

# Taekwon-do: Fostering physical strength. and moral values for social harmony

Clément Vitrac III Degree - November 2023



## Abstract

Mental training to gain a noble spirit is an important part of studying Taekwon-do. Instructors are responsible for teaching the philosophical aspects of Taekwon-do alongside the techniques. In this thesis, I show how Taekwon-do could be used to profoundly alter the behavior of the students so that they will fully integrate into and participate in the society they live. I review the benefits of practicing Taekwon-do on physical and mental health before explaining why a Dojang could be viewed as a reduced-size ideal society. Finally, I show that the qualities learned during training transfer well in the real world and highlight their relevance for improving social cohesion.

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## Introduction

One of the most common misconceptions of Taekwon-do is its violence. From a non-practitioner point of view, it is understandable. The demonstrations of Taekwon-do broadcast the impressive physical abilities of the practitioners. At first sight, the Taekwon-doists can punch and kick an opponent with enough power to break piles of wooden boards, roof tiles and bricks. These abilities, however, constitute only the surface of all the qualities students of Taekwon-do can develop.



The definition of Taekwon-do, as given by its founder, General Choi Hong-Hi, emphasizes the importance of mental training to gain a noble spirit. The true Taekwon-doist is differentiated from the sensationalist by the demonstration of a high level of self-discipline, morals, and a strong sense of justice. The Dojang can be the first place in which these qualities



are taught to and learned by the student. It is a place in which everyone is welcomed, considered, and respected for its uniqueness. Each training session begins with reciting the oath of Taekwon-do to remind each student, however skilled or experienced, to respect each other and to be rightful inside and outside the Dojang. Although the practice of Taekwon-Do could be viewed as a personal discipline in comparison to team sports such as football or basketball, members of the same Dojang can establish strong connections via intensive

physical exercises and commitment in training. Thus, each member will help others to progress and thrive. Therefore, the Dojang could be considered a reduced-size ideal society in

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which helpfulness, righteousness, integrity, and acceptance of differences will be learned and developed as a habit by each practitioner. Once outside the Dojang, the true Taekwon-doist will naturally show the same behavior in society.

The diligent Taekwon-do students will fully integrate into and participate in the society they live. Integration can be defined as the process by which people from different cultural, social, or ethnic backgrounds gather in a cohesive and harmonious group. In an ideal society, individuals can live and thrive free and in peace without fear or anxiety. Unfortunately, this inspirational goal is not yet achieved in the current societies in which sensationalism, personal feelings and gains prevail over the general well-being.



In this thesis, we will show how Taekwon-do can provide societies with strong and honest people and help in harmonizing societies. We will first review how Taekwon-do can change the practitioner's mind and body and how this is important for self-integration. Second, we will detail how the Dojang should be perceived as a model of the ideal society in which the instructor will shape the practitioner's behavior through the teachings of the philosophical aspects of Taekwon-do. Finally, we will see how Taekwon-do students will use what they learned to participate in a better society.

## **1. Improving physical and mental strength to promote integration of the individuals.**

Taekwon-do is most likely one of the best-documented martial arts. The founder left the students with a 15-volume Encyclopedia in which he depicted his philosophy and vision of Taekwon-do as well as a detailed physical program aiming at progressively improving strength and fitness. Therefore, even weaker people can benefit from the physical benefits of Taekwon-do.

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Good physical fitness and abilities are important for social integration, especially for children and teenagers. For example, being overweight is one of the most common issues in children and adolescents nowadays. Unfortunately, overweight children are more often bullied<sup>1</sup>, experience more difficulties in integrating peer networks or are more likely to be socially excluded<sup>2</sup>. School is one of the first places in which people learn key social skills and rules. Ostracization at such a critical period of life can be dramatic for the person itself but also for society. Peer rejection increases the risk of developing issues in prosocial development<sup>3</sup> and aggressive behavior<sup>4</sup>. By directly modifying the practitioner's physical fitness and abilities, Taekwon-do is a great tool to help the integration. The physical benefits of Taekwon-do are often reviewed on school's websites and detailed in the Encyclopedia by General Choi Hong-Hi. Scientific studies including people of different ages confirmed that Taekwon-do training is efficient in reducing fat and increasing lean mass<sup>5-7</sup>, improving bone density<sup>8</sup>, and increasing motor skills, coordination, and reaction time<sup>9,10</sup> as well as reinforcing the cardiopulmonary system<sup>6</sup>. Importantly, the usual duration of training programs in the



aforementioned studies is about 3 months. Therefore, the physical benefits of Taekwon-do on individuals and their integration can be rapidly noted.

