

## The Instructors Eclipse

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As Instructors we are all objects held in a delicate pendulum of seniority and juniority. To the classes we teach we're looked up to as authorities, be it in rank, skill or experience. And as juniors our earnest eagerness to continue learning, to walk the path of a Taekwon-Doin, is an element that needs to last us either our entire Taekwon-Do careers or (and is hopefully the case) our entire lives. We're fortunate in New Zealand to have a broad spread of instructing expertise and we're spoiled by not only a wealth of local knowledge but thanks to modern communication mediums the rest of the world, and by extension the global Taekwon-Do community, has never been closer.

What's the point I'm getting at? Despite the abundance of near and far resources available to us as practitioners there's a paradigm that I've become aware of and witnessed. For the purposes of expanding on this finding I've nominated to define this paradigm, the Instructors Eclipse.

During the course of this thesis I want to delve into what the Instructors Eclipse is, in an effort to define it, understand it and hopefully tender ways to adapt for Instructors experiencing this scenario I've nominated the nomenclature "Eclipse" for the effects experienced on the Earth during a Solar Eclipse and the similarity of this on an individual experiencing the Instructors Eclipse.

In this symbolism the individual constitutes the Sun, and one's presence as Student and Instructor constitutes the Earth and Moon. In a Solar Eclipse the Moon's orbit passes between the Sun and Earth blocking the former and casting a shadow on the latter. Similarly, in the case of the Instructor's Eclipse, the element of one's self as a student becomes a point of blockage casting a shadow on the individual and obstructing their light in teaching.

By the time a practitioner becomes an instructor, their own tutelage as a student will have spanned at least several years and in some instance's decades.

By this point the practitioner will have been privy to higher instruction and while this is absolutely crucial for advancing expertise one's ability to learn changes somewhat. For the lucky few the balance struck between maintaining their progress as a student while delivering consistent instruction seems easy.

In others that balance takes a lot of time and effort to sustain.

Unfortunately, in some cases, the external elements of life become obstacles and the time investment of striving as a student and instructor, hampers one's own ability to seek out the progression we all strive for.

Where that gentle balance of one's inner student is thrown it does weigh down one's ability to effectively instruct others and this consequently further degrades one's ability to study.

In either case the purity you possess as a complete beginner has been replaced by mature understanding. It goes without saying the development of this maturity is a rite of passage of sort's, but it begs the question is there not benefit in learning something from scratch.

Many of our beginning practitioners are completely clean slates with fresh hungers, unfettered by compounded experiences and potential misunderstandings.

Let me illustrate a picture.

You walk into a Dojang ready to train. Your shoes are off and accessories removed, Dobok crisp, clean and white. You've warmed up and are ready to train. The instructor starts the class. You carry out some fundamental exercises, practice a few patterns, maybe do some pad-work and before you know it the class ends. You pack up, go home and feel content that the trainings you've done that week have ticked your Taekwon-Do boxes. Content student.

Behind the scenes this instructor is experiencing one of two things in varied degrees.

In an ideal world they've managed to reap something from the training they just conducted, maybe this was fitness, maybe clarifying technical queries sparked new curiosities that are then explored furthering their own tuition, maybe they had a string of successes with their students grasping a taught concept or technique.

The other side of that coin is maybe the instructor didn't yield any discernible value from the class they conducted. Maybe the student base they currently have are a bit difficult to instruct, maybe the energy of the class was flat and hard to invigorate. Outside the Dojang, given the time investment in instructing this practitioner doesn't have the time or energy to seek out that quality tuition for themselves and eventually submits to a cyclical decline. Slowly over time this Instructor slips more out of touch with themselves as a student and given enough time becomes lost as an instructor.

It goes without saying the example above may be an extreme case and the reality is there will be a spread of varied experiences. I know first-hand I've visited clubs and felt like the tuition was flat from a student's perspective and as guilty as it makes me feel I know I've been on the broadcasting end of the same scenario.

This is the Instructors Eclipse.

When a practitioner's experiences as a student and an instructor become splintered from one another and one facet foreshadows the other negatively impacting both and this is the paradigm to which I've been referring to.

These scenarios can potentially be rationalised as being merely negative perception or jading and that better time utilisation or more/different training focuses are the ways to resolve this.

