

# Leadership Development & International Taekwon-Do

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August 2021

## Introduction

This essay discusses leadership development as a function of General Choi Hong Hi's ITF Taekwon-Do training system, the ITKD syllabus in New Zealand, and the individual interpretation and leadership style of the author.

Examination is made of ITF Taekwon-Do in New Zealand as a personal development system for young and old.

It considers the future development and direction for the author's club and the author's observations of the ITKD organization in New Zealand.

## Leadership Development & International Taekwon-Do

Taekwon-Do is a structured self-development system primarily concerned with developing one's own mind, body and spirit for the primary purpose of physically being able to defend oneself and others while conducting oneself in a morally and ethically exemplary manner throughout one's life.

In contemporary times Taekwon-Do has become a popular competitive sport with various elements of the techniques being adapted or developed specifically to enable rules-based competition. Much of the modern-day physical training and administrative system development is focused on this aspect of Taekwon-Do.

The system as General Choi has designed it, is structured to literally promote the development of individual strengths and qualities of mind body and spirit in every Taekwon-Do student that all good leaders need to possess. Therefore a student of Taekwon-Do is both journeying toward reaching their individual potential as a martial artist and, more importantly, becoming a champion of a morally strong community.

The following highlights and discusses some of the key aspects of General Choi's Taekwon-Do system for self-development that, in the author's opinion, make it a powerful way to build upstanding strong-minded individuals – leaders for good in the world as General Choi envisaged.

## Guiding Principles & Moral Culture

*“It is my sincere hope that through Taekwon-Do anyone can garner enough strength to become a guardian of justice, to challenge social disunity and to cultivate the human spirit to the highest level attainable. It is in this spirit I dedicate the art of Taekwon-Do to the people of the world. The philosophy of Taekwon-Do is based on the ethical, moral and spiritual standards by which men can live together in harmony and its art patterns are inspired by the ideals and exploits of great men from Korean history. Korea's famous military and civil leaders who in nearly five thousand years of Korean history have never invaded their neighbour, yet who fought bravely and made great self-sacrifices to defend their homeland against invading enemies.” General Choi Hong Hi*

Unlike most martial arts, Taekwon-Do has been fully documented by its founder General Choi. In his 15 volume Encyclopedia of Taekwon-Do first published in 1983, Choi describes his philosophy for Taekwon-Do as a roadmap for life and a morally better world. As such General Choi is explicit with regard to his wish that Taekwon-Do, as his legacy to the world, must be a catalyst for good in the world.

The overarching philosophy behind Taekwon-Do is discussed at length by General Choi in Volume 1 of his encyclopedia and distilled into nine simple guidelines for life that he prescribes for all Taekwon-Do students:

1. Be willing to go where the going may be tough and do the things that are worth doing even though they are difficult.
2. Be gentle to the weak and tough to the strong.
3. Be content with what you have in money and position but never in skills.
4. Always finish what you begin, be it large or small.
5. Be a willing teacher to anyone regardless of religion, race or ideology.
6. Never yield to repression or threat in the pursuit of a noble cause.
7. Teach attitude and skill with action rather than words.

8. Always be yourself even though your circumstances may change.
9. Be the eternal teacher, who teaches with the body when young, with words when old, and by moral precept even after death.

In addition, General Choi prescribed five core values or, as they are termed within the Taekwon-Do community, Tenets:

- Courtesy
- Integrity
- Perseverance
- Self-Control
- Indomitable Spirit

The philosophy is explained in the lessons from great leaders throughout Korean history and each of the movement patterns developed by General Choi have meanings and characteristics that honour specific leaders that General Choi has chosen for their contribution to Korea and its people. The Tenets and their meanings appear in full at the beginning of each of the fifteen volumes of the full encyclopedia of Taekwon-Do. This underlines their importance and reminds the student that these Tenets are both the entry point and the ongoing moral guide to fully developing their potential as an individual, within their family and within their wider community and as a student of Taekwon-Do.

