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THIRD DAN GRADING ESSAY BY STEPHEN MARTIN II DAN

*THE APPLICATION OF THE ART THROUGH OBSERVING, PRACTISING
AND TEACHING*

There are two sides to TKD, the physical and the art. Each of us as TKD practitioners has developed a philosophy on TKD, the art aspect, which develops as you train without conscious thought. This essay is a representation of my philosophy from the perspective of the observer, the practitioner and the teacher.

The white belt learns that observing is an important first step to learning a new technique. Eg: watch first, then do, then teach. First we see with our eyes how it is supposed to look, then we attempt it and see that it may not be as straight forward as it appears, then we teach it and know if we truly understand it. This process is used in many fields to teach, learn and develop new skills.

Looking back and reflecting on my journey, I can see how each step in the process combines to form the philosophy which underpins my TKD practice.

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“ The scariest moment is just before you start” Stephen King

Why do people start to train in a martial art or in TKD itself? Improved self defence, physical fitness, increased stamina, improved mental alertness, social interaction as part of a group with a common mindset, imitating their idols or peers, all are valid reasons.

My own story of how I started is probably similar to many other parents, being dragged along by children to after school activities. Sitting and watching their children and thinking why should they have all the fun?

As you watch your children progress through the grades, you can observe a positive change in their self-confidence and their attitude. They learn that to achieve their goals they need to work hard and persevere, and that everyone has the ability to succeed with determination. These lessons are valuable and applicable in life, as they face challenges they have the mindset to work through them rather than giving up at the first hurdle. This change can be the inspiration to join in and learn yourself.

TKD is a great way if you are looking for an activity that you can learn alongside your children working together on a common goal, training for gradings, tournaments and simply having an on hand training partner. Each of you will bring your own strengths and weaknesses. By having a consistent training partner, you can develop and assist each other to improve and correct each others techniques, motivate each other to train and attain goals, and also add a competitive edge , pushing each other forward.

The journey begins from the observer's perspective, just as the techniques follow a straight line to the objective target, the new observer can easily see that the techniques are effective proving TKD to be a modern and practical martial art. In comparison to some other martial arts, it is easy to see the self defence applications of the techniques and how these could be used in real life situations.

The observer can see an ambidextrous sport (art) where the brain is in training as much as if not more so than the body. This has advantages for young and young at heart. If watched and trained properly, the training of the indomitable spirit can be seen. Somehow training to fight creates a paradox, lowering the need to fight.

However, the white belt sees just the obvious, the tip of the iceberg. They have no understanding of the history of the patterns, the importance of the tenets, the etiquette which underpins the art, or the art itself. This develops as they move through the grades and is recognised through the meanings of the belt colours.

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“ It does not matter how slowly you go as long as you do not stop ” Confucius

While training in TKD hold yourself to account, you correct yourself, challenge yourself, assess yourself. Your results are a direct reflection of the amount of effort, practice and the attitude that you put in. This relates to both the physical and the mental aspects. Success in training can sometimes depend on the ability to sustain discomfort for long periods when all it takes to relieve the discomfort is to stop. Winning the battle against the urge to stop, you learn that your body can always do more than the mind thinks it can.

Practice like you play and play like you practice. Many students come to class with their energy set low and they spend the whole class in an effort trying to conserve energy. Why? This is the worst attitude, it's a waste of their time and their instructor's.

The mat is not a rest area. If you are not training, go rest somewhere else. Lying on the mat in a prone position is only justified if you are injured and waiting for an ambulance. If you are found lying on the mat and have no injury, one will be provided for you . F.J.Lovet

Of the many things I have learnt, effective breathing is one of the most important, correct breathing is the key to success. Breathing properly could literally save your life. Learning how to breathe and relax under pressure, such as in a surprise attack situation, the ability to control your breathing, conserve energy and remain focused, give you the advantage to defeat your adversary(s).

If you can breathe you can think, if you can think you can fight, if you can fight, you can overcome. The mind cannot function without the body and the body has a limit without the mind. When we train, focus on training both aspects, mind and body.

It is interesting to note how someone's breathing can give you insight into how they will spar. By noticing these physical signs you can evaluate their level of exhaustion, and in turn their mental acuity.

Learn to work on your focus. There are three types of focus, focusing your mind, your eyes and your body. As you progress through the grades of TKD, focus inherently becomes part of your training as you discover and learn new techniques and to incorporate all aspects of self into your training. Repetition of TKD techniques without focus is unhelpful. Using emotion and focus while practising techniques aids muscle memory and recall, the goal of any practice, to improve speed, accuracy and form.

