

**Tae Kwon Do History  
and Its Tenets**

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## **History of Tae Kwon Do**

Tae Kwon Do, literally translating to “the way of feet and hands,” is a Korean martial art having endured about two thousand years of evolution. As with all other disciplines, it is very important for the practitioners of Tae Kwon Do to be familiar with its history, hence to increase understanding and respect of this art. However, we also must understand that many of the recorded ancient stories could be inaccurate, different schools of thought may have rewritten the history to fit their own agendas, and that translation inconsistencies could have caused errors. While sources provide all sorts of different factual details, the following is a brief Tae Kwon Do history, summarized from several credible sources to my knowledge.

The earliest martial art ever recorded in history was Pankration, a sport that Greeks competed in the Olympics as early as 648 B.C. (Dohrenwend). Along the side was Pyrrhic Dance, a martial art dance that was somewhat similar to modern poomse. Alexander the Great was supposedly an enthusiast in Pankration, and his conquests brought this art to India, who, in turn, transferred a derivative to China through Buddhist missionaries. Then, the Chinese were very likely to have spread some of their martial arts, along with other cultural components, to neighboring countries such as Korea. Historians confirmed that ancient Chinese Chuan Fa and Korean Taek Kyon being very similar (Dohrenwend). However, to say that the whole world’s martial arts were all originated in Greece could be rather far-fetched, and impossible to prove. Therefore, most Tae Kwon Do historians begin their stories with the three kingdoms in Korea.

Two thousand years ago, Korea was consisted of three rival kingdoms – Koguryo (37 B.C. ~ 668 A.D.), Silla (57 B.C. ~ 935 A.D.), and Baekjae (18 B.C. ~ 600 A.D.) (Meador). Paintings on the ceiling of the Muyong-chong, a royal tomb from the Koguryo Dynasty, were the earliest records of Taek Kyon, the oldest known form of Tae Kwon Do (Bristol). Sonbae, a group of national heroes of Koguryo, was said to have done civil constructions for his country and fought off hostile foreign forces (Meador). They were believed to have practiced Taek Kyon and used it to defend their country.

The Silla Dynasty, founded by Park Hyuk Kusae, was the smallest of the three kingdoms but had contributed the most to the developments of Tae Kwon Do (Lee). As a small and weak kingdom, Silla's coastlines constantly suffered from the attacks of Japanese pirates. King Gwahggaeto, the 19th monarch in the Koguryo Dynasty, sent forces to help Silla fight off the Japanese (Bristol). During this time, Taek Kyon was secretly taught to Silla's few warriors, by the masters from Koguryo. Later, Silla's Hwarang, literally meaning "Flower Knights," practiced this art as their regular curriculum. Organized by King Jin Heung in 537 A.D., the Hwarang proved to be a vital part of the unification of the Korea (Meador). In a Buddhist temple in Kyoungju, the capital of Silla, two giants were carved on a tower wall (Bristol). The two giants were facing each other in a fighting stance, and are thought to be a proof of Taek Kyon being practiced in Silla.

Monk Won Kwang Bupsa, the instructor of the Hwarang, was the author of the Sesokokye, the following five student commitments:

- Be loyal to your country
- Honor your parents
- Be faithful to your friends
- Never retreat in battle
- Use good judgment before killing living things (Meador)

Baekjae Dynasty was a tribe that detached itself from Koguryo. Its military system, Soo Sa, also practiced a predecessor of Tae Kwon Do called SooByeokTa (Meador).

In 688 A.D., Silla Conquered the other two kingdoms and unified the Korean peninsula (Meador). Shortly after, its government disintegrated and allowed original Koguryo to take over and become the new Koryo Dynasty (918 A.D. ~ 1392 A.D.). During this time, Taek Kyon continued to be practiced and evolved into Subak. Instead of focusing on the physical fitness like traditional Taek Kyon, Subak was transformed to a primarily fighting art (Bristol). The art became very popular among the Koryo people, and the kings would host contests called Subakki and award prizes to winners (Lee). Kookjakam, the national university, spread and

systemized this fighting art scientifically (Meador). The rules and judgment standards of Subakki were said to be the origins of today's Tae Kwon Do tournaments (Meador). Foreign traders in Koryo Dynasty were very attracted to this martial art and began spreading it outside of the Korean peninsula. It was also during this time when the name "Korea" first evolved from "Koryo" by the foreigners (Lee).

