

A DISCUSSION OF SPARRING/PATTERN/DESTRUCTION

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SPARRING/PATTERN/DESTRUCTION

What type of relationship exists among these three areas of training? How might they be integrated into a student's development? How can they be used as an indicator of the student's technique? How might an instructor use them to further the teaching/learning of Taekwondo? These questions (and perhaps others) will be discussed and analyzed in the following work, submitted as part of my application for 5th Dan.

Individualized discussions of each will be the point of departure. My plan is to look at each separately (knowing all the while that no part is really separate) and then attempt to integrate them into a coherent whole.

SPARRING

There are numerous types of sparring: 3-step, 2-step, 1-step, knife-hand, semi-free, foot sparring, free sparring, and handicapped sparring, to mention some. While each type has its own opportunities for learning and growth, all share some common principles. The most evident of these is the presence of a partner or multiple partners, something not required for patterns or destruction. No matter which type of sparring is being practiced, there is some level of interaction between/among the participants.

Rather than review the textbook definitions and descriptions of sparring, we can look at what benefits might be gleaned from it. One should keep in mind that my approach is certainly not of the "sport" variety...where a student learns how to score more points than the opponent. One can think of constructive (as opposed to destructive) sparring, whereby opportunities for learning are shared by all the participants, as the operative mode. It should be mentioned that an instructor ought to provide the most favorable conditions as are possible for such an atmosphere to exist; this can include a class schedule that regularly contains practice in sparring (and, of course, the other essential areas of training), can be through personal example and also by the proper training and education of his senior students. The attitude of the senior belts goes a long way toward defining the character of a dojang. When a co-operative atmosphere exists, all students can benefit. This is not to say that competitive sparring, such as found in a

tournament, does not have its rightful place in Taekwondo training. Indeed, such activity is desirable on occasion. My point is that on a daily basis, constructive sparring is what the student ought to be practicing.

Sparring is an area of training that provides benefits besides the obvious things such as increased agility, flexibility, and endurance. The ability to act, react, and move quickly and without conscious thought is something the TKD student strives to attain. The more advanced student, already possessing a certain level of skill, strives to further develop and improve his skills. The ability to move quicker or to deliver a more powerful and accurate technique (be it offensive or defensive) is something we all continue to work for. Often it is the "movement without thinking" that provides the greatest challenge. Many Westerners have the need to analyze, conceptualize, or to otherwise "understand" the theory behind things before they can finally internalize them. This need not be the case but all too often is; then the teaching/learning can bog down in question and answer sessions or in lengthy discussions of theory or concepts. Perhaps a more desirable method is to simply "do it." There can always be opportunities for discussion at a later time. Indeed, one possible scenario would be to introduce something in class, work on it with minimal or no discussion, and then discuss and analyze it at a later time. This can provide both the physical practice needed to learn a technique and also the opportunity for mental comprehension and/or understanding of that same technique. As I have discovered over time, the majority of students want a "hard workout" and generally come away from such a class feeling good. How often has a student come away from an "easy" class feeling somehow unsatisfied? I can still hear Master Han saying about a sweaty, hard workout, "they love it!" Of course, this should not be confused with the misconception that good/proper technique is dependent on expending a lot of energy. It is the efficiency of movement (gained through relaxation and the subsequent use of Ki) that helps one develop better technique.

As beginners, we learn simple sparring techniques such as 3-step (maybe this is not so simple for the beginner, but we can consider it as so nonetheless). The rules and parameters are set up for us and we're supposed to operate within them. Points such as "look at your partner's eyes" and "maintain your correct stance" are stressed. As more advanced students, these points have evolved into something else, perhaps "use peripheral vision" or "maintain a flow of Ki" or even "don't think, just be." While practicing sparring over the years we can certainly improve our physical skills (even as we age and supposedly get slower) but we ought to also improve our mental or even spiritual abilities. As humans all of us are imperfect and thereby need reminders of one type or another (a senior telling us is one very common one). There is no reason why any student should not be able to continue improving each day. We need the drive and determination to want to build upon what we already have. This drive

comes from within the person but can (and should) be nurtured by the instructor and the senior belts. I should reiterate that when I say "students" I mean all of us, beginners and instructors alike.

