



## **TAEKWONDO:**

### **A HISTORICAL ESSAY**

**By George I. Petrotta, Ph.D.**

**This is an essay on the General History of Taekwondo. But, I would like to delve a little deeper than that. There are numerous historical articles written on the “past” of the Korean martial art of Taekwondo. Some are more accurate than others are; some are just plain, fictitious.**

**To say that Taekwondo is a product of the early culture of Korea is ludicrous. Taekwondo was a product of one man’s thoughts and ideals. That man, the late, General Choi, Hong Hi, developed the art of TKD in his mind and transposed it to reality in the early 1950’s. But the art that he developed at that time has changed, just about every 10 years since he first used the name Taekwon-do. There have been countless revisions on what is the best way to use the patterns and hand and foot movements. The Taekwondo of the World Taekwondo Federation is not the same as the Taekwon-Do of General Choi. It is called Taekwondo but it is different, more sports orientated.**

**So, what I will present here is my thoughts on the martial arts in general, Taekwon-do, Taekwondo, and the balance between the East and West. Bear with me, as I tend to go off on a tangent at times whether speaking or writing about martial arts.**



### *What is a BLACK BELT?*

People, unfamiliar with a martial art, expect a black belt to be some kind of “super-human.” Unaware of the complete system of ranking, they feel that when a person has attained the level of black belt, he/she has reached the top. The dark band symbolizes mastery of feats that ordinary men/women dare not attempt. Wondering, envious, still they are not quite sure just exactly what a black belt is.

Materially it is nothing more than a strip of cloth 1½” to 4” wide and long enough to wrap twice around the waist. Yet, traditionally, it is a designation of expertise in a field. A black belt is a part of a system of advancement, and therefore stands as a symbol of improvement and achievement.

### *How to achieve a BLACK BELT*

The method by which a practitioner earns a black belt varies according to the system or style, his/her attitudes and culture. For example, most Korean students train six (6) days a week, usually earning their black belt in 1½ to 2 years on the average. In the United States, a dedicated student will attend class approximately three (3) times a week and obtain his/her black belt at the end of 3½ to 4 years. Frequently a student can only come to class twice (2) a week or less, in which case it may take as long as five (5) years for him/her to achieve black belt.



**By comparison, the United States has a much shorter history in the martial arts than Korea, and therefore attaches less significance to it as a part of American culture. Neither does it have the tradition of attitudes and values. As a result, black belts are quite numerous in Korea, whereas they are a rarity and a curiosity in America.**

**Because of the tradition of Taekwondo in Korea and the cultural differences that promote patience and perseverance, a Korean student is likely to get a black belt earlier. The greater availability of instruction, both through an abundance of studios and the installment of classes in elementary educational facilities along with the assistance of other black belts, also serves to encourage the student. The result is a high level of morale and a low level of dropouts. Perhaps one student in a hundred will make black belt in the USA.**

**By comparison, one in ten Koreans will reach that level. The most important concept is that the amount of time it takes to reach a particular level doesn't matter. It is the proper concept of the art and a continued effort that will eventually prove successful.**



### **The value of a BLACK BELT**

Students who begin training in Taekwondo will learn most basics and several forms (Poomsae, Hyungs, Tul, Patterns) (patterns of offense and defense practiced solo) in a few months. They then begin adding to their knowledge with different types of sparring (1-steps, 3-steps, model, free) and gradually, as they progress through the color belt ranks (usually: White-Yellow-Green-Blue-Red), breaking techniques---all important aspects of self-defense. There will always be basics that the student must continually practice. Similarly, as the student progresses, there will be new, more advanced forms, new sparring techniques, greater levels of meditation, and more instruction in philosophy and history.

How the instructor leads each student to a higher level will vary with the student's ability and the instructor's concepts and techniques. Each student must be taken as an individual, regardless of age, and taught the knowledge of the art. There are many divisions of black belt---pee wee, juniors, seniors, men and women.

The symbol of a black belt is not ones ability to beat up the ordinary man on the street. It is the mastery of a certain amount of knowledge of a martial art. One need not necessarily be the best fighter in the class, or the tough kid on the block to become a black belt.

Each person has a different purpose for studying and achieving a black belt. Consequently, each person will have developed some of the aspects and



requirements for a black belt more highly than others. Some practitioners may be very good technicians, but have little knowledge of the “art.” On the other hand, some may be very wise and understanding, but have not developed into proficient technicians.

