

Is Taekwon-Do Practical for street self-defence?

How do you know?

An essay written as part of grading requirements from 4th to 5th Dan

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Introduction

Having spent 30 years practicing Taekwon-Do with a few small breaks over the years, I am confident that Taekwon-do is practical in all self-defence situations, street or otherwise.

I know it is practical because..... well I when I was... now that I think about it I don't know I have never used it outside of the Do-Jang.

Over the years I have attended courses, camps, seminars and have practiced all manner of self-defence in classes against a range of other people, but I have no street experience.

The only experience that I can think of that came close was when I was out running my dog, and he ran in front of me and tripped me up. I performed an excellent forward roll on the pavement jumped up and continued running. Learned during Taekwon-Do classes ... yes, practical ... yes, but not really what I would call self-defence.

So how then can I answer this question? Well I will need to do a bit more research

The research

I decided to be able to answer this question I needed to get more information or more experience, after a little time thinking I came up with two plans.

Plan A: Get some experience

In order to know if its practical on the street, I could go out and find some fights to engage in or some bad people hassling others and in the interest of keeping peace in the community stop them by using Taekwon-Do. Or I could go into the rougher looking neighbourhoods and stand at an ATM machine with some cash in hand. This would surely give me the experience I need, although it might be dangerous.

To be better prepared for the street defence I thought I should look at some videos online about practical street self-defence.

After about 30 minutes of watching and being in awe of what has been labelled as reality based training I decided that getting some experience on the street was not really the best plan, although I did get a good insight into an important part of self-defence called intent, which I will discuss further later.

Plan B: Find someone with experience

After thinking on this I felt it may not be easy to get an unbiased opinion from one person willing to share their experience as I felt it would be a rather personal event, so I decided to do an anonymous online survey with the hope of gathering information from experienced people.

I sent an email out to 45 randomly selected people with a link to fill out the survey (in hindsight all were black belts so the survey is responses from Taekwon-Do experienced people). I explained why I was doing the survey and asked the recipient to think of a street situation they were involved in and answer the following questions.

- 1. How many years have you been doing Taekwon-Do till now?*
- 2. How many years had you been doing Taekwon-Do when the situation occurred?*
- 3. Describe the situation.*
- 4. With the benefit of hindsight and extra training experience you may have had since the event, do you think you would have done anything differently?*
- 5. How different do think the outcome would have been if you had no experience in Taekwon -Do?*

Survey results

How many years have you been doing Taekwon-Do till now?

This question was simply to establish how much experience the person has

I received 23 valid responses with a minimum of 7 years training and a maximum of 42 years. The Average was 24 year's experience.

How many years had you been doing Taekwon -Do when the situation occurred?

This was to find out if the person had any experience at all when they first used Taekwon-do, or if the student was an overzealous beginner.

12 valid responses were received for this question, the minimum was 1.5 years and maximum 25 years with an average of 9.8 years.

Describe the situation.

The answers to this were varied and interesting with 11 detailed replies. It showed a range of situations people had found themselves in but also showed that of the 45 people surveyed less than a third had something to mention.

As it was an anonymous survey I will only list shortened simplified versions of what was mentioned:

- Stranger asked for money and backed down when student said No and took a defensive stance (no physical action taken).
- Abusive patron at pub told to back away which he did (no physical action taken).
- Man charged with theft after stealing at service station and being chased down the street, he had a broken bottle in his hand and was disarmed with a kick (a couple of Taekwon-Do techniques used)
- A friend and I were followed by 3 people intent on causing harm. I decided to run to a more public area and my friend followed but the attackers decided not to follow (no physical action taken).
- Assault attempt in bar neutralised by defender (placed in head lock).
- Two attackers pushing guy around were asked to stop when one attempted bottle swing (neutralised by kick to groin).
- Encountered male harassing female on street, called out and distracted him and deescalated the situation while the females escaped around corner found police and made complaint and male was arrested (no physical action taken).
- Walking talking on phone, stranger jumped out and alarmed student (no action taken).
- Came across robbery in dairy with 2 thieves. Student disarmed and restrained person who had baseball bat until police arrived (some techniques used to disarm and restrain).
- Saw male harassing two females and called to distract. Males anger was deescalated and females escaped around corner to make complaint with police (no physical action taken).
- Walking late at night with friends and was heckled by male youths. Became more aware of situation (no physical action taken).

With the benefit of hindsight and extra training experience you may have had, do you think you would have done anything differently?

