

**Tae Kwon Do: Art or Sport?  
Tradition vs Competition**

by

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In modern times, with the advent of mass communication and the increasing accessibility of information, a great number of people have heard of Tae kwon Do and many people claim to practice it. This is partly because of the inclusion of Tae Kwon Do as a sport in the 2000 Summer Olympic Games. This has emphasized the fact that Tae Kwon Do has dual aspects. There were those who regarded it solely as an art form and a way of life. Others regard it as a competitive sport. One of the concerns of this paper will be to consider the relative merits of these points of view and to address the position of the Studio of Korean Karate on this issue.

This split aspect also exists in another of the martial arts, judo. According to Takagaki & Sharp, judo is both an art and a sport, both a defense and an offense<sup>1</sup> and serves as an illustration of the potential pitfalls facing Tae Kwon Do with the advent of its rising popularity.

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<sup>1</sup> Takagaki & Sharp, Techniques of Judo, p. 1.

The word judo mean, “the gentle way.” In 1882, Jigoro Kano founded the Kodokon Judo Institute in Tokyo, and thus established Kodokon Judo as “a sanitized version of the more aggressive Japanese martial art” jujitsu. This was done, as Cook observes in Taekwondo: Ancient Wisdom for the Modern Warrior<sup>2</sup> observes, because of the perceived decline in popularity of jujitsu. It was felt that removing the more dangerous techniques that were thought to be out of step with the times would enhance its popularity. “In creating Kodokon Judo, Jigoro Kano’s original goal called for the gathering, filtering, and simplifying of the various combative styles of his day. . . .”<sup>3</sup> However, this “gentling” of jujitsu was the first step in the evolutionary decline of jujitsu/judo as a martial art.

As the case in point, judo. . . relies on the yielding, blending, and redirection of an opponent’s negative ki, or aggressive energy to be effective. Being taught to win at any cost, however, flies in the face of this passive form of defense and other basic precepts as well. For example, it is now commonplace for the judo player to avoid being thrown by approaching the opponent in a crouched position rather than in the upright fighting stance found in the 1950s. In addition, the judo gi or jacket is often left open and untied with the belt worn low on the waist. This results not only in a sloppy appearance but has a negative effect on technique, translating into a defensive rather than an offensive spirit.<sup>4</sup>

According to Cook, it was the addition of Judo to the Olympics in 1964 that contributed to the decline of judo and ultimately destroyed judo as an art. This happened because people started to focus only on the competitive aspect of the style and also changed all the techniques to make them unable to harm the opponent during competition.

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<sup>2</sup>Doug Cook, Taekwondo: Ancient Wisdom for the Modern Warrior.

<sup>3</sup> Cook, p. 151.

<sup>4</sup> Cook, p. 151.

When the martial artist concentrates solely on competition, he/she misses one of the most important components of the martial arts, which are its control and mental discipline. Once these factors are removed, all that is left is a competitive sport. Gone is the sense of honor and respect that comes from its existence as a traditional warrior discipline. Few of the people that claim to practice Tae Kwon Do understand this truth behind it.

The martial arts are *not* a sport.

They are a means of self defense, an art, and above all, a mental discipline.

The martial arts are a lifelong commitment. Too often the student regards the black belt as the goal instead of as the beginning of that lifetime commitment. As a consequence, some schools have turned into belt factories, where they guarantee a black belt after a fixed amount of money and a fixed time period. This practice seems to go hand-in-hand with the competitive attitude of tournaments and the sport attitude, where it is observed that many of these “belt factories” actually require tournament participation in order to obtain a black belt.

This policy is, of course, completely opposite to the attitude of the warrior art.

There are certain basic attitudes and practices lacking in these belt factories that are invariably found in a dojo which teaches and practices the traditional martial arts. In the subsequent portions of the paper, we will consider some of the traditional components of the martial arts with the intention of illustrating how the competitive view fails to achieve the fulfillment of the well trained and disciplined martial artist.