The reality is it's difficult to rally this argument. We're all completely different people experiencing the world in completely different ways and while it's easy to try and solve the problems of others, this only stands to relegate the circumstances of that individual. Further I like to believe that time and training access (as I mentioned above) aren't really the problem at all.

In considering this paradigm I started drawing a lot of parallels between the Instructor's Eclipse and the fundamental understandings of Buddhism.

*I want to make a clear disclaimer at this point, the following is a massive paraphrasing of Buddhism, based on the understanding I've developed from reading available texts. Countless scholars have taken countless years to try and define these concepts/beliefs in a way that do them justice and only really scratch the surface. I am not Buddhist and what is written below is done so with the utmost respect to Buddhists and Buddhism in general. I humbly apologise in advance to any and all readers for any offence caused by any error or misrepresentation in this section.*

In Buddhism reality is defined as a prison of sorts for the soul and that the nature of our existence is one that's ultimately steeped in pain. Over time one's life as it's defined ends and the actions and experiences of that lifetime are totalled, and any remainder of want are not only carried over to the next lifetime but are knitted into the very fabric of that next lifetime. We call this phenomena reincarnation and the concept of Four Noble Truths accompany this occurrence are at a very basic level, the sum of Buddhist belief.

These Noble Truths outline the nature of existential suffering, the cause of suffering, the end of suffering and the means to end that suffering. Conceptually these get more difficult to understand as we progress through them so I will endeavour to break them down so the relationship between Buddhist theories and my point of the Instructors Eclipse can be drawn out more clearly.

## **Dukkha**

The first of the four truths is a bit of a dark one but is surprisingly easy to understand. Effectively all of life's undesirable feelings make up Dukkha. Dukkha are characterised by the following 5 definitions.

1. Birth is Dukkha, ageing is Dukkha, physical illness is Dukkha and to die is Dukkha.
2. Sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair are Dukkha.
3. Association with the unloved and separation from the loved is Dukkha.
4. Unrequited desire is Dukkha.
5. The five clinging aggregates (of form, sensation, perception, mental formations and consciousness) are Dukkha.

## **Samsara**

The second of the four truths in Buddhism is Samsara. Samsara is the cyclical state of impermanence we are subjected to as living beings and as such is directly connected to one's death and rebirth. All Dukkha exists within Samsara and the nature of our current existence is assumed as a result of our actions and understandings from our previous life/lives or Karma. The theory of Samsara defines 6 states or realms of potential temporal existence, 3 of which are of good-fortune (being Heaven/Godliness, Demi-Godliness and Humanity) and 3 which are of poor-fortune (being Hell/Devilish, Ghostliness and Animalia) each with their own pros and cons. Of these states, humanity is considered the most blessed as humans are the closest to enlightenment and only humans are able to overcome the Dukkha that binds the other states to Samsara.

Contrary to popular belief Karma isn't solely determined by goodness alone but also factors in awareness of these truths and subsequent proximity to enlightenment. Which is why animals per se cannot achieve enlightenment.

## **Nirvana**

The third of the four truths is Nirvana and is the goal of Buddhism. Nirvana is defined as ultimate enlightenment being the cessation of Dukkha, the complete understanding of one's temporal state, and the subsequent breakout or release of the recurring state of Samsara.

All existence is subject to Dukkha and the ability to identify and reconcile these from within one life cycle is imperative to overcoming these conditions and achieving Nirvana.

## **Magga**

The last of the four truths is Magga and is defined as the path a Bodhisatva walks toward achieving Nirvana. Definitely the most obscure of the four truths, Magga summarises the teachings within Buddhism and direction of Samsara releasing enlightenment.

In Buddhism the nature of Samsara dictates that one will retain their Dukkha until the appropriate state within Samsara (humanity) is achieved. At which point the fabric that makes up our Karma can be unwoven and the balance of all our past lives is reconciled, Nirvana. The totality of this understanding and the effort and method to achieve Nirvana, makes up Magga.

The connection?

When an instructor starts to experience this Eclipse slowly over time the enjoyment derived from teaching and eventually studying the art itself becomes a point of pain. Despite devotion to the art, this suffering or Duhkha collects overtime and the Dojang, being any place under Heaven, is our Samsara, a recurring cycle of the same negative feelings. For many the dissatisfaction experienced isn't tangible at first but as it matures it toxifies one's experience within the art and runs the risk of pushing them away from the art.

The solution as I've seen and experienced is similar to the theories present in Buddhist belief. Just as many of the negative feelings toward are related to the state we're in, we need to rise above this with fresh insight. A Nirvana of sorts.