So, what specifically might be learned through sparring? One thing is the ability to act/react without thinking. On one level, it can be said that if the student has to go through a thought process involving selection of the proper tool (be it for attack or defense) and then a decision as to the proper placement of that tool, not to mention the optimal method of delivering that tool to its intended target, it will already be too late. As beginners, we need to actually go through the appropriate steps to learn how to do this. By practicing enough (repetition) over a long enough period of time, we learn how to do things instinctively and automatically. At some point (usually at the Black Belt level) a student will know how to act and react without thinking about the mechanics of the movement(s). For example, if you block a punch headed towards your face with your left inner forearm, you might then counterattack with your left forefist in a forward motion. This brief exchange can occur without you thinking about it, your forearm simply moves to intercept the oncoming punch and then your fist naturally counterattacks. If Ki is the guiding force, this is a desirable situation since the proper use of Ki demonstrates that internalization has taken place. I will point out that the learning process, whereby the student goes from 3-step (where distance is emphasized as well as blocking, retreating, and counterattacking while maintaining stance, posture, and eye contact) to 1-step (where the same basic things are emphasized but are reduced to one step) to free sparring (where again the same things are emphasized but in a dynamic and unpredictable fashion) is the vehicle that enables the student to react without thinking. Time and effort must be spent in order to develop the ability to do so. Surely, the more efficiently and effectively one can block, dodge, and counterattack, the safer one will be.....certainly in the Dojang but also in one's personal life, where the ability to act and react quickly can be a valuable asset.

Another thing that can be learned from sparring is the concept of sparring as an exchange of techniques between/among the participants whereby the opponent is seen as an extension of oneself rather than as a separate entity. Keep in mind that this is a concept.....sparring is not the same as street fighting. If one ever needs to defend himself or family for real, rules used in class or tournaments do not apply. One must do whatever is necessary to disable or neutralize a serious attacker. And, of course, one certainly needs to exercise caution when working with any partner/opponent. That said, the idea/concept of sparring with what is then essentially oneself is an interesting one. Unlike pattern practice, where the student defends against and counterattacks imaginary opponent(s), sparring with another student provides an opportunity for an exchange of techniques; an ebb and flow of defense and offense in a free-form situation. One "uses" the opponent's technique as a prelude to his own, and vice-

versa. This type of ongoing exchange can demonstrate the beauty of Taekwondo; it can be seen as another example of a martial Art (this time in more of an external or demonstration) sense.

There are, as previously mentioned, numerous types of sparring. Even though they may differ (prearranged versus spontaneous) in external form, they all share in providing opportunities for the student to internalize the learning process and consequently apply that knowledge into action. How then, does sparring compliment pattern practice?

PATTERN

I have heard it said that "when one practices patterns, he is practicing his Art." I have always thought this to be an interesting and factual statement. Of course, there can always be a situation where a student simply goes through the motions/steps of a pattern with little or no effort behind them...this is not what my discussion will focus on. I must mention that all too often this is the case and we, as instructors, ought to try to eliminate such practice and strive to get our students to put genuine effort into their pattern (as well as all other areas of training) practice. This said, let us look at patterns a bit closer.

Patterns are individual movements (basics) and groups of movements against an imaginary opponent(s) in a predetermined or fixed sequence. They not only include the application of the theory of power but can also show the characteristic beauty of Taekwondo. Master Han used to judge a transfer student's ability not by sparring or destruction but by observing his patterns. They can indicate a student's level of skill/expertise and can serve as an inspiring demonstration of TKD to the general public. It is also said that the student who excels at patterns will also spar well. I have found this to generally be true. The time and dedication required to perfect one's patterns will carry over into the other areas of one's training. The ability to deliver a powerful technique in a pattern (using the theory of power and using Ki) naturally carries over into the ability to deliver a powerful technique anytime and anywhere. This is one reason why patterns and sparring compliment each other. It is difficult to do one well and not also do the other well. When one practices dallyon and basics, he is also practicing and preparing for both pattern and sparring. The same basic movements (mechanically speaking and also considering the proper usage of Ki) are involved. It is simply the external application that differs. The person ought to remain the same...focused, calm, and completely in control of himself and the situation. I suppose that a Master is a person who, among other things (such as dedication to

spreading the Art), has internalized this process and therefore naturally applies it in all that he does.

Too little time is spent on practicing and perfecting patterns. When they are practiced during class very little attention is paid to details and fine points. Often this is due to a lack of knowledge on the part of the instructor or senior leading the class session. Further complicating the matter is the situation that exists where the instructors and seniors are doing the same patterns differently. This causes confusion for the students who are looking to the seniors for leadership and clarification. While it is normal for individuals to have slight variations in their delivery of the same technique, the higher-ranking seniors should all be "on the same page" when it comes to patterns. How can the Art continue on (in traditional form) to new generations when the patterns are continually being corrupted? One does not have to go far to see evidence of this. Sometimes while observing colored belts performing their patterns I am astounded to see not only a lack of application of Ki and the theory of power but also the absence of fundamental elements such as correct stance and/or tool focus and placement. In many cases this is the fault of the senior and not of the individual student (who is, after all, following the instructions of his senior). I do not offer a solution to this problem here, but submit that it be addressed soon.

