
ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Taekwondo as One's Life Philosophy

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Abstract

Taekwondo has been postulated as a life philosophy for decades, but to date no proper examination of how this is possible has been conducted. Our question was therefore whether the practice of Taekwondo provides a "philosophy of life" so universal that it can be exercised in all areas of daily life. Long-time *Taekwondo-in* (Korean: Taekwondo practitioners) find that their practice alters their character and ethics, which in turn causes many to ponder why and how these changes occurred. We believe that with the practice of Taekwondo comes experiences that may allow practitioners to develop holistic, autonomous, philosophical, spiritual, and experiential knowledge. We conclude that *Taekwondo-in* may recognize that they are capable of having a unique orientation of life formed through Taekwondo practice if maieutic questioning is incorporated into their training regimes, and that constant practice can remind them that knowledge acquired from training is useful to their daily lives.

Keywords: *Taekwondo-in*, maieutic questioning, Taekwondo Knowledge, Taekwondo Experience, Taekwondo Existence

Introduction

The presocratic philosopher Heraclitus said famously that everything is in constant change and in a process of continuous birth and destruction (17). To understand this process of change, Human Beings must make use of their senses and intelligence to critique and question their knowledge and experiences. (In this paper, Human Being refers to the species *Homo sapiens* [Latin: homo = man; sapiens = wise], and its synonyms are person and individual.) We can then extrapolate knowledge from one experience and apply it to another area of life in order to draw comparisons and, thus, achieve a more structured understanding of the world. Moreover, Plato wrote that some forms of knowledge are acquired intuitively, without having been learned from a teacher or specific source (19). The "I think" utterance shapes an opinion and is called *doxa*. *Doxa* is more than merely one individual's opinion: Plato used the term to refer to the ability to create opinions, and it is now used to refer to the common opinion (18). Knowledge founded upon rational study and that invokes reflection and interpretation is called *episteme*, which is the basis for epistemology,

a branch of philosophical study.

The primary question of this research was whether the practice of Taekwondo can allow *Taekwondo-in* (Korean: Taekwondo practitioners) to develop a Taekwondo-based philosophy that can be exercised in all areas of daily life. Incorporating martial arts training into one's everyday life has been promoted for hundreds of years (23), yet research explicating a method for facilitating this all-important notion (1, 21) in Taekwondo training is limited.

As Heraclitus and Plato demonstrated, Humans Beings possess the unique ability to derive meanings from our actions. In this way, our research followed Scheler's concept of ideation (22), which is also epistemological in nature. Epistemology is concerned with the theory of knowledge, since it addresses relevant issues in the historic, psychological, and sociological circumstances that lead to the gaining of knowledge and the criteria that either justify or invalidate it. Ideation is knowledge acquired from comprehending "essential modes and formal structures of the world through a single case only, independent of the number of observations and inductive inferences" (22). Consequently, we have the capability to take knowledge gained

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through Taekwondo and apply it in a manner beneficial to our everyday lives (11). Our research accordingly adds to the growing research of Taekwondo Philosophy—and more specifically its subdiscipline of epistemology—by examining how the maieutic method may assist *Taekwondo-in* in acquiring a Taekwondo philosophy.

The Maieutics Method and Taekwondo

In principle, any Human Being can reflect on the deepest dimensions of his or her life. As every Human Being is capable of reflecting on life, our discussion envisions and describes a universal perspective applicable to the thoughts of Human Beings as well as the practice of Taekwondo. Does this mean that all individuals are philosophers? At some point there is a hint of philosopher in everyone and, sooner or later, we ask why we exist and do the things we do. We ask where we came from and where we are going, who we are and what we should do with our lives. We often ponder if the universe is real, if God or gods exists, and what freedom is. However, while Human Beings “merely” think about these things, philosophers believe they have the ability to search and find answers to these questions. Human Beings who practice Taekwondo have the unique opportunity to incorporate their Taekwondo experiences into their daily lives. As such, they may be able to create a distinctive life philosophy based upon Taekwondo lessons. *Taekwondo-in* may therefore be considered philosophers, albeit maybe not in an academic sense.

