

Meeting the Masters: Ed Parker (1931-1990)

Over my 50+ years of training in budo, I have been lucky enough to meet or train under many notable martial artists. This year, I want to share my impressions, some deep set, some fleeting, about the men and women I met on the way.



I had always liked Master Parker's concept- and principle-based approach to teaching American Kenpo. It was not my system, in fact the kempo in my part of the country was quite different from his kempo, but I had been using a couple of his concepts teaching Japanese karate and wanted to learn more.

In my first seminar with him, I made sure to line up in front of the class so as not to miss any of the movements or explanations. This meant that he would likely answer my questions and occasionally might use me as a partner. Sure enough, he dumped me in his modified *O-soto-gari* (a version with both feet on the ground), which helped me understand Funakoshi's *Byobudaoshi* (To Topple a Folding Screen) throw in a manner that differed from Judo's *O-soto-gari*.

He showed how a specific extension of the arm could produce a stable energy to be used to block or strike. "Ah," I said, "maybe that's why aiki people tend to take a posture with their arms out and their fingers spread" (thus getting similar energy into their arms by using a similar posture). However, his response was not to confirm or deny this, but to go off on a subject of his own. "Oh that. I love that," he said, waving me to a place opposite him and indicating that I should assume the formal aiki ready posture. He then grabbed my wrist and simulated a fist blow between my fingers, which would have forcefully separated them and sprained the attending ligaments.

I found this to be distressing, not because he was in danger of harming me, but because he did not care to deal with my observation. I realized then that Master Parker really enjoyed teaching and had so much to offer that he almost could not complete a lesson without going somewhat off-topic in order to embellish the instruction. I hope I do not sound disrespectful when I say that he ate the same way.

After the seminar we retired to a small dojo for sandwiches and he managed to answer questions and give mini-demonstrations with an incompletely masticated ham and cheese sandwich in his mouth. It may have seemed a little sloppy on the surface, but it spoke to the idea that he was accessible and eager to teach even during his down times.

A very senior martial artist from the west coast once told me that Master Parker borrowed a lot of his ideas from the Filipino arts that were being practiced in Stockton, California to which

Master Parker was drawn well before they were popular in the wider martial arts community. Could be, but if so, he adapted these ideas well so that his students could troubleshoot and modify their applications. Parker was known for advocating that the student came before the art; that is, rather than forcing the student to adapt to the art, the art should be modified so that the student could easily use it. I am of mixed opinions on this subject, understanding why students benefit from forcing themselves to conform, and also understanding why blind conforming results in robotic and even difficult-to-use application.

Master Parker, when I knew him, was six feet or so in height and somewhat heavy. But he moved so quickly and decisively that it was always a surprise when he turned from a seemingly placid state to a hurricane force with athletic skills that shocked, then disappeared into placidity with only a lingering frown to remember them by. Then he'd smile again and look for another sandwich.