In a similar fashion to the process mentioned in my earlier discussion of sparring, the effort made by the student (over time, through repetition) to perfect his pattern by addressing such issues as diagram, posture, tension/relaxation, realism, and knowing the purpose of the movements is the important thing. If a student practices diligently he will, eventually, go a long way towards perfecting his pattern. By doing this he becomes one with his Art and can consequently pass his knowledge on to others.

In a physical sense, when one becomes proficient at performing his patterns he improves his sparring as well. By moving fluidly and without stiffness, using Ki to move and deliver a tool to a specific target, and by grouping movements together in a logical fashion, one can apply this ability to (a) sparring opponent(s). Again, while there is an external application, internalization is the key point. If one has developed the ability to use his Ki in an efficient and economical way, he will benefit in numerous ways. Better health is foremost among them....how often will a student practice "hard" and then be sore the next day? By efficient usage of Ki, this can be reduced or eliminated. If proper usage of the theory of power is to be attained, then relaxation is essential. In order to attain and maintain a relaxed state, one needs to use Ki. In this way, technique can improve and the student will realize significant results from better training. Often, one must perform a pattern a few times to eliminate muscular tension and then "throw it away;" only then will he be able to execute the pattern correctly. In sparring, the quicker one can move, the better will he be able to attack and counterattack. Just as with the correct performance of patterns

(internalization of proper technique), so too in sparring that the internal exercise becomes the most important thing. Make no mistake, one still has a partner/opponent to deal with; but one is also dealing with oneself at the same time. Such is the dichotomy of martial arts training; what appears to be external is simultaneously internal. Again, as mentioned earlier, perhaps it can be said that the Master is the person who does not differentiate between these; that he is a person who does not start and stop but rather continually demonstrates that he is one with his Art by applying his (advanced) training to all areas of his life. Personally I have no particular desire to be called "Master Helman." If, by some course of events, I ever attained the Master level it would be of much greater importance to know that I have fully gained control of myself and my abilities rather than the title I would have. While I do not exclude anything from the realm of possibility, my sights are currently set on learning and passing on the new patterns of our system. There is more than enough work in this to keep me occupied for years to come! I also hope to somehow be involved with all our Black Belts in standardizing the way we do the patterns.

DESTRUCTION

On its basic level, destruction can be seen as the physical application of the theory of power to a solid target. Such target(s) can vary in degree of strength and manner of presentation to the student, i.e. speed break or number/type of holder(s), the number of boards, tiles, bricks, etc. and even the height/distance of the targets. It is also possible to drop a board and require the student to break it in mid-air. Further, in a demonstration or test situation, the number of stations and the manner in which the student goes from one station to another is a critical factor. If one has forged his tools well and has the confidence to apply them to the targets, he should have little or no problem in successfully breaking (aka destruction). Of course, what should be and what actually is are not always the same thing.

How does one forge his tools? Repetition is the most important factor. A student has to spend enough time (and what determines "enough" varies with each student) hitting a practice target or training aid to toughen and strengthen the skin and bones in order to build up the physical strength needed to prevent injury while destroying the target. There really are no shortcuts in this; the human body needs to be fortified through

repetition. In my earlier days of practice, I went through many layers of skin on my knuckles before they reached some level of toughness. I must confess that lately I have not given the time and effort to this that I should. A student needs to find time apart from classes for this practice. I have not done so.

A factor in destruction that needs to be emphasized is the component of the theory of power known as concentration. In addition to forging strong tools (through dallyon), the proper application of those tools to specific targets is essential to successful destruction technique. How often has a story been reported where a person punches someone and consequently breaks his own hand? It may not be so much that the wrong tool was used, rather it was more likely that the tool was too weak to withstand the impact without injury. It is possible that the tool was not focused properly (a lack of concentration). Witness a forefist that strikes a target (such as two boards) without concentrating the force of the impact on the first two knuckles, all the while with the wrist bent upward. There is nothing but air behind the tool (forefist). When the fist is properly aligned the entire arm/body is behind the fist. This adds more mass to the tool. Add to this the power of the properly focused tool (whereby proper alignment and relaxation consequently allow for an unimpeded flow of energy and acceleration) and the result is greatly magnified. Striking with the properly aligned tool will allow energy to flow through the tool into the target with maximum result. Further adding the application of Ki will do even more to add to the power of the technique. When the student is able to combine these (and the other parts of the theory of power) elements simultaneously, the results will be impressive. I repeat that the student needs to spend considerable time and effort in strengthening his tools and in learning to apply the theory of power correctly.

