

## **The structured curriculum of ITF Taekwon-Do**

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ITF Taekwon-Do comprises a systematic program in martial arts that trains the body and mind to use hands and feet for the purpose of self-protection. The basic ideals of taekwon-do (Encyclopedia, Vol 1, p 40) are as follows:

1. By developing an upright mind and a strong body, we will acquire the self-confidence to stand on the side of justice at all times,
2. We shall unite with all men in a common brotherhood, without regard to religion, race, national or ideological boundaries.
3. We shall dedicate ourselves to building a peaceful human society in which justice, morality, trust and humanism prevail.

These ideals are similar across most martial arts, in which the spiritual / mental training of the art is what elevates skill at fighting above street-fighting and thuggery. Martial artists in any discipline learn a range of devastating fighting techniques designed to seriously incapacitate their opponents, but at the same time learn to control their use of these techniques through mental discipline and building “good character”.

Although mental discipline is an implicit component of all martial arts, taekwon-do is unique in having a 15-volume Encyclopaedia of Taekwon-Do compiled by its founder, General Choi Hong-Hi to provide an incredibly detailed description of the entire physical and mental components of the martial arts program. The Encyclopaedia also comes in a widely available Condensed Version, which contains most of the text from the 15 volumes, but does not have as many illustrations for each pattern. When first reading the encyclopaedia, the most obvious value is in the description of every movement of all 24 patterns, and the depiction of each fundamental movement and along with its application. Not only does it illustrate so many techniques, but it also shows common misconceptions or errors in performing movements and provides a rationale for doing things one way versus another. So in addition to being an essential reference source for serious students, it is a thorough manual for how to instruct. There are instructions on running classes, on developing training programs for a range of circumstances and for running tournaments. There are also instructions on how to fold a dobok, how to tie your belt, how to equip a dojang, or how to build your own training equipment (eg punching bags, forging posts etc). Interspersed with these practical details are sections on theory and moral culture and the instructor / student relationship.

When I first started reading the Encyclopaedia, I focused on techniques and patterns specific to taekwon-do. The rather stilted writing style and use of language encouraged me to skim the rest of the content rather than read it analytically, mostly because I came to it with a mind-set that I would really like the philosophy and theory (much as I like the Jedi philosophy from Star Wars or moral culture from Babylon 5 or Star Trek or Lord of the Rings), but that it would be out of touch with the realities of western life and would clash at some point with my understanding of the world through science.

However, as I examine the content more closely both through listening to my Instructor and reading the encyclopaedia myself, I am in awe of the depth and the many layers within this martial art, and the fact that General Choi has formally articulated each component so thoroughly. Many other martial arts have an implicit depth expressed through stories associated with stances or poses or patterns, but I do not know of martial arts where these are systematically recorded as a specific foundation for that art rather than as existing legends loosely associated with or alleged to have inspired the art.

The two features of taekwon-do for which I have developed a deep appreciation through the encyclopaedia are:

- 1) the structured curriculum for learning physical aspects of taekwon-do; and
- 2) the moral culture on which the martial art is based;

and, in particular, the tight relationship between the two.

The fact that taekwon-do was developed in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by a man who was educated in Korea, Japan and America means that the martial art incorporates ideas compatible with, and able to be communicated to, people of a wide range of cultures. In the remainder of this thesis, I will briefly outline the curriculum of taekwon-do, the moral culture it embraces, and why it appeals to me so much.

The curriculum of taekwon-do is based around military training (which General Choi studied in the United States, before founding a school for officers for the Korean Army). It comprises:

1. fundamental movements (individual soldiers basic training)
2. dallyon (maintenance of equipment)
3. patterns (platoon tactics)
4. sparring (field exercises in simulated combat conditions)
5. self defence (actual combat)

each of which I will discuss briefly below.

### **Fundamental Movements (basic words or vocabulary of taekwon-do):**

As our Instructor has constantly impressed upon us, there are over 1000 hand techniques and as many foot techniques comprising the fundamental movements in taekwon-do, allowing an infinite array of combinations of these basic building blocks for any situation. In learning fundamental movements, we learn balance, coordination, motor patterns, and how to string together motor patterns into sequences.