## System Structure

The training system is hierarchical, and rank based reflecting General Choi's military background.

The hierarchy of rank is signified using 'belts' and the traditional Eastern system of high to low numbers for junior grades (coloured belts) levels 10<sup>th</sup> Gup through to 1<sup>st</sup> Gup and then low to high for 1<sup>st</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> Dan degree rankings (Black Belts & Roman Numerals) – 9<sup>th</sup> being Grand Master and the highest rank attainable. Once again similar to military systems, Taekwon-Do also employs different uniforms and markings to denote milestone Dan levels of rank in addition to the Belt.

Rank is awarded based on:

- Testing competencies of knowledge, technical skills & spirit
- Elapsed time training
- Contribution (various categories - Club, community, the organization, the Art)

An important aspect of the Taekwon-Do system when considered as a self-development framework is the fact that General Choi has documented the competencies and criteria for awarding rank – these are clearly stated and hence transparent. This gives new and established members of the Taekwon-Do community confidence in the integrity of the framework which in turn allows everyone to participate fully in the knowledge that their efforts will be recognized equitably and that they can aspire to achieve the highest level on an equal footing.

Within ITKD NZ this has been particularly well implemented and enhanced by further documentation, technical clarification, organizational and syllabus resource material. All of which are regularly reviewed and updated for their ‘fit-for-purpose’ and suitability in the face of evolving times both in New Zealand and globally.

Within Taekwon-Do, as in most military based organisations, with rank comes certain privileges and incumbent responsibilities. This is a simple yet fundamental precept whereby performance, competency and prior service are recognized within the wider TKD community, entitling the practitioner to the rewards of rank. These are ostensibly a visible recognition of their achievements and contribution to the Taekwon-Do community through the entitlement to wear the appropriate belt and uniform of their rank. This in turn accords them ‘position’, physically in the Dojang formation, and in terms of the deference and respect that must be shown to them by their junior ranks, peers and seniors. The other side of the coin, and more importantly, is the responsibility to oneself, junior ranks, peers, and seniors to demonstrably (inside and outside the Dojang) ‘live up to’ the guiding principles and tenets of Taekwon-Do. The higher the rank attained the more implicit is the expectation - individually and among peers, seniors and within the wider Taekwon-Do community - that the rank holder demonstrates and exemplifies good leadership and moral culture.

## Formal Etiquette

The etiquette is a combination of military rigidity, with added Korean (Eastern) cultural practice of implicit filial piety and of social bowing, handshaking and formality with regard to interpersonal interactions (especially junior to senior rank/age), beginning and ending training sessions, entering or leaving any place of training – Dojang or formal gathering area, etc.

## Discussion

From my experience of Taekwon-Do, as a student and as an instructor running a club within the ITKD New Zealand organisation for the last 15 years, I believe Taekwon-Do is indeed a martial art and roadmap for personal development as envisaged by its founder General Choi.

My wholehearted support for Taekwon-Do as a broader self development system for young and old alike, is also largely a reflection of my experience of the successful organisation and community that has been developed within New Zealand.

## Taekwon-Do Leadership in Action

Taekwon-Do may seem at first to be a very rigid military oriented system with cultural practices modelled on a by-gone era of formal etiquette and Eastern cultural philosophy, which by today's standards seems quaint in a Westernised society, and positively archaic in a world dominated by fake news and social media cynicism.

Also, at first glance, for many the core activity of a martial art is essentially physical violence and therefore not an ideal environment for desirable personal development. Yet herein lies one of life's many paradox's – the more one understands and prepares for the physicality of a potentially violent confrontation, the more one is able to free oneself from fear of it and develop skills and knowledge to avoid such unwanted violence thereby reducing the likelihood of actually ever having to use physical skills to resolve a conflict.

Intense physical training is a cornerstone of Taekwon-Do - as it has been over the course of history for many other successful human endeavours and development. Physically demanding challenges are as much about training the mind as the body.

