

# **Deeper Training and Understanding**

## **(Fourth Dan Black Belt Paper)**

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**By**

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### **Thesis**

“Paying appropriate attention to the Fundamentals and Principles of the UTF, how do you plan to move the students and yourself to deeper levels of training and understanding?”

### **Introduction**

After much rumination, the honest answer to the question above is that, for the most part, I’m going to keep doing what I’ve been doing. While I would love to say that I’m going to start training 5 days a week and teaching classes several times a week, I don’t foresee that happening. The very slow and steady pace I’ve been progressing for the last 26 years is going to continue. Of course, I think I’ve become more efficient in my learning and training and have a better sense of what I need to do to gain more proficiency. Similarly, the additional years of teaching experience have given me additional tools to help instruct and focus students attention on areas needing specific assistance. Furthermore, I plan to bring knowledge I’ve gained in areas outside of taekwondo, including new research into the science of learning and peak performance, into my training and teaching.

I recognize the additional responsibility attaining a higher rank brings with it. Getting to the rank of Instructor should require thinking about and understanding numerous ways to lead students to learn more deeply. Of course, students need to be ready to learn the lesson an instructor gives, so it is important for the instructor to have insights into the students’ current capabilities and learning preferences. A long discussion about using center to drive spiral turns while maintaining a connection to the floor using weight on the balls of the feet or gripping with “claw feet”, will not be very helpful to a new student.

In a non-taekwondo context, people often talk about the golden rule – treating others as you yourself wish to be treated. However, this presupposes others want to be treated the same way I do, and that is highly unlikely. In my opinion, this rule should be updated to say “treat others as they wish to be treated”. Of course, this requires time and energy to understand others motives,

desires, and ability to receive treatment. In the same way, the instructor should teach students the way they wish to be taught (and learn best) for the students to obtain optimal benefit. For some with analytical minds, this may require lots of detailed explanations and descriptions. For those who learn kinesthetically, more exercises would be beneficial. The instructor should try and understand the students best learning methods and adapt to them. Clearly, everyone's learning needs can't be met all the time, but everyone's learning needs should be met some of the time.

And to teach the UTF student, an instructor must not only understand what will be beneficial to the student s/he must also do so within the context of the UTF training principles and fundamentals.

Through this reflection and review of recent research into the science of productive learning, I've come up with two main areas of focus I believe will lead to deeper levels of training and understanding for myself and the students with whom I work.

### **Productive Training**

Unfortunately, as you are aware, I have had shoulder injuries consistently for the last several years. This made training very difficult. I had to discontinue the Wintrust program largely due to these injuries disrupting the class schedule. I anticipate getting control of the injuries and would like start the program up again. And in addition to regular black belt classes at Knapp, assuming my schedule gets under control, I should be able to get out to Wheaton more frequently, as well. Training with others benefits everyone.

More frequent interaction with students and peers should allow me to become a better instructor as I get to know the students. Students should also become familiar with my teaching patterns and focus to allow them to learn better from me. While sometimes hearing the "same thing" from a different teacher can focus the student to learn better, I think most often creating a safe, trusting environment will allow for better learning. In fact, academic research supporting this hypothesis is provided in the book Smarter, Faster, Better: The Secret to Being Productive in Life and Business by Charles Duhigg, Duhigg researched what makes for the most productive teams, particularly discussing Google and the millions of dollars they spent uncovering key factors in effective teams.

I believe this team research directly correlates to how a taekwondo class (or any regular class) should be conducted. And that the "productivity" of the team relates directly to how well a class can learn. Duhigg discusses 5 key factors in an effective team, commenting that team composition is much less important than how team members interact with one another (i.e. class composition is much less important than how the students interact with one another). Important attributes of an effective team include:

- 1) Meaning - feeling their work is personally meaningful
- 2) Structure and Clarity - they have clear and defined roles
- 3) Dependability - they know members can depend on one another
- 4) Impact – people feel their work matters and creates change
- 5) Psychological Safety - Most importantly, teams must feel psychological safety

I will discuss each of these below in the context of team learning and how this relates directly to taekwondo learning and the fundamentals and principles inherent in the UTF.