Learning should not stop if you think your technique is at the conclusion, you have stopped the learning process. This is why becoming a black belt is just the beginning. My favourite hand technique is the backfist being among the fastest hand techniques with it's natural whipping motion and relaxed delivery and delivery angles contradictory to punching angles. In summary, the black belt is just the start, there are so many new techniques to learn but even more important is finding what techniques are useful to you and refining these with speed and efficacy.

As Bruce Lee said “ at the start a punch and kick is just a punch and kick. Then you learn there is so much more to it, then you come full circle back to a punch is just a punch, don't think about it just let it happen”.

There are many techniques in TKD which provide the practitioner with a range of possible responses to any situation. Knowing which technique to employ is a part of the learning process. Just because you learn to kick high and do impressive flying kicks, this may not be the most effective technique in a real life situation. It is the ability to differentiate between theory and practice that separates the yellow belt from the black belt practitioner. As you learn, you need to develop mindfulness of the composition of TKD, adapting what you have learnt from a theoretical focus to everyday practicality. Eg: in patterns, you end each movement sharply before moving onto the next technique. However, in self defence to be effective you need to employ techniques with fluid motion, being flexible and reactive.

Another learning aspect is to recognise that many techniques require a mix of skills. Eg: learning to launch with sudden speed requires paradoxically skill at relaxation. By training in front of a mirror, you can assess your technique and fine tune your responses. This also will show you how you appear to your opponents. This can highlight any given “tells” you do in sparring, where your weaknesses and strengths lie.

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“ when you learn teach, when you get give” Maya Argebu

The first time you teach a class makes you realise that martial arts is a lot more than fighting, and that being entrusted to pass on the art is an honour and privilege that all students should experience. You gain understanding about yourself and the relevance of the tenets is reinforced. Never are you so tested to uphold these values as when you put yourself in front of a group of students.

The instructor can deliver a lengthy lecture in a monotone voice but unless the speaker begins to insert images, emotion or excitement, the students will not absorb much of the information and become bored, distracted and unmotivated to train at their full capability. I feel the intrinsic value of TKD is fun, the art should enhance not subtract from your student's lives.

An effective instructor is one who is excited about the subject, who has energy and enthusiasm. They are the role models and need to display the attitude and behaviours that they want to see reflected back in their students.

The instructor's role is to motivate and facilitate learning. Unskilled people are often unskilled because they lack the willpower. They may be good, have natural ability, but they find excuses for not practicing. Instead of wishing they are good at something, they need to focus on what they have to give in order to be skilled. If you want to get you have to give. As an instructor, you need to learn from each student, what they have to give. You need to put your pride and ego aside. Some concepts are harder to teach than others. I find the most difficult aspects to teach relate to timing, intuition, rhythm and distance, all of which need to come together.

TKD aim is to also educate people on how they should behave inside and outside of the dojang. The etiquette is part of what separates TKD from a sport to a martial art. With the bow at the forefront, symbolising respect for your opponent and yourself, and the history and values upon which it was developed. When teaching, the difference between a fighting art and a person who thinks they are a fighter, the martial artist is patient, undistracted, without ego, waiting for the enemy to be agitated. The untrained fighter does not train regularly, argues, always plotting, wants to win, but most seriously they can do bodily harm. TKD should be a practice for health not for fighting.

I think to be a good teacher you have to be a good entertainer. That can mean many things whether you are an entertaining person or your teaching methods are fun. This is particularly relevant when teaching children, as they become easily bored or distracted. The use of games can be used to motivate, improve flexibility, physical fitness and focus, as they learn by participating and being involved.

To get the most out of your TKD training, the physical aspects you need to develop are strong abdominals, strong legs, and flexibility. The best way to develop speed is to learn the technique correctly, then practice it and in time you will find that the speed evolved naturally. Speed is the result of practice. I try to use exercises or drills with this in mind. Part of delivering an effective lesson is in the planning. Without preparation and forethought, lessons can be disjointed and unfocused, a disservice to the students and yourself.

The most important lesson I have learnt from Bruce Lee's inspiration, comes from the movie *Fist of fury*.....don't accept biscuits from your students.

" A blackbelt only covers two inches of your ass, you have to cover the rest"
Royce Gracie

