thus, a kunja is necessarily an active learner, seeking new knowledge and

integrating it into his life, while so treasuring his old knowledge that he teaches it others so that he may improve his community. A kunja thereby acquires the principles of wisdom and understanding by resting upon the pillar of learning; it is through this pillar that the kunja acquires the moral and ethical paradigm that will influence when he or she uses martial arts and how he or she carries him or herself throughout daily life.

Section II. The Need for Respect

Martial arts is a dangerous business, for all involved. A teacher is exposing the mechanics of their fighting style, which shows how it can be exploited. A student, in taking falls and blows, trusts the teacher not to damage his body. The community is trusting the martial artists not to take advantage of their knowledge at the detriment of the populus. While there are many ways in which these dynamics can be effected, the kunja's way is built on a single pillar, respect, which is essential for Don Burns' "deep appreciation for humanity."

Confucius says as much in his *Analects*. In Book 3 Chapter 7, it is written, "The Master said, 'The student of virtue has no contentions. If it be said he cannot avoid them, shall this be in archery? But he bows complaisantly to his competitors; thus he ascends the hall, descends, and exacts the forfeit of drinking. In his contention, he is still the Chun-tsze.'" The gentleman scholar, even in a contest of martial skill, respects those around him. In my experience, this is necessary for training martial arts. Respecting one's training partners is the only way to keep having training partners, as respect both protects all involved from bodily harm and encourages the partners to rely on one another. Without respect, injuries become commonplace, and students spend more time

worrying about each other than they do the techniques they are meant to be studying.

The same can be said for the community and one's teachers – the community supports the martial artist and expects he or she act appropriately, and students and teachers are simply specialized training partners, where one knows more than the other.

This attitude about one's martial training eventually translates to the rest of one's life. One becomes so accustomed to the giving of respect to others and expecting it that it becomes second nature. The benefits of being able to rely on others and being able to be counted on in times of duress become things to be sought. It becomes a signature of the martial artist within the community, and the community understands one of the core tenets of kunja: that kunja value human life and dignity, in the whole of their life. This may even be a way in which the kunja is a paragon for the community, but for the kunja, it is a requirement of martial study and living.

Section III. The Need for Action

Learning and respect are two tenets of martial study, but a martial artist is not simply a scholar. A martial artist is also a person of action, as part of the striving for excellence previously mentioned. This is an area of much discourse, both in Confucius's *Analects* and Machiavelli's *The Prince*. While very different treatises on personal conduct and state affairs, they agree that an individual in a position of power is obligated by their position to act justly and in the interests of the people. Martial arts are a position of power, as martial technique grants the ability to combat aggression and violence through physical intervention.

From the perspective of Confucius, the *Analects* is fairly clear on the need for

action. Book 2 Chapter 24 part 2 says “to see what is right and not do it is want of courage.” Later, in Book 19 Chapter 1, “Tsze-chang said, ‘The scholar, trained for public duty, seeing threatening danger, is prepared to sacrifice his life. When the opportunity of gain is presented to him, he thinks of righteousness. In sacrificing, his thoughts are reverential. In mourning, his thoughts are about the grief which he should feel.’” The kunja martial artist should follow these principles closely – he or she does not act out of personal gain or emotions. The kunja's actions stem from a need in the interests of righteousness and the preservation of life.

Machiavelli's *The Prince* agrees with this conclusion, though for more practical reasons and ones I find worth remembering. A European prince's position in Machiavelli's days came from his ability to wage war and maintain the peace within his territory. Today, that function is mostly filled by the police and military. However, particularly here in the U.S., some peacekeeping functions still fall to the citizenry. Police have about a 4-10 minute response time from the time 911 is called to when they are able to arrive on the scene. In times of extreme duress, such as in the middle of the commission of a violent crime, the resistance of the citizenry can be key to the protection of the innocent. Machiavelli makes the facts simple at the beginning of Chapter 14 in the *The Prince*: “it is not reasonable to suppose that one who is armed will obey willingly one who is unarmed, or that any unarmed man will remain safe among armed servants.” In order to preserve the learning and respect that kunja try to promote, he or she must be willing to act in the defense of those principles, balancing the desire for peace with the necessity of action.