The remainder of this thesis will touch on my experiences both with the Eclipse and will hopefully stand to close the loop on defining these occurrences and more importantly aid other Instructors and Students who are experiencing disenchantment.

I'm not going to get into the nitty-gritty specifics as this thesis isn't a platform to unravel the past or embroil people or events. Things happen for all of us and I'm at peace with history but speaking broadly to my own feelings, several years ago, I fell victim to the instructors Eclipse. Despite my very best efforts to the contrary, my encounter with the Eclipse saw me stop doing Taekwon-Do indefinitely. It wasn't for not loving the art, as this has remained constant for me since beginning my journey in Taekwon-Do but a number of factors had, for lack of a better way to put it, polluted my involvement. At first I thought I would stop instructing for a while and just focus on my own training, and so I went on hiatus from my club, intending to become a Taekwon-Do nomad of sorts; supplementing my own studies by hopping between clubs that shared my training style or specialised in areas of interest to me, in the art. Despite being "freed" of the stagnation to which I'd unknowingly become accustomed to, I felt empty. The intrinsic connection between myself as an instructor and myself as a student, I realise now, couldn't reconcile one another and consequently my desire to train suffered and so I hung up my Dobok, for good...

Or did I?

I consider myself very fortunate as several months passed and the flame I thought was extinguished, reignited in a most natural fashion. I answered the call and started training again and before long I was instructing again.

Despite my rekindled activity something was off. My own training was still not as it had been and was starting to eclipse my ability as an instructor once again.

Like many others experiencing the same thing I focussed on myself as an instructor, looking to change the way I taught, delivering more specific content to the various audiences we teach. Yet despite my efforts I was once again faced with dysconnectivity with our student base.

So how does one avoid/resolve the Instructor's Eclipse?

Trapped in a Samsara of my own, I happened upon one solution quite by chance.

The issue wasn't my ability as a practitioner or Instructor. The issue was I was out of touch with myself as a student. The realisation of this, was in hindsight, critical to identifying this issue.

This recognition didn't occur, though, until well after I was on the path to breaking this cycle.

In 2017 I purchased a bike to try and build up some knee strength following an injury I sustained. It wasn't anything special, just an entry level mountain bike. I hadn't had one since I was 13 (which I appreciate sounds pretty pathetic) and while riding it was, as they say, "like riding a bicycle", virtually everything else about it was alien to me. When I got it, my intention was to ride around on the

weekends build up that strength I needed for recovery, maybe do some trails, nothing too heavy. Within a year, I was using it to commute, doing all the servicing on it myself and riding it pretty hard. It was heavy, the big tread on it for trail use meant it was slow on the road, so eventually I got a cheap used road bike to make the commute's a bit faster and spread the load of the cycling I was doing across both bikes.

The road bike was a steep learning curve. When you go from riding a mountain bike to a road bike the first thing you realise is the sheer size difference between the two and the forced position of the body between the varied frame geometries. A mountain bike affords you a degree of comfort and error forgiveness not tendered by the aggressive and particular nature of a road bike. I taught myself how adjust to the difference, how to clip into the bike and how to ride in various positions to achieve greater comfort for long rides and more aerodynamically for sprinting. Before long I was entering road Gran Fondo's (which crudely translates from Italian to 'Big Ride' being rides averaging 100km's or more), learning about how drafting works and riding within a peloton (being a large pack of riders in a cycling event).



*First Gran Fondo*



*2019 Counties Classic Fondo*

Seeing my improvement in cycling a friend twisted my arm and convinced me to start competing in triathlons. Equipped with none of the equipment I really needed and even less of a clue what I was doing I entered my first sprint triathlons. Despite being a complete novice, I quickly learned over the course of several events, how the transitions work, how your nutritional needs change between event lengths, how to pace and how/when to attack. Effectively going from a participant and finisher to a proper competitor.

