

In Relation To Physical Standard In Taekwon-Do – Does It Really Matter?

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In this essay I'd like to look at four areas in relation to the topic "Physical Standard in Taekwon-Do – Does It Really Matter?" Each area is linked by a theme of creativity and development as opposed to unreflective and conservative thinking in terms of technique. The first area is minimum syllabus requirements and how they should be approached, from perfecting basics through exploring more complex versions of movements, to developing new techniques. The second area is the Composition of Taekwon-Do [Taekwon-Do Goosong] and how we can feed learning from applied movements back into the creation and development of techniques. Science is the third area. In it I'll pose some questions about continuing the development of our scientific martial art. The final area naturally returns to the first: that if a technique is described in the literature, IICs and technical seminars, it should be practiced to at least a basic level of competency.

As a Taekwon-Do instructor, as a teacher, and in general in life I try to be creative and reflective in my activities. If something goes particularly well or not as well as expected, I like to consider cause and effect; how to retain the good and improve the bad, how best to approach things and how best to be. This approach is what has inspired the direction of this essay and I hope that it may be useful to others in Taekwon-Do. I hope that it will contribute to our journey on the path to having a "scientific mind in matters of technique" and "teach[ing] scientifically and theoretically..." [Taekwon-Do, vol 1, pp 87 & 85].

Minimum Syllabus Requirements

For some years now iTKD / ITFNZ has published an excellent pair of syllabus handbooks for gup and dan students. Within are grading requirements in basics, patterns, sparring, self defence, destruction, fitness, essay writing, theory, credits, qualifications and other prerequisites to testing for the next rank. Sadly many students seem to approach the syllabus somewhat casually. Rather than seeking to train each new stance, attack and defence so that they are performed nearly perfectly nearly all the time, they see the correct performance of techniques as something of a peak in performance on grading day. "Old" techniques from previous ranks are neglected; earlier patterns forgotten; pivoting for turning and side piercing kicks regresses to ineffective methods in line work, patterns, sparring, breaking and self defence. To my mind if a healthy and able student cannot perform correct turning and side piercing kicks they are no higher than 8th gup, whatever their actual rank – these are yellow belt techniques.

I believe all previous techniques should be regularly practised, both for personal competence and integrity when instructing. Certainly injury, physical makeup and age must be considered, but one must not make too many excuses. In the Composition of Taekwon-Do

General Choi speaks about the student constantly finding himself returning “to his fundamental movements even when he has achieved the highest possible degree of proficiency in self-defence techniques” [vol 1 p237]. I personally get great satisfaction from drilling basic techniques. I find doing so not only reinforces those techniques themselves, but also feeds good movement quality into my new techniques and areas like sparring, breaking and flying. And of course as an instructor and coach I feel I must be able to personally demonstrate all aspects of Taekwon-Do to my students and athletes, at least to a basic level.

Many of our seniors suggest following the General’s advice and teaching new movements before attempting the new pattern. This is much easier if previous basics are well honed. For instance the reverse knifehand high guarding block in Sam-Il tul should present very little challenge to the student who has been practicing his / her guarding blocks and reverse knifehand middle side blocks from Joong-Gun tul.

Another approach is to treat the syllabus as the bare minimum, the most boring versions of techniques. Who’ll have trouble with front snap kick if they practise it left and right, front leg and rear, front leg flying, rear leg flying, double in the air and on the ground, twin front flying, scissoring upward, forward and dodging, hitting a small focus mitt, kicking a heavy bag, breaking a board, standing and flying triple kick with one leg, triple flying kick with alternating legs? Using it in three, two and one step, model and free sparring, self defence?

And students should be encouraged to play and create new versions of old techniques or use them in new ways. More than once I’ve surprised an opponent in the ring with a spinning backfist downward strike – a tool, strike and stepping method most students are familiar with, just combined in an unorthodox way. I’ve also had fun with twisting kick as a power break [3 wooden boards, one black polar] and a sweep, and the bow wrist as an attacking tool for outward strikes. In this way basic techniques are well polished because they are seen as the foundation, not the peak.

Composition of Taekwon-Do

The Composition of Taekwon-Do [Taekwon-Do Goosong] alluded to already is a repeating cycle of practise elements, each of which builds on the previous and feeds into the next, returning from the apparent end to the beginning over and over. Fundamental movements lead into conditioning of the body and tools. Patterns follow on and inform sparring which itself flows into self defence. Learning in self defence and sparring contributes to the refinement of fundamentals, and on the cycle goes. In other words application leads back into technique development.