What came next was the Yi Dynasty (1392 A.D. ~ 1910 A.D.) (Meador). It was an era when people put more emphasis on literary arts than on martial arts, so the practice of Subak declined. Especially in the second half of this dynasty, nobility totally lost interest in martial arts, and Subak only survived in families where the art was passed down from generation to generation (Bristol). However, the society's literary emphasis drove to the printing of Mooyae Doba Tongjee, the first martial arts textbook, in 1790 (Meador). This book contained many illustrations, from which we can find techniques almost identical to today's Tae Kwon Do techniques.

In 1909, the Japanese invaded Korea and occupied it for 36 years (Bristol). Many native components of Korean culture were banned by the Japanese military, including their language, names, and martial arts (Meador). Therefore, the practice went underground. Some say that modern-day Tae Kwon Do was rapidly developed during this era because many trained to fight back the Japanese. However, more historians believe that the Taek Kyon lineage was suppressed so much, that most of the martial art schools were primarily influenced by Chinese or Japanese styles (Dohrenwend).

After World War II, when Korea was liberated from Japanese occupation in 1945, the first school to start teaching native Korean martial art again was **Chung Do Kwan** in Yong Chun, Seoul (Bristol). Many other kwans were opened soon after, and each claimed to teach a variation of the original Subak or Taek Kyon. In 1955, the many kwans came together and had a formal meeting on uniting their styles. These kwans include Chung Do Kwan, Moo Duk Kwan, Yun Moo Kwan, Chang Moo Kwan, Oh Do Kwan, Ji Do Kwan, Chi Do Kwan, and Song Moo Kwan. In order to return to the traditional Taek Kyon and develop a national sport, these kwans put their knowledge and techniques together to form Tae Soo Do, which was changed to

Tae Kwon Do two years later (Bristol). The new name was used because it accurately describes the art's nature of using hands and feet, and also because it resembles the name of its ancestor style, Taek Kyon (Meador).

General Choi Hong Hi, who required the Korean police and military to train in Tae Kwon Do, founded the Korean Tae Kwon Do Association (KTA) in 1965 (Meador). Later, he fled to the United States due to political complications, and formed the International Tae Kwon Do Federation (ITF). In 1973, the KTA became the World Tae Kwon Do Federation (WTF), and was recognized by the International Olympics Committee in 1980 (Tae). During the next few decades, Tae Kwon Do spread world wide and was accepted by many sports organizations. In 2000, it made its first Olympics debut (Meador). At the current time, Tae Kwon Do is by far the most widely practiced martial art in the world (Tae).

### **History of Chung Do Kwan**

Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Won Kook Lee traveled throughout the Orient and learned many martial arts. In 1941, one year after returning to Korea, he combined the various styles with Taek Kyon to create "Tae Su Do Chung Do Kwan." For years this style was taught in secret as the Japanese still occupied Korea, but soon after the 1945 liberation, Grand Master Lee retired and named his successor, Grand Master Uoon Kyu Um, as the head of Chung Do Kwan. It was the first and largest kwan in Korea for many years, and in 1954 General Choi Hong Hi served as its director (Dohrenwend).

As Chung Do Kwan received the favor of the Korean Republican government, Grand Master Lee was given much political pressure. His refusal to associate his school with politics offended the government, and then he was accused by the government of being the leader of an assassin group. He fled to Japan and served as the Tae Kwon Do instructor for the U.S. military in Japan. Later, he moved to the United States in 1976 (Dohrenwend).

The first Chung Do Kwan in the United States, "The Academy," was founded by Grand Master Edward Sell in 1967. In the following decades, Korean Tae Kwon Do Association of

America, United Chung Do Kwan Association, and American Chung Do Kwan Ltd. were formed in devotion to this particular style of Tae Kwon Do. To date, Chung Do Kwan Tae Kwon Do is practiced world wide.

