What is Taekwondo?

Taekwondo is one of the most systematic and scientific Korean traditional martial arts, that teaches more than physical fighting skills. It is a discipline that shows ways of enhancing our spirit and life through training our body and mind. Today, it has become a global sport that has gained an international reputation, and stands among the official games in the Olympics.

Let's take a closer look at the meaning of the word "Tae" "Kwon" "Do." It is composed of three parts as shown in the English spelling, though it is one word in Korean. "Tae" means "foot," "leg," or "to step on"; "Kwon" means "fist," or "fight"; and "Do" means the "way" or "discipline." If we put these three parts together, we can see two important concepts behind "Tae Kwon Do".

First, Taekwondo is the right way of using Tae and Kwon 'fists and feet,' or all the parts of the body that are represented by fists and feet. Second, it is a way to control or calm down fights and keep the peace. This concept comes from the meaning of Tae Kwon 'to put fists under control' [or 'to step on fists']. Thus Taekwondo means "the right way of using all parts of the body to stop fights and help to build a better and more peaceful world."

Taekwondo has been developing with the 5000-year long history of Korea, being called by several different names in the course. In Korea, Taekwondo began as a defense martial art called, "Taekkyon," and developed as a way of training body and mind in the ancient kingdom of Koguryo, under the name of "Sunbae." In the Shilla period, it had become the backbone of Hwarangdo that aimed at producing leaders of the country.

Taekwondo today is similar to the martial arts in other Oriental countries and shares some features with them, because in the course of its evolution it has gained many different styles that existed in the martial arts of the countries surrounding Korea, like Japan and China.

But Taekwondo is very different from many such oriental martial arts. First, physically it is very dynamic with active movements that include a mirage of foot skills. Second, the principle physical movements are in simpatico with that of the mind and life as a whole. Third, it possesses dynamic poses from another perspective.

Taekwondo can be characterized by unity: the unity of body, mind, and life, and the unity of the pose ["poomsae"] and confrontation, and cracking down. When you do Taekwondo, you should make your mind peaceful and synchronize your mind with your movements, and extend this harmony to your life and society. This is how in Taekwondo the principle of physical movements, the principle of mind training, and the principle of life become one and the same. On the other hand, the right poomsae lead to the right confrontation, which will eventually produce great destructive power.

How come we reach such a unity in Taekwondo? Taekwondo is a way of life, much like having a job, raising a family, fighting for a cause, or any one of numerous raison d'etre. What makes Taekwondo different from these is that it is an activity for survival in extremely antagonistic situations. One must always overcome the enemy that is trying to cause harm. But simply winning a fight is not enough to guarantee one's safety, because the enemy may recuperate and attack again. Moreover, there may be many other enemies than the one that was just defeated. One cannot ever feel safe unless one gains permanent peace. To attain this permanent or lasting peace, one needs unity. This is what Taekwondo aim for. Otherwise Taekwondo would be no different from any other street-fighting skills.

Taekwondo pursues harmonious growth and improvements of life through its unique activities. This is why one could say Taekwondo is a way of life. To ultimately enable ourselves to lead more valuable lives, we would do well by finding the guiding principles deeply hidden in Taekwondo.

**Philosophical Principles of Taekwondo**

The philosophy of Taekwondo is very special, but what makes it so special? If we learn philosophy from books, we tend to forget it as soon as we leave them, because it is not related to our actual lives. But since Taekwondo is connected with our lives like every movement of ours is, we can never forget its philosophy.

That is, the philosophy is one of actions that can be learned from other actions, and our everyday activities. Taekwondo philosophy represents the principles of the changes and movements in human beings. It also represents the principles of our lives, since life consists of our movements. Therefore, we can say Taekwondo is a philosophy in itself. We can understand the philosophy of Taekwondo by doing Taekwondo, and this understanding should lead to better understanding and enhancement of our life. The principles of Taekwondo can be explained in several ways but here we will explain it simply with the principle of "Sam Jae" [Three Elements] and that of "Eum" [the Negative or Darkness] and "Yang" [the Positive or the Brightness]. "Sam Jae" refers to "Cheon" [the Heaven], "Ji" [the Earth], and "In" [the Man] and the principles concerning them. In oriental countries, it has been recognized as the central principle that explains the changes of everything in the world. "Sam Jae" and the changes of "Eum" and
"Yang" constitute the "Eight Trigrams for Divination" in the "Book of Changes." The principle of Sam Jae has been emphasized in oriental countries, especially in Korea. If you understand Taekwondo's principle, you could understand all the skills and spiritual depth of Taekwondo. The principle of Eum and Yang has also been emphasized in oriental countries as the central principle of life. It maintains that everything has an opposite side. This principle explains various forms of changes, but it comes from "Taegeuk" [the Great Absolute], which represents the ultimate claim that Eum and Yang was the one and the same thing. If we understand Taekwondo according to this principle, we will find a solution, and by continuously changing skills, we will never get stuck, in any situation. After we understand these philosophical principles of Taekwondo, we can find proper ways to understand and develop our lives.