B. The Relationship between Knifework and a Developing Kunja

Knifework is where I connected with the ideals of kunja in my martial arts career at IU. While all the martial training helped me on my way to learning of the concepts of kunja, knifework was where the principles were made most apparent, as all three pillars of a kunja – learning, respect, and action – are necessary to practical knifework, especially in the defensive capacity in which it is trained in HapKiDo.

Section I. Value of Learning in Proper Knifework

Without the proper training, knifework may or may not lead to being kunja, and so it is critical to get this proper training. I am thankful that I have had so many good instructors who have been able to give me that training, and I hope to do justice to what they have taught. To put it simply, knifework requires training in legal understanding, practical understanding, and mental discipline -- all three aspects are required in equal parts to receive a balanced and healthy attitude and to be effective.

First and foremost, a knife is a damaging weapon. Some would say that training knifework is too offensive, too aggressive for a modern, educated citizen to practice unless he or she was in the military or perhaps the police. Because of this, the legal ramifications of using a knife -- and acceptable scenarios for its use -- must be covered. Knife-fights are never pretty, and everyone gets cut. Those who get cut worst face permanent scarring, crippling injuries, and death in worst-case scenarios. Society with good reason takes these facts seriously, and the kunja must learn that the knife is not a first-response tool in his toolkit.

However, there are good reasons to use a knife in certain scenarios, and society, while perhaps not as publicly as could be, can accept the use of a knife. HapKiDo teaches that its martial artists, its kunja, should always respond with an appropriate amount of force -- never overreacting to a scenario yet not leaving themselves undefended. Responding with a knife to an empty-handed punch in a bar is quite obviously an over-reaction and not to be encouraged. However, just last year on IU's campus, someone was murdered with a knife, and there have been a number of knife attacks in town recently. Attacks with a knife or another weapon are not commonplace, but they do happen, even in Bloomington. Instances where clearly one's life is in jeopardy is where the use of a knife is allowed, and this training should be made explicit to the student. The best tactic is not always to engage, but, when retreat is not feasible and one's life is jeopardy, a knife becomes a viable, legal option.

Secondly, knifework must be trained within a practical understanding. There are many intricate joint-locks, trapping maneuvers, throws and counter-cuts that one can perform with a knife. These are interesting to study and can be of benefit in their own right for muscle coordination and understanding of anatomy. That being said, knifework when it must be used is fast and with little margin for error -- the more intricate the movement, the more that can go wrong with it to the user's detriment. For this reason, a student must have a practical understanding of what they can and cannot do in a real engagement. There is too much that can go wrong, and to teach otherwise is both a poor example for the student and a risk to their life, neither representing kunja in the instructor. I have never seen this with the instructors I have learned under, and because

they have emphasized both the practical and the intrinsic I can state the necessity of the practical with certainty.

Finally, the mind must be trained. While not exactly the best source, I still have a lot of respect for an Apache character named Blackwolf from the TV series "Criminal Minds," who did train martial arts and knifework. For him, the rule was 21 feet -- inside of 21 feet, he would win as he needed to and no more; outside of 21 feet, he had other options, like running. The appropriate response is not always to engage -- sometimes an attacker can be successfully fled from, and the situation is diffused. Kunja, in virtue and wisdom, understand that unnecessary harm to another is never desirable and neither is unnecessary entanglement with law enforcement thereafter. Sun Tzu, in his *Art of War* and concurrence with this theory, states that there "has never been a protracted war from which a country has benefited." In the same way, no one benefits from a knife-fight save in the most grave circumstances, much less a protracted one.

Within the 21 feet, however, the mindset must change. The kunja must also understand that neither virtue nor wisdom can be cultivated in idleness or submission to the unnecessary violence of another upon oneself. For this, the kunja must be ready to enter the engagement with the intent to end the fight. If this means causing a limited amount of harm as the situation dictates, the kunja understands that it will end more violence in the long term as the aggressor can be dealt with by police and the judiciary afterwards. In the rarest of cases where a lethal response is required, such as multiple armed attackers with no means of escape available, perhaps that means a death to create the avenue of escape needed. The kunja must have the mental training to deal

as much and as little damage as is needed by the situation.