The most important value in receiving a black belt will be the mastery of ones own conduct. It means that the holder has enough control of him/her self to set a good example to others as a human being. He/She will be able to set aside his/her own desires in order to help others. He/She will have firm control over his/her own emotions and temper, even in a difficult situation. He will conduct him/her self wisely and conscientiously. He/She will be able to determine his/her own moral precepts and stand for his/her rights and ideals. He/She will understand the difference between right and wrong, and weigh the outcome of his/her actions on him/her self and others.

Above all, the black belt should not be a symbol of physical power. It should be a mark of character, the ability to accept a job and do it right, to face life with honesty. It should be a sign of good manners, strong spirit, and perseverance.



**Who issues a BLACK BELT?**

Over the course of many years a student trains for certain values and knowledge. His continued studies should never be allowed to progress through a desire to obtain physical prowess and power over other humans. In order to insure his/her guidance toward the proper goals his/her instructor must be reputable.

Most skillful and sincere black belts receive their rank from their own instructors rather than an organization that was not responsible for their training. The instructor has been able to watch the student progress. He/She has helped him/her to understand the martial arts. In turn, he/she has also come to understand the student, his/her motives, desires, character, ability and spirit. The instructor is most likely to know when the student is ready to progress to black belt. His/Her insights and observations enable him/her, more than anyone else, to perceive when the student has developed into a serious martial artist. Therefore, the instructor should be the judge to decide when to award a black belt.

The student who achieves black belt through an organization that is unfamiliar with him has only demonstrated his physical prowess and ability as a technician. No test, except the test of time and familiarity, can be devised to test ones character. It is for this reason that the student who receives his black belt from his own instructor has achieved a greater symbol of good character and spiritual development. Of course the instructor has to be certified and able to promote a student to black belt. First-degree black belts cannot promote anyone to black belt.



Third degrees can promote to first degree if their own instructors certify them to do so.

There is also one other “type” of black belt. This is the person who writes his own certificate without proper testing. He is a “phony black belt” but the possessing of that type of certificate means nothing. Having a black belt certificate is not the same as having a license to practice medicine or go into business. It is not an objective for economic stability and does not guarantee an ability to make a living. Instead it is a symbol of honor and achievement in ones life. The holder of a fake certificate holds only a piece of paper, a hollow victory at best. His is a symbol of the honor, which he has failed to attain. He who creates his own “black belt” has fooled no one but himself and those who trust in him.

The USA has seen a steady growth of all martial arts and has produced innumerable black belts during the last forty (40) years. At the same time, the general public seems to think that a black belt is the highest achievement that a martial art practitioner can attain.... and that, with so many new black belts, the martial arts in the United States are getting better and better.

Unfortunately, many students of the martial arts seem to share this belief. We have all known some students who work very hard, take direction very well, work out regularly, and finally receive the right to wear the black belt, the 1<sup>st</sup> Degree (Dan), and within a few months have ceased to practice, stopped studying,



and usually stopped listening to their instructor. They behave, as a matter of fact, as if they really do not know that there might be something more to learn.

What is far worse than this is not quite as common: such a student who fairly recently reached 1<sup>st</sup> Degree black belt, decides to promote him/her self, and declares him/her self 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> Degree black belt, and even, I am sorry to say, in some cases 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> Degree black belts. When I hear young men and women in their 20's and 30's declare that they are 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> Degree black belts, or even sometimes 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> Degree black belts, I feel sorry for this state of affairs.

I believe that perhaps one of the difficulties which contributes to this situation is the fact that the beginning student and to the general public, the degrees of graduations which distinguish a 1<sup>st</sup> Degree from a 3<sup>rd</sup> Degree or 4<sup>th</sup> Degree, a fairly advanced student from an instructor, and that instructor from a master, are so unclear. Consequently I would like to offer a few remarks about the degree (Dan) system.

Taekwondo and all of the martial arts are physical arts. It cannot be learned by reading books or articles or by listening to lectures. It is imprinted into the body and mind over a long period of time through constant, disciplined and supervised practice, under the control and guidance of competent and qualified instructors. It is a visual learning process that can be learned through proper guidance and not videotapes. Whole sets of actions and reflexes have to be built into the body slowly, painstakingly, and correctly, over a period of time; complete mastery of such a



physical discipline will take a lifetime of perfect practice. It is a mistake, then to assume that you will master the art in a few years, or when you receive a black belt. It is more correct to say that a black belt admits a student to a circle of individuals who are serious students of their particular school...not an end but a beginning.

