

Is Taekwon-Do Practical for street self defense. How do you know?

Essay requirement for 5th Dan grading

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Introduction

All Martial Arts at some point face the question whether they are efficient for street self defense or not. Some more than others. For instance, Aikido's effectiveness for street self defense is often questioned not to say negatively perceived¹ while some others; effectiveness such as Karate are almost de facto considered good.

TaeKwon-Do² does not avoid the same questioning. In a nutshell, and broadly speaking, it would seem that the general public perception³ of any Martial Art's effectiveness to defend oneself may be influenced by whether a Martial Art's techniques are being used in Mixed Martial Art fighting or not.

Although the general opinion is interesting as to how a Martial Art and TaeKwon-Do in particular is perceived, we as an organisation have a deeper concern, namely: does what we teach our students really prepare them to defend themselves and go home safely?

It is a difficult question to answer especially when, like me, you do not have any practical experience on the matter. I have been fortunate enough so far in my life for not having had the need to defend myself. Consequently, I turned to our ITFNZ black belts for help in asking them to answer a survey I designed. The following sections present the survey and then the results obtained.

Survey

The survey had a total of 27 questions divided into 17 sections. However, many of the questions being conditional a respondent did not have to answer all 27 questions. The survey started with

¹ A search on Youtube with the keywords "Aikido effectiveness" show a large number of videos discussing and questioning this topic.

² Here, TaeKwon-Do as a whole, not differentiating between styles.

³ Through Internet and Youtube searches.

“Have you ever had to physically defend yourself?”

If the answer was positive, it then went on by asking more details about whether the respondent already practiced TKD at the time, what was his/her level, whether they used any of our TKD techniques, and which ones, and also how these techniques felt in a real situation as compared to in the Do Jang.

A second aspect asked was whether the techniques were effective or not and in each case to explain further why they felt that way. A third aspect centred around training adequacy to deal with threatening situations,

For those who never had to physically defend themselves, the next question was whether they had come close to it and whether they felt confident enough to deal with a threatening situation.

The second main part of the survey focused on the other aspect of our teaching, the A level response of diffusing a situation as taught in our self defense syllabus handbook. The survey explored training preparedness to handle such situations and whether the respondents had read the syllabus handbook prior to the event. If they had, the next question was whether the knowledge gained from the handbook beneficial or not.

The last part of the survey asked the respondents whether they thought TKD overall prepared them well to defend themselves.

The survey was sent to 459 email addresses and I received 85 answers⁴. This is approximately 18.5% of feedback and constitutes a reasonable response rate for such a survey⁵. Although reasonable, based on the number of respondents we can surmise that most of the people who did not have to defend themselves actually did not participate in the survey believing that they would not have anything of value to contribute. This is only a conjecture but would explain why the split between respondents who have defended themselves and those who never have is not greater.

The quality of the answers received, however, has far exceeded my expectations and I am utterly grateful to those who took the time to answer the survey.

Results

The answers to the survey have brought some quite insightful information.

The answer to the first question “Have you ever had to physically defend yourself?” showed that only 41% of the respondents have had to defend themselves in their life. The first insight is quite comforting as the majority of people have not had to experience such threatening situations.

The second insight is puzzling. Of those who had to defend themselves, 74% were TKD practitioner and among them, 77% were already black belts at the time. The last part is counterintuitive. I would have expected either an evenly split answer between black belts and coloured belts or a slight bias towards coloured belts. As TKD practitioners and black

⁴ As of 26/12/2018.

⁵ A rule of thumb would say that 33% constitutes a good success rate albeit a large number of nuances to take into account.

belts we learn through our tenets to remain calm, avoid dangerous situations, and the use of violence. I would expect less experienced students or non-practitioners to either lose their temper easily or not being able to recognise real threats and, as a result, ending up in fights. So why did most of our students experienced violent situations as black belts? We can only speculate. An additional question that would need to answer is whether they were confronted to an ego attack or a criminal attack. In the latter case, criminals tend to choose victims that appear weak as opposed to people displaying confidence in themselves like black belts. In the former case, an attacker may pick on someone who believes in himself and is not afraid to stand for what he or she believes in, or is ready to intervene and protect a potential victim. In that particular case, the number expressed in the survey would make sense.

When they defended themselves, 61.5% of the respondents said they used TKD techniques and all of them declared that the techniques were effective. The techniques used are various:

- Kicks: side piercing kick, back piercing kick, pushing kick, sliding front pushing kick, front snap kick, pressing kick, knee kick
- Hand attacks: long fist, elbow, open palm strike, side fist, middle punch, upset punch
- Blocks and locks: wrist lock (and restraining), forearm low block, release and take down, forearm rising block, arm bar, locking and containment

From these, we can infer that respondents, when defending themselves, reacted instinctively as no clear pattern emerges in terms of tools used. One would say that they “let their training do the talking”. This is reflected in some of the answers, some saying that the techniques did not feel different from training and some others that it felt more intense due to adrenaline rush. Here is an interesting comment from one of the respondent:

“In training you are hitting a hard pad or an opponent expecting and ready to resist the blow. when I executed the punch and felt no resistance at all. So much so that I thought I must have missed. However, the attacker fell to the floor and his friend ran away.”