In a similar fashion to observing pattern practice, the seniors ought to suggest training methods suitable for the juniors to learn and practice this process. Sometimes it will mean practicing with the junior and other times it will mean giving an assignment, so to speak, for the junior to practice on his own. At other times, correction of improper technique must be done to guide the junior towards improvement. The attitude employed by the senior in this correction/instruction is important for multiple reasons. This goes along with the creation of the positive atmosphere that I mentioned earlier in this paper: we should be desirous of an atmosphere where learning is fostered by an ongoing relationship between junior and senior. Criticism should be given and taken in the spirit of mutual understanding and learning. All too often a senior who thinks he knows what he is talking about gives advice or correction that is not accurate. Sometimes advice is given in a condescending manner. On the other hand, a junior sometimes fails to be open to criticism and takes the advice/correction in the wrong way. We need to foster an ongoing relationship among all students that is open and in the best spirit of mutual co-operation.

As mentioned previously, the effort required to learn something fully (be it patterns, sparring, or the ability to demonstrate destruction technique) is what makes for a more-or-less advanced student. It appears to me to be a natural process that creates overlapping areas of training. By this I mean that when one practices diligently in one area, other areas will also benefit. Although nothing is guaranteed, generally speaking when someone does one thing well, he tends to do other things well also....the student who excels in patterns usually does well in sparring; the student who can demonstrate powerful destruction technique generally can apply that power into sparring and patterns both.

SUMMARY

As mentioned previously, no single area of training is truly separate from all areas of training. This statement is based on the assumption that when one is training, he is doing so with a full and genuine effort geared towards developing and improving his technique in an attempt to maximize his potential. If a student is practicing dallyon then he is also practicing fundamentals. When practicing fundamentals the student is also practicing patterns (since patterns are, in a simplistic view, individual or groups of fundamentals). When practicing patterns, sparring is being practiced (since sparring is, somewhat, the application of fundamental and pattern techniques). Our training in Taekwondo is an ongoing process that cannot really be dissected to the point that when practicing one thing we are only practicing that individual thing. Class sessions obviously are broken down into separate and distinct areas of training and practice. As advanced students, we know that one element is part of other elements. Our training as a whole is greater than the sum of its individual parts.

One thing we might all work for is the idea that patterns be standardized. Not only do I refer to terminology, stances, and the position of blocking/attacking tools but also to the way that they are taught. In particular we might consider the idea of the pattern being performed as a story, a dramatic exposition with pauses and exclamation points (where appropriate) in addition to executing the techniques with an emphasis on Ki application for delivery of maximum power and beauty. If we are to continue teaching Taekwondo as a martial ART then we need to stress the importance of performing patterns as an expression of ourselves; as meditation in motion so to speak. So too might we also emphasize while teaching/practicing sparring that an internal application is taking place as well as the obvious external application (with the partner). I view this type of approach as indicative of the artistic aspect of our training.....we are not simply technicians or athletes. Any person, regardless of

physical stature and/or ability can benefit from Taekwondo, be it physically, mentally, and/or spiritually. In the matter of destruction, the public will see the physical demonstration of a student's ability to apply the theory of power (the board breaks); those who devote themselves to the ongoing study and teaching of their Martial Art will also see the internal growth of the person/student. This is, after all, one of my main reasons for being an instructor...to help others grow in the same framework that I have come to love. I honestly believe that a student who surpasses his instructor in skill and ability has learned well. It is indeed a compliment to the instructor when the student goes on to "bigger and better things" as a result of the instruction received.

Our training is ongoing. Each of us can learn something new or can improve on what we already have every day. This can be in terms of patterns, sparring, destruction, or in anything else pertaining to Taekwondo and to all aspects of our lives. If we can carry over the dedication and effort given in improving technique to our families, careers, and our other pursuits then we will have come a long way towards building the more peaceful world we promise in the Student Oath. The application of the Tenets to our daily lives is a goal of Taekwondo. So too is the application of the physical benefits we gain from our training. Perhaps the combination of these efforts can help all of us lead a more productive existence. In sharing our knowledge and experience we can influence our juniors to carry on the learning and subsequent teaching of Taekwondo as a true Martial Art.

