

Tul or not to tul - what's the point of patterns?

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Why do we do patterns?

When I try to explain to non-martial artists what patterns (*tul*) are I often get confused faces looking back at me. I can almost hear them thinking "why not actually fight someone?". As strange as they may seem to those who don't practise martial arts, perfecting patterns takes up a lot of our training time. Why do we do it?

Forms or Kata are performed as a part of many different martial arts, but not by all. According to some sources they were originally used as a mnemonic to ensure students remembered techniques or sequences of movements. This ensured that knowledge was not lost in the days before written information was commonly available to record information. However we are lucky enough to have all of our techniques described and prescribed by General Choi in the encyclopaedia, so if this were the only purpose of patterns then performing them could be considered to be a meaningless, or simply an historical, exercise. However I do not consider this to be the case.

Patterns allow practitioners to practise more complex combinations of movements than can be easily worked on in a line work or step sparring scenario. Movements are combined in different ways, in different stances, from different positions, and in different directions. Although such combinations could be set by individual instructors, having a prescribed set ensures that a wide variety of combinations are used and none are forgotten or practised less than others.

In addition, having all practitioners learn each of the patterns ensures there is some consistency in what all Taekwon-Do practitioners learn. In this way patterns are used in the traditional sense, to ensure that techniques or combinations of techniques are not forgotten. Taekwon-Do patterns are formulated so that the difficulty and complexity increases at each belt level. Different movements, stances, tools, and more complex ways of executing and combining movements are included as training in Taekwon-Do progresses. Therefore the patterns in some ways set the syllabus and framework for the entire martial art, demonstrating in a condensed form what a practitioner should be able to perform at each level.

Tae and kwon - Patterns for physical conditioning

In addition to that function I believe that patterns are a valuable training tool allowing Taekwon-Do practitioners to develop a great many skills. In the encyclopaedia General Choi lists seven skills obtained while practising patterns.

"Thus pattern practice enables the student to go through many fundamental movements in series, to develop sparring techniques, improve flexibility of movements, master body shifting, build muscles and breath control, develop fluid and smooth motions, and gain rhythmical movements".

Patterns include different ways of moving, for example slow motion stances and kicks, and movements such as stances performed on one leg. These types of movements are clearly not practical for a combat situation but do improve strength, flexibility and balance. These attributes

will improve a practitioner's physical capabilities, which will in turn improve their ability to defend themselves. Although it may not be necessary to stand on one leg or hold one's leg at head height while defending oneself during a fight, if you are able to do that then less complex skills will come more easily. If you can kick easily and hold your leg at head height it will seem simple to kick at abdomen level. If you can stand on one leg and balance a kick while turning in a circle then you have the strength, muscular control and body awareness needed to regain your balance easily when necessary. During a fight situation you may find yourself in unusual physical positions, for example if you slip, or a leg becomes caught and lifted high. Good flexibility means that there is less chance of injury if this occurs. Therefore, although there are many movements in patterns that appear not to be directly useful in a combat situation they do develop skills that are useful during combat. In addition, if patterns are performed at full speed and power, practising them will work on a student's aerobic and anaerobic fitness. Taking all this into account, patterns can be seen as a specialised martial arts workout. Dedicating time to them at training means that a number of different physical attributes can be worked on in one exercise.

Teaching and learning

As well as providing a good training tool, patterns provide a good tool for teaching and evaluating students' technical abilities and form while performing techniques. An instructor watching a student or students perform patterns is able to see and correct errors in technique because the movements are performed individually and clearly. There is little except the student's own capabilities to prevent them from performing each technique perfectly, and this allows errors to be identified which would be missed in the busyness of a sparring bout. Even in step sparring, which has a set format and limited number of techniques performed at a time, more variables are introduced into the exercise which can reduce a student's ability to perform a technique perfectly. For example, students may be of differing height or ability from their opponent, and there may be errors in timing and set up of the step sparring exercise that may mask that a technique is not being performed correctly.

Although techniques may not be able to be performed in textbook fashion in realistic situation there are advantages to practising techniques as a "closed skill" without the interference of external factors. Repetition of movements with ideal technique over and over again builds "muscle memory" in a student. This is something of a misnomer because it is actually building connections in the brain. Regardless of what we call it repetition of a movement many times means that a student is more likely to be able to perform the movement well, without conscious thought, when they are under pressure. Many martial arts students have surprised themselves by performing a textbook perfect technique without thinking about it when an attack is thrown at them unexpectedly.

