

Opinions on Hapkido and Character Development

By Ron Aizen

INTRODUCTION

Hapkido is a martial art that employs a broad range of techniques. This technical variety allows hapkido practitioners to develop into well-rounded martial artists. And as hapkidoists develop their array of skills, they become physically, mentally, and spiritually balanced. The concept of yin and yang posits that the universe is a unified whole composed of opposite but complementary parts. Hapkido challenges people to reconcile such seeming contradictions as specific and general, hard and soft, hurting and healing. Martial artists who learn to make use of both halves of these dualities become not only highly adept at self-defense, but also develop personal characters worthy of respect.

SPECIALIZATION AND GENERALIZATION

One duality present in hapkido is the distinction between specialization and generalization. Hapkido trains people to be generalists, that is, to become competent in many areas of martial arts. All hapkido black belt candidates are expected to be able to demonstrate technically proficient kicks, blocks, strikes, throws, joint locks, falls, holds, and chokes. But

it is important for hapkidoists to specialize in one or more of these areas so that in a self-defense situation they will have at least one technique to apply in which they are extremely proficient.

My experience has been that the most impressive hapkido practitioners are those who have cross-trained in other martial arts. Several UCMAP Hapkido Club members have improved their kicks by training in taekwondo and competing at the UC Open Taekwondo Championship. Similarly, other club members have developed good close fighting techniques by working out with the Judo Club.

Not only does specializing improve general martial arts techniques, but generalizing also improves specialized techniques. Coming from a taekwondo background, I had well-developed kicks when I started hapkido. Still, when I sparred hapkido-style against hapkido generalists, I often found that my kicks were not enough to defend against their attacks. My sparring partners knew that as soon they positioned themselves inside my leg reach, they could score on me. Once I developed my close-in fighting techniques, my kicks became much more effective, because my opponents became less eager to fight me inside.

HARD AND SOFT

Hapkido makes use of both hard and soft martial arts techniques. Hard blocks, strikes, and kicks involve directing all of one's energy toward a single vulnerable point on an opponent's anatomy. An example of a hard block is a down block against a front kick in which the defender uses the outside of the forearm to break the

attacker's ankle. An example of a hard strike is a reverse punch to the solar plexus to knock the wind out of an assailant. A hard kick would be a roundhouse aimed at the pressure point to the outside of an attacker's thigh; a good strike here will make it quite difficult for the attacker to chase after the defender.

While hard techniques generally involve quick linear motions and only brief intervals of contact between attacker and defender, soft techniques are rounder and often require longer time periods to administer. Soft techniques include throws, holds, joint locks, and chokes. Throws are used to force a standing opponent to the ground. Pain and injury are caused not by the defender's strike, but by the ground when the attacker crashes to earth; of course, the defender can always add to the attacker's misery by landing on top and driving their elbow into the attacker's ribs. Holds are ways of controlling opponents without necessarily causing injury. They include pins on the ground and come-along techniques from standing positions. Holds should be applied so that the attacker is incapable of initiating further attack. Joint locks involve barring various joints, especially the wrist, elbow, and shoulder. They can be administered like holds to restrain an opponent, or the defender can administer strikes to break or dislocate the attacker's joints. Chokes are applied to the nerves, arteries, and windpipe of the throat; they are dangerous techniques which can suffocate an assailant and cause unconsciousness.

Hard and soft techniques often work best when executed together. Hard techniques can be used to set up soft techniques. For example, a standard defense

against a same side wrist grab and pull is a major outer reap. The throw becomes more effective when preceded by a palm heel or elbow strike to the jaw. By the same token, it often makes sense to finish off soft techniques with hard techniques. For example, a throw executed by twisting an assailant's wrist can be completed by stomping on the assailant's head. Martial artists who learn to coordinate their hard and soft techniques increase the efficacy of both of these approaches to self-defense.

SPEED AND POWER

Speed and power are two complimentary variables which determine the force and effectiveness of a technique. Physical force is a product of mass and acceleration. All things being equal, a heavier opponent has an advantage over a lighter one because of the larger mass. But more massive people often have more difficulty generating acceleration. If a defender is half the size of an attacker but is twice as quick, the defender will be able to generate an equal amount of force.