Traditional martial arts teach respect. Respect for yourself, your teachers, your fellow students, and the Studio. This is something that is lost in competition because of the focus on becoming better than everyone else. It is much harder for the practitioner to

learn from someone with experience when he/she is trying only to be better than them. But if the practitioner respects the other person's experience then he can truly listen and learn from them. There is an old saying that with both eyes on the goal, none are left to see the path. At a karate studio one sees this respect in the rules the students follow. A perfect example of this are the rules that are followed at the Studio of Korean Karate. The students must bow to the flags when entering and leaving the floor. This shows respect for the flags, the country you are in, and the country the martial art style comes from. In addition, at the beginning of class the students bow to the flags and the teachers, and the teachers bow to the flags and the students. This shows that the respect goes both ways.

There are more commonplace rules that help bring about respect, too. For example, there is no eating in uniform because to do so is disrespectful to the gi and can result in stains. The students' appearance in class is representative of the school and so the gi must be neat, clean, and unwrinkled. Shoes are not allowed on the studio floor. This of course is out of respect for the studio, but also serves to keep the floors clean for the students. It is considered disrespectful to mix the uniform with street clothes, so one must be either in full uniform or street clothes, no mixing. All of these small things add up to cultivate respect.

There are other differences between the martial art and the martial sport. A well trained martial artist does not think of what he/she will do when attacked: There is no time for this. Instead, the discipline of the martial art trains the practitioner to the point of automatic response, so that when the need arises, the body automatically does what it must to defend itself as soon as it is threatened. This sounds as though it would not be inconsistent

with competitive sparring, but rather than the concept of “quick reaction,” this discipline must be more in the way of an instant, automatic reflex. The body must react before the mind can complete assimilating information from what is seen, heard or felt. To achieve this, studios such as the Studio of Korean Karate have certain training regimens designed to develop muscle-memory reaction. For example, during all training sessions, students perform combinations in repetition up and down the length of the studio to the point that the combinations become automatic. In addition, training is frequently carried out to the point of exhaustion. It has been found that this “exhaustion technique” trains the muscles to respond without conscious thought.

In ancient times this ability to respond and react automatically was called mushin. Mushin means “mind, no mind,” which refers to the instant change between thought and reaction without thought. Forrest E. Morgan states in Living the Martial Way:

If there is a single trait most characteristic of classical masters it’s the ability to enter mushin, or “mind-no-mind.” This mental state is the principle source of the traditional warrior’s quick reactions, extrasensory perception, and steely calm. In fact, mushin is probably the biggest discriminating factor between modern martial artists and true warriors of the past and present.<sup>5</sup>

“Thinking interferes with fighting.”<sup>6</sup> Getting to the point of being able to dispense with thinking takes extended training. Morgan also states, “Crazy as it seems, thinking gets in the way. Of course, we all have to think to learn. Whether it be a new stance, an advanced kick, or a new kata, we all have to think it through to internalize the correct form and function of the movement as we practice it the hundreds of times it takes to learn it. But

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<sup>5</sup> Forrest E. Morgan, Living the Martial Way, p. 124.

<sup>6</sup> Morgan, p. 124.

there comes a point when conscious thinking interferes with our ability to do the technique and slows down our reaction time.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Morgan, p. 124

There are two types of meditation, internal and external. Most people are only familiar with internal meditation, where the body is completely still and the mind is freed from the constraints of the body. According to L. John Mason in Guide to Stress Reduction, “Skilled meditators develop a heightened awareness of their own autonomic functions and a heightened capacity for self-regulation.”<sup>8</sup> At the Studio of Korean Karate we do this type of meditation at the beginning of every class to relax and calm the mind. This method of meditation clears the mind and allows for a more intense and focused concentration. It also allows a different method of perfecting the kata through visualization. A relaxed and calm mind is needed to control a strong body.

External meditation is most commonly practiced through kata. This is the opposite of internal meditation in that the body moves and the mind is still. Performing the kata repetitively, literally hundreds of times at each belt level, causes the meditative state to occur within the movement of the body. This is evidenced by more advanced belts when the practitioner has to perform the kata rapidly in order to remember otherwise forgotten moves. The moves must be “remembered” by the practitioner’s muscles. If the practitioner thinks about what comes next, he/she won’t be able to remember what to do, but if they don’t think, the body will remember it.

The Korean term for kata or forms is poom-se. Cook quotes Grand Master Richard Chun, “Without forms there is no Taekwondo.”<sup>9</sup> Cook then goes on to say:

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<sup>8</sup> L. John Mason, Ph.D., Guide to Stress Reduction, p. 70.

<sup>9</sup> Cook, p. 57.