Patterns do have the drawback that they are performed in isolation, without an opponent. This has several disadvantages. Firstly, the student does not always receive feedback that a technique is being performed incorrectly. In a busy class or if the student is practising alone without an instructor (or another tool such as a mirror or video) to correct them they may form bad habits because they are repeating a movement over and over with bad technique. Repetitive practise with poor technique means that more time has to be spent later correcting the movement. However if there were external feedback, such as a partner, available it is much less likely that the student would make these mistakes. For instance, students often have to be reminded to perform rising

blocks so that the tool is above and protecting the head. If this were to be performed with a partner it is unlikely that they would make that mistake too many times before correcting the error, because few people like being knocked on the head by their attacker! Performing movements with an opponent also makes it easier for a student to see the application of a movement. These kinds of mistakes are also often seen, such as fingertip thrusts performed with a downwards chopping movement instead of a forward movement. Performing the movements with a partner allows the student to see more easily whether the technique is likely to be effective as they are performing it.

The perfect training exercise? What is missing from patterns

Another point about performing patterns as an individual exercise is that there is no resistance against the movements, nothing to actually strike. This means that the muscles used to perform the movement are slightly different from those that would be used when performing the movement with an actual target or opponent to hit because the antagonist muscles of those used to perform the movement must be used to stop the movement at the end of its travel. This is particularly true in Taekwon-Do because most movements in a pattern must be stopped sharply rather than allowing the tool to stop more naturally of its own accord. This means that the movement patterns learned when performing patterns may be slightly different from those used when actually striking a target. This may have the disadvantage that the student does not learn to fully commit or push into a technique the way that is required to do damage when resistance is reached, for example when breaking a board or striking an opponent. This is what will do maximum damage to an opponent in a combat situation. From an exercise point of view there may be advantages to training in this way as it means that opposing muscle groups are used to alternately throw and then stop the technique. However if we see Taekwon-Do more as an art of self defense rather than an exercise routine this may not be a positive attribute. Also, performing techniques alone does not condition the attacking tools or prepare a student physically and mentally for actually being struck by their opponent.

Another thing that a student does not practise while doing patterns is the timing of attack and defence, or learning to distance and target a technique with high accuracy. There is no reaction to an opponent's movements because the opponent is only imaginary. The student knows exactly what movement comes next and does not have to decide what offensive or defensive technique to use in a particular situation.

Therefore, although there are clearly many benefits to practising patterns there are many things that patterns do not cover. Perhaps too much time is devoted in classes to perfecting patterns. However it is important to remember that they are only one part of the cycle of Taekwon-Do training, which includes fundamental movements, step sparring, free sparring, conditioning (*dallyon*). While it is important to perfect the basics in order to do more complex exercises well it is important to remember that there are many other components of Taekwon-Do.

Room for improvement?

Perhaps another consideration though is whether there could be more efficient ways of training. Because of their traditional nature martial arts are perhaps slower than some other areas to accept changes in exercise science, sports psychology and other related areas of research. Although Taekwon-Do practitioners see it as more than "just" a sport there are many principles of this research that could be applicable to more efficient training. Although there are many physical

advantages gained through practising patterns, as discussed earlier in this essay, perhaps it would be more efficient to do targeted training to improve these individual attributes, such as fitness, leg strength, balance and so on. As well as adopting modern sports principles for improving martial arts performance, perhaps improvements could be made to the way that patterns are performed. Some martial arts have two person forms in which one is the attacker and the other the defender¹. If Taekwon-Do patterns were performed in this way it would remove some of the disadvantages of performing patterns alone that I have discussed above, such as allowing the student to receive feedback from the opponent, having resistance against their movements, a target to condition the tools, learning to time techniques and so on. However in my opinion there would also be disadvantages of performing patterns as a partner exercise. Patterns would be more difficult to perform with technically correct stances and techniques because the opponents are likely to be different sizes. This can become a problem in three step sparring with different sized students and the difficulty would accumulate over a longer exercise. In addition the exercise would likely become more difficult for an instructor to ensure that all techniques are being performed correctly because there are more variables to take into account which could result in errors in the performance of the techniques.

The Do

A final point to note is that Taekwon-Do is not all about the *tae* and *kwon*. The length of a patterns exercise means that there is time for contemplation of the movements, technique, and the self as they are performed. Perfecting the techniques and sequences requires a dedication, continued effort and attention to detail that embodies the tenets of perseverance and self control. In addition there is what General Choi described as “feats and characteristic beauty”. While effective technique should not give way for aesthetics there is a beauty in movement and appreciation of that which we find in patterns but is absent from most other Taekwon-Do exercises.

Full circle

The cycle of Taekwon-Do teaches the techniques of Taekwon-Do, moving from closed skills with few variables (fundamental movements) to patterns which combine movements in more complex ways (patterns) and then on to sparring and self defence which require the student to combine and use their skills in increasingly complex ways. Patterns require and develop a combination of physical attributes - strength, speed, balance, breath control, flexibility, fitness – and teach different ways of moving and combining movements. Therefore although they may not be the most efficient way of working each of these individual skills they are still an efficient way of training as there are few other exercises that work on so many skills at once. Finally, through respecting and appreciating the beauty of the movements we grow in our *Do* as well as in the physical aspects of the art.

¹ Of course Taekwon-Do patterns as they are currently formulated could not easily be performed in this way because they simulate many attackers from different directions, and sometimes need multiple attackers at once.