

# A Kick by Any Other Name

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## Introduction

Would a kick by any other name hurt just as much? Having begun my martial arts training in taekwondo, I naturally take note of kicking techniques presented during the course of studying hapkido. As a rose is a rose by any other name, so it is true that a kick is a kick by any other name. However, in martial arts, a kick may not be the same kick by the very same name! Huh? Yes, exactly! It is this conundrum which has spurred me to explore this topic in depth. This paper examines the technical and functional differences in kicking techniques between taekwondo and hapkido.

## What is Taekwondo?

The literal translation of taekwondo is “The Way (*do*) of Foot (*tae*) and Fist (*kwon*)”. It incorporates both the linear techniques of Japanese martial arts such as karate with the circular motions of Chinese martial arts such as Kung Fu. The style is best known, however, for its spectacular and powerful kicking techniques.

Taekwondo was first standardized in the 1950's by six major schools and eventually developed into the martial art style that we know today. In 1969, Dr. Ken Min brought taekwondo to UC Berkeley and hosted the 1<sup>st</sup> UC Open Taekwondo Championship the next year.

In 1988, taekwondo was introduced as an exhibition sport at the Summer Olympic Games in Seoul, Korea, and later became an official Olympic sport at the 2000 Summer Olympic Games in Sydney, Australia.

Since its incarnation as an Olympic sport, much of the development of taekwondo has centered on the sports aspect of the style. The result is that the focus of the techniques has also shifted to accommodate the rules imposed by the governing organization of the sport.

## **What is Hapkido?**

The word “*hapkido*” is derived from the three words: “*hap*”, meaning “together” or “harmony”, “*ki*”, meaning “power”, and “*do*”, meaning “the way”. Thus, hapkido translates to “The Way of Coordinated Power.” The following description of hapkido is taken from the U.S. Hankido Federation web site:

The ‘ki’ always flows in a circle. Hapkido involves harnessing this circular flow of ‘ki’. The universe revolves or pivots, and in the same way, hapkido entails making circular motions based on pivotal points. When you bring your opponent into your circle or adapt yourself to your opponent’s circle, you can control him or her.<sup>1</sup>

Hapkido was founded by Yong Shul Choi, who was born in 1904. During the Japanese occupation of 1909, five-year-old Yong-Shul was relocated to Japan by the occupying forces, where he eventually came to be under the employ of Sokahu Takeda, the 32<sup>nd</sup> patriarch of Daito Ryu Aikijitsu. He worked for

Takeda for the next 30 years until Takeda's death, upon which Yong-Shul returned to Korea, taking back with him the valuable skills learned during his tenure with the master. Upon his return to Korea, he met a Judo First-Dan named Bok Sup Suh. Together they opened the first hapkido school, with Bok Sup incorporating some of his Judo techniques into the art. In 1964, Sea Oh Choi brought hapkido to the United States. In the 1970's, Dr. Ken Min introduced hapkido to the University of California Martial Arts Program (UCMAP).

### **What is a Kick?**

What is a kick? The Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary defines a kick as "a blow or sudden forceful thrust with the foot."<sup>2</sup> In the context of martial arts, this definition should be broadened to include the entire leg, so that a kick can be defined as "a blow or sudden forceful thrust with the leg."

At first glance, there seems to be little difference between the two definitions. At first glance, that is, if you are in taekwondo! Taekwondo is a martial art with a heavy sports emphasis. As such, execution of techniques is restricted by a rigid set of rules. The official striking surface of a kick in taekwondo is "the foot below the ankle bone."<sup>3</sup> Putting the shoe on the other foot ☺, hapkido is a self-defense martial art. In self-defense, using any part of the leg to inflict pain is perfectly acceptable and, in fact, highly encouraged! For example, an effective kick in hapkido may be a knee strike (preferably to a very vulnerable area, like the groin).

## **A Difference in Purposes**

The techniques in taekwondo and hapkido are very much geared towards the differences in purposes between these two martial arts. Some people will argue that the present-day incarnation of taekwondo is not a “martial art”, but a “martial sport”. Indeed, the pages written on the pros and cons of martial art versus martial sport can easily fill all our storerooms. However, for the purpose of this paper, I will refer to both as “martial art.” In this section, I will examine the various differences between taekwondo and hapkido kicking techniques.

### **Goal**

Because of the shifted emphasis of taekwondo towards the sports aspect of the art, the goal of taekwondo is to target and score points according to the current competition rules.

In hapkido, the goal is to defend against any attack and under any circumstances, so the techniques are designed to distract, injure, cripple, or kill.

