

OKINAWAN SHORIN-RYU KARATE-DO

Vovinam

The Way of the Vietnamese Martial Art

Shodan Thesis Submitted by
Cynthia Nguyễn Đăng
Ik-Kyu



Okinawan Shorin-Ryu Karate-Do
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HISTORY OF VOVINAM



Grand Master Nguyễn Lộc (1912 – 1960)

Vovinam was founded by Grand Master Nguyễn Lộc in Hanoi, Vietnam, in 1938 (Wikipedia, 2012). Vovinam was a synthesis of Grand Master Nguyễn Lộc's family style and several traditional martial arts styles that he studied (including traditional wrestling, or Vát). The Vietnamese martial arts schools have evolved as a result of the wars and the civilizations that prevailed in the country throughout its 4,000 years of history including: the Champa, Khmer, Siam, Chinese, and 53 ethnic minorities of Vietnam. According to Master Patrick Levet (2006), the diverse origin is what separates the Vietnamese martial arts from all other martial arts.

Born on the 8th day of the 4th month of the lunar calendar in 1912, Master Nguyễn Lộc received his martial arts training in the family context, from an elder member of the family (Wikipedia, 2012). He then traveled throughout Vietnam beginning in 1930 in search of the essence of a unified Vietnamese martial arts. Master Nguyễn Lộc wanted to radically change the concept of small groups of pupils and set out to diffuse martial arts on a large scale, at least at the national level (Levet, 2006).

In the 1930s, there were very few foreign martial arts schools available to the Vietnamese public (Levet, 2006). With the exception of the Vietnamese, Sino-Vietnamese, and Chinese martial arts, almost

no other martial arts styles existed in the country. Consequently, it was difficult to achieve a universal and diverse understanding of foreign martial arts.

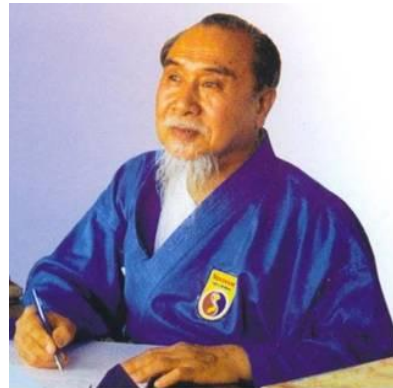
In the 1940s, the Vietnamese struggled against French colonialism in Vietnam (Levet, 2006). The Vietnamese people desperately wished for independence and, at the same time, the French government outlawed any activity that could have been used for unauthorized armed forces. As a result, Vovinam was introduced to the French government as “Vietnamese Gymnastics”. This was believable because Vovinam practitioners wore short trousers and white sleeveless sport shirts that were similar to the garments used in French gymnastics classes of that time.

Master Nguyễn Lộc’s program included three different levels: low level, medium level, and superior level (Levet, 2006). The first three months of training were focused on the easy close combat techniques. The program was divided into 2 parts: strength & fitness and martial arts techniques. Unfortunately, the French government figured out the potential danger of Vovinam, before any of his pupils were able to finish the first three years of the program, and banned its practice. After that, Vovinam classes were taught in secret.

Vovinam was the first Vietnamese martial arts school to teach all the techniques in the popular Vietnamese language (Levet, 2006). Prior to that, the Chu Han terminology from China was used. In fact, the people of Vietnam had no proper writing system for their own tongue before the Chinese invasion, so they had to use the Chinese language for more than 2,000 years. Master Nguyễn Lộc revolutionized the Vietnamese martial arts with the changes he brought to the terminology, making Vovinam easier to learn for the common Vietnamese people. Nevertheless, the Chu Han terms are still in use for the names of the forms, the stances, and the superior level techniques.

The Indochina War was unfavorable to the expansion of Vovinam (Levet, 2006). However, when the war ended in 1954, Master Nguyễn Lộc moved to the south along with most of his pupils. Master Nguyễn Lộc and the other Vovinam masters began to teach the martial arts in Saigon. In 1957, Master

Nguyễn Lộc became seriously ill and his most advanced pupil, Master Lê Sáng, had to take over the teaching and be responsible for the direction of the courses. Master Nguyễn Lộc passed away on the 4th day of the 4th month of the lunar calendar in 1960, at the age of 48. He was survived by his wife and 9 children (6 girls and 3 boys).



