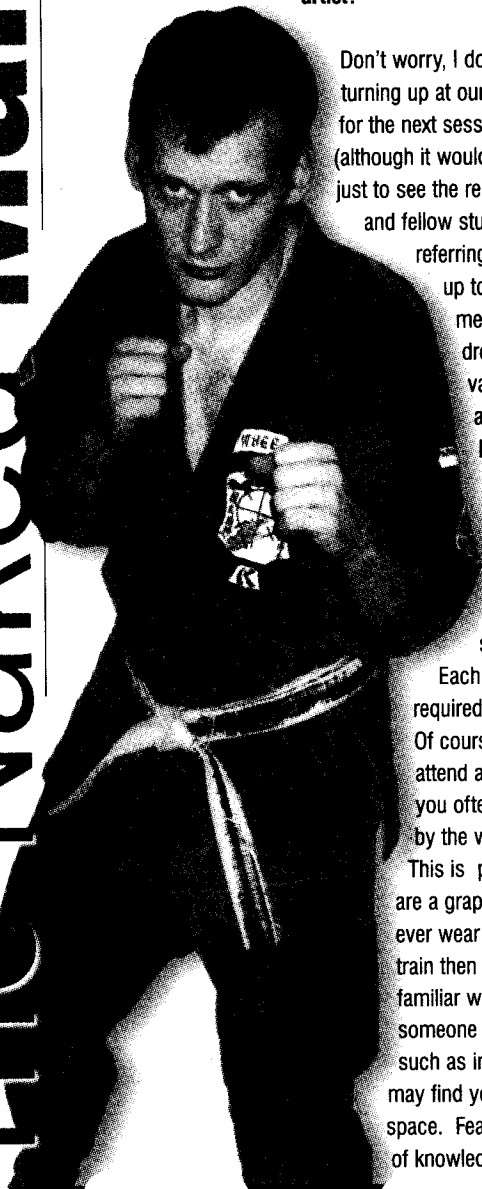


The Naked Martial Artist

By Martin Wheeler

Kenpo practitioner, Frank Trejo once told me the story of the naked hippy. In the mid-sixties Frank was teaching and training at Ed Parker's Pasadena studio in southern California. It was one of the first professional schools in the U.S. and from time to time they had some pretty unusual customers come through the door. On this particular day it was the naked hippy. Frank said that when the guy walked in dressed in hippy garb he could tell something was wrong right away. The Vietnam War was still raging in South East Asia at the time and this poor guy had the look of someone who had come back, like so many others, a changed man. The hippy asked a few questions and then just jumped on Frank and got him in a head-lock. Steve Haring was in the office and ran out. The hippy, who was a big guy, let go and immediately stripped-off until he was completely naked and again threw himself at Frank. As you can imagine, this took them a little by surprise. The specifics of the encounter are not important, suffice to say that Frank and his instructor managed to 'subdue' the man after a manic struggle and get him out of the studio. Why is this important? Well, apart from being a good story (which you have to hear Mr. Trejo tell to do it true justice) it brings up several interesting points. The main one being, should you be fully dressed as a martial artist?



Don't worry, I don't think we should be turning up at our respective training halls for the next session *sans* garments (although it would be amusing to do once just to see the reaction of your teacher and fellow students). No, I am referring to just how do we turn up to our training sessions mentally and physically dressed. I have studied various systems of martial arts ranging through Ed Parker's Kenpo, Boxing, Thai-Boxing, Judo, Jujitsu, Eskrima and anything else I could get my hands on, under what I consider to be some amazing teachers.

Each system I trained in required some form of uniform. Of course I understand when you attend a club or join a group that you often identify with that group by the way you and they dress. This is perfectly normal, but if you are a grappler, for example, and only ever wear a grappling uniform to train then that is what you become familiar with. If you grapple with someone who is not wearing a gi such as in a street situation, you may find yourself in an unfamiliar space. Fear can be defined as a lack of knowledge in a spontaneous

situation, the unknown could prove to be deadly in a real fight. Conversely, a grappler who constantly trains without a gi, only wearing a t-shirt and shorts should realise that if you are heavily clothed (i.e. winter clothing) how dramatically it can slow your movement at close quarters, or how useful clothing is to restrict your opponent or opponents. Any form of combat can be viewed in a similar fashion, from boxing to weapons fighting. Stepping away from the familiar and into the unfamiliar on a regular basis helps the mind and body to adapt more readily in a combat situation. The more versatile you are through adversity the better. A combat situation changes from moment to moment, the more your training is geared towards spontaneous adversity (which can be as simple as changing your clothes) the more you are prepared to deal with the spontaneous adversity of a genuine situation. The mind, body and spirit are amazingly adept at filtering information and processing what is useful and worth reacting to and what is not. We do it constantly. It's the reason we don't buy everything we see being advertised, or the fact we are capable of crossing a busy road safely again and again. But the body has to be familiar with the situation to understand how to filter the information. Even training in a full contact system, or studying 'mixed' martial arts can become a comfortable routine. Changing clothes, the number of opponents, training in a hallway and so on make the unfamiliar the familiar.

I now mainly study The System under an incredible teacher of the arts, Vladimir Vasiliev. The System is as much philosophy as it is 'application'. It is important to train the mind with a positive flexibility for the body and spirit to react with it unhindered. Our physicality is, after all, a construct of our psyche. A weak or rigid psyche will eventually lead to a weak or inflexible body. In one training session with Vladimir he remarked that it was better to come naked to a fight than dressed. I looked at my training partner Al Mcluckie hoping that this particular insight was not as literal as it sounded. Vladimir has had us do some pretty strange training routines up to this point. Vladimir asked me how many martial arts I had trained in. I replied that I had basically trained in Grappling, Boxing and Weapon systems. He said that if you turn up to a fight and you (metaphorically) turn up with your Grappling 'clothes', Boxing 'clothes' and Weapons fighting 'clothes' then you only have these three sets of clothes to change into. It is better to turn up 'naked' and only take the clothes that your opponent offers.

On reflection I think this is an extremely sound proposition and profound insight. It allows your body and mind to react freely out of a shared exchange and interpretation of energy rather than relying on a specific technique or system structure. Technique familiarity and defined structure can be like wearing clothes, once you commit to them they are a relatively predetermined set of events, you are literally forced to wear them. I am not saying this won't work, but I have not been in a fight yet were I could determine with any certainty the outcome beyond the moment I was in. You come into the world naked, you leave naked, it is probably best to approach combat the same way. Just ask the naked hippy.



features