All individuals have fundamental understandings about right and wrong that are reflected in their actions. For *Taekwondo-in*, the practice of Taekwondo provides knowledge of Taekwondo techniques and skills, which we shall refer to as Taekwondo Knowledge. Likewise, the experience of learning Taekwondo combined with Taekwondo Knowledge may create an understanding that the practitioner individualizes. When all Taekwondo experiences and knowledge are considered as a whole, we can label them as the Taekwondo Experience. Taekwondo Knowledge and the Taekwondo Experience are used here to constitute a theoretical basis for establishing a Taekwondo philosophy of life for martial art practitioners.

Long-time martial artists find that their practice alters their character and expression of ethics (5), which in turn may cause them to ponder why and how these changes occurred. *Taekwondo-in* may be viewed as philosophers, because they have the potential to develop holistic, autonomous philosophical, spiritual, and experiential knowledge through Taekwondo practice. Many long-term practitioners have stated practicing

Taekwondo creates a philosophy of life (1, 2, 5, 14, 15, 16), and we look to Socrates to examine how and why this is possible.

Maieutics is the process of introspective philosophical questioning. It originated with Socrates as a technique for elucidating answers by asking questions of one’s self to acquire more intricate understandings of a topic and is sometimes referred to as the Socratic Method (24). Socrates did not hold to the notion that knowledge and truth can be simply acquired by passive learning. Instead, he believed they needed to be brought forth through interaction with a teacher who prods the learner to discover new personal understandings and knowledge by dealing with difficult questions and intellectual challenges. The maieutic method is a technique that consists of questioning individuals, so they gain knowledge through self-acquired conclusions, not ‘merely’ through learned knowledge and pre-conceptualized concepts (19).

The maieutic method is a stratified process, because learners are required to incorporate new ideas and build upon existing beliefs through critical analysis. As new information, knowledge, insights, beliefs, and ideas are elicited and accumulated, the learner then uses them to formulate new concepts or continuously change formerly held ones. The progression of the questioning allows learners to deepen their understandings or beliefs on a subject. Socrates typically asked questions to his students to achieve this purpose (24), but a teacher may not need to do this, since students can just as easily question themselves.

Taekwondo is a discipline, or an organized method of instruction used to train Human Beings. When adhering to a discipline, a Human Being must do something, and that something must fall within the parameters of an established system of knowledge. Taekwondo is a unique discipline and thus distinct from other martial arts, because *Taekwondo-in* move their bodies differently from other martial artists. We can now further define Taekwondo Knowledge as the experimental knowledge of maneuvering the body in agreed upon forms commonly known as Taekwondo. Moreover, *Taekwondo-in* are exposed to a unique educational environment. As such, how Taekwondo is learned is unique from other learning experiences. The Taekwondo pedagogical process may additionally influence how students understand the art and shape the conclusions they make in their own practice. Thus, Taekwondo Knowledge is knowledge acquired through doing Taekwondo as well as the knowledge acquired through the distinctive pedagogical methods used to transmit that knowledge from teacher to student.

Martin Heidegger, a leading contemporary existentialist philosopher, explained that philosophy can be learned only by experiencing it (10). Martial arts are likewise activities that must be experienced to be understood (6). Yet, practice provides more

than technical knowledge: it deepens awareness for certain aspects and reasons for the movement. In Taekwondo practice, *Taekwondo-in* experience intentional and significant moments, which they interpret using their accumulated personal, cultural, and social biases as well as levels of knowledge. Therefore, each person may interpret their Taekwondo Experiences distinctly, and every Taekwondo Experience is a phenomenological experience. Phenomenology “provides important contributions to philosophical issues such as perception, memory, expectation, imagination, habituation, self-awareness, and self-identity over time” (13). From a phenomenological perspective, the basis for understanding includes the idea that Taekwondo movements, skills, and knowledge are not given to consciousness in isolation, nor can they be inspected and valued equally by all Human Beings (20). Consequently, Taekwondo can provide permanent care of selfhood (unity of being); i.e., Heidegger’s the intentional care of myself (9). Here, we must define the Taekwondo Experience further as what is done, what is felt, what is interpreted, and what is acquired through and in Taekwondo Knowledge.