### **Target**

The target of a technique in taekwondo is a scoring area. According to the current set of World Taekwondo Federation rules, the scoring areas are the areas of the trunk covered by the trunk protector and the areas of the face excluding the back of the head. The head is the most desired target in Taekwondo as head strikes now score two points.

The target in hapkido can be any part of the body where impact will cause pain or damage, such as

pressure points, the groin, joints, stomach, ribs, shins and knees. Attacks to a joint would be executed in a direction that is contrary to its natural motion in order to fracture or break that joint. Further, hapkido kicks tend to stay below the belt as lower kicks leave less exposure to counterattacks.

### **Follow-Through**

In taekwondo, kicks are executed against a target area with precise application of accuracy and power. After completion, the leg is retracted so the player will be in a position to execute another kick.

In hapkido, kicks are executed with the intent to damage, so complete follow-through with full power is necessary to maximize the infliction of pain and agony.

### **Implements of Attack**

As previously mentioned, according to the World Taekwondo Federation, the permitted implement of attack for foot techniques is specifically the “*parts of the foot below the ankle bone.*”<sup>3</sup> Extrapolating from this rule, the striking surfaces of a kick for taekwondo can be the ball of the foot, the heel, the instep, the sole, the toes, or the blade of the foot.

In hapkido, the implement of attack can be any part of the leg that is handy and can hurt someone, so it includes all the parts of the foot used in taekwondo plus the knee. Of course, if you happened to land your shin on someone and it hurts them, it’s okay too, but kicking with the shin often hurts the kicker more than the kickee. Similarly, a sweep might impact the calf or the Achilles tendon instead of the heel.

## **Characteristics of a Kick**

This section examines in depth whether the traits of kicks in taekwondo<sup>4</sup> apply to both taekwondo and hapkido and where the differences may lie.

### **Kicks start with the knee up.**

This is true for all kicks in taekwondo and standing kicks in hapkido. It is most noticeable for kicks above the belt. For kicks below the belt, there is a slight lifting of the knee, but it is not very perceptible and is usually well-blended with the kick itself. In hapkido, kicks from the ground and sweeps do not require that the kick start with the knee up.

### **The height of the knee determines the height of the kick.**

This trait is true of all standing kicks. The slight lifting of the knee noted in the previous section is because the height of the kick is low. For high kicks, the knee must be high enough so that the kick strikes the target at the most optimal angle. In Hapkido, the orientation rather than the height of the knee determines the height of the kick for kicks from the ground.

### **The force in every kick comes from the hips, not just the legs.**

This trait is not only true of kicks, but most techniques in both taekwondo and hapkido. The force of a strong hand technique comes from the hips. The ease of some wrist techniques in hapkido depends on

the use of the hips to maximize leverage, so that the defender can increase the pressure applied to the attacker's wrist.

**Place the actual target six inches beyond the physical target to ensure that you go through the physical target, not stopping your kick at the surface.**

This trait is true of both taekwondo and hapkido. Six inches is the ideal depth of a target to generate enough force both to score a solid point in taekwondo and to cripple an opponent in hapkido. However, in a taekwondo competition, the depth of the kick is sometimes compromised by the necessity to retract the kick quickly.

**The knee of the supporting leg should be slightly bent, not locked, to maintain balance.**

It is never a good idea to lock a joint (except when holding onto a board for a break ☺). The slight bend in the knee not only maintains balance but also absorbs any impact that might be transferred to the knee. For Hapkido kicks from the ground, the knee of the supporting leg is normally very bent (and kneeling in some instances) to accommodate the height of the kick, with the forearms on the ground for support.

**The body is up, not leaning back.**

This is true of all standing kicks. In general, the body will lean slightly depending on the height of the kick. However, over-leaning the body tends to compromise balance, and is not recommended for any type of standing kick. For kicks from the ground,

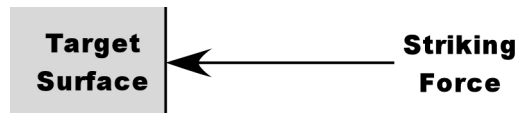
obviously the body will not be upright but will be leaning down for kicks such as a back kick from the ground.

**A kick can be divided into four steps:**

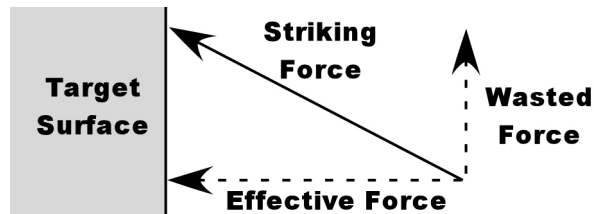
1. Chamber
2. Extension
3. Retraction
4. Landing

The four steps apply to most standing linear kicks, except for the axe kick, which drops the retraction step. Like the axe kick, spinning kicks normally lack the retraction component. Most Hapkido kicks lack the retraction component since the kick is delivered with the full weight of the kicker behind it to maximize the impact of the kick.

