

Taekwondo: A Way of Life

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Taekwondo is a multi-faceted pursuit, a way of interacting with self and environment. More than just an exercise or sporting competition that emphasizes kicking and punching techniques, taekwondo, like many martial arts, is a way of living. At its foundation, taekwondo are five core tenets: modesty, perseverance, self-control, indomitable spirit, and etiquette. Because taekwondo is a way of living, these five tenets transcend the physically rigorous taekwondo training, and permeate the lifestyle of the serious practitioner, who strives to embody and animate these tenets in all aspects of his or her life. The potential benefits offered by the practice of taekwondo are many and success in this endeavor generally leads to a high quality of life.

A Way of Life

Taekwondo is more than just an exercise regime; it is a way of living. Literally translated, taekwondo means: “kicking or blow with the foot” (tae), “punching or fist smashing” (kwon), and “the art, way or method” (do). In other words, it is the art or way of kicking and punching. However taekwondo is about more than simply perfecting one's kicking and punching techniques. Instead, the goal or ideal is ultimately spiritual or philosophical.

In analyzing this ideal of taekwondo, it is helpful to look at the genealogy of *moo-do*, or martial art. The Chinese characters for moo-do consist of several

important sub-characters. The character for “moo”, when broken down to its elemental characters means “to stop the attack, disturbance, and aggression.”¹ The character for “do” similarly reduced to its elemental characters, means “the way to live a life within a harmonious unity of body and mind.”²

Through the practice of kicking and punching, a taekwondo practitioner develops more than just the physical body, but the inner self as well. “Do deals with becoming the ideal self in relation to the entire dimension of living, including our relationships with nature, others, and society as a whole.”³ Do is a philosophy of living, of stopping aggression and minimizing disturbance within ourselves and without in our environment. Unlike other athletic activities, Taekwondo attempts to develop a way of living life where the body and mind work in harmony.

The foundation or path for a taekwondo practitioner is summarized by the five tenets. Although these tenets are sometimes expressed with different English words, they are most often described as: modesty, perseverance, self-control, indomitable spirit, and etiquette. Through the understanding and practice of these tenets, a practitioner can realize the higher taekwondo ideal.

A basic understanding of these tenets is easy to obtain but each becomes more complex upon deeper reflection and practice. Modesty is the quality of having or showing a moderate



Hexagram 15: Modesty. Moderation.
Seeking a just balance.

or humble estimate of one's merits and importance; a state of being free from vanity, egotism, boastfulness, or great pretension.⁴ It encompasses the humility and absence of pride a student seeks to instill within. It is the recognition that no matter how technically correct a kick or punch is executed, there is always room for improvement. Moreover, through reflection on modesty comes the understanding that each participant has something to bring or add to the way of taekwondo, and that it is the role of the instructor to recognize and incorporate those additions into the club's practice of the art.

Closely tied to modesty is etiquette, "the observance of the formal requirements governing behavior in polite society."⁵ In taekwondo, the practice of this tenet is often seen solely as the "bowing" that occurs before, during and after class, yet this tenet encompasses much more than



Hexagram 37: Etiquette. Courtesy.
Patience and Loyalty at Home.

simple bowing. Etiquette is the internalization and subsequent outward expression of deep respect for other people. Although Westerners often view the practice of this tenet, notably the bowing, as an expression of subservience, the taekwondo practitioner understands that a bow is not an act of submission, but one of honoring a fellow human being, particularly the master and assistant instructors. It is in honoring one another that we honor ourselves and develop an understanding of who we are.

The most straightforward tenet, perseverance, is “the steady persistence in a course of action, a purpose, or a state.”⁶ In water we can see an embodiment of this principle; it is persistent; it always flows downhill, sometimes gently, sometimes in a powerful manner. Ultimately water is able to move mountains and dissolve solid rock through centuries or millennia of action. This is the persistent action the taekwondo



Hexagram 1: Perseverance. Creation.
Productive Planning.

practitioner seeks to express, whether to overcome physical obstacles such as injury or pain, or psychological obstacles such as fear or depression. Confucius said. "One who is impatient in trivial matters can seldom achieve success in matters of great importance."