Regardless of a martial artist's size, in order to maximize the force of a technique it is necessary to increase one's mass or accelerate or both. Mass and strength can be enhanced to a limited extent through weight training or other strengthening exercises. Quickness is generally easier to develop than muscle mass, as agility can be gained by training the muscles through repetition of speed drills. Proper power and speed training complement each other and produce techniques that are maximally forceful and effective.

FLEXIBILITY AND STRENGTH

Related to the paired concepts of speed and power is the complementary duo of flexibility and strength. Flexibility is especially important for kicks; it makes them faster and higher. Strength is more important for upper body techniques such as hand strikes and off-balancing opponents for throws. Many long-limbed people are attracted to taekwondo because of its emphasis on flexibility and long-range techniques. Stocky people are more likely to be attracted to judo because they can use their low center of mass and strong upper bodies to their advantage.

While it makes sense from a competition standpoint to pursue a martial art that incorporates the strengths of one's body phenotype, it does not make for a very balanced physique. One of the strengths of hapkido is that it forces its practitioners to develop at least rudimentary skills in all areas. People with short legs are forced to develop their flexibility if they want to develop decent high kicks, and lanky limber people must increase their upper body strength and learn to squat low if they expect to successfully execute throws.

HEALTH AND FITNESS

One positive aspect of martial arts training is its capacity to improve health and fitness. Physical exercises which contribute to a long, disease-free life are said to promote health. Training that improves physical performance in such areas as strength, endurance, speed, and flexibility is said to enhance fitness. From a health standpoint, aerobic conditioning

is probably more important than stretching or weight training. Dr. Michael Olpin, Assistant Professor of Health Promotion and Human Performance at Weber State university in Ogden, Utah, has compiled a list of over 120 ways in which aerobic exercise benefits health.¹ Traditionally, exercise physiologists have asserted that at least three fifteen-minute sessions in which the heart rate is raised to eighty percent of capacity (or more) are required to reap the health benefits of aerobic conditioning². More recent studies, however, suggest that workouts need not be so intensive. Longer periods of exercise with lower heart rates can also improve aerobic conditioning, so walking can replace running³. On the other hand, more intense cardiovascular workouts may be required by martial artists who wish to withstand the rigors of competitive combative sports, since running out of energy before the end of a sparring match is a sure recipe for defeat.

Stretching is also important for overall health because it keeps joints lubricated and promotes circulation. These lubrication and warm-up exercises are important in preventing injury during aerobic conditioning or weight training sessions, since flexible, pliant muscles and connective tissues are less likely to snap or tear when placed under stress⁴. Deep stretches such as leg splits are not necessarily important for general physical health. However, deep stretches certainly improve performance in those physical activities that require a wide range of motion, such as dance, gymnastics, yoga, and martial arts.

For the non athlete, strength training is not so important for maintaining general health, however, in recent years, doctors have begun recommending

strength training to their older patients. Regular weight lifting (or push-ups and other strengthening exercises) results in increased bone density⁵, an important benefit for the elderly, whose bones become ever more brittle as they age. Another recently discovered benefit of weight training is that it helps improve balance, hence decreasing the likelihood of sustaining a fall⁶. Martial artists who lift weights or practice other strengthening exercises can expect to increase the power of their techniques and the strength of their grips (which is particularly important for throws and chokes).

To improve athletic performance, more intense periods of aerobic exercise should be coupled with stretching and weight training regimens tailored to the demands of the activity. Since hapkido practitioners are expected to demonstrate competence in a wide range of techniques employing all parts of the body, they should cross-train in all three areas.

HURTING AND HEALING

There is a close relationship between physical techniques that harm or injure and ones that relax or heal. In hapkido, this relationship between hurting and healing is most apparent in attacks on pressure points. These pressure points tend to be found alongside major nerves or arteries. Depending on how one manipulates these points, it is possible to cause someone pain or injury, or to give pleasure or heal an injury.

