

Tae Kwon Do

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For thousands of years, the people of Korea have offered the world a unique appreciation for the spirit and for man's ultimate perfection of mind and body. Their entire culture -- their humble life-style, their dancing, even their folk tales-reflects this. Yet today, it is not these things as much as a new form of self-defense that is demonstrating to the world the unique spirituality of ancient Korea.

An estimated fifteen million people in more than sixty countries are now studying the Korean martial art, Tae Kwon Do. Though it officially came into existence only ten years ago, its roots go back 1,500 years when King Gwangaeto of Koguryo used a primitive form of the art as a military tactic to help his warriors fight off pirates in a neighboring kingdom.

In the beginning

Mural paintings found in the royal tombs of King Gwangaeto and his son Jangsu show combatants using their hands and feet rather than weapons to fight. It is believed King Gwangaeto had his armies trained in Taek Kwon (primitive Tae Kwon Do) when he sent 50,000 soldiers to drive out Japanese invaders in the besieged kingdom of Silla. A seventh century wall carving of a famous Silla warrior in a Taek Kwon stance is evidence that the unarmed style of fighting had evolved into a specific form.

An early military academy in the Silla kingdom applied the teachings of Buddha to Taek Kwon in its training of young noblemen. Taek Kwon's emphasis on mental discipline was enhanced through the Buddhist ethic which taught loyalty, filial piety, trustworthiness, valor, and justice. Not only was Taek Kwon recognized in the academy as a successful form of unarmed combat, but it was also a life-style, stressing the supremacy of spirit rather than the dominance of physical desire. Such spiritual activities in the academy as writing poetry, singing, and dancing helped the trainee further develop his conscience and purity of heart.

In the generations that followed, the practice of Taek Kwon left the monasteries and the art became deeply rooted into the Korean culture. But when Japan occupied Korea in 1909, all native practices of Korea's culture were stifled. Preference was given instead to Japan's martial arts and Japan's songs, dances, language, and even religion. Taek Kwon could only be kept alive by a few individuals who practiced it in secret until Korea was liberated in 1945.

A second lieutenant in the new Republic of Korea armed forces, Choi Hong Hi, is credited by most Tae Kwon Doists to have developed the basic movements of Taek Kwon into the highly effective and scientific Tae Kwon Do of today. Choi reportedly learned the skill from Korean calligrapher Han II Dong, an expert in the forbidden art of Taek Kwon. Choi refined the discipline and began teaching it to military officers. In 1955 the title Tae Kwon Do (meaning hand and foot fighting) was officially designated, and on March 22, 1966, nine countries signed the first charter of the International Tae Kwon Do Federation, today the most widely recognized association for the Korean martial art.

An art of mind over matter

Tae Kwon Doists are quick to defend the martial art as an art, rather than a sport. It demands control of the mind far more than muscle or brute strength. It is a highly specialized talent which must develop slowly through specific stages of growth. And it requires as much (if not more) discipline and perseverance as classical ballet.

For in Tae Kwon Do, the participant is not a player who wins or loses (though an encounter may deem him so), but an artist. He has no immediate goal but only the ultimate mastery of his art. Yet, as an artist, the Tae Kwon Doist knows perfection is a sacred end and thus he is always in the quest for further development, further refinement, and further conquest in claiming the obedience of his body. Even highest ranking black belt holders have been heard quoting the common adage: "There's always room for improvement!"



One Tae Kwon Do expert claims three years of study is the minimum for most serious students to be able to meet any assailant under any condition and be confident. "It takes that long for the body to be brought under proper control," he says. The spiritual discipline of a Tae Kwon Doist begins when he learns chon-ji, the first pattern of Tae Kwon Do. As described in one text: "Chon-ji means literally 'Heaven the Earth.' It is, in the Orient, interpreted as the relation of the world or the beginning of human history; therefore, it is the initial pattern (for) the beginner. This pattern consists of two similar parts: one to represent the Heaven and the other the Earth."

In chon-ji, the student begins by asserting a firm stance with legs spread (about a foot and a half apart) and hands held fisted at the top of the thigh. To each side and in front of and behind him are striking areas. He is the center of this base of four positions. From the center he brings his left foot forward and to the left and his right foot back to stabilize. Facing left with his right hand fisted at the side, the student uses his left arm to strike downward, executing a low block, before plunging the right fist outward in a middle punch. This movement is practiced in rotating positions.

After the student masters chon-ji, an array of punches, blocks, kicks and other kata lies ahead to be learned and coordinated. It is only after many months that the Tae Kwon Do student is allowed to progress to the deadlier karate forms. Important to remember, though, is that most consider Tae Kwon Do a defensive art rather than an offensive one. Moreover, it is the conviction of all martial art practitioners, especially those of Tae Kwon Do, that an opponent is better countered with a non-fatal blow than a fatal one.

