

Application and effectiveness of Taekwon-Do in the face of modern combat techniques and styles

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As my Taekwon-Do training is advancing and I am becoming more proficient, I have begun contemplating how Taekwon-Do will fare in a real self-defence situation, and how it would face against other martial arts.

While researching this, I found a quote by Master Hutton:

“Taekwon-Do was born and moulded by the General, and our first generation Masters used their skills often in mortal combat. It is without doubt lethal as well as spectacular martial art, yet we have an ever growing number of senior Instructors promoting other arts/defence systems as a way to defend ourselves and just teaching Taekwon-Do as a sport. More often than not I find black belts have no idea how to use our own art to defend themselves. I must stress I am in no way decrying any other system, however, I am at a loss as to why this is happening, I find myself more and more having to defend our own art to some of our most senior Instructor.”

(p.32, Taekwon-Do Talk, Issue 2, 2012)

This essay will explore Master Hutton's perspective towards the application and effectiveness of Taekwon-Do in the face of modern combat techniques and styles. I hope that exploration of this will help practitioners of Taekwon-Do form a better view of the effectiveness of Taekwon-Do in self-defence, and when answering the question “*how does Taekwon-Do compare to other martial arts for actual self-defence*” and the position they could take when explaining the reasons why practicing Taekwon-Do has practical benefits for self-defence.

With a growing number of people practicing different styles of martial arts, various combat systems and the ever increasing popularity of Mixed Martial Arts, it is inevitable to think about which style is considered to be superior. Master Hutton (2012) expressed the view that Taekwon-Do training provides effective and practical techniques to use in self-defence and this has given me an appreciation of the effectiveness and beauty of the Taekwon-Do art used in the application of actual self-defence. After reading Master Hutton's article, I was motivated to learn more about his views, and I was fortunate to have the opportunity to train with him in the course of my Taekwon-Do training.

While training with Master Hutton, I gained a new perspective towards the effectiveness of techniques we can use in a self-defence situation that we already practice in the traditional Taekwon-Do patterns. After the training seminar I had the opportunity to discuss various aspects of Taekwon-Do with Master Hutton and obtain his view on their application and effectiveness in a self-defence situation. Master Hutton's candid attitude and practical expertise towards utilising Taekwon-Do in actual self-defence have inspired me to further explore and develop my views on the practicalities of utilising Taekwon-Do and other martial arts training for self-defence. In the following paragraphs I will examine the main points Master Hutton emphasised.

When Taekwon-Do is compared with combat systems that concentrate solely on competitions and sparring there is a clear distinction that Taekwon-Do is a martial art and not a sport. Taekwon-Do is a way of life: it has as much to do with how we behave and treat other people in real life, based on the five tenets of Taekwon-Do, as it does with utilising the physical techniques for self-defence or competition. Of course there is also a sport element to Taekwon-Do, which includes sparring competitions. Master Hutton said that when sparring is conducted under certain rules it is usually called sport.

Choi (1999) says that "Taekwon-Do is a version of unarmed combat designed for the purpose of self-defence". Its techniques were developed to allow Taekwon-Do practitioners to effectively defend themselves from attack, rather than to initiate the attack. For example, the number of blocks Taekwon-Do offers is similar in number to that of the attacks. This may be a factor for some when determining if Taekwon-Do looks inferior when compared with combat systems that mainly practice attacking techniques or attacks more than they block in regular training. Thus, it is important to remember that Taekwon-Do should be evaluated as a whole when comparing it to other combat systems, and not only the sport aspect in isolation.

The level of aggression in Taekwon-Do sparring is generally conducted under light contact conditions in a sport, or sparring competition context as outlined by the competition rules of the International Taekwon-Do Federation. This may have more consequences than it might first appear. If Taekwon-Do practitioners mainly prepare themselves for sparring under light contact conditions they will usually practice delivering techniques with less power than they could otherwise deliver. This can also have an impact on their mental conditioning and focus, as practitioners can naturally fall into the habit of not performing techniques at 100 per cent power, as well as unconsciously conditioning themselves to not injure their opponent.

Thompson (2008) describes that expert martial artists can be more vulnerable in a real life self-defence situation, where protocol is used in the training environment, out of context, can override the natural instinct for self-preservation. For example in a real self-defence situation a martial artist should be able to defend themselves against an adversary. However, it has been seen that in these situations, even though the martial artist defended themselves adequately and took the attacker to the ground, their training not only stopped them from applying adequate power to incapacitate their attacker, but also caused them to instinctively extend their hand to help them up from the ground as they would with a partner in training. In those cases the attacker then took advantage of the offered hand, to utilise it to bring the martial artist down with an unexpected attack and totally reversing the situation. This shows how regular training habits affect our behaviour in a real self-defence situation.