Consequently, it is widely accepted that adherence to these forms differentiate traditional martial art from martial sport. An observation by a noted instructor confirms this theory when he states that anyone can kick and punch, but it is the poom-se that earns the belt. Mastering a given poom-se demands the student repeat the successive motions hundreds of times. It is through diligent practice and repetition that the inherent techniques become branded upon the student's subconscious memory resulting in an instinctive response should a situation requiring defensive measures arise.<sup>10</sup>

Sparring is a common aspect of both martial art and martial sport. In martial sport, sparring is an end in itself, the primary object of the competition. However, in martial art, it is a training technique, which allows one to get a feel for the mechanics and the rhythm of the human body. One of the other benefits of practicing martial art sparring on a regular basis is the ability to overcome fear or to allow the practitioner to keep fear from causing him/her to freeze, or be unable or slow to react. However, in tournament sparring, sparring is competitive and thus is done solely for points, which results in the match ending almost as soon as it begins. Often, punches and kicks are scored which would be ineffective in actual use. The techniques that are fast enough, accurate enough and controlled enough frequently are not scored and sometimes are not even seen. In schools that spar for points, there is little time for learning countering, since the matches do not last long enough.

Another failing of people who only emphasize competition is that they spend tend to spend their time trying to compete with the instructor instead of learning from him. The teaching doesn't register with the student and even repeated corrections fall on deaf ears. Martial art isn't about competing with other people, it's about competing with ones own limitations and weaknesses. When you do this, you actually hear and benefit from the

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<sup>10</sup> Cook, p. 57.

instructor and therefore improve. Only by competing with ourselves and stretching our limitations can we ever become better than we are, so that more becomes possible not only with the body but in the mind as well.

The martial art teaches proper stances and classical technique. When watching a martial artist most people do not see the many subtle things that make the martial art work. One of these things is balance. Balance is very important. The practitioner must keep his/her weight over his center of gravity in order to allow him to move properly and derive the most possible power. The practitioner's feet must be firmly planted in order to have a solid base from which to launch his attacks. If the practitioner has good balance, he/she can deliver the most power by rotating and snapping the hips. The hips rotate forward and are followed by the shoulders when using the arms. A good example of this is ridge hand because the arm muscles are not used and the hips deliver enough power to lift the hand to the level of the opponents head. A side kick pivots on the foot to rotate the hips forward and the knee back, coiling them around one another. Then it snaps into a line as it uncoils to drive the maximum amount of force in a direct path out the heel at the end. The stance is derived to enhance the balance, strength and timing of these techniques. Counter to this, martial sport has eliminated the traditional stances in favor of quick "point scoring," stances which produce ineffective and weak techniques.

Another aspect of the traditional martial art is how speed is achieved. One way of obtaining speed is by relaxing all the muscles in the body until the moment of impact. Then all the muscles tighten to derive the maximum amount of power. The muscles relax again while they are being retracted. It is for this reason that it is very important for the

practitioner not to freeze up with fear in a confrontation because fear will tighten up all of the muscles and make it harder to move. If one's muscles are tense from fear or for any other reason, it is at a cost of speed, since the muscles must be relaxed before they can actually move. This is one of the things that sparring assists in developing. Sparring teaches the body to learn not to become tense in confrontation. Even one moment of delay can alter the outcome of the entire confrontation and cause harm.

Speed is one area where competitive martial sport can assist instead of detract from the practitioner's ability to perform. However, the martial artist is looking for speed in conjunction with power. Power is of no concern to the practitioner of martial sport. According to Sihak Henry Cho, "Speed, which plays an important part in karate techniques, must be constantly built on the basis of simple unit moves which are applied in a combined form with body shifting. Speed without power is completely ineffective."<sup>11</sup>

Simple quickness is not the only way to achieve speed. When most people attack, they show what their intentions are long before they move. It is not that they actually say that they're going to attack, it is just that a well trained martial artist learns to read telegraphs.

These are the small things that most people do before they move. The arm might pull back just slightly or the eyes flash to the place they will target. The slightest motion of the hips or the foot could give them away. Even just redistributing their weight from one foot to the other can telegraph their move. However, a martial artist is also trained not to telegraph and to give a fake telegraph so their opponent thinks they will do one thing when in actuality defending for that will only open you up to the move that they are really intending to do.