Taekwondo may offer the opportunity to create an orientation of life, while constant practice should allow for continual self-reflection. As *Taekwondo-in* continue to train, opportunities for introspection continue to occur. If Taekwondo practice decreases, so do the opportunities to build a Taekwondo philosophy. Constant practice, however, creates new experiences which may be applied to daily life. When *Taekwondo-in* find a way to apply new lessons to their lives, their Taekwondo life philosophies can be further developed, since maieutic questioning uses existing knowledge to reach deeper conclusions. We therefore conclude that without constant practice, *Taekwondo-in* cannot continue to develop a Taekwondo life philosophy.

Maieutic questioning is a method instructors can incorporate into their Taekwondo classes to facilitate the creation of a Taekwondo philosophy of life. A two-part schemata is easily applicable to any Taekwondo lesson. First, the instructor teaches a Taekwondo skill and the principles behind it. For example, the instructor may introduce the differences between two blocks—a hard block where the defender blocks with speed and power and a pushing block that uses angles and a less forceful motion. Instructors can ask students to articulate the differences between these two blocks. Once instructors are confident students have acquired this Taekwondo Knowledge, the next level of questioning can begin (i.e., students can be asked to apply a fundamental principle to their daily lives). Contemplating how to use the same principles to their professional, personal, and family relationships would compel students to ponder new ways to live, only now they are doing so through Taekwondo

Experience as an underlying component of their decision making process. For instance, an instructor might ask an aggressive student how to handle a potential violent confrontation in two ways by using the above Taekwondo lesson: one with aggression and one which allows them to walk away without fighting.

It is at this point that a life philosophy based in Taekwondo becomes phenomenological, and thus life-applicable, in nature. With practice, the above Taekwondo instruction methodology can allow learners to see for themselves how to choose a response according to their circumstance. Most empowering to the individual *Taekwondo-in* is that they can choose what method is most appropriate for them and their situation. Instructors merely provide the methodology through questions, but students find their own answers.

As new knowledge and experiences are amassed, *Taekwondo-in* have more information from which to draw additional and deeper insights into their lives. The Taekwondo Experience can thus be an accumulative, never-ending, self-learning, and self-discovery process if the maieutic method is incorporated as a part of training. If it is, *Taekwondo-in* may continuously grow under the influence of their Taekwondo Knowledge and Experience towards a more enlightened life philosophy.

Discussion

Intuition is developed over time through trial and error (12), and Taekwondo skills are no different. Taekwondo skills are honed with practice until they are intuited, so they can be performed without being hindered by the relatively slow speed of thought. *Taekwondo-in* should act without relying on discriminative thought in a combat situation, and typically years of repetitive training—the core of nearly every martial artist’s teaching—will develop this capability. Here, a Human Being’s mind and body work synergistically to create a Taekwondo Existence. We define a Taekwondo Existence as to be and to being doing Taekwondo concurrently. A Taekwondo Existence can only be a product of Taekwondo Knowledge and experience, because only Taekwondo movements, knowledge, and skills are performed during the time the experience occurs. If other movements or strategies are used, the experience ceases to be solely Taekwondo. Thus, *Taekwondo-in* become immersed in an organized form of human reality through practice.

A Taekwondo Existence is immediate and starts without preconceptions about and predeterminations of what will happen. It is instantaneous, which makes it pure, simple, and intuited. The concept of a Taekwondo Existence originates in a state

devoid of discriminative thought, but it is born out of, but not restricted to, replication of the movements collectively and distinctively known as Taekwondo. *Taekwondo-in* do and at the same time are Taekwondo. Following the line of thought of Goldenberg, a philosophy of life is generated by the practice of Taekwondo that is "a whole," a kind of Gestalt (8), which occurs in the temporal or spatio-temporal reality.