None of these areas can be neglected. Overlooking legalities leads both to a poor reputation for the martial artist and the school and to the need for reparations that could have been avoided, aside from the obvious time in prison. Neglecting the practical defeats the purpose of training the weapon in the first place, save perhaps as a diversion. (Personally, weapons training is not a game and should never be approached as such. While any training should be fun, training with objects that can cause harm as though they were toys is disrespectful and irresponsible.) Avoiding the mental training can result in overaggressive individuals or those who are too passive to use the weapon in their defense, which would put them at risk if they ever picked it up. Kunja will study and understand all three aspects, rounding them out as a person and as a martial artist.

The training of knifework, through these vectors of learning, teaches the greater concepts needed by a kunja. Courage is one of the first aspects imbued by knife training. Knifework in any form presents an immediate danger to both parties involved. Anyone who has had an inkling of what knifework is capable of has felt trepidation in practicing the techniques -- even a training knife, used at any kind of speed, looks very real. The instinctive response to flashing steel is to recoil. Moreover, fear comes not only from fear of the attack coming in, but many will fear inflicting the damage in response. Most people, I believe, have a healthy desire to not harm one another. These fears combine to create an aversion to knifework when viewed in the practical sense that it should be.

Those who have the aforementioned mental training are able to overcome this

aversion. They know that if they are in a knife-fight of any sort, be they armed or unarmed, then the option to flee has already vanished. To attempt to run when there is no opportunity is only to open oneself to a worse attack. It is then that the martial artist, hopefully in training, has to confront this aversion for himself or herself. This forced confrontation creates an opportunity to overcome it and be ready for the situation in the future. Overcoming the aversion creates an attenuation to being able to overcome it in the future.

I personally feel that this attenuation is a transferable skill. The same aversion to knifework training can be passed on to other uncomfortable situations, such as confronting a friend about a problem or facing an aggressive stranger. Both require courage, and the same ability to overcome an aversion or fear applies to both knifework and real-life situations. Kunja being men and women of virtue, I feel that courage is an worthy attribute that knifework cultivates.

One particular aspect of knifework encourages another attribute -- the limited margin of error in knifework promotes a strong drive for perfection, which is an aspect of kunja that Master Burns mentioned in his treatises. While slipping off on a joint-lock does not reduce the arsenal of a trained HapKiDo practitioner who follows up, losing an attachment on a knife attack presents a significant opportunity for the one wielding it and a significant risk for the defender. This small margin of error encourages dedicated, precise training that will apply not just to knifework but also to other areas of martial arts, strengthening the martial artist as a whole. Training knifework, one begins to understand that a small mistake can have big repercussions. The tendency to always want to do the

technique right the first time is instilled by the repetitions along with the practical skills, and it begins to bleed through to the rest of life. Small mistakes in life begin to be examined for their repercussions, and I for one always try to avoid or at worst correct them in the future.

The question of how this applies to kunja may be one the reader's mind, but it is one easily solved. Not only are kunja expected to be men and women of virtue for themselves -- they are accountable to the community at large. Kunja understand that what they do reflects on them, on the school, and on the community from which they come. Small mistakes are just small mistakes, but over time they may form a pattern through which a reputation is born. Training knifework promotes the early stages of learning to examine the effects of one's actions and to minimize the margin of error so no more damage is done than is necessary. As kunja, this becomes a gateway for improving one's weaknesses and increasing those virtues already strong within oneself. Furthermore, this desire for perfection should become evident in the way the kunja carries himself or herself and thus helps promote the kunja as a model for the rest of the community. As a small side note, even if the community is initially hesitant about the training -- such as knifework -- the benefits and character of the individual can ease the tensions and open the community's mind to a skill set that had previously been closed off by fear, trepidation, or preconception.