### **Dallyon (spelling / diction / grammatical exercises of taekwon-do):**

Dallyon (or “maintenance of equipment”) refers to developing and maintaining appropriate strength and flexibility in the body and mind.

The exact methods of building physical strength and flexibility of the body for taekwon-do match currently emerging scientific models of motor learning and skill acquisition by emphasising fitness for a purpose (specific fitness) rather than general fitness. The concept of specific fitness incorporates correct technique as a critical aspect of performance. Fitness for taekwon-do requires balance, breath control, understanding the trade-off between speed and mass, and strength throughout the range of flexibility. Strength and flexibility in taekwon-do are to provide precise control over an entire movement rather than to develop extreme flexibility for its own sake.

The maintenance of strength and flexibility of mind is also critical to taekwon-do. It is not just a passing comment in the encyclopaedia in the form of something you do in your head for a minute or so at the beginning and end of a lesson. The encyclopaedia begins with history, philosophy and moral culture and then throughout the encyclopaedia, there are references on how to act as an individual, how to interact with other people and how each aspect of taekwon-do fits with the moral culture and tenets. Although some aspects of protocol might seem a bit anachronistic or incongruous with modern Australian culture and the role of women in taekwon-do does not reflect our current social framework, if you read the content rather than the slightly stilted formal language, the moral culture and mental discipline of taekwon-do as outlined in the encyclopaedia can be embraced by a westerner almost entirely as it is. It is a soft, respectful, ethical way of living based on freedom, justice and peace among people of the world. Embracing moral culture in all aspects of our personal and professional lives is a crucial part of “dallyon” - the maintenance of our mental and spiritual “equipment”.

### **Patterns (poems of taekwon-do):**

There are 24 patterns in taekwon-do comprising various fixed, logical sequences of fundamental movements. In each pattern, the student is fighting a number of imaginary opponents under various assumptions, using a range of attacking and defensive tools in all directions. Patterns allow students to put together sequences of movements, to develop sparring techniques, to master body shifting and rhythmic movement, to use breath control and build muscle strength, and to develop precision and accuracy in execution of techniques. Moreover, each of the 24 patterns relates symbolically to historic figures or occasions in Korean history, and all patterns should be performed in a manner reflecting the pattern's meaning.

Although most students of taekwon-do learn the brief story relating to each pattern as printed in the encyclopaedia, a more detailed study of the what is portrayed in the patterns would give students a very full picture of the history and culture of the Korean people. The aesthetic of each pattern is a choreographed visual / kinaesthetic expression of the physical and spiritual dimensions of taekwon-do.

### **Sparring (structured conversations and debates in taekwon-do):**

Free sparring (or perhaps power breaking) is probably the major initial attraction of taekwon-do, especially for young boys. Many students of taekwon-do pay lip service to the rest of the art form in order to learn the fighting skills of the martial art. Taekwon-do introduces sparring through step sparring (3-step, 2-step, 1-step) before moving to prearranged sparring, model sparring and free sparring. Most students find step sparring a bit tedious and something that has to be learned for gradings without realising the degree of thought behind the structure of this part of the curriculum.

In one-way 3-step sparring, students learn sequences of attacking movements, matching sequences of defensive movements, followed by a counter-attack. These are then put together in two-way 3-step sparring, where partners accurately measure their distance from each other at the start, perform their practiced sequences stepping in a particular way that ensures maintenance of the measured distance, and continue over time so that correct distance will only be maintained by accurate stances and coordination of movement between partners.

In 2-step sparring, distance is no longer explicitly measured, but is judged "by eye" and coordination by the partners relies on their own adjustments of position and stance. In 1-step sparring, the mental agility of the students is tested. There is much less of a memory load in 1-step sparring because there are no specific sequences to be remembered, and there is not too much coordination between partners required. What is required is a quick response and counter-attack from the defender and it has to be realistic (ie speedy, spontaneous and powerful).

My own insight into step sparring is that studious people who are not particularly physically skilled can be very good at 3 step and 2 step sparring because there is a known structure to be learned. However it is then a big step to move to 1 step sparring, which requires creativity and spontaneity of movement. In contrast, good fighters who are not studious perform well at 1 step, but are a bit more sloppy at 3 step and 2 step because they require more discipline. A good martial artist needs both discipline and creativity along with a contextual understanding of spatial coordinates and psychology.

