

An exploration of the ‘Do’ of Taekwon-Do

In Taekwon-Do, the concept of the ‘Do’ has always been one of great fascination to me. It helps to differentiate practitioners of the art as ‘martial artists’ instead of just athletes only focusing on the physical aspects and physical gains of what we do. It shows its presence in nearly all that we do in Taekwon-Do, from the Tenets and Student Oath which we get all new students to learn by rote, to the rules of the dojang, student-instructor relationship and preparation for training that students must learn as they pass through the coloured belt ranks. It can be as simple as the respect a junior shows a senior in letting them through a door first, to the respect shown to an instructor when we turn to the left to adjust out doboks. And yet, it can sometimes feel something not as clearly defined and explored as the physical part.

Directly translated, “Tae” stands for jumping or flying, to kick or smash with the foot, “Kwon” stands for punching or destroying with the hand or fist, while “Do” means the art, or way. One caution here is to simplify the combination of these words into simply meaning ‘The way of the hand and foot’, as the Do means far more than this. The word ‘Do’ can be derived from the Chinese word ‘Dao’ or ‘Tao’, also directly translating into ‘the way’, but also more loosely signifying doctrine or principle. In Neo-Confucianism, a term often heard in Taekwon-Do but seldom fully understood, one interpretation of Dao is that of humaneness, and that the following of Dao is the following of humaneness, altruism and other humane virtues. From this, we can interpret the ‘Do’ within Taekwon-Do as signifying a moral culture and a way to develop the mental aspects and noble personal qualities of a Taekwon-Do practitioner.

When Taekwon-Do was created by General Choi, its name was originally separated into three distinct parts “Tae Kwon Do”, to emphasise each distinct part for pronunciation. This was soon changed to what it is today as the General realised the need to emphasise the ‘Do’ as being a distinct and needed part by itself, with as much importance as the physical aspects of the art.

In the Moral Culture section of the Condensed Encyclopedia it is stated that “In Taekwon-Do a heavy emphasis is placed on moral culture, for it not only promotes a healthy body and keen mind but good sportsmanship and the perfection of moral behaviour” (Choi 1999). This can imply the risk the General saw in people only focusing on the punching and kicked aspects (Tae and Kwon) without the equal development of character, morality and ethics. If the ideas of Stan Lee from Marvel comics can be quoted, “With great power comes great responsibility”.

“This moral culture is uniquely tied in with Taekwon-Do, not only for the eventual attainment of the highest goals in Taekwon-Do and the promotion of power, technique, and self-confidence, but also for the cultivation of character. Without this, the instructor would be guilty of imparting a devastating force to those who could eventually become so enamoured of their newly found techniques they might very easily become bullies or use this knowledge as a means to achieve their personal ambitions.”

Encyclopedia of Taekwon-Do, Second Edition, 1987, vol. 1, page 61)

The ability to teach the Do and the moral culture of Taekwon-Do can be seen as a strong sign of a good and well-rounded instructor, as it follows the General's ideal of the use of Taekwon-Do to develop Taekwon-Do students into more well-rounded and moral human beings.

The fundamental aspects of the Do can be boiled down to what is taught to all beginning students, the student oath, which can in turn be distilled further into the tenets.

The Student Oath

I shall observe the tenets of Taekwon-Do

I shall respect the Instructor and Seniors

I shall never misuse Taekwon-Do

I shall be a champion of freedom and justice

I shall build a more peaceful world

As learnt by a beginning white belt, generally through repetition, this can seem strange to beginning students. Whilst the first three lines of the oath can be easily understood as a fundamental part of learning a martial art, the final two lines can take a bit more time to understand the thought processes behind them.

To elaborate, the first three lines of the student oath can be seen as a show of respect to the art itself.

I shall observe the tenets of Taekwon-Do

A student is showing they recognise (if not completely understand) that there are rules behind learning what can be a powerful art. It also can be the first indication that there is more to the art than what is readily seen in demonstrations of physical prowess.

I shall respect the Instructor and Seniors

Often misquoted by beginners as respecting “my” instructors and seniors, this shows the respect a student of any rank should be showing their teacher and people senior to them. These are people who have shown a tremendous amount of still and dedication to the art, and who have a huge pool of knowledge to impart on a student.

I shall never misuse Taekwon-Do

Simple enough to understand if we consider an aim of Taekwon-Do as a strive towards physical perfection. Well seen in the feats of the original masters of Taekwon-Do being forced to use their art to lethal effect in the defence of their lives and their country during the Korean War of the early 1950's, it shows the potential that can be realised through intensive training and the proper application of technique.

The last two lines of the student oath show the ideal dedication a true Taekwon-Do practitioner should have to the General's ideal of using Taekwon-Do for self-betterment and for the betterment of mankind. In the General's own words, Taekwon-Do was designed to counteract ‘the evils of contemporary society (moral corruption, materialism, selfishness, etc)’ which has created a ‘spiritual vacuum’ (Choi, 1999). Following the military Taekwon-Do demonstration to South Vietnam and Taiwan in March 1959, three basic philosophical ideals for Taekwon-Do practitioners were formulated. These being:

1. By developing an upright mind and a strong body, we will acquire the self-confidence to stand on the side of justice at all times.
2. We shall unite with all men in a common brotherhood, without regard to religion, race, national or ideological boundaries.
3. We shall dedicate ourselves to building a peaceful human society in which justice, morality, trust and humanism prevail.

It is these three philosophical ideals that seem to form the basis for the last two lines of the student oath.