Moreover, the kunja is made humble by knifework, a key virtue for men and women empowered with the ability to harm others. Anyone can be take by surprise by a knife attack, regardless of skill. Even the greatest can be made low with a simple cut to

the hamstrings. In society as well, a misplaced word, a poor choice of actions, or a bad reputation can end the career and respect for any individual. Knifework makes evident this vulnerability, first on a physical level and then over time more metaphorically for the rest of life as well.

Pride rarely survives this kind of exposure. One must learn one's own limitations or risk having them used against oneself. Humbleness thus follows necessarily -- the kunja accepts his limitations and does not make himself more than what he is. The courage and respect that knifework instills still remain -- the humbleness I speak of is not one of self-deprecation. The kunja merely is what he is and tries to appear no more than that. His humbleness goes hand-in-hand with his respect, allowing him to treat all equally, and knifework encourages this by showing that everyone has a weakness, including him. His courage compliments his humbleness by allowing him to rise above his limitations -- his drive for perfection allows him to make himself better. However, the kunja never values his own life more than others, and because of this he should encourage all to pursue their strengths so that the community as a whole may be strengthened. Humbleness thus becomes the glue that unifies the other virtues into a cohesive whole that the kunja employs on a daily basis and reinforces the messages of Confucius about the characteristics of the Chun-tsze.

Section II: Value of Respect in Knifework

In the *Shoninki*, a 17th century text from the Iga ninja of Japan, states that "destroying a man deters us away from the objective we are working to achieve." Knifework's practical benefits promote qualities in the individual training them. It is these

qualities that hold value to kunja. Courage and a desire for perfection alone is not sufficient for kunja or knifework -- the foolhardily courageous will still engage even when there is the option to escape a knifefight, and this overeagerness to engage I do not believe to be part of kunja. Another attribute comes hand-in-hand with courage thanks to knife training -- respect. Respect in knifework comes first in respect for the weapon. Anyone who works with sharp knives on a regular basis, for example in cooking, has a respect for what they can do. The weapon or tool must be treated with respect and care. It is a useful tool, but it must be used carefully used to avoid causing more damage than benefit.

This respect is amplified in training to extend to not just the weapon. The instructor also earns the respect of the trainees by teaching. When training knifework, unless it is a number of students sharing techniques, the instructor's level of skill is significantly and demonstrably higher than that of the students. As the instructor shows new techniques, each as devastating or intricate as the previous, he or she shows his or her own skill. The willingness to share these skills and the ability to communicate the techniques well earns the respect of his or her students.

As the training advances, the student's level of skill begins to show some personal preferences. Some students are better at certain techniques than others, and they will stop and help each other as they learn. Over time, this develops a certain level of trust among the students, a sense of community. This trust merges with the understanding of the competency of the other students to form a deep sense of respect.

Respect is central for kunja -- not only does it promote a good martial arts

learning environment, but it is necessary to have a good respect for humanity as well. Without a respect for humanity, martial skill is merely a risk. Moreover, kunja is not merely about martial arts. It is meant to be a philosophy encompassing a life path. Respect must be a part of that philosophy, both respect of self, community, and humanity as a whole.

Section III: Value of Action in Knifework

Knifework is more than a philosophical exercise, and its long-term benefits come from the immediate, practical ones. First, however, a small note of how realistic a weapon the knife is. In 2010, according to FBI statistics⁽¹⁾, 13% of murders, 19% of aggravated assaults, and 7% of robberies involved a knife. The majority of the rest were either unarmed or used a handgun. While canes and han bos are effective tools and worth studying, the knife is a weapon that is found in use on the street. More importantly, many people carry a knife as a tool, even around IU, whether it be a small penknife or a more tactical folder. Even if they themselves would not use the knife as a weapon, it can be taken by another and turned back on them. Thus, training with knives is a worthy aspect on the mere premise, using the three aspects aforementioned.

Good hand- and foot-speed is necessary for good knifework. An angle five stab is a fast and low-risk attack for the aggressor -- one must move quickly off the line of attack and either shut the arm down or make a good attachment with a good diversion in a very small window. This hand- and foot-speed is just as applicable to punch and kick defenses as it is to knifework.

