

# DEFINITIONS OF KENPO – A KILLING ART

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*“Never enter into kumite without the intention to kill, and the willing acceptance of your death. But do neither, do not kill and do not die. But if by circumstance you are faced with the choice of killing or dying, know this, it is better to die not having taken a life than to die a murderer.”*

## Introduction

To understand kenpo, its definition and history, I recommend studying the work of Al Tracy and the original textbook by James M. Mitose entitled, *What is Self Defense?* In Al Tracy’s work on the history of kenpo, he cites information gleaned from *The Textbook of Ju-jutsu as Practiced in Japan* by S.K. Uyenishi and on his website, he publishes the original kenpo book (*What is Self Defense?* by James M. Mitose). The significance of these books in relation to the history and development of kenpo are explained by the kenpo historian. If not for Al Tracy, students of kenpo would simply not have access to much of the rich and highly informative history that has been preserved.

In some circles, a debate exists as to which spelling (kenpo or kempo) is correct, and whether it is primarily a Chinese or a Japanese martial art. In truth, kenpo/kempo is both Chinese and Japanese and in this article, both spellings may be used interchangeably.

As both a student and teacher of kenpo, I do not view kenpo as a style of martial art but rather as a group of techniques collectively and historically referred to as “fist law.”

## Definitions of Kenpo – A Killing Art

Many articles on kenpo begin with definitions and explanations of the origin of the words (kenpo and kempo); however, in this article, the intention is to examine a more global definition of kenpo as a combat martial art originally resulting from techniques applied to the traditional battlefield. Later, these were refined into a killing and maiming combat art long before its modern transformation into a self-defense martial art.

S.K. Uyenishi, author of *The Textbook of Ju-Jutsu as Practiced in Japan*, wrote his book during the early-1900’s and in it offers some brief insights into the historical representation of kenpo. Uyenishi was a well-established senior jujitsu master and teacher and his teaching positions included: *Riku-gun yo-nan gako* (The Military College for Officers), *Tai-iku-kai* (The Imperial Military College of Physical Training), *Shi-han-gako* (The School of Instructors), *Jun sa kio-shun sho* (The Police Training School), and

all government schools in Osaka, Japan. Uyenishi was a pioneer of jujitsu in the UK, and in his book, he demonstrates various techniques such as break-falls, throws, and locks. His father, Kichibe Uyenishi, was also a great jujitsu master and teacher who lived and practiced martial arts during the 1800's in Japan. At the time, Japan was in turbulence and in 1867, the Tokugawa Shogunate was officially ended, after nearly 700 years of Shogun rule.

For kenpo practitioners, the main interest in Uyenishi's textbook is in his references to kenpo. In his research, Al Tracy provides the following quoted content from Uyenishi's textbook.

One of the styles alluded to, known as the *Kempo*, which may be roughly described as a method of killing people, possessed many points of resemblance to Ju-jutsu but was totally different in practice, being a system of self-defence against sudden attack with intent to kill and replying thereto in kind. It was certainly more closely related to ju-jutsu than is boxing (even under the old Prize Ring rules) or *le savate* to wrestling. It might perhaps be best compared to that very strenuous old Greek Physical Contest, which was known as the **Pancration**. By-the-way, I may here remark on the possible derivation of the old English phrase "Kempery man" and the Anglo-Saxon *cempa*, signifying "a warrior," from the Japanese Kempo. This is a point which should not be without interest to etymologists, and particularly to those who follow the late Professor Max Muller in his theory of the Indo-Germanic origin of the Anglo-Saxon Race.

Kempo, of course, was a system of attack and defence which branched off from ju-jutsu into the paths of strenuous endeavor, but, apart from the fact that it was less scientific than, ju-jutsu, it was declared an illegal practice when the sanctity of human life was recognised under the new regime.

The opening sentence of Uyenishi's description of kenpo provides insight into one of its earliest definitions and shows that in the 1800's and early-1900's kenpo was recognized as a killing method (i.e., "may be roughly described as a method of killing people..." and "against sudden attack with intent to kill..."). Al Tracy goes on to clarify that,

in 1868 the new Japanese government eliminated two traditions: first they eliminated the Samurai as a class and outlawed their wearing of swords and at the same time kempo was declared an illegal practice when the sanctity of human life was recognized under the new regime.

