

Loyalty and Taekwon-Do
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Essay for 5th Dan Grading November 2013

“Always be loyal..” and “Never betray the instructor”. Such excerpts from the Student/Instructor Relationship section of the Condensed Encyclopaedia (p. 45) demonstrate that loyalty is afforded a great deal of importance in Taekwon-Do philosophy. As a martial art steeped in Asian history and tradition, this is not particularly surprising. There are countless historical examples of rather dramatic displays of loyalty that have become legendary, such as servants willingly giving their life in order to protect their master. “The scholar does not consider gold and jade to be precious treasures, but loyalty and good faith.” Confucius. Outside of martial arts however the importance placed on loyalty is arguably on the decline in all societies. For example, more frequent job turnover becoming the norm rather than the traditional concept of working for one company your entire working life.

Within Taekwon-Do, there are various potential relationships where loyalty can be considered: that of a student to an instructor, a student or instructor/club to a region, a student or instructor/club to a national organisation, or a national to an international organisation. Each of these situations will have unique considerations, but some generic principles apply across them all.

I believe quite strongly that loyalty is a two-way street i.e. it must be earned rather than simply deserved for its own sake. Loyalty is typically built up over time, and its strength and quality depend on the culmination of what has occurred over that duration. It falls therefore on the instructor or organisation to act in a way that builds trust and respect, and loyalty will naturally develop from this. It is however rare nowadays to have someone who is unquestionably loyal, and at times this loyalty may be tested if there are negative experiences or someone is presented with a perceived “better offer”. I believe that as martial art practitioners we should definitely encourage the concept of loyalty. A balance should be attempted between encouraging a collective sense of unity and loyalty, and the maintenance of independent thinking by individuals. It is not necessarily disloyal to challenge something, however the process via which this is done is crucial.

For example if a student wishes to question an instructor’s teaching this should not be done in front of the rest of the class or behind the instructor’s back, rather in a respectful manner outside of class. Or if individuals have significant concerns about the conduct of their national or international body they should have the opportunity to express these through ideally previously agreed channels. Only if these initial attempts are ignored should things be taken further, but again via established protocols.

The most common scenario in Taekwon-Do where loyalty is questioned is where a student expresses a desire to switch to a nearby club/instructor. The potential reasons for this are varied and often complex and interpersonal. Certainly changing clubs is to be actively discouraged but overall my attitude is that the

student's ongoing development should be prioritised i.e. it is preferable to have them training productively and happily in a different club than discontentedly stagnating in the status quo and likely eventually stopping training altogether. This will often require an instructor to control their ego and behave in the best interests of their student. I have certainly had a number of students where it has become apparent that I am not the best person to continue to be their head instructor, and I like to think I have facilitated their transition and therefore ongoing development. However the process by which this is done is critical. Respect must be shown for the current instructor by communicating about the issues openly, which not only gives the opportunity for potential resolution of these, but at least ensures that due processes are followed. The responsibility for doing this rests primarily with the student, but the instructor of the potential new club plays an important role in liaising with both parties to ensure this has been done acceptably before formally accepting the student.

Less commonly, a club may explore changing to a neighbouring region, possibly for logistical reasons but again more commonly due to interpersonal conflicts. At times this may be unavoidable, however an instructor considering this needs to take into account the history of the club and the region. The resultant disruption to longer-term continuity must be weighed up against the typically quite recent, and in the greater context often quite minor, problems. Similar considerations should be made when an individual or club may be thinking about leaving their national organisation, but even more so given that this will have more significant repercussions and is less likely to be reversible. And this is amplified further in the case of a national organisation looking at breaking ties with an international organisation to which it has been affiliated. In these situations where a club or organisation is involved, then the decision-makers are obliged to act only after very careful consideration, given the impact on their members.

It is interesting to consider to what or whom one's loyalty actually lies. For example in professional team sports nowadays players will often change clubs relatively frequently. Supporters will usually quite quickly support the new player that replaces them, suggesting that their loyalty is to the "shirt" rather than the person wearing it. "My kind of loyalty was loyalty to one's country, not to... its office holders." Mark Twain. The current situation of division into a number of factions within the ITF demonstrates that the concept of loyalty is not always straightforward. Each group may well genuinely profess to being loyal to General Choi and his legacy, but for different reasons. Sceptics will say that many of these interpretations of loyalty are driven by self-serving motives. Such motives are not evident until they are put to the test, and in our organisation I hope this never occurs.

"Loyalty means nothing unless it has at its heart the absolute principle of self-sacrifice." Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924), 28th US President. So it is interesting to ask what the quality of loyalty is within our organisation. When it is demanded under duress then necessarily a very superficial form of loyalty will exist that will be prone to breaking down when tested. Given our relatively long history and the genuine quality of the individuals leading us, my sense it that it is strong. There will always be individuals or small groups that bring this into question on

a small scale, but this is probably unavoidable and should not distract from the vast majority that display their loyalty week in week out at clubs and events around the country.