Grand Master Lê Sáng (1920 – 2010)

In 1964, Master Lê Sáng opened a Vovinam training center and gathered a group of disciples from the “class of 1955” who founded the first official Vovinam Direction Committee, also known as “the first Council of Masters” (Levet, 2006). As the name suggests, this group of masters commissioned the direction of the style Vovinam. The meeting was composed of two structures: The General Commission for teaching and the General Commission for the Youth. The hierarchy of Vovinam, uniform, belt color system, and new basics for Vovinam were established in this meeting. By modernizing Vovinam, Master Lê Sáng finally accomplished the work that Master Nguyễn Lộc had passed down to him. During this year, Vovinam also got a new name (Việt-Võ-Đạo or “Way of the Vietnamese martial art”) and the principle of “one technique develops into three” was born.



Taekwondo

There had always been an intense rivalry between the Vietnamese martial arts and the sino-Vietnamese martial arts in Vietnam. However, during the Vietnam War, Vovinam faced an unprecedented competition with the introduction of Taekwondo in the country. Korean officers and soldiers, many of whom held high ranks in Taekwondo, Tang Soo Do, and Hap Ki Do, would teach their art to the South Vietnamese youth in their free time (Levet, 2006). The South Vietnamese youth found Taekwondo to be dynamic, easy to learn, and attractive. Moreover, Korean masters were able to offer Taekwondo uniforms and classes to whoever wanted to practice with them free of charge. Taekwondo became such an integral part of the martial arts landscape in Vietnam that the General Head Quarters of the Vietnamese Army ordered the South Korean government to teach Taekwondo to the Vietnamese troops in exchange for the Korean troop's participation in the conflict. In 1966, thousands of Vovinam practitioners and citizens marched in protest of this and the General Head Quarters issued a new order authorizing the teaching of Vovinam, Judo, and Taekwondo in the army.

In 1974, Master Lê Sáng established the International Federation of Vovinam Việt-Võ-Đạo, which gathered some of the most famous and well-known Vietnamese masters and instructors under Professor Phan Hoang (Levet, 2006). These masters and instructors, who studied other martial arts styles previously, agreed to learn Vovinam and help to diffuse it. In fact, there were even Western

practitioners who traveled to Vietnam in 1973 to train in Vovinam and take the techniques back to France. Grand Master Lê Sáng is credited with modernizing Vovinam, systematizing its techniques and its philosophical way.



Grand Master Trần Huy Phong (1938 – 1997)

In 1975, the North Vietnamese troops entered Saigon and ended the war. As a result, Vovinam and other styles of martial arts were forbidden in the south and Masters Lê Sáng and Trần Huy Phong were incarcerated (Levet, 2006). Master Trần Huy Phong was a beloved and respected mathematics teacher, endowed with great intelligence and exceptional charisma. Master Trần Huy Phong also led the largest Vovinam training center in Vietnam, the Hao Lu club. He is credited with contributing the most to Vovinam expansion in Vietnam before 1975 and outside of Vietnam after 1975.

In 1978, the new Vietnamese government reauthorized the practice of martial arts in South Vietnam (Levet, 2006). However, the government still controlled Vovinam activities and Master Lê Sáng still remained in jail. During that same time, Vovinam flourished in Europe and Africa due to its unique uniform color and spectacular flying scissors kicks. Nevertheless, the disagreements between masters dramatically slowed down the spread of Vovinam.

In 1980, Master Trần Huy Phong was released from prison and designated as the Third Patriarch Successor of the Vovinam School by Master Lê Sáng (Levet, 2006). Master Trần Huy Phong contributed to the continuity of Vovinam by training a great number of masters and helping them to escape from Vietnam in order to continue to diffuse Vovinam in free countries. Unfortunately, the police caught Master Trần Huy Phong and ordered the closing down of his training centers.

In 1988, Master Lê Sáng was released from captivity and this created a disagreement over who should be the new leader in Vovinam (Levet, 2006). Nevertheless, in 1994, Master Lê Sáng was removed from his leadership position when the Vietnamese government created the Commission of Control and Management of Vovinam. This divided Masters who cooperated with the regime from Masters who did not want to mix politics and martial arts. Outside of Vietnam, this development provoked anger in the Vovinam community.