Uyenishi's definition of kenpo as a killing art predates James M. Mitose's book (*What is Self Defense?*; 1947), which presented kenpo in the post-shogun and post-samurai period as a form of personal self defense.

In the introduction to his book, Mitose defines kenpo as,

The main purpose is to give faith to man and reform him into a new man. One should hate the wrongdoings of a criminal but not the man himself, for no matter how bad a person, man was created by GOD, so if it is possible, one must try not to injure or take any life. Try not to use any dangerous tricks, unless it is really necessary. Do not oppose force with force, but allow force to defeat itself."

This definition sharply deviates from the historical and well-recognized reputation of kenpo as being an art of killing. In any case, since Japan and the US were just ending World War II, it should not be surprising that a social and moral receptivity existed for redefining certain martial arts in a more peaceful and spiritual light. Mitose's definitions and explanations of kenpo reflect similar spiritual and philosophical concepts found in the writings of the *aikido* founder, Morihei Ueshiba, who was a contemporary of Mitose's. Just as the killing art of Japanese *aiki jujitsu* was being reformed into the peaceful martial art to be known as *aikido*, kenpo, in the hands of Mitose, also experienced a similar reformation. Incidentally, in 1970, Mitose received an honorary tenth dan in *aikido* at the direction of Morihei Ueshiba. The written content of that award follows:

Certificate of Testimony and Appreciation

To: Dr. James M. Mitose

As you are the president of the Japanese-American (International) society for the promotion of goodwill, friendship, and social welfare, you have contributed to the happiness of mankind and world peace, and especially for the handicapped people. You have rendered services for many years to develop the rightful ways of the Japanese martial arts of Aikido. For your distinguished service, I hereby bestow upon you an honorary tenth degree or Ju-dan. I respect and appreciate your faithful and unselfish service.

March 22, 1970

Koichi Tohei, 10th degree, Ju-dan

Head instructor of Aikido

General Headquarters (signed and stamped with seal)

Some controversy exists regarding the award, with Koichi Tohei later alleging that he was reluctant to issue the certificate and only did so at the direction of Morihei Ueshiba. If true, then Koichi Tohei or Morihei Ueshiba, or both, falsified their statements in the award with the words, "I respect and appreciate your faithful and unselfish service." This

would have been no small matter of honor, considering the reputation and position of these two noted founders of *aikido*.

Kenpo practitioners and teachers, Brian Zarnett and Paul Seaby, describe its development:

On the surface, Kenpo's uniqueness lies in its comprehensive and diversified means of unarmed defense. Shaolin Kenpo Karate proper is both an armed and unarmed system of combat incorporating applications in varying appearances and method. On an external level, Kenpo is a no holds barred fighting system of offensive and defensive methods with equal emphasis of striking techniques with the hands and feet; immobilization and controls; projections and takedowns; as well as weaponry and various spiritual and healing arts. Shaolin Kenpo is a streetwise defensive art that does not restrict its students in methodology. Clawing hands evolve into slashing feet. Cunning joint locks turn into devastating hip throws. Evasive blocks turn into breath closing chokes.

As we examine the early history of the martial arts, as practiced in war, and during mankind's history when empty-handed combat and hand weapons (knives, spears, and swords) was all that was available to combatants, we can readily understand that devastating attacks to the throat to crush the airway and cause death, or techniques for destroying the joints and connective tissues to maim the opponent, were the ideas and techniques behind many contemporary martial artists (i.e., controlled sport chokes and joint locks). To further examine the development of the fighting arts from their early martial history to contemporary sports, we can see the evolution of these arts from a focus on killing and maiming towards a universal philosophy for preserving and protecting life (or to providing recreational and leisure satisfaction by the diminishing of true martial technique and the adoption of sports rules and regulations).

From early history and traditional warfare, to the martial spiritual transformation that was seen in the 1970's and 1980's, to the development of recreational sports and martial arts competition in the 1990's and the present, the martial arts have undergone many changes with reference to our understanding of the fighting arts. Nevertheless, the fundamental techniques and applications involving the physics of killing and maiming have remained unchanged. From the breaking of a joint or use of lethal techniques to the airway, arteries, or nerve centers, the techniques have remained constant, despite contemporary beliefs that may have been manipulated by martial art gurus, movies, or promoters of recreational and sports martial art competitions.

