

*The Way of Hands and Feet, a path to awakening.*

## The Spirituality of Martial Arts

By

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The reason I loved Tae Kwon Do from the beginning is that it was the real deal, not a lot of talk or esoteric ideas about energy and power, it was more about physics, generating power through sine wave, timing hand, foot, breath, movement, and perfecting that. Moral culture development was inherent in the actions of my instructors and seniors. Gen Choi, the founder of TKD taught me the importance of carrying the mental focus of moral culture into my own physical training and development, then parlaying those structures into my daily life and those of my students. Now after more than 30 years of training I find myself defining here in the article the esoteric path traveled unbeknown to me. A true example of a spiritual path is when the act is unknown by the doer.

Spirituality is defined by Anthony Demello as waking up. Anthony Demello was a world renown speaker and Jesuit priest. I also refer to spirituality as waking up. Here I present the martial art path toward waking up or enlightenment.

Let's look at three tools or three areas of focus for this discipline. Here I relate them to the three jewels of Buddhism. They could also be aligned with any other religious teachings, as they are basic human truths.

- Moral Culture teachings, in Buddhism this is the Dharma. With out teaching moral culture we would produce only soldiers. With moral culture the result is closer to spiritual warriors.
- The practice consists of Fundamental movements, patterns, and conditioning of the body. In Buddhism your

## Buddha nature

- The Community aspect of training is learned and studied through sparring, structured class training, group practice, and community service activities. In Buddhism this is the third jewel called the Sangha.

## Moral Culture

On this path of awakening is a credo, a set of rules or guidelines that describe a mission, some boundaries to express what we are and what we are not. The main point of the guidelines is to point us in the direction of the goal. To move us toward an opening of our consciousness, and away from narrow-mindedness. Here listed are the five tenets of Tae Kwon Do with a brief description of each as it would be explained to the new student of the art.

Courtesy; Be polite to one another, show respect to seniors and instructors, use proper etiquette, respect others property.

Integrity; a conscience is developed through being truthful, as actions and words find common ground.

Perseverance; setting goals and continuing to practice is the only way to achieve great things. With practice and patience, moving steadily toward the goal one finds accomplishment. Accomplishment builds self esteem.

Self-control; Emotional awareness is taught through sparring and practice of all the tenets. To be the observer of the energies as they arise brings awareness, focusing that awareness builds control and emotion intelligence.

Indomitable Spirit; In the face of injustice armed with the tools listed, fear will be transformed with courage and truth will prevail.

Continuing with these guidelines, the Student oath is an affirmation or agreement that the student has decided to be on this path. Making a decision to start is often where people are left behind. One might talk about it, agree or disagree, philosophize or judge the criteria for years. Until one takes an oath or takes the first step on the journey, it is still just talking about it. Thought precedes the word, the word precedes the action. Once all the explaining is done, “It is time to shut up and suit up” It basically means that there are certain things that can only be learned through doing, talking about a side kick will never be a side kick. Similarly, talking about courtesy means very little in comparison to bowing to your students with heart felt respect.

The student oath;  
I shall observe the tenets of TKD  
I shall respect the instructors and seniors  
I shall never mis-use TKD  
I shall be a champion of freedom and justice  
I shall build a more peaceful world.

Quoting Gen Choi TKD founder “As meditation is to the religious, concentration and devotion is to the artist, and perseverance is to the laborer, so is Moral Culture to the martial artist.” This existential truth is that a man’s devotion to his own interest and duty are the source of life and power. “ Moral Culture then is considered to be a cultivating movement to make one devote oneself to his work, whatever it might be, until his work and life become one.” This is the highest integrity.

The Student/instructor relationship is at the base of this Eastern Path of development. A certain amount of respect and trust is imbued at the onset of the journey. From the moment the student walks into the gymnasium he or she will see that the other students

are behaving in a respectful way, and quickly follow suit. This practice of showing respect and recognizing senior from junior relates in the eastern tradition back to Confucius, whose teaching were most generally about honoring king, country and family in order to have a harmonious society. Responsibility lies on both the instructor to respect the students and thereby be a good example, also upon the student to honor and respect the instructor. Once again, as a part of this practice while on this path to Integrity (integrating ego and spirit or self and Self).

I'd like to mention two other paths here, so as to put them side by side. It is helpful for me to notice the similarities. Starting with the three jewels as mentioned above and eight fold path in the Buddhist tradition of which I will paraphrase.

The Three jewels in Buddhism are the

- **Dharma** or the teachings
- **Buddha nature** or your own individual practice and behavior
- **Sangha** or the community, or how you behave in relationship

For Tae Kwon Do these three are represented very much the same

- The teachings of Moral Culture
- Your individual practice of the Patterns and fundamental movements
- Student Instructor relationship, group training, sparring and community service.