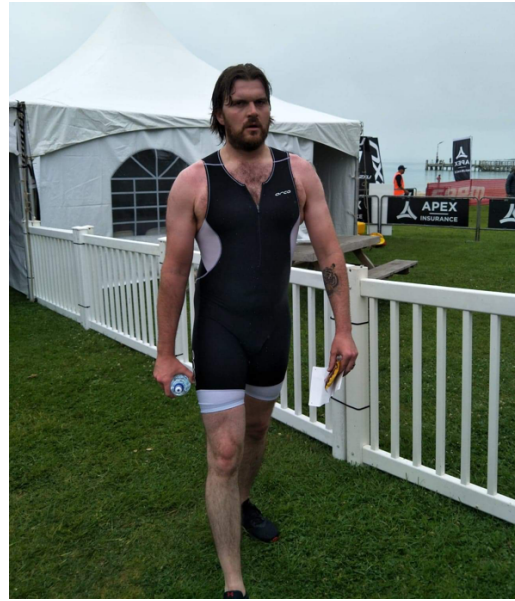


*Riding back into transition*





*Last sprint to the finish*



*The look of completing an Olympic length triathlon*



Toward the end of 2017, I tore my acromioclavicular ligament bringing the 2017/18 triathlon season to a pretty swift end for me.

Following a string of pretty disappointing physiotherapy experiences and looking for a means to improve the strength in my damaged shoulder, I started doing archery.

Archery is a very technical sport and one I would compare a lot to Taekwon-Do. At its core, you point the bow, draw and shoot at a target, but the reality of this basic idea gets quite complex quite quickly. I picked up 3 styles of archery, recurve, barebow and Korean horse bow. I was fortunate and graduated through a system defined by the International body for archery (Fédération Internationale de Tir à l'Arc). This system gradually delivers the fundamentals of archery beginning with form, and slowly delivering more complex elements like hardware preparation, targeting concepts, and excruciatingly fine bow configuration considerations.

I recall being impressed by how well documented and well delivered the lessons were and immediately thought of how our Taekwon-Do is delivered.

I started drawing parallels between each of the styles I was practicing. The highly defined, technically specific nature of recurve archery echoed our line work and patterns. In contrast the Korean horse bow, which has high a draw weight, a thumb draw over the conventional “Mediterranean” three forefinger draw and none of the bells and whistles, reminds me of self-defence or power breaking; a little bit raw and demanding the utmost control lest it become completely wild.



*The fruits of well-structured tuition with World Archery*

It took me till this year, 2020, to realise that as I was picking these activities up that my progression and experiences were slowly but surely redefining my Taekwon-Do. The value of reverting to a complete beginner, allowed me to unpackage my familiarity with the art and start unknitting my own flaws both in my Instruction of others and in my own studies. This particularly clicked for me as I observed my new-born son learning things for the very first time ever. Watching as one lesson forms an understanding that serves as the foundation for other understandings allowed me recognise that my own new proficiencies had been welded into my existing experiences with Taekwon-Do ultimately giving me a new perception.

My experiences in both self-tutelage and structured learning in completely new subjects gave me a new outlook regarding relaying concepts to others. Students I had found difficult to reach, I began to understand and subsequently became easier to teach. By the same token it was as though I was able to reach myself also, my own Nirvana, as it were.

The truth I was unable to see and I'm sure other Instructors have difficulty identifying is that our gearing to be the best we can be sometimes produces habitual behaviours that are unintentionally either disruptive or destructive rather than being of use. Identifying and breaking these cycles of stagnation, jadedness and negativity are of vital importance in order for us to grow, attain more of our potential and dispel the problem of the Instructors Eclipse while hopefully improving both student and teacher retention.

This brings me to the final parallel to be drawn here against the fourth Noble Truth. As described above Magga concerns itself with the process to achieve enlightenment. By no means am I suggesting the path I followed, immersing myself into new experiences is the only way to overcome the Instructor's Eclipse. For me, this path took me to places I didn't expect to go, has taught me the value of coming full circle and re-exploring the purity of starting from scratch. Further, I'm fortunate that this path and my experiences in the last several years have leant themselves to furthering my Taekwon-Do life, something I do hold very dear.

This approach can't work for everyone, I know that. I appreciate that starting something new, in the way I have, can eventuate with the abandonment the art of Taekwon-Do and certainly this is something we've seen before. Whether it's the draw of an alternate martial style, or sport, or even just lifestyle. Taekwon-Do can be hard and it can be an exhaustive practice and like many things in life the path of least resistance can be tempting.

Despite the risk presented by change and in learning something new to rediscover oneself, there's the potential for converse reward.

To achieve the purity of a beginner, while maintaining the proficiency of a seasoned practitioner and in the process overcoming the Instructor's Eclipse is in my humble opinion, most definitely worth the effort.



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