Self-control is often seen as a hallmark of martial arts. Defined, it means control of oneself or one's actions or feelings.⁷ The practice of this tenet includes more than simple physical control of a technique or of the body, but comprises mental and emotional control as well, both within and without the dojang. It is often said in martial arts that when you are in control of yourself, you are in control of any situation. This principle teaches that you must control yourself before you can seek to control external factors.



Hexagram 26: Self-Control.
The Taming Power of the Great.

Finally, the most important tenet, indomitable spirit, is “the vital principle in man that cannot be subdued or overcome, such as a person, pride, or courage can.”⁸ More than the other four tenets, but in conjunction with them, indomitable spirit fosters the development and expression of ki. Ki has many unique shades of meaning and its usage is often difficult to understand. Ki can refer to the force behind all things—the universal force. It is also described as the “expression of the vital life force which arises from healthy union of body and spirit”, making the body a conduit for spiritual energy.⁹ More simply, ki is often identified as internal spirit:



Hexagram 48: Indomitable Spirit.
the Well, Universal Truth.

Ki is a concept that is both natural and simple. Those who would make of it something mysterious and akin to magical power do a great disservice to what is essentially a common thing. All human beings possess ki. It is only that one must learn to release and utilize ki, wherein lies the difficulty of expressing its nature and functions.¹⁰

In taekwondo, the student is taught to develop, control, focus, and release ki through hard work, meditation, and application of the five tenets. Releasing ki during a specific technique, by using a kihap, or shout, allows the taekwondo practitioner to move beyond simple physical strength and tap into a spiritual strength that is immeasurable.

The Benefits

Taekwondo allows a person to move closer to personal self-fulfillment, self-actualization, and an increased awareness of one's social and spiritual responsibilities towards society. Through hard physical workouts, meditation, and practice of the five tenets, a taekwondo practitioner can attain a union of body and mind theretofore unknown in the individual's life.

A number of studies confirm, or at least indicate, the tremendous positive aspects taekwondo can bring to an individual's quality of life. "Research suggests that formal training in the Eastern martial arts can have a positive influence on measured personality traits such as self esteem and self-concept."¹¹ One study compared advanced martial arts students with less advanced students and found that the former were more independent and confident and were willing to work harder than the latter.¹² Another study supported the notion that students of martial arts are generally more self-confident than those without such training.¹³ Moreover, in support of the understanding of martial arts participation as a means of relieving aggression, research seems to indicate that formal taekwondo training tends to reduce aggressiveness¹⁴ and increase measured traits such as social adroitness and positive social values.¹⁵

Researchers have attempted to identify the quality of taekwondo that appears most responsible for the beneficial aspects discussed above. One group of researchers believes the benefit of taekwondo comes from its effective management of internal energy—ki.¹⁶

They liken taekwondo to psychotherapy: “Both disciplines focus on energy—intrapsychic and interpersonal energy, the energy of being and existing.”¹⁷ Through management of ki, the taekwondo practitioner reduces stress and becomes more aware of the inner self. Taekwondoists develop a sense of psychological identity, forging a social definition within the overlapping circles of family, friends and culture, ultimately defining the individual's place within the universe.¹⁸

It is simplistic to believe, however, that there is one particular quality of taekwondo that is responsible for all of these benefits. Taekwondo, as a way of living, is far too complex to simply dissect and then identify the parts responsible for prompting growth and change in a person. An attempt to identify the root quality responsible for its beneficial aspects is analogous to analyzing an individual's life to identify the single turning point that is responsible for his/her current state. Too many factors play into the ‘life equation’ for any one factor to bear primary responsibility for an entire lifestyle. Instead, it is the interplay between a variety of factors that enable taekwondo to make such a positive change in a person's life. Health professionals generally identify six areas of personal wellness that are important to an overall healthy lifestyle. These are wellness in the physical, mental, emotional, psychological, social and spiritual arenas. To be healthy and happy, a person needs to develop and maintain a balance among these six areas.