An example of a point that can be manipulated for either hurting or healing lies beside the brachial artery, located on the inside of the upper arm, beneath the

bicep. By placing the tip of the thumb on top of this nerve and plucking downward, enough pain can be produced to cause an assailant to flinch long enough to execute a follow-up technique. Police officers often use this pressure point as a come-along technique to control suspects resisting arrest. But the brachial artery is also a key first aid point for controlling bleeding. By placing direct pressure on the artery, blood flow can be stemmed from wounds located on the lower arm, until further medical help arrives.

A pressure point that can serve either to help defend against an attacker or massage away tension is located on either side of the back of the neck. This point can be used in conjunction with a shoulder bar to transfer an unwilling assailant from a face-up to a face-down position. This point is also commonly used by massage therapists to alleviate stress. Acupuncturists also manipulate such pressure points by inserting needles; acupuncture can be used to treat a variety of afflictions, as well as to perform invasive surgery without anesthesia.

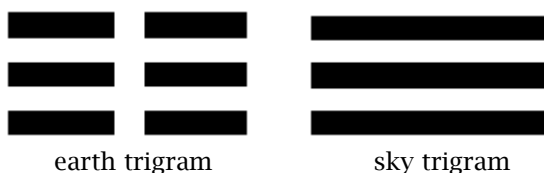
One category of martial arts pressure points that does not correspond to medical pressure points includes those areas on the human body that can be manipulated only to cause pain. One example is the hollow pit at the base of the throat. Placing a reinforced middle finger on the throat and pushing in and down causes a gag reflex forcing the assailant to step back. It can be used to persuade an attacker to release a grab, or to set up a throw.

Another way to cause someone pain without manipulating a medical pressure point, is to grab a section of skin and twist the attached hairs. A good

place to pinch is along the inside of the thigh. This technique works well against a rear bear mug. It causes the attacker to become off-balanced by shifting the hips back and the head forward. Combined with a backward head butt and knife edge strike to the groin, it makes an excellent lead-in to a variety of throws.

EARTH AND SKY

Earth and sky represent two of the eight elements represented by the trigrams of the classic Chinese text, the Tao Te Ching.



Earth grounds us with its gravitational pull, but also gives us a firm foundation from which to draw energy up toward the sky. Hapkido striking techniques make use of both the earth and sky principles to generate power. For example, an upper cut delivered to the floating ribs is best executed using the earth principle of power generation. By bending at the knees and coiling low, the punch gains the full force of the drive of the legs off of the ground. A hammer fist to the side of the neck, however, works best using the sky principle. By rising up on tiptoe and raising the arms above the head, the strike benefits from the downward momentum of gravity.

Kicks can also be classified into either earth-rooted or sky-originating techniques. A reverse roundhouse

(striking with the top of the foot) to an exposed groin derives its power from the spring off of the ground. But to deliver a powerful sidekick to the side of the knee, it's important to chamber the knee high and stomp down to take advantage of the gravitational pull.

In-close fighting techniques can also be divided into upward driving or downward falling. Throws combine the earth and sky ways of generating force. To unbalance an opponent, it's often best to force the opponent's center of mass upward, either by pulling up on the uniform, or by using pressure points, joint locks, or strikes to induce an unbalancing motion upwards. Once an opponent's weight has been shifted up, the defender can crouch low, bringing the defender's center of mass beneath that of the attacker. The defender then makes use of the earth principle, springing out of the low crouch and throwing the attacker. The attacker then involuntarily makes use of the sky principle as they crash into the ground.

Pins consist entirely of the sky principle. Since the opponent is already lying on the ground, the person doing the pinning uses their own weight to maintain the hold. Escaping from a hold, however, requires making use of the power of the earth. The person trying to escape drives their hips off the ground in order to create enough space to squirm out of the hold.