Martial art, whether called *kenpo*, *hapkido*, *aikido*, *taekwondo*, *shorin ryu*, or any other name, or as part of any religion or philosophy, or as developed by any individual, is fundamentally the manual application of principles, laws, and forces of physical mechanics against the functional biomechanics of the human body.

Many traditional martial artists claim their superiority in style of martial art, and in their particular philosophy or theory, or specific techniques. The kenpo community is no exception. Many kenpo practitioners believe in the inherent superiority of their kenpo techniques based on its history. Members of the kenpo community commonly believe that the only effective kenpo has been derived from a group of techniques that came from early kenpo founders (i.e., James M. Mitose, William K.S. Chow, and Edmund K. Parker). Nevertheless, many experienced martial artists, especially those involved in combat or mixed martial arts, recognize that the most effective principles of the martial arts are based on effective training and conditioning methods, both physical and mental, as well as fighting techniques that are based on correct physical mechanics and physics.

Regardless of its origin, whether esoteric or modern fighting science, any technique is either correct or incorrect because of its alignment with physical mechanics that involve inertia, momentum, rotation, acceleration, velocity, mass, and the generation of kinetic energy, as well as mechanical forces such as leverage, torque, shearing, traction, and compression.

The three most commonly used and most effective martial art attacks are to the throat and larynx, eyes, and joints:

### **1) Attacks to the throat and larynx**

Hand, forearm, elbow or foot attacks to the throat area and larynx are techniques commonly used in many martial arts. While blunt trauma resulting in damage to the throat is rare in the general public, intentional trauma executed by a trained martial artist is easily executed and can be devastating against an opponent. Blunt trauma injuries to the throat can lead to problems with aspiration, speech, or respiration and such attacks can cause rapid asphyxiation. When blunt throat trauma is the result of a car accident, for example, four of ten victims of blunt laryngeal trauma are likely to die at the scene of the accident.

### **2) Attacks to the eyes**

Eye gouging techniques are commonly used in most martial arts. Kenpo attacks to the eyes include the use of finger pokes, finger hooks, and thumb compression to the globe of the eye. Blunt trauma can be a significant cause of visual loss, and occurs when the eye is struck with a finger, fist, or other solid object. Such injuries will damage the eye, with sudden compression and indentation of the eye globe at the moment of impact. Bleeding from the eye may also occur as a result of blunt trauma. Some martial art techniques attempt to compress and crush the eye globe and others are designed to scrape the outer surface of the eye to cause corneal abrasion, which is very painful can immediately compromise vision.

### 3) Attacks to the joints

Catastrophic joint dislocation (a “joint break”) is a trauma to a joint that results in the tearing or detachment of tendons and ligaments and a partial or complete separation of the connective tissue structures of the joint. Joint breaks are common kenpo techniques and frequently involve hyper-extending, pulling, and twisting joints until the connective tissues tears and separates. Hinge, ball and socket, and gliding joints such as the elbow, knee, shoulder, fingers, toes, and wrist are especially susceptible to joint breaking techniques.

The kenpo system of martial arts consists of over 400 techniques with variations. The techniques are taught to kenpo students from white belt to black belt, and they comprise a series of choreographed responses to various attacks, from punches to grappling. To evaluate kenpo attacks solely on individual strikes, joint locks, or the likelihood that a technique will inflict lethal or maiming damage, and if we sort the techniques according to their lethality, we would find that the physical damage reputed to result from single strikes or techniques is not supported by common sparring or combat experience, or our understanding of physical mechanics and body physiology.

The human body is amazingly durable and plastic, and many of the attacks, strikes, and techniques of martial arts are not directed to the most vulnerable areas of the body. For example, the yellow belt kenpo technique called, Alternating Maces, has blocking and covering movements, as well as a thrust punch to the sternum or solar plexus and a back fist attack to the temple. While any of these strikes could cause discomfort or unconsciousness, in full contact or mixed martial arts, these strikes frequently fail to achieve either result and they are certainly not reliably lethal or maiming techniques. Martial art techniques that involve strikes to major muscle areas of the arms, legs, torso, or abdomen, to the ribs, or to the bony cranium of the head frequently fail to achieve their intended purpose.