I would say that in a good and strict school in which a student practices diligently a minimum of three times a week, that he might be recommended for the qualifying test for the 1<sup>st</sup> Degree black belt at the end of three (3) years of study, or sometime during the students fourth year, depending on his/her progress. It will take a similar 2 to 3 years of work for him/her to be qualified for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Degree black belt examination; it will take another 3 to 4 year period of work, three or more times a week to reach the point of qualifying for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Degree black belt. In other words, to become a 3<sup>rd</sup> Degree black belt in one system, such a Taekwondo, entails a minimum of eight (8) years of diligent practice under constant supervision.

To qualify for the 4<sup>th</sup> Degree black belt the student should spend another four (4) to five (5) years in steady practice and study. At this point I would like to emphasize that only at this level—4<sup>th</sup> Degree—can the practitioner be considered qualified as an instructor, only at this point is he ready and able to teach. We all know that many schools now have 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> degree black belts as teachers. My point is not that this should not happen, but that it should only happen under the direct control and constant supervision of a qualified instructor, better still, a master or grandmaster.



At this time it might be well to digress to clarify something concerning the higher degrees. The fact that one person has been awarded a higher degree than another person, who may even have studied for the same length of time, does not necessarily mean that the first person has a better technique, or shows better form than the other; particularly for the fourth degree and above, it may rather mean that his/her superiors who judge him/her and ultimately have the responsibility to promote him/her are looking to other elements. This is particularly important for the 4<sup>th</sup> and higher degrees because these students are becoming the new instructors and masters, and will in turn be responsible for the proper training of the juniors and the integrity of the art.

The higher degrees are, like the lower, awarded at the discretion of the practitioner's superiors and teachers, usually after long and careful observation, and ideally under supervision and further instruction. This is not an ironclad rule, but ordinarily the period of further study and work between 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Degree black belt will be more than four (4) years; from 5<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> degree black belt five to six years; from 6<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> Degree, six to seven years. It goes without saying that very few students of martial arts, even after working out for years will ever attain the rank of 4<sup>th</sup> Degree, and that a 7<sup>th</sup> Degree black belt will always be very rare.

After seventh degree black belt there are also eighth and ninth degree black belt, and some claim tenth degree status. Instructors who reach such a high degree are most likely to be professional instructors who have devoted many years of their



**lives to mastery of the martial art. As a rule of thumb, perhaps a master could attain eighth degree rank with eight (8) years of training after reaching 7<sup>th</sup> Degree, but that would be 35+ years of training; then add another nine to ten years for 9<sup>th</sup> Degree.**

**My final analysis is this: If a student started at age 20, he would be eligible for 8<sup>th</sup> degree at age 55+. I know that there are quite a few Masters and Grandmasters who claim that they started training at age 5 and continued to train through their childhood into adulthood. But, if you look at most of the martial arts schools that cropped up in the last 30 years in the USA, how many of those 5-year-old students stayed with the program for 30+ years? How many stay with it for 10 years? How many stay with it for 1 year? How many stay with it for 2 months? I hope whoever reads this gets the point I am trying to make.**

**Now, to get back to the main subject of this essay, Taekwon-Do / Taekwondo / Tae Kwon Do / T'aegwondo. The usual English spelling is split into two factions. The International Taekwon-Do Federation prefers "Taekwon-Do" and the World Taekwondo Federation prefers "Taekwondo". There are other ways to spell the word, such as adding hyphens here and there. Presented first is the ITF version of the history and philosophy of the art they term Taekwon-Do.**



The late General Choi, Hong Hi makes the statement that “his” Taekwon-Do originated from his study of TaeKyon and Japanese Karate (Shotokan). He does not claim that Taekwon-Do came from the 3 kingdoms of old Koryo.

**The International Taekwondo Federation**

General Choi, Hong Hi, founded the ITF in 1966. Soon thereafter he moved his headquarters from Korea to Canada and now, after his death, it is split to include Austria and N. Korea. The ITF uses the Chang Hon series of color belt forms called Hyungs. Their style of sparring closely resembles Karate’s point style of fighting where hand techniques to the face and kicks to the groin are allowed, however, little or no contact is used. After a point is scored, the match is stopped and the officials award the point to the scoring contestant. The winner is usually the first player to score three points.