**The angle of the strike is always perpendicular to the surface of the strike to maximize force delivered.**



If the angle of strike is not perpendicular to the target, part of the force is lost. Only the normal (perpendicular) component of the force affects the target.





This trait is true not only for kicks, but any type of strikes. Only the perpendicular component of any kick or strike is effective.

## **It's Not the Same Kick!**

Both taekwondo and hapkido have kicks with the same names, but they are certainly not the same kicks! It goes back to the difference in purposes. As previously noted, taekwondo kicks have a retraction portion that is missing in most hapkido kicks. Also, hapkido kicks have full follow-through to maximize damage inflicted on the opponent. In this section, we will examine some common kicks with the same name found in both hapkido and taekwondo:

### **Front Kick**

In taekwondo, the striking surface of a front kick is the ball of the foot, with the toes pulled as far back as possible (to avoid hitting the toes when striking). The angle of the foot from the side point-of-view is 45 degrees to the horizontal. The ball of the foot is striking perpendicular to the target. The front kick chambers with the knee up, extends for a strike, and retracts back to the original chamber position before landing. The front kick in taekwondo is sometimes referred to as a "front snap kick."

In hapkido, the striking surface of a front kick can be the ball, the instep, the blade, the heel, or the big toe of the foot. In a self-defense situation, shoes usually get in the way of pulling your toes back, so the ball of the foot is generally ineffective. For kicks to the groin with shoes on, using the blade or the instep of

the foot may be the most effective as the foot is not flexible enough to use the heel. However, if one is wearing steel-toed shoes, it makes the most sense to strike with the toes of the shoe. For kicks to the groin without shoes on, the kicker can curl the big toe upwards, so that it penetrates the softer tissues of the groin. (Sticking the big toe up is probably not recommended for striking any area other than the groin). The front kick can also be executed from the ground, in which case either the ball of the foot or the heel would be used to strike the target. A kick from the ground has a retraction component only in that the kicker has to retract the leg to stand up or throw another kick.

The angle of the foot for a strike with the ball of the foot, the instep, the blade, or the big toe is the same as in taekwondo, but the angle is a little past 90 degrees to the horizontal for a strike with the heel of the foot. The front kick in hapkido has no retraction. It is thrust forward with the kicker's full weight behind it to maximize force. In hapkido, the front kick is sometimes referred to as a "front thrust kick" to differentiate it from the front snap kick in taekwondo.

### **Round House Kick**

In taekwondo, a roundhouse kick strikes with the instep of the foot. The roundhouse kick chambers with the knee lift, and then the hips turn to open up the legs (keeping the knee up) so the instep of the foot is perpendicular to the target. The kick extends for the strike and retracts back to the cocked position before landing. The knee must stay up during the kick in order to strike perpendicular to the target.

In hapkido, a roundhouse kick is usually low, often targeting the knee. The kick chambers with a slight knee lift, extends in a downward circular arc with full force to maximize damage. A taekwondo roundhouse kick is often impractical in a self-defense situation as it opens up the very vulnerable groin area to attack.

### **Side Kick**

In taekwondo, a side kick strikes with the blade or the heel of the foot. The chamber of the kick starts with the knee lift, and then the hips turn completely over without opening up the legs (keeping the knee up). From this position, the leg extends straight sideways to deliver the kick. The kick is led by the heel with the toes pointing downwards and in towards the kicker at the moment of impact. This kick requires that the hips are completely turned over to take advantage of the maximum thrust of the hips to deliver power. The kick retracts to the original chambering position before landing.

In hapkido, the side kick strikes with either the blade or the heel, and sometime with the sole of the foot. As in the roundhouse kick, the hapkido side kick tends to stay low and targets the lower extremities such as the knees. A side kick which targets the instep of the opponent's standing foot may be characterized more accurately as a stomping kick. The side kick can also be executed from the ground while using the forearms on the ground for support. Unlike the roundhouse kick, it is safer to use a higher side kick in a self-defense situation because the vulnerable groin area is protected by the initial chamber of the kick.

### **Back Kick**

The striking surface of a back kick in both taekwondo and hapkido is the heel of the foot. In taekwondo, a proper back kick begins with the heel of the supporting leg pointed towards the target prior to the chamber. The kick chambers by lifting the knee, which brushes past the knee of the supporting leg, and extends through the heel, straight back at the target without opening up the legs sideways. The kick then retracts back to the chamber position before landing.