This question was designed to have the students think about the situation and if they felt that they could have done better, were they happy with the action taken (if any) or would extra training allow a better outcome. Again, I have simplified the 11 valid responses.

- Given the same situation now I would have just ignored the guy's abuses and left him alone.
- I was a green belt who thought he knew more than he did.
- No (2 responses).
- No - it worked.
- No, I saw a situation that I could not morally ignore.
- Stayed at home.
- No. The circumstances of how this situation started were completely innocent and accidental.
- No. The situation called for immediate action and a strong response. My training was sufficient to give the knowledge and confidence to respond.
- Don't walk and talk on phone.... walk different route rather than put myself in that position.
- Yes, I would not escalate things, calm people down.

How different do you think the outcome would have been if you had no experience in Taekwon-Do.

This question was an opportunity for the surveyed to decide if /how Taekwon-Do had been of benefit. The summarized responses are as follows:

- I think it would have resulted in a very serious accident.
- Not sure - probably wouldn't have spoken up in the first place.
- I would have just walked away from the guy if I didn't know any TKD; the same as I should have done in the first place.
- None.
- Probably be a violent person like others I know who are in gangs. Not helpful in the community
- Very different. The experience in Taekwon-Do meant I knew the position, the correct tools and the correct target area.
- A lot more scared and concerned about my safety.
- I would have lacked confidence. It wasn't physical call but ideas around tenets and moral culture. Things like helping others weaker or in need. I had the tools, so I used them.
- I would have engaged in a (probable) 3-on-1 fight, and more than likely have been in significant trouble.
- Quite different, most of what I've learnt from TKD over the years, physically I don't believe I would have used in this situation. It was the internal confidence TKD has provided me that made me confident.
- Less confidence in myself and my ability to protect myself and others.

Conclusion from results

After thinking about the results supplied in the survey I began to see some common themes and have the following theories drawing on my own knowledge as to what happens with the students.

It is not common to have been involved in a street self-defence situation. In fact it seems that very few people are. Even though we study Taekwon-Do, a fighting art, there are a lot of other areas incorporated into the teachings, it doesn't mean that we take our fighting to the streets or out in public, it is practiced in controlled environments.

These environments or Do-jang have experienced instructors whose teachings are based on a well-structured syllabus. The syllabus is well thought out practical and easy to gain experience when working with other willing students. Part of that experience or knowledge that is passed on between students, teach us that avoidance is preferable to confrontation. The avoidance is now a key part of the self-defence syllabus. This means that to be able to avoid a situation on the street students develop better awareness. I believe heightened awareness can be trained whilst at classes inside the Do-Jang and instructors are advocating the heightened awareness to be used first and foremost outside the class.

Once we have awareness over our surroundings and if we were to find ourselves in a street situation we have a decision to make. That decision is who will be the victim. Will it be the person attacking us or will it be us? If we decide that we will be the survivor, then we have the intent to survive.

As mentioned earlier (in my research above) when watching the videos online of reality based training, I realised that if someone is intent on hurting you then they probably will or at least they will have a good try. However, I believe that if you have the intent to survive you will and practicing Taekwon-Do will increase your chances as it gives you the to become intent on defending ourselves.

If we find ourselves having to defend ourselves or someone we need to help, Taekwon-Do will give us more tools than just physical fighting, it allows us to practice being in conflict situations, it allows us to practice de-escalation and be better able to stay calm and subdue anyone who attacks us and if all else fails we can physically defend ourselves.

It is worth nothing than in the responses received where physical action was taken, a small number of and the simplest techniques were used.

In summary

To give an answer to the question Is Taekwon-Do practical for street self-defence, for the junior black belt or inexperienced coloured belt if we were to look at the technical aspect as we practice in the Do-Jang then I would say no its not, or rather it wouldn't be against someone who has more experience and is more intent on harming us. In fact, for the inexperienced beginner it may be less than helpful, that is if the student believes their skills are more developed than they actually are. This is possible if the student is arrogant or Instructor uses false praise.

However, as the student develops skills and gains experience the chances of successfully using Taekwon-Do in the street are increased, students can test their own skills in class or in controlled competition. Instructors can also give good corrective feedback to hone the skills.

Add to this mix students becoming more aware of their own body and being aware of how to read the situation they find themselves in and their physical surroundings and the student skills are maximised.

If the student has a well-rounded technical skills base, awareness of the situation they find themselves in and intent to do more damage to the attacker than the attacker is, Taekwon-Do becomes a practical form of self-defence that will not only help defend yourself in a bad situation but hopefully stop you from ever getting there in the first place.