In the early history of the martial arts, including kenpo and *aiki jujitsu*, joint breaking, involving partial or complete destruction of the joint capsule or complex, was a common technique and a physical objective in fighting. During the late-1800’s and through the 1900’s, these techniques lost favor and became relegated to joint pressure locks in the quasi-spiritual/philosophical martial arts (i.e., *aikido* and sport martial arts like judo). The original kenpo joint attacks involved complete or partial destruction of the joint, and the mental and physical execution of a joint pressure lock was significantly different from a joint break. When the intention is to destroy a joint through maximum trauma (connective tissue tearing, detachment, and dislocation), the joint attack is executed more like a strike moving through the joint, rather than a grasping or holding pressure on the joint.

Many, if not most, grappling techniques are defeated by the simplest and most basic martial art technique, breaking the fingers of the grappler.

As another example of the progression of kenpo away from its original roots as a killing and maiming art, is the chokes and counters to chokes that are routinely taught in kenpo schools. The development of quasi-spiritual/philosophical and sports approaches to the martial arts have led many martial artists to misunderstand the proper application of a choke. The original intention and purpose of a choke is to crush the airway and larynx and to cause arterial damage, collapse, and swelling, which cuts off blood flow to the brain, in one sudden and forceful movement. On the battlefield, the intention is not to render an opponent temporarily unconscious, but to kill. In a rear naked choke, for example (as a kenpo technique), once the forearm is positioned across the opponent's throat, the radial bone of the forearm is forcibly driven backwards through the opponent's neck effectively crushing the larynx.

Kenpo stylists could argue that the techniques are not designed to be executed as choreographed in real self-defense situations, but simply serve as instructional templates to teach progressively higher-level techniques and to develop advanced kenpo practitioners who can spontaneously respond to any attack. Nevertheless, if an attack does not contain strikes to the most vulnerable areas of the body, and to body parts that would be subject to severe trauma (i.e., the eyes, throat, and joints), the attack fails to meet the original definition of kenpo as a killing art.

Claims have been made throughout history regarding the superiority or the invincibility of certain martial artists and different styles of martial arts. The current mixed martial arts are no exception to these claims. While the mixed martial arts are popular as a form of controlled and state-regulated sports competition, they cannot be considered as a combat or killing art, because of the many rules and regulations. Mixed martial arts fighters are often superbly conditioned athletes, who are trained to fight in an artificial environment (e.g., "cage fighting"). The conditioning of the body and strengthening of connective tissues is an important element in martial sports events, but throughout the development of traditional martial arts, the most vulnerable areas of the body (joints, eyes, throat, and other soft tissue; nerves and arterial target areas) are well understood to be vulnerable to a focused attack because they cannot be "hardened." Even the strongest fighter has a brain composed of 78% water, which is vulnerable to concussion when acceleration/deceleration forces, directed to the head, exceed the brain's ability to withstand blunt trauma. Moreover, the strongest of fighters still has joints that can be hyper-extended or hyper-flexed beyond their ability to maintain joint stability.

## **Conclusion**

Because of the nature and limitations of human anatomy and physiology, with regards to body tissues, organs, and the physical mechanics of joints, a human body will be equally susceptible to any technique, whether it is Chinese, Japanese, Okinawan, European, or American, or whether it is based on Buddhist or Shinto religions, or is without any religious or philosophical foundation. What matters is the proper mastery and application of conditioning and training, both mental and physical, as well as, the proper use of physical mechanics in the execution of fighting techniques.

When this universal principle is recognized, the need for a large number of different martial arts styles may disappear, along with the often confusing array of techniques and the frequently baseless claims about the superiority of one over the other.

The historical development of kenpo, from traditional to modern, has been a long process. While kenpo, in recent times, has been modified to fit with contemporary ethical, philosophical, and spiritual sensitivities, and the recognition of the sanctity of human life, its origins and applications were centered on its effectiveness as a killing and maiming art.

Perhaps, the best way to explain kenpo, in terms of modern fighting applications is through the statement of an unknown kenpo teacher as it pertains to sparring or *kumite*,

Never enter into kumite without the intention to kill, and the willing acceptance of your death. But do neither, do not kill and do not die. But if by circumstance you are faced with the choice of killing or dying, know this, it is better to die not having taken a life than to die a murderer.

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