Taekwondo life philosophy and fundamental techniques

Ontology is a branch of philosophy that studies the natures of being, existence, and reality while trying to determine the fundamental categories and relations between things that exist. In an ontological context, Taekwondo is an abstract reality that consists of kinesthetic knowledge and principles that are actualized when executed. Gadamer contends that through practice Human Beings learn to recognize what they feel and perceive (7), which can have moral and life-changing consequences. For instance, some students of Kenjutsu (various methods of Japanese swordsmanship) stated that their practice "instilled in them a sense of inner peace and an outlook on life that made them abhor the killing of fellow human beings" (4).

With practice, the ability to perform a skill becomes intuitive whether the skill is tying shoelaces, throwing a punch, or analyzing the self. Fundamental techniques are based on all Taekwondo Knowledge, and, consequently, are the source of introspection on the experience of Taekwondo. No one can intuit the purpose of a technique without repeating it countless times (6, 16). *Taekwondo-in* must thus practice a technique for years to acquire this type of knowledge.

Yet, every time *Taekwondo-in* move in a prescribed Taekwondo manner, they do not repeat the past, but are creating something new and never-before experienced. For instance, even if an exercise routine is repeated daily, it is distinct each time it is practiced, because the *Taekwondo-in*'s bodies maybe have become stronger or are injured, they may encounter new training partners, their expertise and abilities could have increased, or they may be experiencing a myriad personal issues. Moreover, times of exhaustion, improved physique, and an ever-evolving understanding of the technique necessitate the continuous alteration of how their bodies perform. Each Taekwondo practice is therefore a completely new experience and an opportunity for a new Taekwondo Existence. Nevertheless, by practicing a skill and the maieutic method consistently, *Taekwondo-in* may develop their skills and self-awareness by examining what happens to and within their bodies.

Taekwondo life philosophy and poomsae

There are many types of exercises that *Taekwondo-in* may experience during training (e.g., free sparring, 3-step sparring, and self-defense drills) that continue the use of fundamental techniques and provide new Taekwondo Experiences. *Poomsae*, a series of prearranged defensive and offensive techniques, are performed to show the technical skill of *Taekwondo-in*. They are therefore a continuance of the learning of fundamental techniques and, as such, provide *Taekwondo-in* with new and evolving Taekwondo Experiences from which to draw deeper insights.

The movements in *poomsae* are fundamental techniques, which are usually taught independently and then introduced as a series to assist learners in understanding the techniques' application and possible uses in relation to other Taekwondo techniques and movements. The techniques are founded upon Taekwondo Knowledge and thus constitute part of a Taekwondo Experience. Like other Taekwondo movements, *poomsae* are repeated continuously throughout a Taekwondo practitioner's training. When *Taekwondo-in* perform *poomsae*, they may begin to experience oneness of the mind and body, since they can be completely immersed in *poomsae*. However, just as with fundamental techniques, *Taekwondo-in* cannot intuit a *poomsae* without numerous repetitions.

Unless guided through the maieutic process by instructors, *Taekwondo-in* may never begin to understand the value of *poomsae* to their daily lives. Instructors only need to ask how one fundamental technique affects the next in the prescribed series of techniques in the *poomsae* for *Taekwondo-in* to see how one action influences or facilitates the next. The instructor can then ask students to describe the effects of their actions outside of the *dojang* (Korean: martial arts training hall) (e.g., studying for a test, ignoring the request of a child, etc.). A connection between the technique and purpose of a *poomsae* can then be developed in the minds of *Taekwondo-in*, which may serve as practice for seeing how Taekwondo could resonate in their daily lives.

