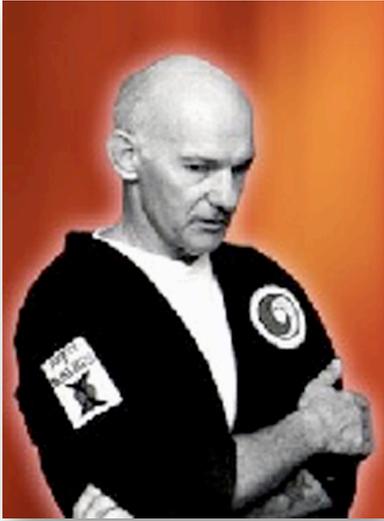


## Meeting the Masters: Joe Cowles (1928-2014)



Over 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.

Joe Cowles was one of the original students of Bruce Lee during Lee's Seattle period. I met him indirectly through Texas students of mine who took classes with him occasionally in Forth Worth. His senior student, Joe Purcell, showed us his school and let us watch an informal lesson. I immediately invited Sifu Cowles to do a seminar at Bushido-kai. I was interested in his Wu Wei Gung-fu because it was a close offshoot of Bruce Lee's Jun-fan boxing and early JKD that had exploded in popularity immediately after Lee's 1973 death. Sifu Cowles told me that he had been following my magazine articles and was interested in my helping append some aiki finishes to his Wu Wei entries.

Joe was a small man, clearly in good physical condition, but still managed to look like a senior citizen since he was losing his hair and occasionally had a tremor in his voice. When he moved, however, there was a tremor only in his opponent's confidence. Bruce had at first told Cowles that he was too old to start training, but Cowles kept at it and changed Lee's mind. Cowles was one of the fastest men I had seen on the mat, certainly the fastest for his age. Obviously this was impressive, but equally impressive was his very humble disposition. During the seminar he would ask me for ways I might adjust his technique and always listened attentively if I had a question about a potential weak point. His seminar at my dojo appears beside Wally Jay's in our very first video program *Wally Jay & Joe Cowles at Bushido-kai*, still popular, even after thirty years.

A few years later, we did a seminar together in Arlington, Texas. By then I was familiar enough with Wu Wei so that I could easily add aiki to Joe's combinations, and he complimented me by inquiring about the details of my execution. Eventually, I would use this compilation of early JKD and aiki to create the *sandan* level of my own Seiken Budo.

I had asked him later in life to offer another seminar for us, but he was attending a very sick wife, something he had been doing off and on for decades. However, on a few occasions I would discover in the mail an aikido book he had sent me with his notes in it, with a dedication that was always complimentary. As far as I was concern, he was the star, not me. Not only had he successfully developed his own system, but also a student of his had been teaching it to a division of the Israeli army, something of which he was rightfully proud.

I learned as much about Bruce Lee through Joe's saying, "Bruce used to say..." as I have through the books and articles I have read on the man. More importantly, I learned a lot of details that

books and articles fail to show. I certainly don't claim to have mastered JKD, Wu Wei, or even my adaptation of Wu Wei used in Seiken Budo, but without my relationship with Joe Cowles I would never have dared to see an important aspect of training that seems quite natural now.

Of all the high level martial artists I have met, and there have been quite a few, Joe was one of the most modest with the least to be modest about.