To be successful in life and to be a successful leader one must first develop a good understanding and control over oneself. Learning to understand one's own physical potential and capabilities while also developing skills that are potentially lethal demands discipline and self control on the part of the student and careful judgement and knowledge as an instructor.

The Taekwon-Do Dojang provides a defined space<sup>1</sup> with a clear set of specific rules and boundaries where, individually or as a group, students can focus on developing their physical and mental skills in a demanding but safe environment. It is this very aspect that is missing from many people's lives in these rapidly changing and more liberal politically correct times. I am frequently reminded of this by the comments made by new parents looking for an activity that provides a 'structured and disciplined' environment *for their offspring and themselves as a family experience together.*

In many ways our quaint 'offline' Dojang environment, free from the increasing pull of the ever-present smartphone/watch/clothing and the myriad of other modern lifestyle entrapments, is a sanctuary for learning and self-development that is rapidly becoming extinct. Our decluttered legacy environment with 'old-school' philosophy and practices is now our point of difference. Recent growth in class numbers would suggest there is a growing demand for our product especially amongst parents seeking developmental opportunities for their young families in a disciplined safe environment.

The core strength of Taekwon-Do as a personal development and training system for life is its values based and structured system that has, at its core philosophy, the

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<sup>1</sup> Anywhere and everywhere can be a Dojang for the purpose of learning.

development of morally strong individuals focused on community and the building of a peaceful world.

The Taekwon-Do training system provides a positive, structured environment with community based values as the fertile soil for developing individuals who are strong in mind, body and spirit. The clearly defined rules for conduct and engagement are paramount in setting up an environment which strips away social ambiguities and allows the student to focus on the skill of learning.

However, without doubt, a crucial ingredient in the Taekwon-Do recipe for individual development is quality instruction.

***“It is of particular importance that the two aspects of Taekwon-Do, the spirit and the technique, must be taught together. Therefore, a qualified instructor must combine the qualities of a scholar and a soldier if he is to produce pupils of noble character and outstanding skills.” General Choi Hong Hi***

General Choi heavily emphasises the importance of the relationship that should exist between instructor and student in so far as each owes a debt of responsibility to the other which extends well beyond learning of physical skills and cannot be expressed in monetary value.

General Choi’s guidelines for students of Taekwon-Do (ref 5,7 & 9 above) explicitly exalt students to both recognise the characteristics of a good teacher/instructor and also to aspire to excellence as teachers/instructors themselves. This is a very powerful concept whereby as a student you are striving to be the best you can be and in doing so you are also a role model and exemplar for your peers and juniors. It is important to note that it is not enough to be physically proficient at Taekwon-Do techniques, but it is the way or the “Do” in how you pursue your journey, acquiring your knowledge and skills from others and in turn then imparting your knowledge through actions along your journey, that builds the morally strong individual and leader.



## My Leadership Approach

My philosophy simplified and ‘Mantra’ if you will, both as a student and as an instructor is:

“Monkey See Monkey Do”

By design, the structure of a Taekwon-Do Dojang **implicitly** encourages students to make use of this principle. Observing and emulating the language, movements, actions and behaviour of your instructor and seniors in the Dojang is a fundamental and primal learning mechanism. The simple construct of ‘uniforms’ and ‘belts’ is another very visible cue and constant reinforcement of achievement and responsibility.

As an instructor I **explicitly** counsel my students very early on, and remind them on an ongoing basis, that as they progress, they themselves become role models for their juniors primarily through their actions. At the same time, I am acutely aware that as their instructor I am being looked upon as the ‘monkey’ to be!

This simple symbiotic concept of student-instructor is a key element of developing the good leadership mentality and qualities for young and old as General Choi envisaged for his Taekwon-Do legacy.