Exercising the spirit

The immense power in a Tae Kwon Do kick or punch is all governed by the mind. Indeed all coordination of power, speed, relaxation, focus, balance, and accuracy for an effective movement depends upon utmost mental concentration.

"Immersion in the subject must be total," one author emphasizes. The power, or ki, for the lightning fast physical output of Tae Kwon Do stems from the lower abdomen, tanjen. There energy is built up through concentration much like electrical energy is charged in a capacitor before suddenly being expelled with great intensity. At the opportune moment, the Tae Kwon Doist aligns all his muscles to coordinate the strike. The movement is smooth and swift, allowing the ki to flow directly from the tanjen to the point of impact almost like a bolt of electric current.

The amount of concentrated energy launched in the strike is devastating because the Tae Kwon Doist mentally aligns his body for the ki to flow and accurately be focused on target. But like any capacitor, time must be allowed for relaxation if the tanjen is to continue its function at peak performance. So the

Tae Kwon Doist is careful to stay relaxed at all times until he reaches the final few inches of his attack or block. This puts optimum energy force in the strike, keeping the body as well as the mind relaxed to notice counter movements and reactions. Also, if the student is tense and tight all the time, needlessly burning up energy, he may become fatigued. Controlled relaxation alleviates this.

In the classroom

Tae Kwon Do students in most academies engage in preparatory exercises before rehearsing katas or fighting. These exercises reflect both the spiritual and physical characteristics of Tae Kwon Do.

Spiritual training includes single and group meditation, of ten before and after activity. On the physical level, weightlifting is usually included in warm-up exercises, though with caution. The intent of Tae Kwon Do is not to build bulging muscles but rather lean muscles that are supple and fast. Five pound weights are recommended for men; two or three pound weights for women. And before practice, various stretching exercises to limber the muscles are recommended.

Jogging and swimming are good for extracurricular exercise. Katas are often classified according to soft and hard styles, symbolized by the Korean uhm yang (yin yang in Chinese). As stated in one report: "Uhm symbolizes softness and darkness, and is represented in the martial arts in the soft fighting styles. Its power is that of gently flowing water that changes the shape of stone. Its typical motion is circular, with the force of a whip, or a rock whirled on a string, and its tendencies to unite and combine, to close in.

"Yang symbolizes hardness and brightness, and is represented in the arts in the hard, linear forms of fighting. Its strength is that of steel or rock, and its typical motion is straight lines and angles, with force derived from leverage. Its tendency is to maintain distance between opponents."

While it is the objective of Tae Kwon Do schools to teach their students how to defend themselves against any attack at any time under any conditions, Tae Kwon Do students also learn what is called free-style fighting, in which the opponent presents a series of unexpected attacks and situations without prior rehearsal or premeditation. The style is the trademark of karate tournaments and is judged in much the same way as competitive wrestling, with points awarded for advantage maneuvers. Blows to the head and groin are restricted completely in most tournaments, with allowance for surface strikes only on other parts of the body. Besides teaching a student to be accurate with his attacks and blocks and to keep his balance at all times (both on offense and defense), free-style emphasizes the attitude of good sportsmanship. Here the aspect of Tae Kwon Do as a lethal weapon is forgotten. Both contestants are battling for superiority of technique, style, and control.

This sportsmanship has been characteristic of Tae Kwon Do since its history began in the days of the Koguryo kingdom. Tae Kwon Do has always taught man how to live together more harmoniously, so that any fighting between comrades is for the mutual benefit and growth of the participants. The nature of Tae Kwon Do is to serve the purpose of the whole, not the individual. The spiritual power that is the life blood of the Tae Kwon Doist is of a positive nature, experts contend.

"Those whose interest in Tae Kwon Do is for the purpose of perpetrating evil never seem to have the spiritual control to support the self-discipline necessary to achieve proficiency in the art," states one leading Tae Kwon Doist.

Attitude is further developed in Tae Kwon Do training by stressing respect on the part of the student. Always when a student comes onto the floor mat, he bows before the joint flags of Korea and the United States - "our two fatherlands" as one instructor explains. It is also traditional that students in a class bow together before the flags prior to an activity.

Respect is also given on the highest order to the instructor, fondly called "master" by most students. Tae Kwon Do is the answer for many people in the world whose lives are constantly in danger, as the art is an effective and natural deterrent to aggressive persons, armed or unarmed.

But more than for protection, Tae Kwon Do is especially valuable in training the oneness of mind and body, something the Koreans have been working on for ages, and something the West is only now beginning to value and appreciate.