The building of confidence and ability in free sparring through attention to detail in step sparring cannot be over-emphasised, as it is the correct technical performance in step sparring that forms the technical foundation for understanding distance in sparring. The combination of movements in patterns and step sparring give the vocabulary of techniques to be used in free sparring, but step sparring is critical for learning correct distance and for coordinating movements with an opponent.

### **Self defence (free flowing language of taekwon-do):**

It was only after reading the encyclopaedia and understanding the thought processes and philosophy behind the taekwon-do curriculum that I began to appreciate that self-defence classes cannot really be divorced from the martial art itself – ie that self-defence is the pinnacle of taekwon-do in that it involves producing the correct defence and counter-attack to disable an opponent in an unprovoked attack that occurs without warning. The whole structured curriculum of taekwon-do aims to teach a

student how to defend themselves, self defence is at the top of the learning pyramid, and there are no short-cuts in acquiring this level of expertise.

People attending self-defence classes that claim to distil only the “self-defence” component of taekwon-do without all the fighting and philosophy are deluding themselves. It would be like teaching prayer without having to understand any details of god(s) or religion; or teaching how to fix cars without needing to know any details of how an engine works; or thinking that working at McDonalds will teach you how to cook. Clearly if it was possible to teach self-defence in a module of six 30-minute classes with a certificate of attendance at the end, students of taekwon-do who train day after day, year after year, must be very slow learners! Although it is undoubtedly true that with just a few basic techniques of taekwon-do, a good student may be able to escape from an otherwise life-threatening situation, there is no way that such training will equip the student with the necessary skills to consider themselves proficient in self-defence. Indeed it is possible that such training is counter-productive in producing a false sense of security rather than an appropriate sense of vulnerability.

In summary, as I approach my blackbelt grading having completed the gup curriculum in taekwon-do, I am continually surprised at the amount I have learned through taekwon-do, and I am very excited by the fact that there is still so much to learn. In particular, I have been surprised at the degree to which taekwon-do has become part of my personal and professional life and how much it has enriched me mentally as well as physically.

I finish my thesis with a moderately random selection of quotes that encapsulate the moral culture underlying the mental training incorporated within taekwon-do. They provide an explicit articulation of moral and ethical values that western education systems have shied away from in recent times by devaluing respect and courtesy, mistaking discipline for tyranny and giving way to materialistic values over ethical behaviour. These quotes reflect moral values that resonate with my own view of the world and gave me reason to reflect on value systems, ethics and the essence of humanity. I am privileged to have had the opportunity to explore many of my introspections with my Instructor who takes seriously the role of moral culture and mental training within taekwon-do and who thinks deeply about how to convey all aspects of taekwon-do to all his students.

### **Moral Culture:**

**Humanity:** *“Humanity lies in the idea of sharing fruits of nature with all people”*  
Tae Kong Mang (12<sup>th</sup> Century)

**Righteousness:**

*“the ability to feel ashamed of unjust acts and to do one’s duty to others ...”*

*“to live and die for righteousness is much more important than life and death themselves”*  
Mencius

**Propriety and courtesy:**

*“Frankness without courtesy can be rather ruthless;*

*Respectfulness without courtesy can make the recipient rather uncomfortable;*

*Courageousness without courtesy can be rather violent;*

*Prudence without courtesy can be rather cowardly.”*

Confucious

As an aside, I found these were words to be particularly enlightening at a personal level because, like many Australians, I have taken pride in informality and as a consequence have been fairly dismissive of “politeness and protocol” as empty and shallow – these words gave me cause to rethink ...

**Wisdom:**

*“the ability to judge right from wrong not especially in matters concerning the rights and wrongs of others but in matters concerning oneself”.*

*“A man who can control himself is stronger than a man who can control others and man who knows himself is truly wise”*

Lao Tzu

**Trust:**

*“The ability to keep one’s word and promises not only to friends but to everyone in general”.*

**Generosity:**

*“There is no better way to self-satisfaction and human growth than the constant development of a generous nature”.*

**Softness:**

*“Be soft: because light is formless and soft, it can illuminate and give warmth even to hidden corners”*

**Defence:**

*“It is neither righteous to avoid fighting when the enemy attacks, nor humanitarian to cry over dead bodies after neglecting one’s defence.”*

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