**What exactly is the meaning of Taekwon-Do?**

To put it simply Taekwon-Do is a version of unarmed combat designed for the purpose of self-defense. It is more than just that, however. It is the scientific use of the body in the method of self-defense; a body that has gained the ultimate use of its facilities through intensive physical and mental training.

It is a martial art that has no equal in either power or technique. Though it is a martial art, its discipline, technique and mental training are the mortar for building a strong sense of justice, fortitude, humility and resolve. It is this mental



**conditioning that separates the true practitioner from the sensationalist, content with mastering only the fighting aspects of the art.**

**This is one of the reasons that Taekwon-Do is called an art of self-defense. It also implies a way of thinking and life, particularly in instilling a concept and spirit of strict self-imposed discipline and an ideal of noble moral rearmament. The nearest description of it is almost a cult.**

**Translated literally "Tae" stands for jumping or flying, to kick or smash with the foot. "Kwon" denotes the fist-chiefly to punch or destroy with the hand or fist. "Do" means an art or way - the right of way built and paved by the saints and sages in the past.**

**Thus taken collectively "Taekwon-Do" indicates the mental training and the techniques of unarmed combat for self-defense as well as health, involving the skilled application of punches, kicks, blocks and dodges with bare hands and feet to the rapid destruction of the moving opponent or opponents.**



Now we will look at the WTF and it's Taekwondo. You will notice that most individuals who do research on the history of Korean Martial Arts claim that Taekwondo is old. Claims that it descended from old Koryo and before. I do not subscribe to this theory but present it as an objective observer.

*WTF version:*

Korean martial arts can be traced back to the Koguryo dynasty, founded in 37 BC. However, it was during the Silla dynasty (668-935) that a group of young warriors, called Hwarang, made martial arts popular. The Hwarang were a group of young knights who trained their bodies and minds by devoting themselves to hunting, studying, and the martial arts. The code of honor on which the Hwarang was based was loyalty to the nation, respect and obedience to one's parents, faithfulness to one's friends, courage in battle and avoidance of unnecessary violence and killing. Hwarang-Do (the way of the flower of manhood) was an essential part of Silla's struggle to unify the country.

Martial arts maintained its popularity in Korea through to the Koryo dynasty (935-1392). During this dynasty the practiced martial arts were referred to as Subak (in more modern times this is still referred to as Soo Bak Do) and they were practiced by the military as a skill to improve health, as a sports activity and as a martial art. History shows that this was the first occurrence of martial arts contests being held for spectator appreciation.



During the Yi dynasty (1392-1907), the rulers held scholarship and learning in high esteem and military related pursuits fell into disrepute. As a result, martial arts known as Subak and TaeKyon became popular with the general population. There was even a book published to teach the martial art and the sport.

### *The 20th Century*

In 1909, during the Japanese occupation of Korea, which lasted 36 years until 1945, the Resident General banned the practice of martial arts. The martial arts continued to be practiced secretly and were passed on, by forms, from father to son. Also, many patriotic young men visited China or Japan to study martial arts becoming the first to blend Korean martial arts with other Asian styles. Back in Korea the popular art called TaeKyon was secretly being kept alive.

The end of World War II saw thousands of post occupation Korean immigrants, filled with patriotism and national pride, return home from other parts of the Orient. As part of the national movement to restore Korean traditions, the martial arts were revived and many experts established schools. Thus were born the Kwans (schools) of Korean martial arts.



The first schools opened in 1945. The original five Kwans were the:

- ◆ *Chung Do Kwan* (“Blue Wave Training Hall”)
- ◆ *Yun Moo Kwan* which later became the Ji Do Kwan,  
(“Wisdom Way Training Hall”)
- ◆ *Song Moo Kwan* (“Pine Tree Training Hall”)
- ◆ *Chang Moo Kwan* (“Development of Martial Arts Training Hall”)
- ◆ *Moo Duk Kwan* (“Military Virtue Training Hall”).

These five Kwans generally called what they were teaching, Tang Soo Do or Tae Soo Do.

By the end of the Korean War (1954), other Kwans had branched off from the original five Kwans. These were:

- ◆ *Oh Do Kwan* (“Our Way training Hall”)
- ◆ *Han Moo Kwan* (“Korean Military Training Hall”)
- ◆ *Jung Do Kwan* (“Proper Way Training Hall”)
- ◆ *Kang Duk Kwan* (“Arena For Teaching Virtue Training Hall”)

Now there were nine different major schools, each espousing a different style.