The technique of the standing back kick in hapkido is the same as in taekwondo minus the retraction, so the kicker drops his weight through his leg onto the opponent. A back kick from the ground has the same supporting structure as a side kick from the ground (with one or both forearm on the ground for support).

### **Spin-Heel Kick**

In taekwondo, the striking surface of a spin-heel kick is the heel or sole of the foot. The heel generates more pinpointed force while the sole has greater reach. The kicker starts the kick at the 270<sup>th</sup>-degree point of the spin with a knee-lift chamber that quickly extends towards the target to begin the kick. The kick hooks horizontally across the target (bending the knee during the hook) and lands back in the same position. There is no retraction component in spin kicks in taekwondo as the retraction portion is bundled into the landing. The kick is executed quickly to maximize the surprise factor. The actual hook of the kick is normally only the width of the shoulders because of the necessity for speed.

In hapkido, the striking surface is normally the heel of the foot to maximize force, but can be anywhere on the leg that happens to hit the target. Another difference from taekwondo is that the kick does not hook in hapkido (although it can). The knee remains unbent, so the entire leg sweeps through the target. The width of the kick itself tends to be wider than the taekwondo kick to make sure that the circular sweep of the leg will hit the target, thus requiring less accuracy. In short, a hapkido spin-heel kick is a sweep. Hapkido spin-heel kicks are executed at varying heights, depending on the target, while taekwondo spin-heel kicks are normally high to target the head. A low spin-heel kick is especially effective in sweeping someone off his or her feet (and I am NOT talking about courting!).

## **And Now for Something Completely Different!**

Even though taekwondo is the martial art known for its spectacular kicks, there are actually more hapkido kicks than taekwondo kicks! This is mainly due to the fact that hapkido practitioners can include taekwondo kicks in their regimen (even if they don't necessarily want to do so), while taekwondo practitioners cannot use many of the hapkido kicks because of the formal competition rules of taekwondo. In this section, we will examine some of the kicks that are specific to hapkido.

### **Knee-Lift Kick**

Ah! My favorite! ☺ The striking surface of a knee-

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lift kick is obviously the knee. The knee-lift kick is very effective for striking an opponent from very up close. The kicker normally targets the groin or the stomach, followed by another knee-left kick to the chin for the knockout (or by an elbow to the spine for a knock-down) after the opponent doubles over.

### **Scoop Kick**

The scoop kick looks very much like a mirror reflection of a side kick. The striking surface of a scoop kick is the heel of the foot. The leg kicks inwards instead of outwards, with the heel pointing towards the supporting leg instead of away from it. The angle of the foot between the leg and the foot is 90 degrees. The scoop kick is useful for attacking the inside of the opponent's leg in a front-to-front hold scenario.

### **Cover Kick**

The cover kick is another name for a low out-to-in axe kick. It is used to knock something out of an opponent's hand, so it tends to crescent lower than the out-to-in axe kick, but retain the same sharp upwards and downwards motion as the axe kick.

### **Shuttle Kick**

The shuttle kick looks like a turning side kick with a stunted extension. The target is the floating ribs or the stomach. The shuttle kick is used to push an opponent away from you in a close-up encounter. In this kick, the leg is chambered at the 270<sup>th</sup>-degree of the turn with the leg opened up as in a roundhouse

kick. The leg extends enough to push the opponent away. The force of the strike comes from the turning of the hips rather than from the extension of the leg, but the extension provides the thrust to repulse the opponent.

### **Ground Kicks**

Taekwondo has no ground kicks, as all the targets are above the belt, and competition rules require both combatants to be on their feet. The ground kicks that were covered in the previous section were the front kick from the ground, the side kick from the ground, the back kick from the ground, and the low spin-heel kick. Another ground kick is a low scoop kick, which is useful for targeting the shin. For the low scoop kick, one hand is placed on the ground for support.

### **Conclusion**

Taekwondo and hapkido both using kicking techniques, but the kicks can be very different in the two martial arts. As emphasized throughout this paper, it comes down to a difference in purposes. The competition aspect of taekwondo versus the self-defense goal of hapkido necessarily requires that the kicks in the two martial arts be adjusted to accommodate these differences. A kick with the same name may not be the same kick and a kick with different names can in fact be the same kick. As a book cannot be judged by its cover; likewise, a kick cannot be judged by its name.

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## Endnotes

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- <sup>3</sup> World Taekwondo Federation. "Competition Rules: Article 11. Permitted Techniques and Areas."
- <sup>4</sup> Vogel, 2002, p. 32.