Taekwondo life philosophy and social rituals

Individuals do not experience Taekwondo in a social vacuum. Other individuals must be their teachers, practice partners, sparring opponents, and competitors. Taekwondo is also founded on moral philosophies (1, 21), so it possesses numerous social rituals that teach etiquette and safety during practice. For example, students show respect to their juniors and seniors by bowing. Through this practice, *Taekwondo-in* may learn how

paying respect to others offers positive and motivating experiences. Even a rival can inspire *Taekwondo-in* to become better in some way. Through maieutic questioning, they can explore why showing respect to others is socially important. These lessons may not be available to them elsewhere and thus may inspire them to begin respecting others in society outside of the dojang.

When the maieutic process is applied to the social aspects of Taekwondo, *Taekwondo-in* can demonstrate proper Taekwondo decorum outside of the dojang. For example, instructors who require that students keep their uniforms neat and tidy can impress upon them the importance of cleanliness. This knowledge could in turn motivate them to practice better personal hygiene or behave in more socially acceptable manners.

Taekwondo life philosophy and sports

Because some *Taekwondo-in* are being trained solely as competitors, their focus is not on self- or community-development. In order to win, competitors must maintain focus on improving their ability to perform. Consequently, some practitioners may come to believe that Taekwondo is an activity for overpowering others through force and strength. We contend that maieutic questioning may help these individuals live a less aggressive Taekwondo philosophy.

Combat sports have replaced traditional martial values with western sport goals (3). Sport Taekwondo may therefore create a win-at-all-costs mentality, as winning is its primary goal. If this is mentally applied to everyday life, the fighter does not know what to do with their training other than overcome other Human Beings with force. So, what life philosophy can these competitors have? They only see themselves successful if they dominate other individuals, get their hands raised, and receive a medal. Afterwards, they are not prepared for the time when they can no longer win due to age or other circumstances. As a result, Taekwondo may cease to be useful in the competitors' daily lives when they stop competing.

On the other hand, if competitors are asked how a new skill or situation is applicable to life outside competition, their responses may allow Taekwondo Knowledge to be used in ways other than domination of another Human Being. They may for example ask how or why an opponent helps them become a better person or competitor. Competitors may then conclude that their opponents are more than stepping stones to victory, but individuals who challenge them to become more than what they are. From this conclusion, a respect for their fellow Human Being can be realized.

This is not to say Taekwondo competitors do not already find

competition valuable. Sport Taekwondo has benefited numerous individuals around the world (25), but it was created in the context of Western values and practices. Taekwondo is a Korean martial art that was created for self-defense and self-cultivation purposes (1, 21), not simply for winning tournaments (2). We merely contend that Taekwondo competitors could benefit more from seeing Taekwondo from a Korean martial arts perspective, rather than a Western sports perspective, by incorporating maieutic questioning into their training regimens.

Conclusion

Taekwondo training provides unique educational opportunities for practitioners that can be used for self-cultivation purposes. If maieutic questioning is incorporated into Taekwondo training, *Taekwondo-in* may develop deeper insights into the purpose of a technique as well as acquire a deeper level of self-knowledge. Taekwondo's unique activities such as performing fundamental techniques, *poomsae*, and social rituals may provide unique insights and lessons unavailable elsewhere. Thus, Taekwondo can be seen a physical, mental, and social learning activity.

As this is a qualitative study, further research is needed to determine our theory's validity. Nonetheless, we believe *Taekwondo-in* should incorporate the lessons learned during practice into everyday life decisions and actions in order for their practice to be more profound than learning how to inflict harm. The maieutic method allows *Taekwondo-in* to impart such knowledge in a personal and meaningful manner. We believe Taekwondo instructors should teach students how to live through Taekwondo as well as how to do Taekwondo. We therefore embrace the notion of using maieutic questioning, so *Taekwondo-in* may integrate Taekwondo into their daily lives. Taekwondo training would then become more than a set of physical skills, sport, or a means of dominance. It would then become a life philosophy capable of contributing to students' overall personal advancement.

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