Today, Vovinam is practiced on all continents and has several international organizations in existence around the world. Its vast expansion is attributed to the escape of Vovinam masters and instructors to Europe, Australia, Africa, and the United States after the end of the Vietnam War (Levet, 2006).



THE RANGE OF TECHNIQUES OF VOVINAM



Vovinam is one of the most complete martial arts styles in the world (Levet, 2006). That is because Vovinam works in all the different ranges of combat including: wrestling, close combat, strikes, punches, kicks, throws, sweeps, dodges, blocks, locks, strangulation, and submission. Vovinam also includes other martial arts aspects, such as inner energy work, forms, self-defense, breaking, and traditional weapons.

Vovinam is both a physical and mental martial art. Vovinam masters who are testing for a higher rank have to present a thesis on Vovinam techniques, philosophy, pedagogy, and/or diffusion work (Levet, 2006). Although Vovinam has evolved over several decades, the philosophy still follows that of Master Nguyễn Lộc who emphasized: effectiveness, elimination of purely aesthetic techniques, a focus on self-defense, use of traditional weapons, arm-locks, throwing, traditional Vietnamese wrestling, and intensive training on kicks (including flying scissors kick).

Forms are currently used in Vovinam as a way to develop self-defense techniques and sparring strategies without a training partner (Levet, 2006). For example, there are three traditional forms that each teach 10 fighting strategies. There are also forms that teach basic self-defense (first and second level) as well as techniques against the knife, sword, and wooden long staff.

According to Master Patrick Levet (2006), Vovinam is highly attractive to martial arts practitioners because of its wide range of techniques. Classes are both interesting and varied. In fact, one of the most important advantages is the workout with a partner because it allows the student to check the efficiency of the techniques.

Vovinam is not a static martial art. Rather, it has continued to evolve since its inception in 1938. For example, Masters Trần Huy Phong and Lê Sáng used means, techniques, and/or materials from other Asian martial arts in order to achieve technical progress (Levet, 2006). For example, they decided to use Taekwondo body gear and helmets in the 1990s to reduce the risk of injury during sparring. Taekwondo was the only martial art to develop effective protective gear for high-level competitions in Vietnam at the time.

Vovinam techniques are based on five basic principles: eccentric (rotational) strength, concentric (direct) strength, lever (locking) strength, jumping or springing (kicking) strength, and transformed strength from the opponent's power (Levet, 2006).

The concept of inner body power can be compared to the electricity of a car battery (Levet, 2006). The power is distributed but needs to be recharged in order to keep the balance. If the use of inner body power exerted is greater than the recharge, the power will be lost. The first method to recovering inner strength is having a good, healthy, and balanced diet. The second method uses regularization, which consists of controlled breathing and improvement of acupuncture meridians. The center of distribution of inner strength is located just below the navel.

The principal of progression requires that the training program goes from the easiest things to the most difficult ones (Levet, 2006). The principal suggests that if the workout is not methodical and progressive, it can actually cause injury or impede the martial art practitioner's progression. Accordingly, the more you progress in your training of Vovinam, the more critical it becomes to observe the methods of the Masters and train under their supervision.

The efficient falling techniques in Vovinam are usually practiced on hard floors without mats (Levet, 2006). That is because most of the Vovinam schools in Vietnam are too poor to buy mats. Western schools may have the opportunity to practice Vovinam with modern equipment. Nevertheless, practicing on a concrete floor is considered by some masters as a good way to evaluate if a Vovinam practitioner's falling technique is done well.



Master Nguyễn Văn Chiếu (1949 – Present)

Master Trần Huy Phong and Master Nguyễn Văn Chiếu organized the first Vovinam National Championship in 1992 (Levet, 2006). The Vovinam sparring matches in Vietnam use full contact rules, and weight categories. The use of protective gear is mandatory, including: helmet, body and shin gear, groin protector, boxing gloves, and a mouth guard. In Vietnam, knock outs and kicks in the face are permitted, even for children under 18. However, the sparring rules for Vovinam practitioners under 18 have been adapted according to the laws and culture of each Western country.