As an instructor it is very interesting to observe my class is like a mirror. This can be good and bad, as we all know sometimes you may not always like what you see in a mirror! But as personal feedback it is powerful seeing my students performing movements/behaviours well and I enjoy the sense of satisfaction that brings. In addition, and more powerfully for me, seeing them perform movements or behave in a way I have probably demonstrated to them which is, shall we say euphemistically, less than perfect? As a student this is all the motivation I need to better myself as an instructor. The reminder is to always assess my actions and make conscious decisions as to whether I meet my own ‘bar’ for execution/behaviour.

I also let my students know that, like them, I am also still a student of Taekwon-Do and life, that I am still learning and have human challenges as well. This is not so much to let myself 'off-the-hook' so to speak but an important life concept whereby as students<sup>2</sup> we need to continually process and make judgements about the quality of the information we receive before we act on it as the 'right' way or as 'fact'. A questioning student is engaged and growing!

When it comes to the 'Do' or 'Way' and imparting the thinking and behaviours to be modelled, Monkey See Monkey Do is still very much in play and I am conscious to ensure my actions, verbal and physical, are those that provide a positive model for the behaviours I want to see reflected by my students. As and when specific opportunities arise in the course of classes, I may choose to specifically explain certain concepts, but largely and for the most part, I follow General Choi's words—*"let your actions speak louder..."*. My simplistic philosophy is to be committed, passionate, and empathic with myself and others - whether in a Taekwon-Do setting or life in general. I attempt to instill a similar philosophy in my students primarily through my actions.

## Club Strategy

I have deliberately divided our classes into Junior and Senior, using belt level and not age. Green and above are the Senior class with the one proviso that generally twelve years and under remain in the junior class. For many years I did not accept students younger than seven years on the basis that my class 'plans' (philosophy) and personal delivery style is pitched for 7 years and up. I expect the younger ones to step-up as far as learning to take personal responsibility and the older students to channel their younger selves when it comes to some of the class exercises.

I believe this methodology has worked well over the years and I have always encouraged parents to participate rather than be 'sideliners'. I further incentivise this by capping our club fees at such a low rate for two or more from the same

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<sup>2</sup> Students of Life and Taekwon-Do

family that there is minimal financial barrier to Mum, Dad and all the kids participating together.

This year we have had an influx of new families with at least one parent training and the age ranges of the siblings varying from five years upwards. I have allowed the younger siblings in the new families (5 - 7 yrs) to join our Junior classes because, with additional senior Gups and now two new adult 1<sup>st</sup> Dan's to assist, there is scope to cater for more divergent age appropriate activities.

I do not run the club as a commercial enterprise and thus far the fee structure (fees have not changed since I set them in 2007) has been sustainable as a non-profit organisation.

Over the years the club has had several teenage students achieve their 1<sup>st</sup> Dan's having begun their Taekwon-Do journey as primary school age juniors. However, like in many clubs, they have then 'moved on' to the myriad of other activities or life challenges. In our club we only have one such student currently still training. Fortunately this student is motivated to help their younger sibling (currently 1<sup>st</sup> Gup) to also achieve 1<sup>st</sup> Dan, and also enjoys the challenge and satisfaction of assisting our other students in class as well. Suffice to say as an instructor I am working hard to fan the fire of this student's enthusiasm for the aspects of Taekwon-Do that they enjoy most and encourage a lifelong association. The "Leadership Team Manual" is a valuable resource in this regard.<sup>3</sup>

In the case of those that leave or have left at senior gup levels or 1<sup>st</sup> Dan, despite maintaining contact with parents of these students, and despite the parents wanting their young adults to maintain their training and association with the club and/or ITKD, as yet we have not had these students return. I remain ever hopeful and take some satisfaction in knowing some have achieved their 1<sup>st</sup> Dan and that the "Do" of Taekwon-Do that they have experienced will stand them in good stead in life and they will become productive community members and future leaders at least in part through their exposure to my efforts and Taekwon-Do.