But does it?

Many techniques have been adapted from the textbook versions for use in sparring, breaking, flying and self defence, yet the fundamentals are presented unchanged. To an extent I agree with this, as it ensures that the original movement remains in the art and can be referred back to in the creation and development of new ones.

On the other hand as an umpire, coach, instructor, world champion and physical education teacher I'm disappointed with the conservatism in some aspects of the competition side of Taekwon-Do. One of the Olympic values is joy of movement, which I understand as exultation in human achievement, the love of pushing the boundaries of human possibility ever outward. Just because something is new does not mean it is wrong – we should not as martial artists feel threatened or criticised in any way by the modification or creation of techniques.

The non-scissoring flying high kick allows the performer to reach higher than ever before. Jacek Wąsik [The Analysis Of Twimio Nopi Ap Chagi Kicking Styles] studied both versions. He was able to give the test subject an increase of ten centimetres from 2.6m to 2.7m with only 30 minutes of practice in the non scissoring version. The performer had plateaued at 2.6m for a year prior to the study.

The long range power breaking punch in which the fist is chambered far to the rear, unlike the pattern style front punch, is more effective for breaking boards. This is because a longer attack path allows for the generation of more speed, which is why ball and stick sports have a long wind up for peak throws or swings, for example cricket ball & javelin throws and baseball & golf swings. It's true that the long range punch doesn't look like the patterns punch. But nor do most of the breaks, flying kicks, or almost anything in free sparring look like their patterns versions.

In each of these two modified techniques the problem seems to be unfamiliarity, the discomfort of the new. Whereas an umpire could feel that because they haven't seen something before it must be wrong, the far better attitude is to examine it carefully. If it works, if it isn't harmful or unfair in some way, then it should be adopted, not least because the umpire's own students may come up against the new technique if it proves popular.

High jump in athletics has been through drastic change in the last century, progressing from the simple scissors through the Western roll, straddle and Fosbury flop. Each was radically different to the last and experienced resistance initially but ultimately extended the limit of human achievement in high jump. As an umpire I feel there are essentially three considerations only:

- Was anything unsafe?
- Was anything unjust?
- Who was better?

In competitive flying and breaking there is no opponent but oneself, nobody who will counter attack or dodge, the luxury of choosing one's own timing, distance and angle. Technique can thus be purely in the pursuit of human excellence. We have an opportunity to refine our basic techniques based on the competitive evolution of movements and the experiences of applied self defence.

Before moving on to science in Taekwon-Do there are two other examples where I feel applied learning could be fed into fundamentals. Despite my nearly two decades of

forging and punching and kyokpa gisool I know that the open fist is a far safer tool for use in self defence. Perhaps we could practise with it earlier instead of waiting five years for the student to reach 2nd Dan and learn the technique in Choong-Jang tul. Many of my seniors have taught fun and provocative classes exploring the patterns by using different tools and ways to move. Finally there are a few widely accepted techniques that need be included in future editions of Taekwon-Do literature. Inward downward kick, spinning side piercing kick and elbow outward strike are three.

Science in Taekwon-Do

Chang Hon Taekwon-Do is “a version of unarmed combat designed for the purpose of self defence... it is the scientific use of the body in the method of self defence...” [vol1 p21] This is an aspect of our art I thoroughly enjoy and appreciate. I feel sure that without the careful consideration of General Choi and the other pioneers I would not have been able to train so long without injury from overuse and poor technique.

While tradition is the indispensable basis for all we know, our very tradition itself is based on iconoclasy – smashing the old to create the new. Taekwon-Do had firm foundations in older arts but radically altered them and brought science into the martial arts. We must continue to strike the balance between heritage and creation.

There are so many possible areas for further scientific study in Taekwon-Do; all the elements of fitness [agility, strength, flexibility etc], diet and rest, periodization, reaction time and so on, but I’ll pose questions in just three: sinewave, full facing in front punches, impulse and keeping the back / supporting heel on the ground at the moment of impact.

In regard to sinewave, knowing what is now generally well known about the reasons for its introduction, where to next?

There is no doubt that dropping the body into downward techniques is highly effective. Every set of tiles broken with downward punch or downward strike at every black belt grading bears testament to the effectiveness of adding mass in the direction of the tool. Ground reaction force [GRF] is an important factor in studying movement in sport. High GRF is a positive contributor to throwing and striking in baseball for instance [see Characteristic Ground-Reaction Forces in Baseball Pitching]. In our terms GRF helps us throw powerful punches and strikes by providing a strong foundation for movement in the horizontal plane. Tai Chi practitioners are particularly good at using good posture in martial movements. And equilibrium is one of the elements of the Theory of Power [vol2 p24], critical for delivering accurate and powerful techniques safely. Boxers too have powerful punches on strong stances.