According to Master Patrick Levet (2006), one unique characteristic of Vovinam is that all techniques studied in the classes are part of tournament competition, not just sparring and forms. The categories of competition include: pre-arranged sparring with a partner (without weapons), pre-arranged sparring with a partner (with weapons), pre-arranged sparring with several partners (without

weapons), pre-arranged sparring with several partners (with weapons), leg offensive techniques (men only), self-defense (women only), forms (without weapons), forms (with weapons), and sparring. In some European countries, children have special categories of competition such as sparring strategies, falling techniques, and team obstacle courses in addition to the normal competitions. These types of competitions do not exist in Vietnam, where children compete in the same way as adults, under the knock out rules.

Previously, traditional wrestling matches were included in Vovinam competition in Vietnam (Levet, 2006). Historically, these were even required for the belt exams. Unfortunately, traditional Vietnamese wrestling matches caused a lot of injuries due to the lack of mats so they are no longer allowed in Vovinam competition. However, traditional Vietnamese wrestling is still a part of the technical program, they still teach it in the Vovinam schools, and some European National Federations are in favor of returning to this form of competition.

Vovinam masters do not rule like dictators (Levet, 2006). On the contrary, Vovinam masters have the duty of teaching the logic and reasons why things must be done the way they are done. A good master would teach their students the value of honor, of noble spirit, and the basis of philosophy. Students must respect their masters because they are passing on their knowledge of martial arts. Vovinam masters are received by other Vovinam masters as if they were family, a principal known as “the spirit of the Vovinam family”.

In Asian cultures, age is highly correlated to wisdom. Therefore, a 70 to 80 year old master is regarded as more knowledgeable than a 40 to 50 year old master. However, this concept of wisdom is lost in the West, where too many young masters act as spiritual guides when they are in need of guidance themselves (Levet, 2006).

CONCEPT OF THE UNIVERSE AND THE LIFE



In order to understand Vovinam, it is necessary to understand the concept of the universe and the concept of the life. Although Vovinam is a product of the Vietnamese society, the people, and its history, the concept of the universe is attributed to the Viet Vo Si or “Samurais of Vietnam” (Levet, 2006). The Viet Vo Si contributed to the vast majority of the activities of the Vietnamese people. The four theorems of the Viet Vo Si are: the theorem of the three principals, the principal of the three creative elements, the principal of incessant changes, and the principal of the infinite life.

The theorem of the three principals include: the absolute entity, the microcosm, and the macrocosm. The absolute entity is the recognition that each one of the living beings of our world has the same origin (Levet, 2006). The absolute entity is the acceptance of the existence of an essential metaphysical and tangible being, in the interior of each form of life. Contrary to the absolute entity, the microcosm is the principle of what “can be studied”, what the science can experience, verify, and demonstrate. The microcosm includes atoms, cells, chemical elements, and all the microelements that are invisible. To accept the microcosm principal is to recognize that nature is progressing from the “it might exist” principal to the “it positively exists” principal. The macrocosm is an intermediary principal

whose function is “why it exists”. The macrocosm is the union of the substances that compose our universe.

The principal of the three creative elements is very old and the Chinese basis is well-known. According to the principal, all the elements of the universe and of the nature can only have three forms: negative elements, positive elements, or the complete state (Levet, 2006). Vovinam’s concepts of martial techniques and martial way are following the principles of the three creative elements. Using the principle of the three creative elements in the practice of martial arts, as a martial way or as martial techniques, illustrates the following points: (1) the values of nature have two opposing forces but there is a third element that could be a variable notion, (2) the opposite polarities are always found living in harmony, (3) the Vovinam martial art way has more importance than the Vovinam martial arts techniques.

The principal of incessant changes means that everything is changing endlessly. All elements of our universe can be transformed, nothing is unalterable (Levet, 2006). The “changing” is like the water of the river that seems to stop when arriving at sea, but actually continues to transform, mixing with the seawater, traveling with streams until it evaporates. In the air, it will transform into clouds and eventually it will fall as rain and be transformed again through the earth. Someday, it will transform and go back to the river.

The principal of the infinite life means that each element of our world lives in an endless chain. In fact, life and death are two phases of an endless circuit which is the existence (Levet, 2006). They are only states in a certain moment of the journey of the elements of our universe.