Good control of the situation is a must for good knifework. While training in the

dojang, one is working in a wide open space. The real world is not this way. One is often surrounded by a myriad of objects -- tables, chairs, doorways, book-bags, loose material scattered across the floor, other people, walls, etc. All of these can be used by the good student to avoid the engagement and diffuse the situation -- ignorance of them can lead to disaster. Understanding and training for this is of immediate value to the martial artist in any kind of engagement, not just knifework. Knifework is simply one way to bring the situational awareness to the foreground.

One unique benefit to knifework is awareness of what another individual is carrying. Canes and sticks are not exactly easily concealable. One expects one's foe to have hands and feet. The knife is the first weapon introduced that can rapidly "change the game," so to speak. A fistfight that would otherwise have ended relatively amicably becomes a struggle for life and death when someone pulls a knife that was not noticed beforehand. I for my part am now much more conscious of other people's hands and their dress. I can often spot knives from first conversational contact with another, and if I don't, usually they are pen-knives or small folding knives -- too small to be the same threat as a four-inch folder, which can cut deeper and is more likely to reach an artery.

These traits prepare the kunja martial artist for action. There are many police accounts and personal stories of attacks by armed individuals. When a kunja is trained in the ability to respond appropriately to them, he or she can be prepared to intervene if necessary in the interest of greatest respect for human life, morality, and dignity. He has been given the courage to act through his learning, allowing him to follow Confucius, and his respect for human life will respond as Machiavelli knew he or she would have to.

C. The Final Relation of Kunja and the Knife

I have found a useful metaphor in the knife. In its purest form, it can be tool or weapon. The same cutting power of the knife can be turned for good or ill. In the hands of a butcher, the knife is the tool of his craft and allows him to provide a good product for his customers. In the hands of a chef, the knife becomes an instrument for the creation of culinary art that he serves to his customers. In the hands of a craftsman, the knife becomes the tool he relies on daily to complete his tasks. These same knives, however, can be turned to ill purposes. The butcher's cleaver, the chef's filet knife, and the craftsman's woodworking blade can all take on a different attitude in the hands of a robber or someone who has broken into our home in the middle of the night. It is the attitude of the wielder, more than the innate attributes of the blade, that define whether the knife is viewed as a favorable tool or a repulsive instrument of destruction. True, there are some knives whose purpose is self-evident, but in that also the metaphor holds true. If the knife is carried openly and aggressively, being designed in such a way that it immediately shows its purpose to harm human life, then it is shunned with good reason. But, if the knife is kept simple, showing its purpose by remaining well-sharpened and yet sheathed and subtle when not in use, then it is not seen as an overly dangerous tool. Inazo Nitobe in his book on Bushido made a mention of similar principle. In Bushido, he said that it never authorized the promiscuous use of the weapon. "A dastard or a braggart was he who brandished his weapon on undeserved occasions," he said. The knife is included in this.

The martial artist is much the same. If a martial artist without the attributes of a kunja struts around, declaring himself a weapon and seeking a fight, then society fears him. He is demonstrating that he has neither the self-control to be reasonable in the practice of his art nor does he truly value human life. When he becomes involved in an altercation, society will see that he brought it on himself by seeking it out and consider him of poor character for the harm he has caused. However, if the martial artist carries himself or herself with a quiet confidence, akin to a knife sheathed, he earns respect from all but the most paranoid and is not considered a risk to the society as a whole. The times when the metaphoric knife is unsheathed are then considered justified, as a virtuous kunja -- the equivalent of a good knife -- would never attack without provocation and good reason. The reputation the kunja has earned will be known among the community.

The Tao Te Ching says that "clay is fashioned into vessels; it is on their empty hollowness that their use depends." So it is with the martial artist and with the knife.

Conclusion

Knifework is a great tool for the kunja. Not only is it a practical weapon that with the proper training can be of use, the training itself promotes other skills. The kunja grows with the training, gaining courage, respect for self and community, a drive for perfection, and a measure of humbleness. I have found knifework to be my greatest asset in my journey to become a kunja.

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