Taekwondo satisfies or meets needs in each of these six areas. First, it is obviously physical, and rigorously

so. Students are encouraged to develop coordination, flexibility, strength and stamina. In most clubs it is very rare for a student to leave the dojang without being drenched with perspiration and physically exhausted. Almost every practice is a rigorous cardiovascular workout.

Second, taekwondo develops mental acuity. Not only are students prompted to learn the history and philosophy of taekwondo, but the challenge of integrating the many kicking, striking and blocking techniques into a useful strategy during sparring is an exercise in memory and mental discipline. Meditation is also an integral part of the taekwondo way of life, helping the practitioner to reduce stress and focus mental energy.

Third, taekwondo practitioners learn to control and constructively express their emotions. Throughout taekwondo training, a student is taught to control the powerful emotions of fear and anger, and to release these emotions via the exercises of kihaping, kicking, striking or blocking. Students are further trained as to when and where expressions of certain emotions are appropriate.

Fourth, taekwondo promotes psychological wellness. As a student meets and perfects each increasingly difficult technique, he or she develops a sense of satisfaction and self-confidence. The student learns appropriate manners for expression of negative energy and obtains true therapeutic stress relief from class workouts. His or her self-esteem also improves and the general psychological outlook on life improves.

Fifth, taekwondo is a natural social outlet. Each class

is a complex social interaction between the instructor and the students, and among the students themselves. The tenet of etiquette provides a foundation for social interaction within and without the dojang. Discussions of taekwondo and other topics before and after class are encouraged. Often local club members engage in extra-curricular activities such as fund-raisers, picnics and social hours. Moreover, taekwondo builds community. "As practitioners of taekwondo, we are in essence, a community of artists, helping each other in the process of realizing our aesthetics and values."¹⁹ This community extends beyond local clubs, to the state, nation and world through activities such as tournaments, clinics, seminars, and conventions.

Sixth, and finally, the practice of taekwondo is a spiritual expression. As noted above, taekwondo is deeply rooted in an understanding of ki, the energy that permeates each individual and is the cohesive force throughout the universe. As well, taekwondo is based on the spiritual understanding of the balance between yin and yang; though opposites and quite distinct from each other, both are interlocked and some of one piece lies in the midst of the other part. The serious practitioner who seeks the full realization of the tenet of indomitable spirit seeks a greater understanding of the connection and connectedness of all things.

Conclusion

Taekwondo is a way of living that is intrinsically designed for overall personal wellness. Practitioners of

taekwondo are enabled to develop the six areas of personal wellness important to a healthy and happy personal lifestyle. Through an understanding of the five tenets of taekwondo, rigorous physical exercise and meditation, students realize a higher quality of life than most individuals not otherwise engaged in martial arts.

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Endnotes

¹ Hyong, p. 58.

² Hyong, p. 59.

³ *Ibidem*

⁴ *The American College Encyclopedic Dictionary*, Chicago, IL: Spencer Press, Inc., 1958, p. 782.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 413.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 903.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 1099.

- ⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 619, 1165.
- ⁹ Kim, p. 136.
- ¹⁰ Draeger. P. 143
- ¹¹ Kurian; Daniels & Thornton; Finkenberg.
- ¹² Duthie, p. 71.
- ¹³ Finkenberg, p. 891.
- ¹⁴ Skelton, p. 179.
- ¹⁵ Trulson, p. 1131.
- ¹⁶ Seitz, p. 459.
- ¹⁷ *Ibidem*.
- ¹⁸ *Ibidem*, at p. 463.
- ¹⁹ Hyong, p. 59.