This point of view comes under scrutiny when we compare Taekwon-Do with a style such as with Muay Thai. Muay Thai sparring rules generally award a higher score to the practitioner who is able to hit their opponent with aggressive attacks with powerful, accurate and unprotected hits to their opponent, causing the most physical exhaustion to their opponent. For instance, if an actual confrontation were to arise between a Taekwon-Do and a Muay Thai practitioner, the regular training and competitions undertaken by the Muay Thai practitioner would be considered more

advantageous because Muay Thai training involves predominantly full contact fighting.

Master Hutton shared with us the history of Taekwon-Do and how its techniques were used in mortal combat. Gillis (2008) provides a description of how Nam Tae Hi killed two dozen men in hand to hand combat on Yongmun during Korean War in 1951. There is also a story about how Korean marines used Taekwon-Do in actual combat as it is quicker and can be more effective than using rifles. As the history reveals, Taekwon-Do proved itself to be highly lethal when used in such situations when one's life is endangered.

Choi (1999) states: "Taekwon-Do is able to take lives easily, when needed, by defending and attacking 72 vital spots using 16 well-trained parts of the body". Gillis (2008) also cites an interview with Grand Master Nguyen Van Binh who comments on how an appropriate attack to an appropriate vital spot, even with only bare hands, can be lethal. A back fist strike to the temple with enough force would cause critical damage to a person, for example. Taekwon-Do comprehends many vital spots and trains the use of various attacking tools. With the knowledge and physical ability to apply this, one can kill another with ease. It is all about when, where, and how the techniques and knowledge of Taekwon-Do are used; as we know Taekwon-Do is about self control. Thus, it is important to control the force exerted on opponents during a competition or a sparring match and not abuse this knowledge.

It is inequitable to compare different combat styles that have significantly different end results as part of their training philosophy. To further illustrate the uniqueness of Taekwon-Do compared to various martial arts, Choi (1999) states that Taekwon-Do training philosophy is "the scientific use of the body in the method of self-defence". This may be distinguishable from the training philosophy and method of Muay Thai. Muay Thai sparring places emphasis on heavy contact with the use of bigger bones of the body, which can be devastating when used with force against many areas of the opponents body. Whereas, Taekwon-Do utilises other smaller attacking tools to attack the opponent in a variety of ways and towards different targets. For example, in Muay Thai, they use elbows and knees as main attacking tools while Taekwon-Do uses different parts of hands and feet such as knife hand and ball of the foot. Thus, Taekwon-Do is designed for self-defence: its principle is defending oneself from danger by exerting enough force to incapacitate the attacker and the techniques are not designed to be used in a vicious manner.

Master Hutton believes Taekwon-Do techniques can be used against other styles, including in actual self-defence scenarios which may involve ground fighting. As a novice black belt, the knowledge and experience that I have acquired is less than that of a Master or a Grand Master. However, Master Hutton's seminar taught us how pure Taekwon-Do techniques can be used in self-defence. For example, a technique we have learnt at the seminar against an over arm bear hug was an application of the first movement in Yoo-Sin. By dropping into sitting stance and extending both elbows to the sides horizontally, attacker was not able to hold onto the person.

There is also an ITF community on Facebook where I came across what is called the Radix project 2013. The goals of the project are to research the tactical treasures hidden in the Taekwon-Do patterns and to develop the understanding of the

techniques in the patterns so they have meaningful self-defence applications. Sabum Robert Boer (ITF Netherlands) and Sabum Roy Rolstad (NTN Norway) launched the project with support of their organisations. Although the content of the project is still being developed, however, this initiative is an opportunity for all of us to utilise more of the pure Taekwon-Do techniques for actual self-defence. It is encouraging that more Taekwon-Do practitioners are working towards the utilisation and of pure Taekwon-Do techniques in a real self-defence situation.

This essay has explored and expanded on Master Hutton's perspective of Taekwon-Do when compared to various other martial arts. Firstly, Taekwon-Do is a martial arts and not a sport, so it has many aspects in its system and one single aspect such as sparring should not be picked and compared individually, rather it should be evaluated as a whole. Secondly, the regular training of light contact sparring in Taekwon-Do potentially does not prepare practitioners for more aggressive fighting as seen in other combat styles. However they should not be compared as the competitions being training for are different. It is also said that techniques from different styles should not be compared when their intended purpose has different intended results. Thirdly, history proves how deadly Taekwon-Do techniques can be, but whether the techniques are executed to a lethal degree depends on the situation the practitioner finds themselves in. Finally, Taekwon-Do techniques can be applied in their pure form against other martial arts disciplines and other combat styles when one's skill and knowledge increase through training. Therefore Taekwon-Do practitioners should be proud of what their art has to offer, and be passionate about their training.

References

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