When asked what part of training helped, the respondents emphasized practicing techniques and kicks in particular, drills to increase reaction time, repetition, and a good instructor.

A few noted that sparring helped them as it allowed them to read the opponent’s body language and increased their reaction time. This is a good point but personally I would take this with a pinch of salt as although it may work with some, for the larger community it may present the risk to believe that because one is a good sparrer then he or she is ready to effectively defend oneself. The risk I see here is that ultimately we react as we train. One who heavily focus on sparring will not have necessarily the reflexes to avoid kicking above the belt (risk of losing balance), keep awareness of surroundings while fighting (in case of multiple opponents), and move in an unsafe environment (uneven and slippery ground, obstacles).

For those who said they never had to physically defend themselves, the survey asked how close they ever came to a fight on a scale of one (never) to five (extremely close). Most answers were between one and three with the majority being three (36%). Here again, this is quite comforting to see that most people enjoy a life without experiencing violent situations.

For those who came close, it is interesting to note that 31% of them were confident they could handle the situation, 7% were not trusting themselves, and 62% were somewhat confident but quite unsure. This makes perfect sense as we can never know how we will react in a situation until we are facing it. There is always a certain amount of uncertainty especially when there are many unknown variables: true potential number of opponents, weapons, personal physical condition, environment just to name a few.

The second main part of the survey focused on the A level response and using our TKD skills to diffuse a situation.

Here, 56.5% of the respondents answered positively and the vast majority thinks that their training prepared them well to handle such situations (92%). The keyword occurring the most in the answers is “confidence”. The training built confidence in themselves. Other noticeable recurring words were “avoidance”, “de-escalation”, “practicing”, and “self defense syllabus”. It is quite clear reading the comments that the teachings of our self-defense syllabus handbook are well known as a lot of the terminology used in the book was reproduced in the answers. It is not only interesting but also a very valuable insight to know that the self-defense syllabus handbook is well known and used throughout our organisation and is making a difference.

This is confirmed by the answers to the question: “If you had read it, did the knowledge you gained from the book help you?”. An overwhelming 93% responded positively.

Another interesting insight comes from the answer to the question: “When you had to use your TKD training, either A-level or B-level responses, was the self-defense Gup syllabus already available?”

A majority of 58% answered positively. This means that the situations the respondents were involved in are still relatively recent as the handbook is approximately five years old. We can optimistically believe that, based on the answers to the two questions above, the syllabus had a positive impact in helping diffuse a situation and avoid potential fights.

Last, the survey asked whether the respondents thought that TKD prepared them well in case of self defense situations. An overwhelming 91% answered positively. However, beyond this positive answer, the comments provided are more balanced. The respondents note that regular practice of techniques in TKD helps build confidence and together with the syllabus handbook, which describe theoretically how to de-escalate situations, they feel they have the necessary knowledge to be prepared for handling threatening situations.

Many of the respondents also mentioned the difficulty to train realistically or to create the right environment for realistic scenario as compared to what Mr Phil Thompson proposes at Protect self defense. Another issue lies in the breadth of our TKD syllabus that is very large and the limited available time to dedicate to self defense compared to patterns and sparring. Quite often, self defense is practiced for grading purposes only which does not give enough repetition and time to build muscle memory. A few respondent note that this is very dependent on the instructors and that self-defense teaching may vary considerably between clubs.

Here are the keywords occurring the most in the comments received:



Conclusion

A key question for ITFNZ is to know whether our teaching is adequate to provide our students with the necessary knowledge and tools to effectively defend themselves in the street.

I used a survey sent to our black belts to help address that question. A total of 85 respondents provided very insightful information. There is an overwhelming agreement that, yes, TKD prepares us well to handle threatening situations. The emphasis being the confidence TKD practice gives. A majority of the respondents have used the techniques taught in our self-defense syllabus handbook successfully. The minority that had to physically defend themselves, mostly used TKD techniques and all of them found the techniques effective.

The survey also provided some valuable information about what could and should be improve. There is a need to devote more time to self-defense practice beyond just meeting grading requirements. It is also important to find ways to train more realistically. This could be a reflection task given to our board.

There also seem to be a disconnect between TKD as practiced nowadays in clubs and what can be found in the encyclopaedia. In the encyclopaedia we can find techniques for all

distance ranges, from striking with kicks to very close using elbows and knees for instance. This comes from the fact that TKD was designed for the military as a close combat system. Unfortunately, as noted by some of the respondents, we do not have the time to focus on and teach all the various techniques that can be found in the encyclopaedia in the way General Choi taught his soldiers. We could ask the board to set a second task force to investigate how we could instill some of the original military training spirit back into our self-defense teaching so that our system gets improved further.

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