### **Twenty-Five Tenets**

The word “do,” common in Korean, Chinese, and Japanese, means “the way.” Narrowly speaking, it is “the way to do something.” However, it is often used in a broader sense of “the art of doing,” or “the way of life through doing something.” Tae Kwon Do, with no exception, teaches people more than just how to fight with hands and feet. It teaches people, through the art of fighting with hands and feet, the way of life in all aspects.

The Tae Kwon Do tenets "provide the framework for the philosophy of living the martial way (Khan)." There are five basic tenets recognized by Tae Kwon Do practitioners internationally, and twenty additional tenets established by Khan’s Martial Arts Academy. Black Belt candidates such as myself are required to know and interpret these tenets. The following is a list of the twenty-five tenets and what they mean to me. Most of my interpretations came from the black belts who have taught me, tested me, or influenced me in other ways.

- *Courtesy*

Courtesy is a basis in self and interpersonal relationships. It is deeply tied with some of the other tenets such as loyalty, selflessness, and patience. Generally speaking, courtesy is “treat people how you want to be treated.” It is a behavior of respect. It is an important attitude required for any success.

One of the first things we learn in a Tae Kwon Do dojang is how to dress and act properly, and to call the instructor “sir.” At the moment of being courteous, we stop being self-centered, and we open our hearts for acceptance. Only by being courteous to our teachers, our classmates, and ourselves, we are able to appreciate them and learn from them.

In addition, only by being courteous and respectful to people, will we get courtesy and respect in return.

In the circle of martial artists, I find it easy to tell a person's character from how he respects a different style of martial art. Josh Walters, my white belt instructor, is a Kenpo black belt and enthusiast. He did not know much Tae Kwon Do, but he perfected his knowledge and became the instructor for the beginners. He taught us flawless Chung Do Kwan Tae Kwon Do techniques, and he respected John as the head instructor at all times. Without words, he taught us to respect people who think and act differently.

This attitude is a broader sense of courtesy, and it surely applies to more than just martial artists. The United States is so great and powerful because it respects foreigners and foreign ideas – the same exact philosophy that martial arts taught me.

- *Integrity*

According to Merriam-Webster dictionary, integrity is firm adherence to a code of especially moral values. Having integrity is what gives a person complete quality. It is about being honest and true to people, and more deeply, being honest and true to one's self. Putting in words of pop culture, being "true to your heart" is the first step to integrity.

Being honest to one's self is the key to know one's own abilities and to have confidence. Being honest to others is the key to be trusted. In a dojang, one must be honest with himself about what he can do and what he needs to do, so he does not hurt himself or other people. Outside of a dojang, it is even more important for a person to make wise decisions and consider consequences of his actions. A person with integrity feels no guilt, and is one whom people can trust and rely on.

- *Perseverance*

"What is a black belt?" asked Josh to my white belt class. Then he told us, "A black belt is a white belt that never gave up."

These few words have imprinted in my head for nearly four years, and I have grown from a know-nothing beginner to a black belt candidate. Over the years, many people joined and quit the club, started learning and never continued. I know way more ex-members of our club than those who have stayed. Many of those who quit had way more talent than I could

wish for, but now they no longer use that talent. I, on the other hand, do not have much natural ability, but gladly, I have not given up.

Perseverance is about not giving up. Martial arts are something whose learning process will never speed up or simplify, and quitting equals failure. Whenever I think the training is hard, I think of Jet Li who has trained eight hours a day for over two decades. Only those who can stick to it will succeed, and those who can stick to it best will succeed most. This applies to everything – Edison’s story of inventing light bulbs tells exactly how one can achieve what nobody else can by working harder. Perseverance is definitely not an enjoyable process, but in the end the fruits of the hard work will be worth it.

- *Self-control*

There are two kinds of self-control: physical and emotional. Physical self-control comes with practice. From white belt to today, I find my balance and accuracy in kicks increase every year, and I can perform harder and harder techniques. However, there are black belts who can throw lightning-speed round kicks to my face and stop two inches in front of my eyes, and I know I still have much room for improvement.

The emotional self-control is more important for a person. It comes with internal training, which is inseparable from Tae Kwon Do. I’d like to think of martial arts not to teach us how to fight, but to teach us how not to fight. Fighting uncontrollably is the act of uncultivated people. When others wrong us, we need to have enough discipline to hold our anger from exploding. Our student creed tells us that our skills are only meant for “self-defense, and to protect our families and communities.” Before we have enough internal self-control to use them, we do not deserve to learn the physical skills.

