

## *Is Taekwondo effective for Self-defence?*

### *A Two Thrust Response*

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The question posed to applicants for the February 2018 5<sup>th</sup> Dan Grading – “*Is Taekwon-Do practical for street self-defence/do you know?*”. This question arises in a time when Taekwon-Do is experiencing popular success for fitness and competition. My experience as a youth being taught Taekwon-Do for defence against bullying followed by my military training in the art of Taekwon-Do and in later years studying Taekwon-Do as a parent and then Instructor leads me to the opinion and reflections offered in this essay.

General Choi Hong-Hi, the founder of Taekwon-Do created a martial art reflecting “the wisdom and spirit of ...the... Korean people along with the ethics and virtues of the Far East as well as ... his ... own philosophy of living”.<sup>1</sup> While the harmony and wellbeing created in the practice of Taekwon-Do is now often highlighted, it was created in response to cultural and personal bullying and the drama and crises of war and its aftermath.<sup>2</sup> It’s important to have an understanding that its techniques were fine-tuned as it became required training for the Korean army in 1954.<sup>3</sup> This particular focus and its influence from karate is why some people refer to Taekwon-Do as the killing art.<sup>4</sup>

History records, Korean soldiers were trained in Taekwon-Do for its degree of extreme fitness and effective self-defence. It was used as an attacking tool to kill the enemy. The South Vietnam Army seeing the effect Taekwon-Do training had on Korean soldiers adopted similar training for its own troops.<sup>5</sup> I understood first-hand in the Vietnam War, North Vietnamese soldiers would avoid Korean troops, serving in the South Vietnamese Armed Forces, because of those soldiers’ reputation for brutality and destruction. Martial arts training is now common in many countries’ military training.<sup>6</sup> Singapore for example includes

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<sup>1</sup> *The memoirs of Choi Hong-Hi, the founder of Taekwon-do, TAEKWON-DO AND I Volume One, Motherland; the land in turmoil*, ITF. pg 434.

<sup>2</sup> *A Killing Art, The Untold History of Tae Kwon Do*. Alex Gillis, ECW Press, Ontario Canada. 2016. pg 28.

*The Condensed Encyclopaedia of TAEKWON-DO*, Gen. Choi Hong-Hi ITF. pg 23.

<sup>3</sup> Gillis, pg 50.

<sup>4</sup> Gillis, pg 28.

<sup>5</sup> <https://whitedragondojang.wordpress.com/2014/12/02/military-taekwondo-stock-footage-from-vietnam-war/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.blackbeltwiki.com/military-martial-arts>

Taekwon-Do specifically for its effectiveness in attacking,<sup>7</sup>

Taught properly Taekwon-Do is very effective in the right circumstances for self-defence. It can interrupt, delay and/or successfully stop a physical attack by an assailant.

In contemporary western society the popularity of Taekwon-Do is based on the sporting competitive nature of the Art. In this approach the focus is on technique. The focus in training is on movements and patterns without the deadly follow through as originally intended. While training is rigorous this focus on the technical aspects means students are probably not conditioning themselves as their historic predecessors would have done.

Contemporary students are well trained to execute the moves with accuracy and force but intentionally use less force in their movements because the intent has changed. They still develop the movements and follow through, *but* they must contain their force to not cause harm. Their mindset is focused on sportsmanship not on permanently stopping their opponent.

The mindset, while strong, is intentionally not a mindset to destroy. The full energy and drive is not cultivated to lead to the degree of self-defence and serious impairment of one's opponent as Taekwon-Do was originally designed. In fact, safety gear is worn to protect and to prevent injury

<sup>7</sup>[https://www.mindef.gov.sg/oms/imindef/resourcelibrary/cyberpioneer/topics/articles/features/2013/jan13\\_fs.html#.WkfKN-WbyQ](https://www.mindef.gov.sg/oms/imindef/resourcelibrary/cyberpioneer/topics/articles/features/2013/jan13_fs.html#.WkfKN-WbyQ)

and often light sparing technique is employed.<sup>8</sup>

Taekwon-Do is either sporting technique or self-defence. A class which promises both a fun time and self-defence arouses my suspicion as to the truth of its promise. A student's mind needs to be prepared to know exactly when, if and how to use this martial art for self-defence. The body needs to be conditioned to a degree of resilience and toughness greater than club level. People often don't have the time or desire to train in the traditional way to produce the full impact of Taekwon-Do as self-defence. Current teaching is intentionally cautious and mindful to ensure safety and welfare of the students. Instruction is, perhaps unintentionally, tempered to meet the popular and valid desire for fitness, fun, in addition to competitiveness, technique and discipline.

Most students train two hours a week with no extra time, no hard-core conditioning or special self-defence skill training. If they were to believe that they could defend themselves based on this level of training, particularly in situations in which assailants are fuelled by drugs and alcohol, I fear they face more harm than safety.

It is my opinion, informed by experience, that for Taekwon-Do to be an effective form of self-defence at street level it would require an extra course to be taught by instructors with the sole purpose of perfecting the execution of this martial art

[https://www.mindef.gov.sg/oms/imindef/resourcelibrary/cyberpioneer/topics/articles/features/2010/jun10\\_fs3.html#.WkgAVN-WbyQ](https://www.mindef.gov.sg/oms/imindef/resourcelibrary/cyberpioneer/topics/articles/features/2010/jun10_fs3.html#.WkgAVN-WbyQ)

<sup>8</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taekwondo>

to its full and original impact. Such a class would focus on intensive physical and mental training well beyond what is required in normal training. The moves taught would be simple and direct. Technique would be less elaborate and executed with greater physical impact.

*I don't know if anyone is currently teaching Taekwon-Do for self-defence at this level.*

### **Are they?**

A lack of distinction in training means students trained or training in Taekwon-Do for self-defence may be put at risk with a false sense of confidence. The techniques they have been taught may not be supported by the continuous training required to bring a true degree of protection when faced with street level attacks.<sup>9</sup> I would recommend if Taekwon-Do is to be offered for self-defence the training is taught as a possibly-lethal form of protection. It needs to come with certain cautions and restrictions which need to be worked out by the ITKD council. I suspect this approach may not be popular with parents and perhaps general society.

I do agree with current club level training for students under the age of 14 which trains them in developing awareness of their surroundings, noticing potential conflicts, gaining confidence to avoid conflict when possible and to seek help

and draw attention to oneself when in need of help.<sup>10</sup>

After this stage Taekwon-Do for self-defence would need to intensify to a degree which effectively takes it from club level.

**O**verall, Taekwon-Do as the art of harmony and discipline through technique and sporting competitiveness lends itself to promote public health, wellbeing and self-confidence.

*I am enthusiastic to continue my active involvement in ensuring Taekwon-Do is available to a wide range of people at club level.*

*And I am keen to engage in the discussion as to whether Taekwon-Do for self-defence should be developed at the level I think it requires to be safely effective.*

I would be in favour of such development, but I am not sure if the public would be.

*Original thoughts and sourcing by Hung Nguyen, co-written with Lucy Nguyen.*

<sup>9</sup> *Encyclopaedia*. Hong-Hi. pg 16

<sup>10</sup> *International © Taekwon-Do Self-Defence Handbook Coloured Belt Syllabus*, 2016. Master

Paul Mc Phail, Mr Mark Banicevich, and Mr Phil Thompson, pg 5.

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