Meaning – In the business world, teams function well when team members feel their work is personally meaningful. They must feel their effort helps improve themselves and is not just a means to an end for the team leader. Similarly, as a class instructor it is my job to make the students feel like they are improving themselves meaningfully. Just running a class through rote exercises will not be engaging nor help students connect meaning to what they are doing. Nor will repetitively saying “use your center”. Students don’t get to feel a sense of accomplishment by being told what to do, they must feel it for themselves to get meaning from it. Thus it is imperative that as an instructor feedback be tailored to focus on both short-term and long-term training goals to give the students the feeling they are constantly learning – which they should, in fact, be doing. Sometimes this instruction could be “relax your knees” while other times it could be “straighten your body” or “keep your weight centered on the balls of your feet”. The challenge will be not to correct too many things all at once to allow the student to achieve some level of success at some of them and not be overwhelmed by having too many things to work on. Then, periodically, the student will be “caught” doing things correctly that s/he had not been doing previously, leading to a big “aha” moment that will keep this student engaged and returning to class.

Duhigg points out that praise is an important reward and motivator for a student. However, to be most effective, the praise must focus on the actual work not some “intrinsic” quality. Focusing on the “external locus of control” allows the student to feel they were in control and made a meaningful contribution via their own effort versus something that was intrinsic that the student had no control over. Saying “Wow, your effort really showed” is motivating, whereas “Wow, you’re really good” is not as motivating because “being good” is something the student can’t control.

Structure and clarity – At work, knowing who is responsible for various aspects of a project is extremely important to prevent confusion and overstepping. People want to know what is expected of them so they can perform their tasks. Confusion over team members’ responsibilities results in wasted time and redundant efforts. In class, students, particularly lower level students, want to understand what they will be doing and how (and for how long). While certainly every class should not be the same, the structure of a class should cover most, if not all, of the 5 training areas, including time for warm-ups and cool downs. Things such as starting each class by lining up by rank, bowing, and reciting the student oath as well as the formalities of bowing before exercises help get students focused on what they need to be doing. Additionally, students understand their role in the class is to follow the instructor. Instruction will generally only be given by the leader unless delegated to others. Senior students trying to instruct without receiving the authority from the leader will be considered disruptive and can make it difficult for the students to know who to follow.

As an instructor, I must maintain order in the class so students can learn. I remember losing control of a class once at the Wheaton dojang when certain students were requiring too much of my time and I couldn’t focus or offer instruction to other students who were “left out to dry”. A

new student who didn't get my attention (but was very capable) apparently never came back to another class, but the high attention students repeatedly returned. The lesson learned was that the class structure is very important and I let down the student who didn't return. This student probably felt that her time would be wasted as she would not get the instruction she deserved. I should have communicated more clearly to her, and the class, about what would be expected for our exercises, particularly the ones I couldn't be directly supervising each student. Hopefully, this doesn't happen again.

Dependability – In the context of a team in an office environment, team members must be able to rely on one another to complete assigned tasks. Should a team member not fulfill his or her obligations, the rest of the team will suffer and may not be able to achieve their goals. Similarly, in a taekwondo class, students must be able to rely on each other for many exercises. Holding strikers, providing the proper resistance for pushing exercises, giving feedback on techniques performed, etc. are all vital for the performance of a class. The instructor must know how to structure exercises which will allow the students to develop these skills, as well. As we all know, a class of white belts cannot be depended on to provide appropriate resistance or feedback for a push kick exercise. However, the instructor and senior students working with white belts should be depended on to provide feedback to these students. A class where the instructor cannot be depended upon to discipline unruly students or push students to test their capabilities will likely find him or herself without many students as the basic role students rely upon the instructor for would not be satisfied. I believe my dependability has been proven over the years for both my seniors and juniors and expect this will continue throughout my training.

Impact – For team members to operate effectively, they need to feel the work they are doing is meaningful and they have an impact on the final results produced by the team. An effective team's members feel empowered and know that what they are doing "makes a difference". Certainly an effective class leader has significant impact on the training of the students in that class. But a truly effective class leader empowers the students to feel they are making a meaningful impact on their own progress, as well. Students normally need to feel the exercises being performed are "at their level" so they can attain a feeling of satisfaction upon a "good" technique.

However, instructors also need to provide "stretch" exercises to challenge the students and invigorate them to do better. The effective leader needs to provide motivating and engaging exercises. While it may be useful at times to do "tai chi" style exercises to enable students to feel techniques all the way through and understand where there are weaknesses, constantly doing these exercises could be enervating, sapping the motivation from a student who signed up for taekwondo, not tai chi.

Thus, I feel as an instructor it is important to "feel the room" and sense whether the exercises being done allow the students to feel like they are having impact on their own training. While this is more important for higher ranking students, I try to solicit input at certain times to let the class feel they are learning the things they want to be learning. And while it is also the instructor's responsibility to introduce "new" topics to help focus on building students' skill sets, engaging and motivating students by spending time doing what they want to be doing is also important for their training.