The resulting enhanced capabilities achieved through thorough Taekwon-do training transfer to other domains. The high performance of the soldiers trained by General Choi Hong-Hi in the 29<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division during the Korean

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military games is often reported. Surely, nowadays civilian training is less stringent than in the former military. Nevertheless, it remains physically demanding and sets the students in confrontational, self-challenging situations during sparring, power breaking and execution of complex flying techniques. Therefore, students learn to control their bodies and, in doing so, realize they can achieve high-level capabilities compared to non-practitioners. The feeling of being stronger, fitter and more able to move than the average person benefits self-valuation and the feeling of worthiness. Thus, Taekwon-do training benefits mental well-being<sup>11</sup>, self-esteem<sup>12</sup> and self-confidence. It has been shown that better self-esteem benefits social relationships<sup>13</sup>, although the reasons are still unclear.

Sparring requires mental strength and self-confidence. Willingly facing a trained person in a contest including punching and kicking builds resilience, self-confidence, and courage. Hence, Taekwon-do students will be more likely to go towards others or stand for themselves or weaker peers when necessary. Consistent with improved mental strength, Taekwon-do students show higher sociability and leadership<sup>12</sup>.



Altogether, Taekwon-do training has the potential to produce strong, resilient people able to overtake responsibilities and face adversity. Through thorough training in which the students can explore their full capacity, Taekwon-do greatly improves their physical abilities. As a result, the students self-valuation increases. They feel more worthy, more confident, and more courageous in the middle of their peers.

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## 2. The Dojang: a reduced-size ideal society

Blaise Pascal once wrote: “Justice without strength is powerless; strength without justice is tyrannical”. As the Taekwon-do students develop greater physical strength, the need for high morale and a strong sense of justice is more important. Without being able to discriminate what is good or bad, the Taekwon-doist will be more harmful than helpful for society. The likelihood of accepting bribery or misuse of force to abuse people is higher when self-confidence and physical strength increase. Undoubtedly, the Dojang in which the students evolve will have a major influence on developing high moral standards. Therefore, the instructor’s responsibility is to teach the philosophical aspects of Taekwon-do alongside the physical ones. Taekwon-do is strongly rooted in neo-Confucianism; therefore, the Dojang should be an example of the ideal society in which students can thrive and become their best.

### a. Relationship between instructor and students: promoting honesty and trust.



There can be no integrated society without trust among its residents. Most likely newcomers will first revere the school instructor and advanced students for their physical abilities. Maintaining this reverence and leveraging it to gain favors or increase their income would be a simpler and more convenient route for instructors who are not meticulous. Ultimately, students will either quit or copy this behavior. Fortunately, the guidelines for the relationship between the instructor and the students described in the Encyclopedia set an atmosphere of honesty and trust in the Dojang. The instructors help every student to progress and reach their full potential in Taekwon-do. They teach honestly, openly recognize the gaps in their knowledge and organize or attend seminars with other instructors to learn further. Therefore, respect due to their rank and experience is not demanded but earned through their honest

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behavior geared towards the benefit of students rather than fame and power. This is certainly swiftly recognized by the students who will in turn care for the others, adopt similar behavior and involve more time and energy in the social growth of the Dojang.

Therefore, by behaving honestly and transparently with their students, instructors have the power to start a virtuous circle to profoundly change students' behavior.

## **b. The Dojang: a place to break barriers.**

Instead of evolving as a unique cohesive group, modern societies are fragmented into isolated sub-communities tending to distance themselves from others. This phenomenon exists because people naturally tend to connect and stay with similar individuals who share the same thoughts<sup>14</sup> and is amplified by the internet and smartphones. The increasing fragmentation of the different groups based on religion, wealth, culture, and age damages social cohesion. On the opposite, Taekwon-do advocates for unity and peace around the world. For example, Taekwon-do is an important part of the diplomatic efforts that occasionally bring North and South Korea closer. Therefore, Taekwon-do constitutes an important counterbalance to the fragmentation of society.

At the Dojang level, Taekwon-do brings together people that would normally never meet, or at worst reject or fight each other. Taekwon-do includes everyone regardless of wealth, culture, age, or belief. Everyone wears the same outfit, lines up and receives the same



consideration without exception. Thus, people from different backgrounds will develop a feeling of belonging to the same community. Hard training and sweat create bonds and break

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barriers originally built by history, cliches, culture and ignorance. Ultimately, Taekwon-do students become more open to the other sub-communities in their vicinity.