- *Indomitable spirit*

I believe that, what Tae Kwon Do teaches me is not the abilities to destroy an enemy. Instead, it teaches me the courage to go against an enemy who I know can destroy me. A real black belt’s body can be defeated, but not his mind. For if one loses his spirit, he gives up even the slightest chance of winning.

In my Tae Kwon Do dojang, sometimes I workout continuously to a point of exhaustion, sometimes I get the wind knocked out of my chest, and sometimes I try a technique for a long



time and still cannot get it right. The feeling of standing up and continuing to work at it is especially rewarding, because I know my spirit is alive and I will become better. Outside of the dojang, we know that many great people are great because they did not give up hope, even in the most hopeless situations. In fact, the whole human species has been able to survive through long courses of evolution, because our ancestors had indomitable spirits.

- *Loyalty*

In ways, loyalty can be seen as the combination of courtesy and perseverance. It is about having faith. A martial art style would not be taught and passed on if its practitioners are not loyal. A company would not prosper if its employees are not loyal. A country would not be wealthy and strong if its citizens are not loyal. On the other hand, the practitioners, employees, and citizens could not benefit from the groups where they belong, if they do not have the right amount of loyalty. It is a very important quality that establishes the relationship between the leader and the follower.

- *Self-respect*

“If you want others to respect you, you have to first respect yourself.” The saying might be old but it is universally true. Self-respect is not about courtesy and humility, but it is about perseverance, honor, dignity, and integrity. A martial art student who has self-respect would come to class wearing neat, clean uniform, and he would have the knowledge and skills that he should have. Outside of a dojang, a person should equally know his responsibilities, and behave properly as a good character. By self-respecting, one gives himself what he deserves to have – including, of course, all the necessary quality for people to respect him.

- *Patience*

With interstate highways, microwave ovens, and the Internet, waiting is not something that people are used to nowadays. However, there are things that we can never speed up. Tae Kwon Do is a traditional art that builds a person’s internal and external qualities, and the training can be long and tedious. Only patient people who are willing to endure the lengthy process will become black belts in Tae Kwon Do. Outside of the dojang, patience is also

the key for people to become outstanding. Success and failure often differ only by that little extra wait.

- *Selflessness*

If I ever learned selflessness from one person, that person must be John, our head instructor. For the entire six years of his life at Virginia Tech, he instructed almost all the classes within our club, on a voluntary non-pay basis. Even for a student of his, I have learned how difficult it could be to commit five hours every week to come to TKD. For him, an engineering student and a graduate teaching assistant, the time and effort must be even more precious. Teaching us made no personal gain for him – he could not even use this time for his own training! Yet he has always been so willing to sacrifice himself for us; and this sacrifice has benefited me and many other people for life.

In or out of a martial art dojang, I believe, selflessness is one of the most important qualities for achieving great things. Siddhartha Gautama, Jesus Christ, and the soldiers who fought for this country's independence are some of the most praised heroes who gave up everything of theirs for the wellbeing of the human kind. We might never be as brave as those heroes, but hopefully through practicing Tae Kwon Do, we will learn to sacrifice ourselves for others.

- *Humility*

Humility is best understood from those who lack such quality. Over the years, I have observed a number of people who joined our club from different martial arts backgrounds. Because their philosophies and techniques differed from ours, some of these people would question our style in very rude manners. In the end, because they were too self-centered to open their hearts to a different style, they did not learn anything from here.

On the other hand, I learned the true meaning of humility from some of the black belts that I respect most. Master Khan once told us his experience learning at a Judo school. Even though he was already a multi-degree black belt in Tae Kwon Do, he was able to put on a white belt again and learn from a different system. It would take a lot of courage, I think, to put down his pride as a master and start over as a beginner. However, by learning something new, he diversified his skills and broadened his knowledge as a martial artist.

Many black belts have told me, “The best thing a black belt can do is to think like a white belt.” Whenever I think about this saying, I realize how these black belts have become so good.