The Historical Development of Taekwondo Philosophy

Taekwondo contains thoughts that Han [Korean] people had developed through history. Its philosophy is easily explained with Hongik-Ingan, Jaese-Ihwa, or Hwarangdo spirit. Hongik-Ingan and Jaese-Ihwa were not only ideologies of Tangun Chosun's foundation, but also a fundamental thought of Han people. With time, these ideas developed into the Hwarangdo spirit and the Taekwondo philosophy today. Now, let's look at the principles contents of the philosophy.

Hongik-Ingan’ means universal welfare of mankind. It was the idea of the national foundation by Tangun, and the Taekwondo spirit too has inherited the idea of Hongik-Ingan. It is easily confirmed from the fact that the word of Taekwondo, itself means to suppress fighting and induce peace. On one hand, Jaese-Ihwa means that the world is educated in accordance with the reason of heaven. Taekwondo is a principle, not a simple connection with movements. It is the Korean traditional martial art characterized by the trinity of body, mind and life. Thus, the principle is the reason of all creation, and so it refers to the reason of heaven in Jaese-Ihwa. Therefore, human beings can be educated in accordance with the reason of heaven through correct training of Taekwondo. That's the very meaning of Jaese-Ihwa. Hongik-Ingan and Jaese-Ihwa appear clearly in the myth of the Korean foundation. According to it, "In the early age, Hwan-Wung, the son of Heaven established a nation called Baedal [earliest name of Korea]. He then announced the purpose of the national foundation as Jaese-Ihwa [educate with the reason of heaven] and Hongik-Ingan [universal welfare of mankind].

Taekwondo in Ancient Times

The historical background of Taekwondo development will be explained following the chronological order of 4 different ages; ancient times, middle ages, modern ages and present times.

The origin of Taekwondo

Man by nature has instinct to preserve his own life as well as his race, and therefore engages in physical activities either consciously or unconsciously. Man cannot do without physical motions that he grows and developed on them, regardless of time and space. In ancient times people had no means other than the bare hands and body to defend themselves; so they naturally developed the bare-hand fighting techniques. Even at times when arms were developed as offensive or defensive means, people continued to enjoy the bare-hand fighting techniques for the purpose of building physical strength as well as showing off through matches at rituals of tribal communities.

In the early days of the Korean peninsula, there were three tribes, each enjoying warrior's martial art contests during the ritual seasons. At the time, people learned techniques from their experiences of fighting against the beasts whose defensive and offensive motions were also the subject of analysis. It is believed that this was exactly the true grounding of today's Taekwondo, which names have descended from "Subak", "Taekkyon" and so on.

In the latter part of ancient times on the Korean peninsula, three kingdoms were rivaling among them for the hegemony. They were Koguryo, Paekje and Shilla all indulged in growing national strength with trained warriors. Therefore, the Korean history tells that there were military personalities among the well-known prominent national leaders of the three kingdoms, which proves the military tendency of ruling hierarchy.

As a result, youth warriors were organized, such as "Hwarangdo" in Shilla and "Chouisonin" in Koguryo, which both adopted martial art training as one of the important subjects of learning. A known martial art book of the days, called "Muyedobobongji" wrote "Taekwondo is the basis of martial art, enabling one to build strength by using the hand and foot freely and training arms and legs as well as the body to adaptable to any critical situations,” which means Taekwondo was already prevalent in that age. Thus, it can be easily assumed that Taekwondo was originated from the days of tribal communities on the Korean peninsula.

Shilla kingdom founded in B.C. 57 on the southeastern part of Korea, and Koguryo founded in B.C. 37 on the northern part of Korea along Yalu river, both made great efforts to raise their youngsters into strong warriors called “hwarang” and “sunbae” respectively, certainly with Taekwondo as one of the principal subjects of physical training.

