

Taekwondo

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Brief Overview/Basic Philosophy:

Taekwondo is a Korean martial art emphasizing in kicking. Developed in the mid-20th Century and drawing upon millennia of Korean and East Asian martial tradition, it is currently one of the world's most popular martial arts. Although powerful hand techniques and throws are taught as part of the curriculum, taekwondo is most known for the variety and sophistication of its kicking techniques. As a martial art it is a holistic approach to hand-to-hand combat and general physical and mental wellness and agility. As a sport it is an Olympic event contested by almost one hundred countries at the most recent Olympiad.

History and Origins:

Taekwondo is the product of a martial tradition over two millennia in the making. The earliest known reference to empty-handed fighting arts are from paintings on the walls of a Goguryeo dynasty tomb built between 3 and 427 AD. Historians speculate that warriors from the neighboring Silla Dynasty learned of these arts (most probably *taekkyeon*) from the Goguryeo prior to this in order to fend off Japanese pirates. Although no specific evidence exists, the tradition of the Hwarang ("Flowering Knights") of the Silla Dynasty holds that their training included the predecessor arts of taekwondo, and this tradition has captured the mind of the Korean public in the latter half of the 20th Century.

The indigenous arts fell into disuse in the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1897) as Neo-Confucianism became ascendant, and the practice of martial arts by civilians, now regarded as lowly and base and eventually banned, was pushed underground, where it remained until the mid-20th Century.

During the Japanese occupation of Korea (1910-1945) the two main arts practiced by the Koreans were *ssireum* (folk wrestling) and *gungdo* (archery). In 1946 many martial arts schools began to open in the newly-free Korea by practitioners who had studied the Japanese arts during the occupation. With the knowledge of the Japanese arts, and the long history of Korean martial arts as prelude, the groundwork was set for a new, Korean martial art. Masters in different schools began to innovate individually until 1952, when South Korean President Syngman Rhee asked the practitioners to unify under one umbrella organization. General Choi Hong Hi, a central figure in the development of this new art, coined the name *taekwondo* (roughly meaning “the foot hand way”), and unification of the style finally came with the founding of the Korea Taekwondo Association in 1959.

Due to a controversy involving Choi, he and the KTA parted ways, and Choi formed the International Taekwon-Do Federation in 1966. Seeking to promote the art internationally, he sent teachers to countries all over the world, including North Korea. This led to his expulsion from South Korea and the abandonment of the ITF in favor of the WTF. Although the ITF now exists as three groups claiming to be the sole legitimate owners of the name (one located in Vienna, one in the UK, and one in Spain), the sport can generally be understood to be divided into two styles, the WTF and the ITF. In subsequent years, the WTF, based at the Kukkiwon in Seoul, adopted a more sport-oriented Olympic style (a/k/a, “Kukkiwon-style”), whereas the ITF

tended to remain true to its traditional martial arts roots. Since then, several other federations and styles have grown up around the world with several different philosophies and masters. However, the WTF and ITF remain far and away the two largest and most influential federations, and are therefore the focus of this article.

Training and Techniques:

Taekwondo has two basic areas of training – forms (*poomsae*) and sparring (*gyeorugi*).

Poomsae are pre-arranged patterns of striking and blocking movements that one must master to move to the next belt level. There is little uniformity from school to school, especially at lower levels, and some *poomsae* include weapons. However, what is common across all *poomsae* is the attention to detail and execution critical for mastery of the moves that make up the *poomsae*. *Poomsae* are designed to build muscle memory, kinetics, and strength that are necessary for the martial artist to be successful in hand-to-hand combat. The moves in each *poomsae* also help condition and limber the practitioner, promoting athleticism and general health as well.

Gyeorugi is the other component of taekwondo training. Most often in a school the *gyeorugi* is conducted with “no touch” rules, which means that all punches and kicks are restricted to a light touch so as to minimize injuries in practice. Depending on the size of the school, students may spar against others of the same skill level or those of a different skill level, and those of a similar weight class or of a different weight class. *Gyeorugi* is meant to help put the skills learned from a student’s *poomsae* into practice by placing him into a more “real life” situation with another

human. It also helps to quicken the physical reflexes and hone the mental sharpness needed to be effective in a hand-to-hand combat situation.

Uniforms and Rankings:

Taekwondo practitioners typically wear uniforms (*dobok*) that are highly similar to the *keikogi* worn by students of Okinawan judo (and later, Japanese karate). The average *dobok* has slightly wider pants and sleeves and a V-neck instead of a double-breasted jacket-style front, in order to more closely resemble the traditional Korean dress, the *hanbok*. The *dobok* is usually slightly heavier than a karate *gi*, but is still a light cotton or polyester-cotton mix meant to be cool, yet strong. Most schools require a white *dobok* with a white collar, but there is no standard for the art and, as a result, a high degree of variation.

Students advance down the path of taekwondo knowledge in steps known as *geup*. Again, owing to the lack of a standard promotional system in the sport, there is a great deal of variation in rank and testing, but generally there are ten junior *geup*, symbolized by colored belts, and nine senior *geup*, symbolized by a black belt plus markings for the particular rank, here known as *dan*, the wearer has attained. The junior *geup*'s belts start with white (often seen as purity or a blank piece of paper) and progress through the colors yellow, orange, green, blue, purple, and red. Depending upon the school, the colors may be augmented with a stripe to indicate a higher *geup*, or the belts may consist of two adjacent colors to represent the rank between the *geup* represented by the individual colors. However the school wishes to indicate the *geup*, they all agree that a student must pass through all ten *geup* for the privilege of joining the senior *dan* and wearing a black belt.