- *Obedience*

Obedience comes with trust and loyalty. Obeying the leader is what keeps a group together. If everyone values personal freedom over obedience, there would be no group identity or wellbeing. In a dojang, a student shows obedience to his instructor and then is able to learn the art. In the military, a soldier shows obedience to his commander so the military can perform its duties effectively. In a country, a citizen shows obedience to the laws so the government can function as a whole. We cannot live by ourselves, therefore we must be obedient to the groups in which we belong.

- *Initiative*

Initiative is the will to become better, the motivation to improve. A Tae Kwon Do student cannot be satisfied with his current level and stop training. A famous Chinese saying explains, “Learning is like sailing upstream, you will be pushed backward if you don’t go forward.” People also say that retired people tend to age and die a lot faster, because they lose their direction in life to work toward. Therefore, to succeed or to stay successful, with martial arts or with anything else, we must have the initiative to become better.

- *Dedication*

Dedication is setting one’s self aside for a particular purpose. Our purpose is Tae Kwon Do, and we must give up a certain amount of time and pleasure for it. If we are unwilling to dedicate, we can never be proficient. This is to dedicate ourselves for a purpose of ourselves.

On the other hand, there is a dedication for others, which is at a higher level. When Master Khan spends a restless weekend driving down to Virginia Tech to administrate our test; when John, Josh, Marque, and other black belts spend hours after hours teaching us their skills; when the officers of the club stay up all night sorting the business of a hundred people... I see tremendous dedication, and I strive to learn from them. Virginia Tech’s

motto is “That I may serve” – I will remember the service that people have given me, and I will do the same for people.

- *Leadership*

As my professor once said, leadership can be best learned by being a follower. A Tae Kwon Do dojang is one of the best places to learn leadership this way. Because loyalty and obedience are required qualities for Tae Kwon Do students, we learn first not how to lead but how to cooperate with the leader. Once we step onto the other side of the floor and become leaders ourselves, the understanding will help us through our work more reasonably and effectively.

John has shown amazing leadership during his years serving the Tae Kwon Do club. After being his student for four years, he has influenced me in many positive ways. When I run a meeting or work in a group, the leadership skills that he has taught me always benefit me in many ways.

- *Responsibility*

Like the famous quote from Spiderman: “with great power, comes great responsibilities.” As we gain more martial arts skills, we should know better when and how to use them. In Jurassic Park the novel, Ian Malcolm comments on how people with guns commit a lot more unjust violence than black-belt martial artists, because, unlike the latter, the former do not earn their power and therefore do not learn to be responsible. Along with our darker and darker belts, we gain more and more knowledge about ourselves. We know what it takes and what it will cost to throw that punch – and we will not throw it unless it is absolutely necessary.

Learning to be responsible is a natural process of growing up, and martial arts help us in achieving this maturity. We learn the consequences for ourselves and for others when we break a promise, when we skip work, and when we abuse our powers for selfish reasons. Then, we learn our responsibilities, and we mature.

- *Pride*

Pride is the belief and appreciation in self. It comes from self-respect, and shines

through self-esteem. We must be proud of our identities, our martial arts skills, and our faiths. If we lose pride, we will hardly be able to keep our perseverance, and an indomitable spirit will be impossible. However, keeping a balanced amount of pride is necessary – we must control ourselves from being arrogant. Pride is the water that can float the boat and sink the boat, which we have to treat with caution.

- *Honor*

Honor and pride are like two sides of the same thing. Soon after I joined the Tae Kwon Do Club, I was taught to never place my belt on the floor. On the practical side, I do not think this rule makes any sense, because a belt is just a piece of decorative clothing. However, on the other hand, we were taught that the belt represented our rank and our honor. It is the symbol for all the hard work that we have devoted to Tae Kwon Do, and to such symbol we must treat with respect. When one feels honor in himself, the self-esteem will help him go far.

- *Dignity*

Dignity is the quality of being worthy or esteemed. It is about having pride and honor. A person with dignity will have self-respect and be responsible. It is a fundamental quality for a complete and excellent character.

- *Excellence*

Excellence is the quality of being eminently good. It is a virtue of being the best of the best. While it is impossible for everybody to have such quality, all professionals should have excellence and strive for excellence. In the Tae Kwon Do world, this quality is expected in every black belt, because the color itself signifies excellence. Outside of the Tae Kwon Do world, excellence can be seen in professionals of every field: Michael Jordan in basketball, Yo-Yo Ma in music, Bill Gates in software corporations... It is not just a state of being, but it is also an attitude that keeps the excellent qualities.

