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Taekwondo, Health and Safety

Speech prepared for the Taekwondo Grandmaster's Society Seminar

By Grandmaster Kim Soo as told to Dimitrios Gakidis

Thank you for the invitation, I feel honored to speak today about Taekwondo and Health.

I would like to speak about the evolution of martial arts over the last 100 years, more importantly how the purpose of martial arts has changed over time and what goals we would like to achieve as teachers of martial arts. I would like to speak about what is, in my opinion, the true purpose of martial arts today, and perhaps how to adjust our teaching method to better fulfill this purpose.

The purpose of Martial Arts has changed over time. In the old times, martial arts was used mainly for warfare. A martial artist trained in order to become a better soldier and to better serve his country or his emperor. Indeed, the highest honor for a martial artist was to die in combat. Not surprisingly, emphasis in training was placed on physical ability, while the mental values that were practiced were those of loyalty, devotion and discipline. Traditionally, the health of the martial artist was of low importance in training; no one trained for personal self-improvement, and some of the traditional methods of practice could even be detrimental to a person's physical well-being. One such example is that, historically, punching was practiced with the mouth closed with exhale at impact. This technique increases speed and power, but practicing it daily would take a toll on a person's health. Of course, traditionally, the soldier would never live long enough to develop health problems anyway.

Today, many individuals that train in martial arts do so mostly as a sport, which means importance is placed on outcomes as measured by awards, winning tournaments and gaining glory. Indeed modern Taekwondo is an Olympic sport, and as such, it places emphasis on tournament fighting. During training, emphasis is on one's ability to perform fancy moves, beating one's opponent, and winning trophies. During demonstrations, extreme acrobatics and deadly looking movements are emphasized. In my opinion, exhibiting one's ability in this way misses the true purpose of martial arts. Tournament fighting teaches the wrong values: winning at all costs is what is important, while physical aggression is awarded with trophies.

The way I see martial arts, sparring should benefit both parties. There should be no winners and losers. Additionally, tournament fighting sets the stage for the martial artist to lose sight of the goals of training. They may feel that after passing their "prime" there is no longer a purpose to training and studying further. So the question rises, what is the true purpose of martial arts.

The purpose of martial arts today is health and longevity, and training must reflect these goals. The student of today is not training to die for country or a political leader and fortunately, for most of us, very rarely will we encounter a physical attacker. Modern day enemies are internal rather than external: stress, depression, worry, defeat, insecurity are ever-present. You must fight these inside enemies on a daily basis and defeat them through your training. This requires first and foremost, mental and physical balance. By developing mental and physical balance you can easily overcome the challenges of the 21st century, and accordingly, mental and physical balance should be the most important aspect of martial arts training.

I am surprised to hear that some masters brag about going to the gym, how they stay healthy by running on treadmills and lifting weights.

I am here to emphasize that traditional forms have EVERYTHING that you need in order to stay healthy. They have everything that you need mentally and everything that you need physically. At the same time, if you practice forms the wrong way, it has the power to harm you. The sole emphasis on speed and power is like taking small amounts of poison everyday – slowly killing you. In contrast, practicing forms the right way has the power to heal you.

I want to share with you my personal experience. When I first started to train in martial arts, the method of instruction used at the time was that the student had to figure out most things by himself through long and hard training until reaching the point of total exhaustion. Students were not taught proper breathing techniques. Many students suffered serious injuries such as broken bones, kicks to the groin and even death. The instructors' attitude was that only the toughest survive and we don't want any weak students amongst us. Most students would not see benefits from training and very often they would get injured. As a result they would drop out.

I myself developed some serious health problems from martial arts training.

Within three years of training I developed a bad ulcer. A couple of years later I developed rheumatism. A few years after that, I developed a lower back problem. I accumulated many serious physical ailments due to poor training methods. Ironically, I became far less healthy than other people who did not practice martial arts. After suffering for over 10 years, a doctor recommended that my back needed surgery, with a 50 per cent chance of getting better. Surgery required that I would stay in bed immobilized for a while after, so I chose instead, to try physical therapy, traditional Chinese medicine, acupuncture, anything. However, nothing provided much of a relief to my problem.

I remember exiting the health studio one day. It was a gorgeous day with the sky very bright and blue. But, to me, it all looked gray and gloomy. Not only did the day look dark, but my future looked bleak as well. I thought to myself that martial arts was making me sick; because of my constant physical suffering, I was at such a low point that I could not even enjoy a beautiful day. Through meditation and training I came to the understanding that the principles and the teaching methods I was using were wrong, and the real reason for my poor health. Instead of doctors and acupuncturists, the solution to my health problem was in my training. In essence, the root of my health problem was that I was putting too much emphasis on the technical-physical aspects. I came to the understanding that martial arts training under the right principles requires an emphasis on breathing, rhythm, balance and proper body shifting.

So let's briefly talk about these principles.

What is balance? There is balance of movement and balance of mind. When techniques or forms are practiced, they must be balanced to insure that the body is not harmed by repeated un-balanced movements that may strain the human anatomy. We also need balance in life in general; in our mind. You may design a building that looks beautiful, but without proper balance it may crack.