The eight fold path in Buddhism

1. Right view
2. Right intention
3. Right speech
4. Right Action
5. Right Livelihood

6. Right effort
7. Right mindfulness
8. Right concentration

This set of virtues can be found in most any culture and religious dictates, in Tae Kwon Do we find them imbedded in the responsibilities of both parties in the student /instructor relationship, tenets, and the student oath.

The ox herd path, finds its roots in an ancient Taoist myth relating the path of finding one's own true nature. In the Zen tradition it came to be represented in ten paintings each with a verse subtly describing the stages of enlightenment along the path to help students stay on track or to recognize their own progress.

The ox represents the raw base energy of the universe of which we are all a part. The ox-herd boy represents the ego-self individuated from that true source. Here listed, are the ten stages in the ox-herd path juxtaposed to the 10 ranks of Tae Kwon Do from white belt to Black belt.

1. In search of the ox    White belt interested in finding something out – not sure what it is...
2. Seeing hoof prints    Beginning student feeling the presence of something other than they have known
3. Seeing the ox    Yellow Belt With practice one sees the potential of what might be available
4. Catching the ox    Green belt level has found some power but little control
5. Taming the ox    Working on balance, speed and control. Struggling.
6. Riding the ox home    Blue Belt with humility one relaxes and allows the power.
7. Ox transcended    The power is found in focus and relaxing the self
8. Ox and self transcended    Red Belt represents danger. The

- energy source and the self disappear into oneness.
9. Reaching the source Enzo - The Void - No Words Some times you have to totally loss it in order to get it.
  10. In the world Living the potential of one's true nature nothing more nothing less.

These few paths are presented here as just an example of the similarity of systems for focusing one's development. Any of these paths can be used as a guiding light for something as simple as a trip to the grocery store or as profound as finding you true life purpose. In these modern times, for the most part Tae Kwon Do and martial arts in general are a pastime or a form of entertainment, no longer do many of us have the need for defending our lives against brutal attacks. The purpose is to channel and focus our primal energies for good, to create a more peaceful and enlightened world.

### The Practice

The daily exercise of Tae Kwon Do not only consists of the kicking and punching but also moral development through the structure of the class. The entire class from the moment of arriving is part and parcel to the development of the student. The gymnasium is considered a sacred place of practice. To bow when entering the Gym is to honor the practice space, as well as the time, the hour or two that you will be training. After suiting up everyone lines up facing the instructor by order of rank and age. Starting with black belts at front right, down to white belts at the rear left. Knowing my place in line is an act of humility that keeps me right sized.

The opening of the class begins with a call to attention. Chariyot is the Korean command for military troops to come to attention. We use this same term. It is a call to take the posture of the attention stance, heels together, arms to the side, back straight, head up and eyes forward. Coming to attention is more than this

posture, it is also paying attention, clearing the mind chatter for a moment to hear the next command. Next, there is a call to show respect to the National Flag done with a salute of the right hand over the heart. Followed by a short meditation, everyone kneels, knees together sitting on the heels and at the command of Mukyom everyone sits quietly with eyes closed. The purpose of this meditation at the beginning of the class is to act as a doorway from our busy day, to leave behind any concerns of the outside world, to leave a clear space for this practice time. It is a great tool for developing the ability to be clear where you are at and what you are doing now. Another call to attention and command for a bow to the Instructor. This Bow or show of respect affirms that you are turning your attention over to the instructor for the next hour, agreeing to follow instructions and do your best.

The class time generally starts with warm up exercise and some stretching, followed by fundamental movements, kicking, patterns and step sparring. As the group works and moves together the energy of the class accumulates. It is important to try to keep up with the class or to pace with the others in the room. The instructor's job will be to try to maintain a pace in which all will be challenged. Stopping just enough to correct the movement of a few individual for the group to observe. Here I find it important to point out to the students that they may have feelings that the pace does not fit them. If they feel this way, try to surrender to the class pace. Not to judge it as right or wrong, or if frustrated let it go and try the new pace. There is a natural pace to things in the world and to be adaptable to the external pace of things is a good strategy at times. Just slowing down or speeding up a little can make all the difference in a persons daily frustration level. If you are in new environment where others are in charge of the situation we blend to their timing. If we are the person in charge we may expect others to follow our pace. The middle road would be to tune into the natural timing of things, like surfing a wave, the wind and water set the pace, you cannot push or drag the wave, it is necessary to tune into the natural energy there in

the wave and then play around within the parameters of the energy.