Upon attaining a black belt, the taekwondo practitioner usually gains some degree of responsibility and the right to be addressed by a particular title. Also, the association to which the school belongs has much more control over the testing standards for advancing from one dan to the next. In addition, though an exceptional student may be able to progress through the junior ranks within a matter of a few years, gaining promotion from one *dan* to the next may take several years to accomplish. And, in contrast with the lower *geup*, *dan* testing may involve written tests as well as forms and sparring.

In the WTF, the first three *dan* are classified as instructors, *dan* four through six are called masters, and *dan* seven through nine are grand masters. Individual schools may promote their students up to the fifth *dan* under the auspices of the local taekwondo association, but the national association must test the sixth and seventh *dan*, and applicants for the eighth and ninth *dan* may only test at the WTF's headquarters in Seoul. Additionally, the time between *dan* testing increases by one year from *dan* to *dan*. In other words, a first *dan* student must wait one year before testing for second *dan*, a second *dan* must wait two years before testing for the third *dan*, the third *dan* student must wait three years before testing for fourth *dan*, and so on.

Although there are three distinct divisions of the ITF, they have agreed to test black belts under the same set of criteria. The ITF calls first through third *dan* "assistant instructor," fourth through six are "instructor," seven and eight are "master," with ninth *dan* being called "grand master." The waiting requirements are similar to WTF rules, but can be shortened by several months by participating in certain ITF training courses and events and receives satisfactory test

results at them. In general, an ITF-certified instructor can test up to half his *dan* degree (a fourth *dan* can test an applicant for second *dan*, a sixth *dan* can test an applicant for third *dan*, and so on). A seventh *dan* may administer the fifth *dan* test, an eighth *dan* may administer the sixth *dan* test, and all subsequent *dan* tests are conducted by the ITF's Master Promotion Committee.

Terms and Teachings:

General Choi Hong Hi developed his *Theory of Power* by studying biomechanics and physics, which heavily influenced the development of the new art of taekwondo. Choi's theory was multi-faceted and involved using other limbs to increase striking force, maintaining the body's equilibrium while striking, concentrating all the muscular force on one particular striking point, and that speed can compensate for lack of mass if applied correctly. He first published his theory in 1965 and expanded it into a fifteen-volume work twenty years later.

Choi also advocated a "relax/strike" theory involving relaxing between techniques and raising and lowering one's center of gravity from technique to relaxation in what resembles a sine wave. Practitioners of Kukkiwon-style taekwondo have largely abandoned the sine-wave method, but it is still adhered to by some major schools of ITF traditional taekwondo.

Taekwondo, as a martial art, is not simply a system of blocks and strikes. It also contains a very important moral component, encapsulated by the Five Tenets of Taekwondo, developed by Choi and based upon the Five Commandments of the Hwarang. They are as follows:

- Courtesy
- Integrity

- Perseverance
- Self-discipline
- Invincibility of Spirit

Choi also authored a taekwondo oath invoking these same principles. Variations of the oath are used today among practitioners to teach and remind them of the determination, discretion, and honor required to successfully learn and practice taekwondo.

Although most schools teach lessons in the local language, many still retain a few terms in Korean. For instance:

- Attention – *Charyeot!*
- Bow – *Junbi!*
- Punch – *gwon*
- Kick – *chagi*
- Instructor – *sabumnim*
- Thank you (formal) – *Kamsahamnida!*
- You're welcome – *Chonmaneyo!*
- Hello (formal) – *Anyong hashimnida!*
- Goodbye – *Anyong hee gyesayo!*

FAQ's:

- **Who may participate in taekwondo?** Any person, male or female, who is in a reasonably good state of physical fitness may participate in taekwondo.

- **Is taekwondo dangerous?** Taekwondo involves contact between participants, so scrapes and bruises are not uncommon. Broken bones do occur, but they aren't common.
- **Is taekwondo better than other martial arts?** Like all systems, it has strengths and weaknesses. No system is perfect, but a taekwondo practitioner who is in good physical shape and has kept up his training is on par with a practitioner with the same experience in any of the other martial arts.
- **What does it cost? Can I try it out without committing to lessons?** As the federations don't control the business of individual schools, cost can vary greatly among schools in the same area. However, most schools will let a prospective student sit in on a class and/or take the first class free, so don't be afraid of being tied into lessons if you just visit.
- **Do I have to go to Korea or speak Korean to take lessons?** A few of the terms retain their Korean names, but lessons are generally taught in the language of the region in which the school is located. A student is not required to go to Korea to learn taekwondo (except at the very highest *dan*, of which few students will ever attain without decades of intensive study), but many schools and associations do offer trips to various taekwondo sites in Korea for those with an interest.

Organizations dedicated to the Style:

Organization Name – Link to website – Brief description

World Taekwondo Federation – <http://www.worldtaekwondofederation.net/>, international federation governing the sport of taekwondo

International Taekwon-Do Federation – <http://www.itfkd.org/>, <http://www.itf-administration.com>,
<http://www.tkd-itf.org/>, global taekwondo organization dedicated to administering traditional
taekwondo

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