Psychological Safety – The most important factor in effective teams, as discussed by Duhigg, involves the concept of psychological safety. Effective teams allow the members to experiment and try new things without feeling like there would be negative repercussions. Team members feel they have the opportunity to speak up, that everyone is listening to them, and that everyone has the opportunity to be heard. Additionally, he pointed to studies that show groups are much more productive once they know each other. Teams that spent the first five minutes of meetings catching up on each other's lives, rather than jumping straight into the meeting agenda, while less efficient, were found to be more productive. So what does this mean for a taekwondo class or a taekwondo school? I think the applicability of psychological safety is very straight forward.

Class leaders need to get to know the students a bit to make them feel more comfortable. I think this helps in gaining credibility. Showing up a few minutes early for class is important not only for stretching out, but to get to know the fellow students and gain comfort with each other. Once the class starts, the instructor should be actively looking for ways to praise students or provide constructive feedback, not criticize or ridicule students. Students must always feel safe in their training or they won't come back. And when students come back, often for years, the implicit trust and safety offered by the other students and instructors allows for deeper learning. Obviously, for my own training and teaching I continue to follow this logic assiduously.

I believe the UTF should pay attention to and be aware of these important factors to ensure all the instructors make learning for students as productive as possible. Certainly, we have been doing these things to some extent already. But by focusing specifically on providing meaning, structure/clarity, dependability, impact and psychological safety to students, I think we can improve the way taekwondo is taught. This may mean more preparation on the part of the instructors will be required, but student focused preparation should pay off with better learning. Of course, when the composition of a class is not known in advance, it may be difficult to prepare, but by getting to know the students, a teacher can know what is needed for each student when he or she shows up to class. Additionally, instructors who teach many of the same students should share their knowledge about the students to help create a more consistent, learning experience for them.

### **Deliberate Practice**

While certainly repetition is one of the UTF basic training principles, consistent training requires more than simply repeating what has been done in the past (as pointed out in our literature we strive for "aware repetition"). As we know, something repeated wrong only reinforces the error. Practice makes permanent, so the expression goes. This is why our early patterns show our history - they have been repeated the most and, as such, they are the most difficult to change. While practicing the advanced training principle of spontaneous adaptability should theoretically make corrections easier, I've observed in myself and in my seniors that this is extremely difficult to master.

Thus, I have tried to be aware during my repetitions. Rather than rote practicing patterns with no intended purpose, I try to go through them with intent – different intents. Perhaps the intent is merely to “warm up” and move my body. Or perhaps it is to work on a specific fundamental of movement. Or maybe I try to work on cardio/stamina or elongating techniques, connecting from one technique to another and not letting go. The idea is not to fall into a rut, but to reinvent, experiment and become better. I like the idea of always having incremental improvement. If I can improve only 1% each day, that will add up to a lot of improvement! And if I don’t improve, I likely will be regressing. So every day I strive to improve.

Anders Ericsson, in his book *Peak: Secrets from the New Science of Expertise*, discusses the role of *deliberate practice* in becoming proficient in an activity. Activities could vary widely from playing a musical instrument, singing, athletic events or learning to write well. However, they all share the common thread that with deliberate practice you can become much better because “other people have already figured out how to do [this and] effective training techniques have [already] been established.” Thus, pianists today are better than those from 100 years ago because the instruction methods have been built up over the years, using a foundation from prior years. Athletes today are much better than athletes from earlier generations because techniques used today incorporate all the best learning methods discovered over time, allowing individuals to reach higher levels of performance through more effective practice.

Deliberate practice involves “well-defined, specific goals, and often involves improving some aspect of the target performance. It is not aimed at some vague, overall improvement.” Additionally, “you need feedback in order to be able to tell what kind of adjustments you should be making. If you don’t have a clear criterion here for what it is that you were doing, then it’s unclear how you actually are going to improve if you get subsequent opportunities to do the same thing. So anytime you can focus your performance on improving one aspect, that is the most effective way of improving performance. We think of deliberate practice requiring a teacher that actually has had experience of how to help individuals reach very high levels of performance.”

Well, there you have it. Essentially, exactly what we have been working on and teaching in the UTF confirmed by academic research! Thus I need to set specific goals for myself to improve my training and work towards them with supervision and feedback from experienced teachers. Over the years, I have been given specific feedback at Dan reviews. The most common themes going back to colored belt testing include “get lower in your stances”, “focus on precise endpoints”, and “connect the center to the tool more effectively.” These themes (along with others) have been relayed repeatedly. I certainly believe that I have improved on all of them over the years, yet clearly more effort and deliberate practice is required to fully bring these skills to fruition.