The concept of the universe and the concept of human life are two philosophical points of view based on the same ideology (Levet, 2006). Moreover, the concept of human life can be considered as the application of the principles of the concept of the universe to the human life, and its result.

There are four theorems: consciousness of life, consciousness of the objective of life or the goal of each one of us, relationships with the others, and our conduct or attitude in the way (Levet, 2006). Consciousness of life calls for a greater awareness of all the geographical and natural elements that are surrounding us (i.e., rain, snow, sunshine, earthquakes) because they have an influence on us. The consciousness of the objective of life is to obtain something that motivates us or helps us to move forward, such as martial arts. Our relationship with others is unique in that we are different than one another and it is precisely this difference that allows us to live in harmony. Our attitude in the way should include the following: to live, to help others to live, and to exist for others.

Generally, Vovinam practitioners will start by studying Vovinam techniques and when they reach a superior level, they are introduced to the philosophy. Việt-Võ-Đạo is essentially the metaphysics of Vovinam (Levet, 2006). Vovinam practitioners feel better as a person each day, each time they practice, both inside and outside of their body.

PHILOSOPHY OF VOVINAM

In 1964, veteran masters and instructors gathered and decided to unify the philosophical principles of Vovinam. According to Master Patrick Levet (2006), the ten fundamental principles of Vovinam include:

- 1) The practitioner of Vovinam must reach the highest level in martial art to use it with humanitarian ends.
- 2) The practitioner of Vovinam must be faithful to Vovinam's principles and will use them to build the new Vovinam generations.
- 3) The practitioner of Vovinam must live in unity and in harmony with others, respect the masters and his elders, and love the other practitioners.
- 4) The practitioner of Vovinam must absolutely respect the discipline and consider the honor of the marital artist above all.
- 5) The practitioner of Vovinam must respect the other martial arts and use Vovinam only in the event of self defense or to help people in danger.
- 6) The practitioner of Vovinam must study with assiduity, forge his spirit and be a perfectionist to progress in the way.
- 7) The practitioner of Vovinam must live with rightness of mind, simplicity, frankness and honesty, as well as noble spirit.
- 8) The practitioner of Vovinam must develop strong willpower in order to defeat abuses and violence.
- 9) The practitioner of Vovinam must be clear minded, perseverant and be able to surpass difficulties.

10) The practitioner of Vovinam must be self-confident, modest, respectful, generous, and self-critical in order to progress.

Generally, a Vovinam practitioner will be conscious of having a healthy lifestyle and a noble spirit, and being generous, kind, and honest (Levet, 2006). When caught in difficult situations, a Vovinam practitioner must be quiet and peaceful. He or she must also be aware of the dangers of modern life and to help the needy.

Life often confronts us with challenges. However, Vovinam practitioners will have perseverance to help overcome these challenges. With respect to perseverance: wealth and power should not corrupt, poverty should not dishonor, and oppression cannot subjugate (Levet, 2006).

Vovinam philosophy includes elements of: self-control, self-confidence, self-improvement, and humility. The Vovinam code of conduct calls for practitioners to believe in his or her own capacity to improve throughout life, as well as to self-criticize and correct his or her mistakes (Levet, 2006).

Humility is very important, especially when the Vovinam practitioner is particularly talented. It reminds the Vovinam practitioner that he or she is not the best martial artist. That is, there is always someone technically or combatively better.

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APPENDIX A: VOCABULARY OF THE CLASSES

Numbers

Vietnamese	English
Một	One
Hai	Two
Ba	Three
Bốn	Four
Năm	Five
Sáu	Six
Bảy	Seven
Tám	Eight
Chín	Nine
Mười	Ten

Colors

Vietnamese	English
Màu đỏ	Red
Màu vàng	Yellow
Màu đen	Black
Màu trắng	White
Màu xanh	Blue

Salute

Vietnamese	English
Chuẩn bị	Ready
Ngồi xuống	Sit down
Quỳ xuống	Kneel down
Đứng dậy	Stand up
Giải Tán	Dismissed
Khỏe	Strong, healthy
Cố gắng	To make an effort, to try harder
Nghiêm	Strictly
Lê	Salute! Bow!
Sửa lại võ phục	Arrange the martial art uniform