Koguryo's "sonbae" and Taekkyon
Koguryo was founded on the northern part of Korea, surrounded by hostile Han [Chinese] tribes in the north. Therefore, in its early days, the kingdom organized a strong warrior corps called "Sunbae" in its attempt to consolidate power.

According to the scholars, a man of virtue who never recoils from a fight means "sunbae", which is a member of the warrior corps. Later, the chronicle of the Old Chosun Dynasty described the lift of Koguryo days, saying: "people gathered on march 10 every year at a site of ritual, where they enjoyed a sword dance, archery, Taekkyon contests and so on," implying that Taekkyon was one of the popular events for the ritual in the Koguryo days. It also said "sunbae" lived in groups, learning history and literary arts at home and going out to construct roads and fortresses for the benefits of society, always devoting themselves to the nations.

Therefore, it was natural that Koguryo put the priority of interests on the Taekkyon which was the basis of martial arts, as can be proven by the wall paintings discovered at tombs of Koguryo days. A mural painting at the Samsil tomb shows two warriors engaged in a face-to-face match in Taekkyon stance, and a third at the same tomb shows the scene of Korean wrestling bout [Ssireum], clearly distinguishing it from Taekkyon. It can be assumed from the painting of Taekkyon match that the dead were either a Taekkyon practical or the subject of condolence with dances and martial art.

Silla's "Hwarang" and Taekkyon

The Kingdom of Shilla was founded on the southeastern part of the Korean peninsula where there were no immediate threats from outside, but along with the birth of Paekje Kingdom on its west flank and the start of invasions by Koguryo from the north, Shilla was impelled to arm itself with development of martial arts.

In fact, "hwarangdo" is the typical example of Shilla's martial arts, which is an assimilation of Koguryo's "sunbae" system. The youth group hwarangdo were well trained with the senses of filial piety, loyalty to the kingdom and sacrificial devotion to society to become important personalities for the rein of the kingdom. Notable among them were Kim Yu-Shin and Kim Chun-Chu that made definite contributions to the unification of those three kingdoms.

The chronicle of Old Chosun described the life of hwarangs, members of hwarangdo: "hwarang were selected by the kingdom through contests and, after selection, they lived together in a group, learning, exercising subak, fencing and horse-riding, and sometimes enjoyed various games of communities, working on emergency aids and construction of fortresses and roads, and they were always ready to sacrifice their lives at the time of war."

Hwarangs were particularly influenced by the Buddhistic disciplines and therefore the bronze statues of a Kumgang Yoksa [a man of great physical strength] currently exhibited at the Kyongju Museum clearly indicate that martial arts were practiced at temples by showing a strong man's bare-hand defensive and offensive stances.

Especially the shape of a fist shown on the statue of Kumgang Yoksa exactly resembles that of a "jungkwon" [proper fist] in the contemporary term of Taekwondo. The statue also shows "pyon jumok " [flat fist] and the use of legs, which are seen in today's Taekwondo.

It is really noticeable that in the Shilla epoch the terms "subak" [hand techniques] and "taekkyon" appear together, signifying that both hand and foot techniques were used in martial arts as shown in today's Taekwondo.

Taekkyon transmitted from Koguryo to Shilla

As the art of taekkyon was popularized in Koguryo, it was also handed down to Silla, which is justified by the following points of view;

1. "Hwarang"(or sonrang) in Silla has the same meaning with the word "sonbae" in Koguryo by indicating both the youth warrior's corps from their etymological origins.

2. Both Hwarang and sonbae had the same organizations and hierarchical structure with each other.

3. According to historical, as sonbaes in Koguryo used to compete in taekkyon games at the time of their national festivals, Hwarangs in Silla also played taekkyon games (subak, dokkyoni or taekkyoni) at such festivals as "palkwanhoe" and "hankawi" , thus systematically developing the ancient fighting techniques into the taekkyon(or sonbae) as the basis of martial arts by around a.d.200. From the 4th century the Hwarangs took the takkyon lesson as a systemized martial art at their learning houses to make it also popularized among ordinary people so much so that their techniques were depicted on the mural paintings of ancient warrior tombs. Again, it is also true that taekkyon, coming down to Silla, was further developed into a school of martial art with the division of techniques, i.e bare-hand techniques and foot techniques, which can be proved by the fact that both hand and foot techniques art clearly shown in the ancient sculptures buddhistic statues.