Fragmented by the pre-war secrecy of their teachings and the post-war confusion of reconstruction, it took some ten years before these stylistic spin-offs and adaptations were able to consolidate into a single martial art. On April 11, 1955 at a pivotal conference of Kwan masters, historians, and TaeKyon promoters, it was decided to standardly adopt the term Taekwondo, which was created and submitted



by General Choi, Hong Hi. The name was approved because of its resemblance to TaeKyon, providing continuity and maintaining tradition. Further, it describes both hand and foot techniques. The number of Kwans, which then consolidated into Taekwondo, is the subject of much debate and historical confusion. This dissension among the Kwans went on for six years, and it wasn't until September 14, 1961 that the groups once again organized into a single association, as ordered by an official decree of the new military government. It was called the Korea Taekwondo Association (KTA), with General Choi, Hong Hi elected as its first president.

On March 22, 1966, Choi founded the International Taekwondo Federation (ITF), for which he also served as president. He later resigned as KTA president and moved his ITF headquarters to Montreal, Canada, from where he has concentrated on organizing Taekwondo internationally. His emphasis is on maintaining Taekwondo as an art, rather than as a sport.



**Taekwondo in the U.S. and the Development of the Sport**

**Jhoon Rhee introduced Taekwon-Do to the United States in 1956 when he attended San Marcos Southwest Texas State College. In 1957 he taught a non-accredited Taekwon-Do course at the college and in 1958 he opened his first public Taekwon-Do school. Mass expansion to the U.S. started in the early 1960s. In 1963, a Taekwon-Do demonstration was performed at the United Nations headquarters in New York City, and on November 26, 1967 the U.S. Taekwondo Association was formed.**

**In May, 1973, several KTA leaders including Chong Woo Lee, Won Kyu Um, and Nam Suk Lee, saw the future of Taekwondo as an international sport and established the World Taekwondo Federation (WTF). They invited Un Yong Kim to be president and shortly thereafter the first World Taekwondo Championships were held (biannual event). With unification initiated by the WTF under the leadership of Un Yong Kim (1st president), instructors in the U.S. (Ken Min, Dong Ja Yang, Mu Yong Lee, and others) organized and made possible the admission of Taekwondo into the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) in 1974. Under this organization, all newly established technical standards, sanctioned by the WTF, were adopted into this official form of Taekwondo in the United States. Its name was changed to the National AAU Taekwondo Union of the United States on November 28, 1981, and renamed the United States Taekwondo Union (USTU) on**



September 9, 1984 and was unanimously approved as a "Group A" member of the U.S. Olympic Committee.

Today the USTU is USAT, the national governing body for Taekwondo, as well as the sole representative of the World Taekwondo Federation in the U.S. The USAT is a non-profit amateur sports organization that exists to develop Taekwondo in the United States.

Under the leadership of Dr. Un Yong Kim of the WTF, Taekwondo was chosen as a demonstration sport in the 1988 Seoul Olympics and the 1992 Barcelona Olympics. The 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney, Australia showcased Taekwondo as a full medal sport. Taekwondo is also a full medal sport in the World Games, Goodwill Games, Asian Games and the Pan American Games.

It is the philosophy of Taekwondo competition regarding technical development, that the process of competition will serve to weed out vacant, formalized techniques from among the traditional techniques, through actual application in full contact competition. While considering the development of Taekwondo, the original architects of Taekwondo competition did not think of it as a simple sport, rather, after deep reflection, competition was deemed the best method through which to realize the essence of modern Taekwondo (mu do) in a universal format. If there is no disagreement that Taekwondo's essence (mu do) is found in the realization of its spiritual, philosophical and educational values



through practical experiences, then it can be shown that the most direct and natural way to accomplish this is through sparring.

To an individual, the threat of an actual combat situation, ultimately the most extraordinary and unpredictable instant a person might face, in which all the potential of that person's physical and mental characteristics must be concentrated, cannot be experienced except in actuality. The ultimate motive of martial art training would be the strength of will to challenge the intensity of the moment of actual combat. The real value of Taekwondo as "mu do" can be found in extreme, intense moments of spiritual challenge when, instead of violent inclinations, a moment of genuine self-awareness is produced. Taekwondo competition then, was formed under a full contact system to inject a realistic element into the training for the purpose of developing a highly educational method of practice and application.

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