What is breathing? Breathing is fuel for the body. The air that we breathe is free, invisible energy. Performing techniques and forms requires a lot of "fuel". Without proper breathing your health will be at risk.

What is Rhythm? Breathing properly establishes a proper rhythm. The body then can follow the rhythm of the breathing in order to execute a safe and more powerful technique. A simple explanation would be to consider running. You may be able to run five miles without rhythm. But if you keep running every day without rhythm, eventually your health will suffer. So we must have rhythmical breathing when practicing martial arts.

So how did I cure my back problem? I practiced the above principles while training. I practiced basic form number one with a new focus on appropriate breathing, balance, rhythm, and proper body shifting. I practiced every day; over and over again. While incorrect martial arts harmed my body, practicing correctly healed my body. Natural way martial arts is my way of teaching the above principles: it is teaching with the ultimate goal of preserving and enhancing the martial artist's health.

I want to share with you another personal story. A good friend of mine sent me a demonstration tape. I was shocked by what I saw on the tape. He was performing very fancy moves; moves that looked impressive to the observer, but were lacking balance, breathing and rhythm. When I saw my friend a few months later, he told me that he could not sleep, he could not eat, he was too nervous and anxious all the time, and he did not know why. I told him that it was of no surprise to me. His problem was his lack of breathing, his lack of rhythm. He could kick very high and demonstrate fancy moves, he was very limber. But he had no breathing, no rhythm, no balance of the movement. He was interested only in fancy moves. I told him that his problem was in his own training.

So the simple question as to whether or not martial arts is good for your health can be answered with a not-so-simple answer of yes and no. Taekwondo can save a person's life, but it can also destroy a person's life. We have to practice correctly and under the right principles. The traditional Asian method of instruction is also part of the problem. Very few persons will have the patience to train for enough time to come to understand basic principles. Students cannot figure out martial arts principles by themselves. We must follow basic principles when performing techniques as well as help our students understand the importance of these vital, health-protecting concepts.

This is the reason that today, in Asian countries, there are very few adults training in martial arts. The problem is even worse in my home country of South Korea. I am astonished by the fact the students are mostly children. In Korea today, few train long enough to develop long-term health problems. Students quit training from disinterest after only two or three years.

Martial arts teachers in Korea are astonished to find out that I have students that have been training with me for twenty, thirty or forty years. Therefore my message is that an incorrect understanding of the purpose of martial arts results in poor teaching methods, which leads to wrong attitudes, injuries, and ultimately to students giving up and quitting. Today people study martial arts for their personal happiness, rather than to die in battle. The student is seeking health, longevity, and relaxation, in addition to learning self-defense. Since these goals are today's reality, instruction must consider the short-term and long-term physical repercussions.

In conclusion, martial arts is much more than a sport, tournament fighting or even self-defense: martial arts at its best is a way of life. It combines philosophical insight with physical training to create mentally strong and independent individuals that can fight physical sickness as well as internal enemies of doubt, insecurity

and stress.

Since the purpose of my speech today is health, I want to talk a little bit about dojang sparring. Taekwondo students often wear protective gear when sparring. Unfortunately, sometimes they exercise no control and persons get hurt: this is bad education. One time I was serving as a judge in a tournament where one contestant tried to poke his opponent in the eye. The second time that he tried to poke his opponent in the eye, even though he did not touch him, I stopped the fight and told him that he was disqualified. This is also the reason that I do not encourage my students to compete. Because good people can get hurt through the inappropriate actions of others trying to satisfy their own personal need to increase their egos.

In the old times, many students would get seriously hurt and even killed. When I was a young student, my friend received a side kick with no control. He went home where he started to cough blood and soon after he died. So many people were killed during training in the old times. I was lucky myself not to get killed when I received serious injuries a few times. One time, I was 15 years old, my senior kicked me in the neck really hard, with no control whatsoever. He could have killed me. Another time my senior mounted a round-house kick so hard that the pattern of my judo uniform was imprinted on to my arm. He could have broken my arm. Another time, the assistant instructor told me that we were done with class, then he proceeded to kick me in the solar plexus really hard. He could have killed me. So I want to emphasize the importance of control when sparing.

I would like to end my speech with a funny story. I was serving as a judge in a tournament, when one of the contestants was kicked in the front real hard. He was roughly 13 years old, and he fell on his back with his arms open above his head. Everyone was worried about him, and expected me to deduct a point from the opponent that appeared to kick him in the abdomen. I walked to the student that was on the floor, I kicked him very lightly and told him to get up, and that next time, he should ask his master to teach him to be a better actor. The reason that I knew he was pretending, is that no person that is kicked in the abdomen will fall on his back with his arms open: the natural response to a kick in the abdomen is to double up, perhaps fall forward and land on one's knees, with the hands reaching for the abdomen. So if you ever see me smiling and telling a student to get up, is not because I am insensitive, but because in all likelihood someone is pretending.

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