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<sup>3</sup> Compiled by Mr Kevin Reinelt, Canada, used with permission. Edited by Mr Mark Banicevich and Master Paul McPhail. © Paul M Limited

Retaining our teenagers into early adulthood and beyond is an ongoing challenge that at this point, as an instructor I am still wrestling with and, based on our recent national membership demographic data, it would seem I am not alone.

## The Way Ahead

### My Club

Earlier this year two of my female students, both Mum's, achieved their 1<sup>st</sup> Dan together after some years with the club - both having originally joined with their kids as a family. A milestone achievement for them, the club and a very satisfying validation of the "Family 1<sup>st</sup>" strategy I've employed as an instructor. They are the club's first adult parent Dan students in my tenure as instructor.

It gives me great satisfaction to see these two students now passionately looking to continue building on their leadership skills and passing on their knowledge within our club and ITKD. From a club perspective their passion and energy, re-energizes me as an instructor, and opens up opportunities for us to expand and improve the club training offering(s).

In a project being led by my two new female 1<sup>st</sup> Dan's, we have also recently launched a "30 minute Induction Class" as a trial. This runs once a week before junior class to give our under 10 year olds and any new students a fun focused introduction to the basics. The benefits as I see them are several-fold - my seniors have more scope to develop their instruction and leadership skills and the younger juniors get some more focused attention.

Also, in terms of our Family-1st strategy, our existing parents appreciate that they are also able to attend this session which is an enabler from a family logistics perspective. Initial observation and feedback from these club members is very positive so we will incorporate the class into our permanent schedule and build on it.

Ongoing we see this class as a valuable way to bring new students onboard as well as nurturing the mini-kids age cohort. As an integrated package with the existing

family based junior class, hopefully we will continue to grow our adult membership through parent retention.

A current snapshot of our club gender binary demographic currently is 50:50 (Male:Female) and we have more females over twelve years old - 31% female versus 23% male. Further, the challenging 13 – 18yrs demographic is 28% of our total membership with slightly more females (15%) than males (13%) in this bracket. This is the highest percentage of teenage female students the club has ever had and it will be interesting to see if this trend continues and whether we can retain this current cohort into their early adulthood and beyond. I am certain that the positive role modelling by our female 1<sup>st</sup> Dan's has been, and will continue to be, a big factor as far as inspiring existing and new (especially female) students.

From a club perspective we are entering a new phase with our senior students now taking on more leadership and growth initiatives within the club and our 1<sup>st</sup> Dans spreading their new-found wings in terms of their individual growth journeys. As such I have adopted a 'Leadership Team' consultative approach to class instruction and student development planning amongst my Dan students. As well as sharing some of my administrative and instructional load, this is building their ownership and motivation as stakeholders in the direction and success of the club.

## Our New Zealand ITKD Community

I believe we have a high quality organization that I'm proud to be a part of and I also believe New Zealand's ITKD organization is held in high regard by our International peers, for the quality of our martial artists and its leadership team in the promotion of Taekwon-Do according to General Choi's vision.

There is no doubt that the qualities of our leadership in New Zealand are a reflection of the leadership team's dedication to following the "Do" of General Choi's Taekwon-Do. That said it takes special individuals working as a team, as we have, to step-up to the plate with energy and passion to successfully lead ITKD in New Zealand. This is the Monkey See Monkey Do operating at the highest level and the example for all New Zealand students of Taekwon-Do.

## Final Comment

General Choi's ITF Taekwon-Do is a comprehensive self-development system with strong guiding principles that promote a culture of continuous learning. Students (as Taekwon-Do practitioners we are all students of the art irrespective of age or rank) who persevere, develop not only their individual martial art skills but also, and more importantly, self-realisation and strength of mind to lead a healthy lifestyle and to be upstanding community members inside and outside the Dojang.

As I interpret General Choi's philosophy, leadership in the broader sense of the term is about not being a weak follower, but having the strength of mind and personal courage to stand up for your beliefs in morality and justice to promote peace in the world. In so doing, a leader inspires and influences others, including those in positions of power, to do the same.