

# **Multiple Levels of Teaching & Training in Tang Soo Do**

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As I progress in Tang Soo Do, I am beginning to come to the conclusion that many of the outwardly visible physical techniques we learn are merely a means to teach a deeper or more subtle level of technique. I also observe many parallels between martial arts training and academic teaching. In this essay, I will explore these two ideas and then wrap up with a discussion of integrating martial arts skills and values into everything I do. The result is a life long journey of continual learning and self-improvement.

## **Correspondence between degrees and belt ranks**

I find myself in an interesting position to observe parallels between the academic learning process and the martial arts learning process. At a simple level I can compare earning a bachelor's degree with earning a black belt, and earning a PhD with achieving master level. But the comparisons go much deeper.

## **Academic Departments correspond to different martial arts styles**

Another simple comparison is to consider different styles of martial arts as equivalent to different majors. Each has their own set of material to learn, and their own curricula, but each ends with award of a commonly recognized symbol of achievement: either the bachelors degree or the black belt. Further, each has a core of material unique to their department or style, but at least an introduction to many different techniques. For example, Tang Soo Do emphasized (at the gup level), kick, block, and punch, but provides some introduction to grappling, balance and so on which are more fundamental to other styles. Similarly, a chemistry major typically has to also take some courses in history, language, social studies, and so on.

## **Initial regimented learning, followed by more self learning**

As an undergraduate, or as a martial arts color belt (gup in Korean), the curriculum is fairly standard and fixed, and the learning process well defined and directed. However, the level of teacher provided direction decreases as one advances.

In my academic career, as I moved into graduate school pursuing a master's degree, I once complained to a professor that the text book was no good, that it did not cover some of the important things which an undergraduate book I had used, on the same subject had covered. The professor's response was that he had selected the text book for the problems, and that as a graduate student I now "knew how to learn" and should go to the library and find a book which provided the material I needed. In other words, as an undergraduate I was learning basic material, but I was also learning how to learn. Now at the graduate school level, we were no longer explicitly taught some of the material but instead simply given problems to solve and we were expected to go learn how to solve the problems by finding the right resources ourselves.

Moving beyond the master's degree, to pursue a PhD, one selects a problem which no one has addressed before. At this point there is no one with the answer. The student now becomes the world's expert on his small, well-defined problem. The advisor may know the general research area, and can provide guidance on general techniques and approaches, and can provide an independent review and assessment to ensure that sound methodology is used. But the professor does not have the answer – the student is now leading the way.

I see a similar progression in martial arts training. As a color belt, one is learning how to learn martial arts. Under close supervision in a structured environment you learn the basic tools. However, as one progresses through the ranks of black belt, the amount of supervision and direction decreases. There are some new forms to learn, and your instructor can provide some guidance, but at this point, the martial arts student begins to take more responsibility for their own learning, seeking out new material, both from other instructors in your style and from different styles. While everyone who reaches black belt in a style may have about the same basic set of skills (same forms, same one steps), by the time one achieves master status, it appears to me that each person develops a unique blend of skills, the core skills of their style, plus some additions of their choosing from other styles, or unique insights within their style.

This addition of material from other styles also reinforces a suspicion I developed about the time I earned my first degree black belt. That is, that by the time one achieves master level it does not really matter which style one studied, you will have learned much of the same material, it is just the order of learning that is different. In Tang Soo Do the visible aspects which are learned first are the classic kick, block, punch. Only later do we learn the more subtle grappling, balance, and so on. Other styles, such as Aikido or Tai-Chi place the early emphasis on balance, re-direction of energy, and grappling, and only later do the more direct movements become evident. A recent realization of mine is that the key word above is “evident”. Each style is teaching the same basic underlying techniques, but the externally visible methods vary. More on this later.

For myself, I have chosen to learn more about grappling by trying to learn more about Hapkido. Related to this, I have also begun to try to learn more about pressure points. I previously spent a little bit of time (when Tang Soo Do was not available) studying Aikido. These are areas where I have tried to bring in additional material and learning from other styles. Within Tang Soo Do, I have tried to apply my academic, physics training to understand the basic techniques at a deeper level. I have worked with and spoken with other masters around the world who have expressed that the old masters only teach so much, and then we have to discover the rest ourselves. This is in fact similar to the PhD in academia – at some point it is up to the student to strike out on their own and make their own discoveries, to develop their own interpretations.