I shall be a champion of freedom and justice

I shall build a more peaceful world

Whilst we must remember that the philosophy of Taekwon-Do came off the back of a conflict that tore our founders' country apart, in which we can understand his desire for all men to unite in brotherhood without boundaries, and the desire for a peaceful human society, the same philosophical ideas hold strong in our current day and age.

The Tenets

Identified in the opening line of the student oath, the Tenets should be considered the backbone for an individual's development of moral culture, or 'Do'. The General defined five human qualities which he states have been recognised as virtues since ancient times. These being; humanity, righteousness, courtesy, wisdom and trust, with the constant cultivation and practice of these leading a person to a life of virtue. In these, I see the development for the Tenets of modern Taekwon-Do.

Courtesy (Ye Ui)

To show courtesy is to treat others in a compassionate, considerate and respectful way. I believe this is one of the easier tenets for a student to begin to develop through Taekwon-Do, as the actions of it are constantly taught and developed, even if the reasons behind it are not clearly understood by a student. In waiting for a senior student to enter or exit the dojang before yourself, you are affording that person courtesy and respect. Courtesy is shown to the instructor by a student turning to the side before adjusting their dobok.

In teaching children, who can occasionally have difficulty understanding or interpreting the wording or phrasing of the tenets and student oath, one way this can be distilled down further is into an issue of manners. Making sure junior students say thank you to whichever person took them to training, not talking back to teachers and school, and even as simple as saying please and thank you are all aspects of courtesy, and as the lessons of the dojang are imparted, courtesy outside the dojang should also see improvement.

Of course, in today's culture where a courteous attitude is not always seen as often as would be liked, the proper application of this Tenet would lead towards a respectful, well-mannered, polite and loyal individual. As stated by Dr Gauthier on his thoughts on the Do, displaying courtesy and respect to others helps to ensure better relationships with people and this can help an individual be more successful in their personal and professional life.

Integrity (Yom Chi)

Integrity, in its application through Taekwon-Do, signifies the knowledge of right from wrong, the application of that knowledge regardless of its consequence, and the conscience to feel guilt if wrong.

Teaching this at a Taekwon-Do club is often achieved through games such as first point sparring, where a student is taught the integrity to admit to a loss even despite an often strong desire to win. This is to teach that there are no shortcuts to success, and for a student to learn from their defeats in order to become better.

Unfortunately, in this modern society, integrity can often be seen to be lacking. From a person who picks up a lost wallet with no intention to return it, to a person who lies and uses deception in order to get ahead in the business world, to something as simple as a student claiming they've done all the push-ups an instructor has assigned then, when they quite clearly know they haven't.

Perseverance (In Nae)

Perseverance can mean to continue on a chosen path, regardless of difficulties and hardships in order to reap the rewards on its completion, never giving up. A person displaying good perseverance is motivated, goal driven and focused, ideal qualities both for people in the business world and for practitioners of martial arts.

It can be seen quite clearly in student's actions and behaviours during a rigorous training session. The students who always push that little bit further, the ones who are always striving to improve. The students who always get to training well before it starts, even in the winter months.

In developing perseverance in our students, we cannot afford to show the opposite ourselves as seniors and instructors. If students fail to see their seniors and instructors constantly attempting to develop their abilities, they can start to lose that same drive within themselves. Of course, this is limited by age and ability, but while an older instructor might not be able to push their bodies to the same limits as that of the younger generation, there can always be further development of the technical aspects of the art.

Self Control (Guk Gi)

The control over ones behaviour, thoughts and actions has a tremendous importance in learning an art such as Taekwon-Do. As stated by the General in the Condensed Encyclopedia, wrongly applied, Taekwon-Do can be a lethal weapon (Choi, 1999). From a younger student having the control over themselves to not use Taekwon-Do inappropriately in the playground, to an international competitor not losing control of their techniques against a formidable opponent, the exercising of appropriate self-control does not mean to disregard ones emotions, but rather to channel ones feeling towards a constructive output.

Consider an employee who has recently been turned down for a promotion. By exercising good self-control over their emotions and striving to understand the reasons behind the decision shows maturity and strength of character to their seniors, and can open future possibilities and opportunities.

Especially important for younger students who lack the wisdom and temperament of age, as one of the last things an instructor wants to hear is that of a student using Taekwon-Do inappropriately at school or home and hurting a sibling or classmate.

Indomitable Spirit (Baekjul Boolgool)

Can be considered as being synonymous with courage, the General states that this is shown when a courageous person and his principles are pitted against overwhelming odds (Choi, 1999).

Courage is a choice on the part of an individual, as it involves the conscious decision to do what is right or to stand up to what a person believes in. I would consider the application of this Tenet to be the culmination of the Do, because, as Edward Slingerland states in his translation of the Confucius Analects, "that a virtue such as courage that is entirely uninformed by other virtues becomes a vice", as "if you are courageous but lack ritual you will become unruly" (Slingerland, 2003). It is courage, tempered through the application of all other aspects of the Do or Moral Culture, that enable a person to act with the modesty, honesty, integrity and the strive against injustice so valued by General Choi.

To fully develop ourselves in this art, our focus cannot solely be on the martial aspect. General Choi developed a great system, which is continuing to develop thanks to the efforts of our Masters and Grandmasters, but I believe it is our focus on developing well rounded and moral students that will truly set us apart from other fighting arts in the future.

Choi, H. H. (1999), *Taekwon-Do (The Korean Art of Delf-Defence)*

Slingerland, E. (2003), *Confucius Analects*

Grandmaster Trần Triệu Quân (9th Dan)

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