So, what do I need to do to improve these things? Ericsson goes on to mention “deliberate practice take[s] place outside one’s comfort zone and requires a student to constantly try things that are just beyond his or her current abilities...thus it demands near-maximal effort which is generally not enjoyable.” So this means I have to challenge myself and be willing to make mistakes. As long as the mistakes don’t lead to injury, I’m OK with making mistakes and putting extra (at times uncomfortable) effort in to avoid autopilot while training. We’ve often

discussed creating exercises for lower belts that force them to autocorrect...if a student is falling over, he or she will instinctively autocorrect to not fall over again the next time the exercise is practiced. For higher level exercises, the mistakes may not be as obvious (although they could be) and will probably require higher levels of awareness on the part of myself and my seniors (and juniors) to identify. Did I pull with the front foot? Was I leaning forward in my stance? Were my knees relaxed to allow a lower stance? Did I start the spiral turn as soon as I should have? How was my center engaged?

This all leads back to one of the core UTF training principles: Awareness.

The only way to change an outcome is to think differently about how I've been arriving at those outcomes. I must continue to learn new ways to think about outcomes. I need to continue to develop my self-awareness to identify the mistakes being made and correct them. This means not going on auto-pilot during patterns, but using the "Little I" to constantly examine what I'm doing to find areas to improve. I'll also need to consciously ask my seniors and fellow students to offer critiques on particular goals i.e. getting lower in my stances.

The principle of awareness encompasses what may be the most difficult thing to teach. An instructor needs to have an inherent amount of self-awareness to be able to understand his/her effect on a class and to perceive that impact on his/her own training. While a lower level student cannot be expected to be aware of subtle technique changes that can be employed to improve the student's force, a student over time is expected to incorporate the teaching received to more easily become aware of missing or mis-executed technique. However, I've noticed some students simply don't have the natural ability to incorporate what has been learned to see it from an outside or objective perspective and make necessary changes to improve. These same students obviously then have difficulty teaching and conveying to other students what needs to be done to learn. This type of student may be able to lead an exercise, but has great difficulty in adapting the exercise for a particular student's needs. Thus, this type of student may be able to lead, but not be able to *instruct*.

The unaware student is one of the most difficult situations for me to work with as an instructor. The unaware student can be told repeatedly, have exercises devised to focus on the weakness, and be explicitly told what to be doing, but the unaware student will not be able to internalize the instruction and will continue to execute techniques without much improvement. The unaware student can also be considered a relative of the overconfident student, the one who believes he needs no instruction because he does everything correctly. Sure, this may be the case for the rare inherently talented student, but not for the vast majority of students.

As for myself, I have continually been working on my self-awareness during pretty much everything I work on in class. As mentioned above, I continue to work to stay off auto-pilot. In conjunction with self-awareness, I'm making the commitment to get in better physical shape (when not riddled with injuries). Particularly, I've noticed the ability to "dig deeper" in techniques and train longer when I'm in better shape. I have a better ability to start a technique "from the beginning" and can focus on extending the duration of acceleration to maximize power. Additionally, I've been commenting to my wife that taekwondo is a lot more fun when

I'm in better shape. The ability to jump higher and start more force from my "strengthened" core makes a big difference in the execution of techniques. Additionally, as I've recently had a procedure called radio frequency ablation (RFA) performed to deaden the "troublesome" nerves in my back, I've also been able to push myself more easily without fear of causing injury.

Going forward, I continue to strive to improve, perhaps one day performing a "perfect" pattern. As we know, it takes a lot of work. A whole lot of work. In his book *Outliers*, Malcom Gladwell discusses the now famous 10,000 hour rule of "mastering" a specific skill. Of course, the 10,000 hours require not just a rote 10,000 hours, but hours with "deliberate practice". Additionally, he points out that if he played piano for 20,000 hours, he would not become another Mozart. There has to be an inherent talent or interest along with proper mentoring and support to bring the skill to a level of expertise. He talks about how the prima ballerina or virtuoso violinist actually has a whole team of people behind him or her because it is impossible to get to those highest levels without high levels of support from others. So, I certainly hope over the coming years, with the support of my family and the UTF, that I can approach a level of expertise with my continued training and deliberate practice.

## **Conclusion**

One of the things I appreciate about the UTF is our willingness to adapt new ideas or use new techniques if they are found to be useful (i.e. changing the default *kaunde jirugi*, introducing the new 4 directional basics). Additionally, I think we recognize that all knowledge doesn't come from within. We understand that learning in other places and having deeper knowledge about a wide variety of subjects allows us to gain new perspectives and deeper understanding of our own training methods and art.

The teaching methods and philosophies discussed in this paper (which I intend to keep using and refining) should be used to help students (and myself) become more proficient and better practitioners of UTF taekwondo.