### **Learning by Teaching**

In both academia and martial arts, some of the higher level learning is obtained through teaching. To advance in either academia or martial arts, teaching is required after reaching the threshold level (bachelor's degree or black belt). In most majors, part of the

requirements to obtain a master's degree include teaching undergraduates. You may think you know the material, until you try to explain it to someone else, or your students begin to ask you questions. This forces you to analyze your knowledge at a deeper level and gain more proficiency at it. In Tang Soo Do this was recently brought home to me trying to help a student understand why they were having problems with a certain turn using the bo (staff). As I watched the student and tried to understand the problem, I realized the problem had nothing to do with the bo, but was a basic issue that students begin learning with their very first white belt form. As I studied this, I gained new insights into how I have learned to move and was able to then pass this knowledge on to the student. This was a case where my body knew what to do, but until confronted with the problem solving issue of trying to help someone else, I did not consciously understand it myself. In fact, the solution was in words I had heard my instructor use many times, but they now gained new and deeper meaning as I helped this student.

### **We first teach tools which teach how to learn advanced material**

A recent realization I have come to is that we do not teach useful techniques at the beginning. Instead, we teach techniques which will provide a foundation to be able to learn useful techniques. In martial arts, my favorite example is how to get power. We teach low block and center punch, but in reality we will probably never use those techniques as they are taught. Instead, we teach them so we have a foundation to start to teach how to add hip motion to gain power. Thus we teach low block: hand motion and good stance. Once the student has learned that, we ask them to learn hip motion, initially be overturning, then gradually reducing the exaggerated hip motion but keeping the power. Eventually the student should be able to generate the power without the stance. Similarly, in academia, we may teach basic material at the undergraduate level, then repeat the same material with much more complex problems at the graduate level.

In either case, it is not possible to teach the student the more complex and ultimately more useful and practical techniques, until they have gained a foundation from which to learn the advanced material. The student sees the obvious and external technique being taught, and it is only later that they may realize the technique itself was not important, instead what was important was using the basic technique to get to a point where the student can learn the more important technique. Ultimately, in both Tang Soo Do and academia, we teach the student to be able to learn and discover on their own and continue without us.

A friend of mine in his third dan essay talked about "over-teaching", teaching students material they were not ready to learn. I have done that, sometimes unintentionally, which can be overwhelming, sometimes intentionally with the idea that the student will not retain the information, but I am planting the seed, letting it germinate. A challenge I face as I advance, is to figure out what techniques are simply tools for teaching more advanced techniques and if so, what the relationship is. As an initial instructor, I am following a recipe for instruction. As I advance, I need to learn the relationships between various techniques in order to ensure I build the proper foundation and reinforce the right techniques. This again mirrors academia. As a graduate student, you are given a course to teach by the professors, including outline, syllabus, and so on. As a professor, you

develop the course content, select the text book, or even write the text book to cover the material you think should be covered, in the way you think it should be covered.

So in summary, I see the following parallels:

1. Bachelor's degree corresponds to Black Belt; PhD to Master level
2. Different academic departments or subjects correspond to different martial arts styles
3. First phase is learning basic technique (bachelors or black belt), followed by more self learning at higher levels
4. At higher levels, we learn by teaching
5. One cannot directly teach the most advanced techniques but instead have to teach simple techniques to enable learning the more advanced and ultimately useful techniques.

### **Levels of Learning**

At least in Tang Soo Do, many of the outwardly visible techniques are, in my opinion, merely tools to learn deeper and more fundamental techniques. Certainly some techniques are useful by themselves. However, as I look at what I consider to be the more fundamental techniques of Tang Soo Do, these are things which are only learned by building on the foundation of basic techniques and stances.