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<sup>11</sup> Cho, Sihak Henry, Tae Kwon Do: Secrets of Korean Karate, p. 21.

The perception of speed is frequently attributable to the lack of telegraphs. A martial artist may not necessarily be any faster than an untrained individual, he/she simply lacks any telegraphing before he/she moves. Even untrained people subconsciously pick up on telegraphing. For example, men seem to be very sensitive to sideways motion, but fail to perceive forward motion. The classical martial artist, especially in Tae Kwon Do, is trained to attack in straight motion without any vertical or sideways deviation. This means an attack is delivered before the opponent becomes aware of the motion, and lends to the perception of speed. Again, these subtleties are commonly glossed over by the martial sport.

There are two different approaches to the martial arts. These are the hard and the soft styles. The main characteristics of these are in where the energy originates. With a soft style, the martial artist uses almost none of his/her own energy, but instead redirects all the energy of their opponent back at them. This is commonly seen in many styles of Kung Fu and especially in T'ai Chi which could be considered the softest of all the styles because the martial artist spends no energy of his own.

Hard styles are designed to drive the maximum amount of force and energy that is possible into every move. Feet are firmly planted to the ground to anchor the force. Power is derived by rotating and snapping the hips and the shoulders. Tae Kwon Do is one of the hardest styles there is (this does not mean hardest to learn). What one must remember when training in a hard style is that every attack and every block must be able to break bones. If the first move you make is able to cripple or maim your attacker then the person will no longer be able to harm you. This is the main concept behind all hard styles and especially

behind Tae Kwon Do. The idea of the hard and the soft styles is firmly rooted in the Oriental concept of Yin and Yang. After all, you could just as easily call the hard and the soft styles, the active and the passive styles. The yin is the passive soft style; it is like water that engulfs the strongest object and sweeps it away in the current. The yang is the active hard style; it is like a rock that strikes hard and can not be moved.

Such subtleties completely escape the martial sport but are the core of the martial art.

Training to produce maximum power with every strike and block means that the techniques of the martial artist should not be used lightly. Certainly, unlike martial sport where sparring is solely for competition and techniques are not delivered with the intent of injuring an opponent, the martial artist must be extremely careful when using his skills. As Doug Cook says: “Concurrent with the traditional belts a martial artists earns over the course of his training, come the added responsibility of acting with restraint and forethought.”<sup>12</sup>

He discusses four levels of interaction or guidelines that he refers to as the “Four Levels of Engagement.” The first level is basically to turn and walk away from a confrontation whenever it is possible. Gichin Funakoshi in his biography relates an instance where his master walked a much longer path just in order to avoid confronting a gang of bullies. Having nothing to prove and no need to show off his abilities, he was able to just totally avoid a confrontation by going an extra distance.<sup>13</sup>

The next or second level is that in which one tries to talk ones way out of a situation. “This technique combines both offensive and defensive skills since at times a conciliatory

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<sup>12</sup>Cook, p.111.

<sup>13</sup>Gichin Funakoshi, Karate-Do: My Way of Life, pp. 51-52.

tone must be taken while at other times it may become necessary to appear irrational, even going so far as to feign sickness.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Cook, p. 112.

When one can't walk away or avoid a confrontation, the third level of engagement tries to control an attacker without causing irrevokable harm. For example, a wrist lock or an arm bar can subdue an attacker but leave him uninjured. When it is not possible to dissuade an attacker without causing them harm, then the fourth level of engagement "is the irrevocable commitment to an opponent's total destruction in combat."<sup>15</sup> This last level should only be used when all the others have failed and when the martial artist is faced with the attackers intent to cause grave harm.

The more popular martial sport becomes, the harder it is to find a school that teaches traditional martial arts. The popularity of the sport is destroying the art like sport judo was seen as ruining the traditional jujitsu. Tae Kwon Do's stepping into the international sport when it was adopted by the Olympics was largely seen as a positive thing for the Tae Kwon Do, but could eventually lead to the end of the art form as it has done with judo. Even though enrollments have increased, those increases are largely in schools that are stressing competition in tournaments and are essentially belt factories. Even though some amount of competition may be healthy, it must not be at the cost of the martial art tradition. The Studio of Korean Karate is one of the few places left in the Baltimore-Washington area that still teaches traditional martial art.

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<sup>15</sup>Cook, p. 113.

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