While learning new movements, students often express that they feel extremely uncoordinated. The neurological pathways being generated to make the movements take some time to develop. I liken it to a new goat path through the hills, rough and rugged, after repeating the movement one thousand times the neural-pathway becomes like a super highway. Repetition is the only way to get there, and it is best if practiced correctly. If you practice a move wrong your brain records it wrong. Similarly in life, bad habits are hard to break, especially if they have been laid down hard in your brain function. With discipline and perseverance any bad pathway can be overwritten. Right repetition is reparation.

There are twenty four patterns in TKD each form has a diagram. The diagram is a shape that it forms as you go through the moves. These pattern diagrams along with the name of the pattern have a meaning that is to be focused on mentally while performing the pattern. This body muscle memory patterning in the brain deepens the moral development to a core level. During this practice the breath, eyes, hands and feet are to be brought into a coordinated timing. Breath is integral in the process and timed as breathing in on the preparatory motion, out through the motion and compressing the breath slightly at the end of the movement. Breath is the coordinating aspect of the chi power. Your brain and thoughts are the coordinating aspect of the Ki power. Ki leads while Chi is focused and channeled. Chi (energy) is the universal power and energy that runs in and through all of nature, Ki (energy) is the will or the energy of your mental concentration, able to bring the Chi into a channeled direction. Bringing the two into harmony is to be practiced in every movement.

There is a form of meditation called single pointed focus. One might use a candle and look at the light, or imagine a virtuous deity with pointed concentration. Focusing on the breath in silence is also a technique. I am proposing that a pattern of moves is a series of short burst single pointed focus meditations in the now moment

strung into a series. Grasped in the moment and left behind in an instant, now moment after now moment. It is a difficult practice, some people want to linger and judge, either congratulating or shaming themselves. Another pitfall is to fall asleep, allowing the body to go through the motions with out the focus. The body can learn the motion and function easily with out thought, this is not single pointed focus, it is mechanical sleep. Mechanical sleep can come in handy if you are an assembly line worker, but not so good for your awakening consciousness.

Practice being in your body, feel your emotional energies rise and fall and attempt to develop the ability to channel that energy with strategy or the mental focus. This is Body, Heart and Mind working in balanced, coordinated determination. Self mastery.

### Community Aspect

To be in relationship with others is as essential to human beings as breathing. Our family of origin as our training ground for how to be in relationship. It often does not prepare us for the situation out in the world. Relationship with in the Tae Kwon Do experience, is learned and practiced through the Student Instructor relationship and through sparring.

The Student Instructor relationship in the orient is one of trust and hard compassion. An ancient adage says “the parents are to love the child while the teacher raises the child” In my experience over the years teaching young children, often the parents will come to me and report that the child has been misbehaving. The parent asks me to speak to the child about the incidents and to discipline the child. Often what I will do is scold the child and ask them why they show more respect to me as their instructor than they do to their parent. Pushups are ordered while I remind them that our training in class is so that we use our etiquette out in the world, it is not only for class

times. Meanwhile the parent stands to the side and gloats, happy to have me reinforce the child.

When I began Tae Kwon Do I found a friend in the class that I took on as a training partner, someone to come up the ranks with. Deciding to compete with one another to accelerate the progress or to help each other as co-travelers on the path, conscious of this idea or not, it had it's positive influence.

The sparring training starts out with a very safe format called 3 step sparring. It is a basic format for developing timing and distance with an opponent. This also develops an conditioned response of attacking while moving forward or back and defending while moving forward or back. Relating these conditioned responses to conversation develops strategies for dealing with emotional energies of the flight or fight response. Early in my training I noticed that when I was attacked my gut response was to hit back or counter attack. Others had an immediate response to retreat. Either one might be a good strategy but a person has no chance to strategize in a moment of being attacked unless they have the awareness of that energy arising. The practice of sparring allows the student to strategize and chose to either retreat, counter attack, dodge, or some other strategy that channels that reaction energy for the best possible outcome.

Listed here are the stages of sparring as they are taught

- 3step alone, The format Alphabet or sounds
- 3 step with a partner, timing balance distance Learning to talk
- 2 step sparring            learning to listen
- 1 step sparring            learning to strategize
- Semi Free                    Conversation
- Free sparring                Prose
- Pre-arranged sparring    Poetry

Learning to be in relationship through sparring has to do with learning to deliver what you need to say with conviction. This is attacking with intention. Then listening with attention, paying attention to what is coming at you. The counter attack is an informed response. Then developing strategies that fit with in the structure of the conversation can be practiced and repeated.