- *Commitment*

Just like perseverance, commitment is the ability to stick to a faith. One must be

committed in order to achieve in learning Tae Kwon Do, or anything else for that matter. When one commits to himself, he does not easily give up on his wishes or beliefs. When one commits to others, he keeps his promises and acts selflessly. We must commit ourselves not only to perfect our Tae Kwon Do knowledge, but also to work toward an overall goodness for the human beings.

- *Accountability*

Being accountable is being responsible. An accountable person is one whom people can count on. Master Khan, for example, is one whom we can count on to travel long distance every semester to test and to teach us. John, also, is someone whom we can count on to teach us everything that we need to know. Being accountable is very important for a martial artist, for people will want to know that he is responsible with his powers. It is also important outside of a dojang. In the business world, say, employees want to work for trustworthy employers, while employers would only hire accountable employees. Every grown-up should have accountability for himself and for the others around him.

- *Discipline*

Discipline is the mental and physical control gained through training of obedience and order. To have discipline is to behave properly, and to do the right thing at the right time. A Tae Kwon Do student with discipline will respect his instructor, his classmates, and himself. He will not abuse his skills on immoral acts, but in case of self-defense, protecting his family or community, he will not reserve his abilities. A person with discipline in one field can easily apply the same discipline to other fields, and this discipline can help the person succeed in various ways. Many company recruiters love to hire martial artists, because they know that martial artists tend to have good discipline.

- *Awareness*

Being aware is a big part of being wise. Narrowing speaking, especially for martial artists, is it important to be aware of his surroundings, so he can react to events quickly. For example, we see in movies how a great warrior can sense and protect himself from assassins even while sleeping. In the modern world, such ability might be unnecessary and useless.

However, the general idea stays the same. As a responsible citizen, we need to be aware of the news so we can make rational decisions when it comes to electing a government official. For group leaders, such as a company's CEO or a country's president, it is even more important to be aware of events that will possibly affect the company or the country. Awareness is a quality that a responsible person should have.

- *Objectivity*

Objectivity is the perception without personal prejudice or interpretations. When we study Tae Kwon Do, especially if we have been exposed to different philosophies, we must learn the techniques objectively. For if we look at a new idea subjectively, it is natural for us to over- or under-value the idea based on our existing beliefs. Someone I know is learning a mixed style of karate, and he would bash everything that differs even slightly from his style. When he would not even look at Tae Kwon Do, how can he see the beauty of it? Objectivity is particularly important for people of power. Teachers need to grade student papers objectively, and judges should examine court cases objectively – because objectivity means fairness and justice.

- *Humor*

Humor does not come directly involved in martial arts training. However, it is very important to the martial arts training environment. Because of the aforementioned tenets of Tae Kwon Do such as perseverance, humility, and obedience, the dojang atmosphere can be too serious and boring. We see Tae Kwon Do as a way of life, so we like to make our dojangs more lively. Master Khan has mastered the way to tense up and loosen his belt tests (for I have not been to any class of his) by using his authority and humor. Many other black belts I know can also make the dojang friendly and relaxing with their sense of humor. It is a way of life embraced by many people in many different environments.

- *Trust*

Trust is a very important component in a Tae Kwon Do dojang. When we practice self defense and do partner stretch, we expose the weakest parts of our body to our classmates. Similar ideas apply when we spar, kick targets, and condition. We must trust our partners to

never take such advantage of us, and trust them to have enough control to not hurt us. For if we lose that trust and would not put ourselves into the exercise, we would never be able to learn certain things.

In general, trust is a fundamental quality in any interpersonal relationship. If I do not trust my teachers, I will not learn anything from them; if I do not trust my business partners, I will not make any deal with them; if I do not trust myself, I will never be able to achieve anything.

The twenty-five tenets of Tae Kwon Do teach us not only how to be true martial artists, they also teach us how to become better persons. As students of Chung Do Kwan Tae Kwon Do, we will strive to live our lives by these tenets.



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