The guidelines for the relationships between instructors and students advise instructors to let students visit other schools. Openness to other schools and practices promotes respect and acceptance of differences. In doing so, the Taekwon-do instructors help further counterbalance the fragmentation of society.

Altogether, students will be encouraged to develop in the Dojang a sense of community surpassing the natural barriers that fragment modern societies.

## **c. Taekwon-do: a personal practice for a common progress.**

Over time, Taekwon-do students cultivate altruism. Honest instructors should be eager to learn from anyone regardless of their rank in Taekwon-do. Ultimately, this will benefit the students in two ways: first, the instructors further their understanding of Taekwon-do and can offer better teaching; second, they show the students that the progress of a school depends on all the practitioners. A personal



gain has no value if it does not benefit the entire community in the Dojang. As a result, students cultivate a vision in which they view their peers not as rivals but as people sharing common objectives. Recognizing the worth of anyone and that even a less advanced or younger student could be stronger develops a sense of humility.

Altogether, the development of these qualities makes students more inclined to share their knowledge and assist others.

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### 3. Taekwon-do students as assets for societies.

To benefit society, Taekwon-doists must be able to transfer their behavior acquired in the Dojang to the real world. To guide their everyday behavior, students can use the Moral Culture section of the Encyclopedia. This guide helps them use the qualities learned in the Dojang to behave as a true gentleman according to a Confucianist vision. Five interconnected virtues must be respected to be a true gentleman: humanity, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trustworthiness. Defining each of these qualities is beyond the scope of this thesis. Overall, they instruct the students to become righteous in society, think and act ethically and benevolently with others in addition to develop a taste for continuously learning to develop wisdom. These five virtues place the individuals in the center of the society.

During training, Taekwon-doists become stronger in their mind and their body. They meet people from different backgrounds. Thus, they learn to understand different points of view and cultures. Therefore, Taekwon-do practitioners develop better sociability and bridge the gaps separating generations, ethnic, social, or religious groups. Moreover, they learn to see their peers as partners rather than competitors and develop humility and a vision in which improvement is mediated by anyone in society, regardless of the importance of social status.



Thus, Taekwon-do students become more prone to help others and to undertake tasks neglected because of their apparent lack of prestige if they are important for the general well-being.

Nonetheless, do they develop better social skills<sup>12</sup>, but recent research revealed that young teenagers involved in martial arts outperformed children involved in team sports or sedentary ones in executive function involved in self-control and self-discipline<sup>15</sup>. Impaired

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regulation of emotions has been linked to aggression<sup>16</sup>. This indicates that Taekwon-do increases the ability to regulate emotions and could consequently reduce impulsive aggressivity in the population.

Naturally, behaviors such as using violence to dominate or to appropriate other's belongings will be rejected. Through the practice of power breaking and sparring, Taekwon-do students can realize the danger of being involved in a physical confrontation. As a result, they will be less likely to start fights for irrelevant reasons. An inverse relation between the aggressivity in children and their rank in Taekwon-do has been scientifically demonstrated<sup>17</sup>, meaning that children with higher rank in Taekwon-do are less aggressive. However, they develop the capability to face adversity and stressful situations more easily. This has personal consequences for the practitioner as martial arts students tend to academically perform



better than team sports practitioners and sedentary people<sup>15</sup>. More importantly, this suggests that Taekwon-do students are more likely to stand up in front of injustice or to take over responsibilities despite the difficulties. Consistent with this idea, children practicing Taekwon-do show higher leadership skills<sup>12</sup>.

## Conclusion

The ideal society in which everyone can thrive and live peacefully is not yet achieved. Individualism and lack of cohesion between the sub-communities hinder the development of peace and harmony. Despite teaching combat techniques, Taekwon-do leverages the physical and moral strength of the practitioners to educate them to be an asset to society. The benefits of Taekwon-Do can be described at every level from the individual to the community. At the personal level, the practitioners benefit from efficient physical exercise

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improving health and self-confidence. This helps in preventing peer rejection and favors social integration. In addition to a higher socialization rate, Taekwon-do provides the students with a set of moral guidelines that can be first integrated and practiced in the Dojang under a responsible instructor. During their training, practitioners develop a sense of community going beyond the social and cultural barriers. Simultaneously, Taekwon-do students develop helpfulness, self-discipline, and humility. These qualities developed inside the Dojang will naturally transfer into society in which every student is encouraged to behave honestly, truthfully, and benevolently. Therefore, as instructors behaving correctly in the Dojang will influence the behavior of their students, the way students behave outside the Dojang has the potential to influence non-practitioners.



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