FOLLOW-UP TO 5th DAN PAPER

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Spiritual abilities, in the context of their previous mention, are tied into the idea of Moral Culture, the integration of Taekwondo Tenets into our everyday lives. Since we strive to become one with our Art, this integration is crucial to the ongoing process of our development as Martial Artists. By going beyond the mundane aspects of our training (and keeping in mind that we don't actually "leave behind" the everyday physical parts of our training and that, in fact, we continue to develop that physical practice) we are, perhaps, better able to nurture our spiritual abilities.

As with other philosophical topics, a definition of Spiritual Abilities is rather hard to come by. When I think of this term I think of something outside of oneself, of something greater than an individual. Without getting religious or bringing in the notion of the Divine, these abilities (or perhaps better termed as aspirations) help define a person more so than his/her physical abilities. Instead of seeing someone and thinking, "There goes the person who broke seven boards with a fingertip thrust!" we

might think more in terms of "There goes the person who has good character." While the ability to accomplish physical feats is desirable, more so is the ability to positively affect one's community and even the world-at-large. A combination of the two is, I think, a worthy goal.

I don't know that the serious TKD student consciously and deliberately attempts to nourish his spiritual side (or abilities, or aspirations, or whatever term might be used) through his ongoing training. This nourishment can be seen as a natural result of dedicated training rather than as a goal of it. In fact, attempting to train with the idea of spiritual growth as an outcome may be counter-productive and not accomplish the desired result. By intentionally trying to better himself spiritually, the student can become too involved with his own growth and consequently interfere with the natural process. It's like trying to relax or fall asleep.....sometimes you just can't force yourself do it.

In terms of my discussion of sparring, I had mentioned that while improving our physical skills (over time and through repetition) we ought to also improve our spiritual abilities. I did not necessarily mean that we should purposely focus on our character development. My intention was to illustrate that while working to improve physically we can go beyond ourselves and help contribute to others' growth and development. By so doing we can also help maintain and promote the Art in its traditional form. It requires something of a selfless dedication to the Art to help accomplish this. I do not mean that a person should neglect his daily training, but rather that each of us can and should help others to improve themselves too.

As I think about it, I wonder if "Traditional Taekwondo" was intended as a journey towards Moral Culture or as simply a military discipline for soldiers defending their country. I also wonder if there was any specific intention at all. As countries move from times of war to peacetime, people have more time to devote to pursuits besides military preparedness. Perhaps this is when the higher, nobler pursuits humanity is capable of are developed. At any rate, today we are able to practice a Martial Art without having to overly concern ourselves with battles and hand-to-hand combat. While the need for effective self-defense will always exist, we are fortunate to be able to also develop ourselves as more complete people. We can look at ways to contribute to society rather than having to defend it. This is not to say that there are no problems in the inner cities and elsewhere. Gangs, crime and other unpleasant things will be with us for a long time to come. We should be involved with community service, as many of us currently are.

Again referring to the earlier discussion of sparring patterns and destruction, the physical improvement (and the dedication required for it) can and often does lead to the mental and spiritual development of the practitioner. Even if I have not clearly

defined Spiritual Abilities, I hopefully have given the reader a general understanding of my meaning. If the development of Moral Culture is a primary goal of our training in Taekwondo then we must go beyond the physical. I recall a Black Belt promotion test many years ago (I was present as an observer) when the candidates were asked to add another tenet to the existing seven (it might even have been before 1982 and therefore five). In my mind that day I came up with Ku-Do (self-discovery). I am ABSOLUTELY NOT advocating we add another tenet, but simply am pointing out that Ku-Do can be seen as a goal we attempt to achieve. An entire discussion can be devoted to this topic at some future time. I will say now that seeing oneself as part of a whole rather than as a separate and distinct entity is a valid way of looking at the world. This is perhaps a discussion of Western versus Eastern (religious) philosophy that I do not want to enter now. Perhaps also this is one area of the "Big I versus Little I" question that people are sometimes required to write about.

In conclusion, I repeat that there is no distinct definition of "Spiritual Abilities." Whether or not I accurately applied this term, my intention was basically to advance the idea that the Taekwondo student (at whatever level) needs to do more than simply develop better technique if he wants to honestly consider himself a student of the Martial Arts. It is through the process of ongoing, repetitive practice that one improves both his physical and non-physical (spiritual, mental) abilities. One goal of the Martial Artist is the notion of self-improvement. This improvement takes numerous forms, apart from the physical. As one journeys along the path of self-discovery one comes across opportunities for learning and for growth. Those who take advantage of such opportunities have the best chance to nourish their intellect and their spirituality. In this way perhaps they become more complete Martial Artists.