LONG AND SHORT

Another duality that hapkido techniques can be divided into are those that can be executed from long distances, and those best suited for inside fighting. A well-executed flying side kick can cover fourteen feet or

more. More standard kicks such as rear leg front kicks can be launched across a six foot gap. Hand strikes such as a lead arm back fist work best in a range between three and five feet. For distances between about one and three feet, there are only a limited number of feasible strikes, such as knee lift kicks, elbow smashes, and head butts.

For distances within one foot, strikes become less plausible because there is no room to accelerate into the technique. Close fighting situations require appropriate defenses, such as joint locks, pressure point attacks, throws, pins, and chokes, which are well-suited to confrontations in which an attacker is grabbing a defender. For example, a front overhand bear mug is difficult to defend when relying exclusively on strikes. A forward head butt, a stomp on the foot, and a knee-lift kick are about the only options. But if a defender, say, digs their fingers into the assailant's ribs, then the attacker will be off-balanced and hence susceptible to any of a number of throws.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The final, and perhaps the most important, dualism that hapkidoists encounter during the course of their training, is the distinction and interdependence of teaching and learning. As white belts, beginners learn from more advanced students; even yellow belts can teach white belts basic concepts, such as the importance of tucking the chin when falling. And white belts also indirectly teach black belts; instructors learn how to diagnose the sources of beginner errors and how to correct them, thereby reinforcing the black

belts' own knowledge.

As white belts progress through the ranks, they begin to take on teaching responsibilities. When they reach first *kub*, they are expected to serve as teaching assistants to low and intermediate level students. First *dan* practitioners may be asked to teach without the immediate presence of senior black belts. Senior black belts take on further teaching responsibilities as they instruct lower-ranking black belts. At fifth *dan*, instructors become masters who are certified to open their own schools. But even fifth *dan* masters must answer to grandmasters who are responsible for ensuring the technical excellence of hapkido. And even grandmasters pay respect to the grandmasters that preceded them. In martial arts, everyone is both a student and a teacher.

CONCLUSION

Hapkido training has the potential not only to make practitioners competent at self-defense, it can also help them develop well-rounded characters. As people progress through the ranks of the Hapkido Club, they may become aware of the fact that what they thought were opposite concepts are actually inseparably linked. Dualities such as short and long, or teaching and learning no longer seem contradictory; rather, they start to look more and more like two sides of the same coin. When people come to realize the underlying unity of everything that exists, they become less self-absorbed and more able to give back to the world what they have received. The discipline required by martial arts training promotes self respect. And it is

only when people respect themselves that they are able to extend that respect to others. If all the people in this world truly respected themselves and understood their interdependence with the rest of this world's inhabitants, there would be no need for self-defense.

Endnotes

- ¹ Olpin, Michael. "Benefits of Aerobic Conditioning." An article posted on Olpin's personal web page at <http://faculty.weber.edu/molpin/exercisebenefits.html>. Last updated, November 10, 2003. Accessed July 22, 2004.
- ² Dinubile, Nicholas A., M.D. "Aerobic Conditioning." An article posted on the Training section of the Professional Team Physicians website, available via <http://tinyurl.com/3r2e2>. Accessed July 22, 2004.
- ³ Grant, Steven, with Kevin Corbett, et al., "A comparison of physiological responses and rating of perceived exertion in two modes of aerobic exercise in men and women over 50 years of age." *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, v. 36, 2002, pp. 276-281.
Full text of the article is available at <http://bjsm.bmjournals.com/cgi/content/full/36/4/276>. Content verified July 22, 2004.
- ⁴ Nikos Apostolopoulos, "The Role of Flexibility in Sport." Full text available at <http://www.elitetrack.com/nikos1.pdf>. No date given. Content verified July 22, 2004.
- ⁵ "Exercise for Healthy Bones." An article posted on the website of the National Osteoporosis Foundation at <http://www.nof.org/prevention/exercise.htm>. Last updated January 7, 2004. Accessed July 22, 2004.
- ⁶ Liu-Ambrose, Teresa, with Karim M. Khan, et. al. "Resistance and agility training reduce fall risk in women aged 75 to 85 with low bone mass: a 6-month randomized, controlled trial." *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* v. 52, no.5, May, 2004, pp. 657-665.