

The Eternal Scholar

Intersecting Circles of Knowledge in the Taekwon-Do Journey

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty of the
World Taekwondo Alliance
A partial fulfillment of the requirements for the 5th Dan Testing

June 4, 2013

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Taekwon-Do is a lifelong journey, a noble quest, and a composition of goals to be achieved. If pursued efficiently, it will be never ending, in that those you affect along your way and even the legend of your journey may one day encourage others. I will express thoughts and philosophies developed through my personal journey, and compare them with referenced knowledge provided by those who have come before us.

From the onset of martial arts training we begin aspiring to progress. Many dojang (training hall) walls contain posters or banners proclaiming “We are a Black Belt School” and/or have the belt progression clearly displayed across the training area to encourage students to set goals and strive to achieve them. Initially, students walk into the dojang with the aspiration of earning the coveted black belt. Later in the journey, nearing or having just attaining the black belt, students often reassess their goals and aim to further their knowledge. Soon thereafter the student may begin learning to teach, as they aspire to one day become an Instructor. This is the broad circle of martial arts training, but what will be experienced along the way, and what will we learn on this journey?

The new student struggles as he learns to use his hands and feet, to step with rhythm and power, to bring together his body and mind. Instructors refer to this process as “learning to walk”. Every student learns differently while simultaneously pursuing the same goal, and each technique poses a new challenge. The student is not only learning the physical techniques but also developing the perseverance necessary to struggle through, and achieve goals. So, through the struggles to learn the physical elements the practitioner is forging the spirit as well.

The student may involuntarily compare himself to other students often wondering why his progress appears more complicated, or see others struggle with what comes naturally to him. Through this process the student is learning a valuable lesson about both self improvement and modesty that will assist him in many areas outside of the dojang. Perseverance and a sense of accomplishment, while maintaining a modest disposition, are traits that will serve a student well throughout their entire life. As the student progresses through the geup ranks (colored belts), he will grow stronger, more cognizant of his motor functions, yet the curriculum will continue to challenge this growth. Much like lifting weights strengthens the muscles, so too does the syllabus of Taekwon-Do increase in resistance against the students growing capacity, thus forcing continual physical, psychological and spiritual development. Through this process, the student may ultimately achieve the first great milestone, Black Belt.

Taekwon-Do mirrors the process of life in that one generation replaces another over time. This accolade expresses the importance of continuous growth and development. The students become the instructors and so the cycle continues into another generation. The importance of an Instructor is his knowledge, and more so in his ability to impart that knowledge on others. Having attained the black belt level, the student will often begin to apprentice as an instructor trainee. This educational process will help lead the student towards the next level of Taekwon-Do training.

The new instructor trainee will quickly realize that the ability to perform a technique is not nearly enough. The task now is expressing the technique both verbally and physically in a manner by which the beginner student can comprehend and emulate.

Once the information is clearly expressed, the apprentice must learn to assist and motivate the student towards scholastic comprehension as well as developing the proper physical execution. The new instructor trainee can quickly become overwhelmed as he realizes how trying this seemingly simple task can be. Almost abruptly the apprentice will realize that this pressure is multiplied by the number of students he instructs as each student learns and is encouraged in their own unique way.

General Choi and Kano, Jigoro (founder of Judo) have both restated the quote "Pain is the Greatest Teacher"*. I believe this philosophy should be absorbed by both the trainees and Instructors of Taekwon-Do. By embracing our growing pains as we become Instructors we can see the wisdom in the lessons of those who came before us. The initial lesson is that true improvement is forged through perpetual motion against resistance.

Life is truly a series of circles that intersect at many points along their way. The student learns the basics of the techniques, building a fundamental understanding. As the student achieves the Black Belt (Dan grade) he is quickly reminded that he is but a senior student, and is truly ready to learn. Often, this lesson comes as the student begins to assist the Instructor by working on basics with beginner students. Through the process of teaching these fundamentals he will be forced to articulate the specifics, and physically exhibit the intricacies thus leading to a greater personal understanding of the techniques based on a more expansive, intimate and therefore superior knowledge of these techniques. So too is he simultaneously continuing to forge his spirit and aptitude to maintain the tenets of Taekwon-Do. All of which will be continually tested along his journey.