Certainly one of the more obvious examples is how we learn to build power. First we learn basic stances and techniques (such as low block or center punch). Even at this level there is sometimes an evolution as we teach one way for the student to master the basic movement, and once they have that, we refine the technique and alter it into a more useful form (as in outside-inside block, moving from a starting point near the ear to one in the chambered position). Once the student has the basic foundation, we introduce hip motion, beginning with an overturn to get the feel, and gradually reducing the overturn, while maintaining the actual hip motion and power. We also emphasize timing and getting all parts of the body to work together. The next level is to be able to apply this without the infra-structure of a full low block, or center punch in front stance, but rather to generate the power from essentially any position, using all of the body.

Related to this is the concept of contraction and expansion. This develops as part of stringing together basic moves, either repeating basic moves during basics practice, or more importantly, in forms. With contraction, we are coiled, ready to strike, we have reduced our moment of inertia so that we can turn more quickly, and so that we can drive our body forward to generate additional power, compared to trying to move or turn without a preceding contraction.

Our one steps (and Hapkido) introduce several more concepts. At a simple level, many of the one steps are really knife defense techniques, but may require some minor modifications (don't let go once contact is established). However, beneath the basic physical techniques are lessons in balance, distance, and the flow of energy. In learning our one steps, we learn to judge distance, both of ourselves and of our partners, and hence of opponents. We learn how to use the opponents energy and how balance magnifies our strength – a simple movement suddenly enables a small person to overpower a much larger and stronger opponent. Finally, with one steps, we teach awareness and timing. By

not initiating a counter immediately, but learning to wait until we need to move, we learn an efficiency of motion, less frantic blocking and instead more deliberate, coordinated responses.

I can relate this back to learning in the academic realm. In my academic field, physics, we learn many things about the physical world, summarized in equations and basic facts. However, the deeper learning is “problem solving”, how identify, define, and address a problem, whether related to physics or some other field. We do not have a major called problem solving, but that is the life skill which we learn.

### **Carrying Martial Arts into Life**

We often teach younger students that karate is only for the do-jang or if their life is in danger. But I think of this as one of those areas where that is the first, outward teaching, until they have advanced to a sufficient degree. Ultimately, that must change. The student must internalize the teachings of Tang Soo Do and incorporate them into their being and let them suffuse their entire life. This applies not only to values, but even to physical technique: the way one walks and carries oneself, the awareness and ability to observe, the ability to understand motion. On the internal level, the student should carry respect, humility, self-control and all of the other values from the do-jang and use them as part of their daily lives. Without this, martial arts are simply a form of exercise and self-defense. The difference is perhaps best captured in the different endings of Japanese martial arts: -itsu compared to -do. The -itsu ending referring to a purely fighting art, the -do referring to a more complete way of life.

We carry our academic learning into all of our lives. At a simple level, basic reading, writing, and arithmetic are used not only in school and on the job, but through-out our lives. In my case, my profession as a physicist teaches me not only physics (the external and obvious), but also at a deeper level, problem solving and rational thought. I bring the external, the basic physics into my life, for example using physics to understand Tang Soo Do techniques, or to understand driving and safety issues. I use the more general problem solving technique, the less obvious but perhaps deeper teachings of physics in all aspects of my life, trying to understand how things work and inter-relate.

Similarly, I try to carry Tang Soo Do over into my everyday life. The basic values (5 codes, 7 tenants) are easy – they clearly are meant to be values to live by outside the do-jang. For a somewhat different example, Tang Soo Do teaches both external (physical) and internal (mental/spiritual) balance.

Any discipline, studied over an extended period of time provides certain character traits and insights, and develops techniques and habits which can be used to enrich a person’s entire life. By virtue of studying over a long period of time, one learns patience, and hopefully respect for those who have gone before (elders), and humility as you realize the things you do not know and come to appreciate that others, who may follow different courses are not less for their different course, but have learned things you have not, even as you have learned things they have not. In academia, the top degree is call a Doctor of Philosophy, and for a reason. At this point, the student has not only learned and mastered

specific material, but has hopefully gained a deep and philosophical understanding of the pursuit of knowledge in general. And finally, in both martial arts and academic pursuits, one hopefully “learns how to learn” and how to continue learning and gaining insights on your own.