Some questions for the reader to consider, that I feel our art needs to look at:

- Does sinewave genuinely contribute to powerful, safe techniques in horizontal plane movements like inward & outward strikes and blocks, and front & side punches?

- Can sinewave possibly contribute to powerful, safe techniques that move upward like rising and upward blocks and punches?
- Depending on the answers to the above, can instructors in good conscience teach sinewave as an effective element of technique in “a version of unarmed combat designed for the purpose of self defence... the scientific use of the body in the method of self defence...”?

I have my own understanding of the answers to these three questions, but will leave each reader form their own conclusions and contribute to the continual refinement of the art in their own way.

Full facing in front punches is the next possible area for further study and development.

- What is the historical basis for front punches being full facing?
- Is there science available that supports or refutes the continuation of full facing in front punches?
- How are front punches applied in our systems of sparring and self defence?
- Can learning from applied movements be fed back into fundamentals here?
- What are the implications of full facing front punches on power, speed, safety in combat, economy of motion for second punches, comfortable repeatability; in comparison with half facing punches?
- Can we observe techniques in our own or other arts that can inform our research?

I personally prefer quarter facing punches i.e. with the punching shoulder slightly advanced beyond the other. This is a compromise between science, one of our most prized values, and tradition, without which we’d have nothing. It seems clear that stopping the body in a full facing posture causes unnecessary tension, exposes the maximum body surface area to counter attack, reduces reach and puts the shoulder in a weak position [push ups are done with the hands shoulder line or wider, not solar plexus line].

Impulse is the third possible area of improvement I’d like to address. Impulse is the relative duration of a force. In a side piercing kick break the foot is in contact with the board for as short a time as possible, while in a side pushing kick the idea is to move the opponent by applying the force over a longer duration. Each kick works well in its purpose and method, using impulse correctly – the right amount of force applied over the right amount of time.

In Ul-Ji tul the performer executes a backward double step jump, landing in an L stance with both feet simultaneously. Is the landing component of the double step jump critical to the effect of the technique? If the purpose is to remove oneself from the opponent’s reach, does landing with first one foot then the other affect the quality of the jump? Should the reader experiment with a twin foot landing and compare that with landing left-right,

transferring the impact of landing from the front foot to the rear foot, I'm certain he / she would find the second method more comfortable and less damaging to perform repeatedly. This is analogous to rolling breakfalls, where the idea is to lessen the impact by spreading it out over a longer period of time.

The final area for possible research is having the heel of the rear foot or supporting foot on the ground at the moment of impact. Certainly while wearing shoes kicks are safer performed with a flat supporting foot. How can we best train in self defence, with the probability of not being barefoot in a real situation? How do we strike the balance between stability at impact and the safety and effectiveness of pivoting in shoes?

Given that boxers are considered to be the most powerful punchers, and they do so without the rear heel on the ground, can we examine our premises to improve our punching? Masters van de Mortel, Jedut and Hutton, and Grandmaster Lan have all demonstrated punches with the real heel up in the context of free sparring while visiting New Zealand. If this method is valuable, should we adjust our fundamental movements? Or maybe add some new ones and preserve to old ones as they are?

If It's There, It Should Be Used

To bring this essay full circle, the final area for comment is techniques described in literature, at IICs and in seminars. In contrast to the idea of adding techniques is the importance of having competence in all the techniques we already have. A few years ago I published an article entitled "Taekwon-Do: The Original Mixed Martial Art", and I firmly believe we have just about everything we need already within our traditions. We have the scientific and cultural values I've described above, and we have a variety of techniques that few other arts do. Active use of weapons, continuous grappling and healing are some of the only things we don't practice.

There are many parts of our art that sit forgotten, gathering dust down the back of the dojang, useful but neglected. The encyclopaedia describes grabbing, joint locks and breaks, throwing and falling, forging, reflex kicks and flying two, three and four direction kicks, double, triple, consecutive, combination and tumbling kicks. Meditation and community service.

I believe we must perfect our basics, refine and practise higher level versions of them, feed learning from application back into determining how we execute our techniques, using science and respect for tradition to guide us, and go beyond the syllabus to appreciate the entire art in all its glorious parts. Does physical standard in Taekwon-Do matter? Absolutely, yes.

References

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