This refinement of knowledge is what separates the Black Belt Student from a Sabum. Lessons learned during the apprenticeship (a more intimate knowledge of the techniques, and the development of a methodology for delivering this information to others) will manifest when the Instructor steps out on his own. He will be a better teacher, and will be rewarded by producing better students. Remember the old adage there is no such thing as a bad students only bad teachers.

Traditionally, the titles of Assistant Instructor, Instructor, & Master Instructor are not synonymous with rank, yet have a minimum rank associated with each although this varies between schools and organizations. Appointment is generally granted within the various stages of Black Belt with the title "Sabum" being issued around the 4th Dan. This means the average student should have spent approximately five or six years as a Black Belt Student / Instructor's Apprentice prior to earning this designation. During this time they will be exposed to the teaching methods of their instructors, the motivational tactics and controls used to insure proper quality while simultaneously maintaining motivation within the dojang. During this period the apprentice will also begin to develop his own methodology and style of instruction. This step is crucial as it allows the apprentice the proper support while he forges his craft. Remember, at this stage the black belt student is still learning many of the academic aspects of Taekwondo, while reinforcing the foundation on which future generations will stand. Simultaneously, the Sabum (Senior Instructor) is developing his own craft as he is not only teaching students, but is now learning to instruct others in the art of teaching. Thus the circles of education continue to intersect.

These circles provide a balance, an easily articulated explanation for two separate trains of thought. It relates to the definition and variations of use related to the term “master” in Taekwon-Do. Many schools or systems of Taekwon-Do refer to the title Sabum as a Junior Master and grant this title to the 4th Degree Black Belt, while others refrain from bestowing this title until the rank of 6TH or 7th Degree. While one can argue semantics as to which is most appropriate, I believe the reality is rather simple. The word “mastery” is defined by Merriam Webster as “*a*: the possession or display of great skill or technique *b*: skill or knowledge that makes one master of a subject”(1). I believe this logic provides a valid explanation for the variations between uses of this title. The Sabum has developed a “mastery” of the foundational skills necessary to teach Taekwondo and has a strong methodology for teaching others. The true Master will not only possess technical and academic mastery, but will also possess an advanced skill in physical instruction and the art of teaching. Additionally, he should have achieved a strong functional knowledge of the entire system, and accordingly should not be bestowed until the curriculum, and personal growth have been developed to a point of maturity.

Major General Choi, Hong Hi was quoted as saying “Be the eternal master, who teaches with his body when young, his words when older, and with moral precept even after death”(2).

A true journey through the art of Taekwon-Do is that of perpetual growth. Both knowledge and wisdom are living things, constantly developing and improving. Far too often the black belt becomes consumed with the pursuit of titles and authoritative positions, failing to remember that Taekwon-Do is ultimately about service to others both inside and outside the

dojang. By developing the character of ourselves and our students, teaching peaceful strength, and upholding a strong commitment to community and mankind we can truly build a better and more peaceful world.

Through the many circles of my own martial arts journey, I have come to the firm belief that the true spirit of Taekwon-Do is not found in seeking mastery of the art, but rather in the circles themselves. Just as a circle is never ending so too are the cycles of improvement they provide.

Be an eternal scholar always learning so that we may teach others, and teaching others that we may ultimately learn.

(1)Merriam-Webster Online (2013) *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*: Online: Merriam-Webster Inc.

(2)General Choi, Hong Hi (1999) *Taekwon-do – The Korean Art of Self-Defense (Condensed Encyclopedia)*: Canada: I.T.F.

*Quote not directly attributable to one source. This saying has been expressed in a myriad of ways and examples exist from multiple points in both eastern and western philosophy.