



The Five Tenets of Tae Kwon Do

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Introduction

Frequently, at the end of class, the question will be asked of students, “*Can you name the five tenets of Tae Kwon Do?*” After some stumbling and a few puzzled expressions, student after student will eventually trip over one of them until all five have been identified in one form or another. However, very little is normally discussed as to their origin, their meaning, how they apply in our Tae Kwon Do training and practice, or how these principles can translate and be employed in our everyday life. This article will endeavor to put these tenets in perspective and bring a better appreciation of how embracing each of them will help bring us peace and harmony as we face our daily challenges.

The Origin of the Five Tenets

Let’s start with the most basic question, “*What, exactly, is a tenet?*” A dictionary or encyclopedia definition would merely define it as any opinion, principle, dogma, or doctrine which a person or group believes, maintains, or practices. However, this stoic definition does not do justice to the rich heritage from which our current Tae Kwon Do tenets were derived nor the lifestyle that heritage defined.

During the Three Kingdoms Period of Korean history, an organization was developed from the youths of noble families for the purpose of training warriors to defend the Kingdom of Silla from rival kingdoms. This organization was known as the Hwarang and, to be considered for selection, a youth had to be a person of good character, virtue and countenance. These youths were taught arts, dance, literature and the sciences. They were trained in the arts of warfare and hand-to-hand combat. The leaders of each group of Hwarang youths were referred to as Kuk-son. It was from the ranks of the Kuk-son that many of the military and government leaders were subsequently chosen. And, it was two noted Hwarang warriors who were responsible for the development of the Hwarang Code of Conduct from which our current Five Tenets were derived.

During the 30th year of the reign of King Chin Hung, the king who first established the Hwarang, warriors Kwi-San and Chu-Hang sought out the famous Buddhist warrior monk Won Gwang Beop Sa (*meaning Won Gwang Teacher of the Law*) and requested he provide them with a set of rules or principles to live by for those who did not have the ability to embrace the Buddhist monks’ secluded way of life. Won Gwang provided them with his “***Five Commandments for Secular Life.***” These commandments were accepted as the Hwarang Code of Conduct and were comprised of these five rules: rigid loyalty to king and country; respect and obedience to one’s parents; unswerving loyalty to and trust of friends; to display courage and never retreat in battle; and, prudence in the use of violence or in the taking of life. Hwarang warriors were reputed to exhibit displays of their allegiance to this code in every facet of their lives.

There are numerous tales of bravery and dedication to these principles that have served to define the spirit of the Hwarang throughout history. One such story relates the tale of the hero warrior Sa Da-Ham who, upon the death of his best friend, starved himself to death due to a death pact they made to each other as youths, thus demonstrating his loyalty to his friend and adherence to the code. Another tale tells of Kwan Chang, who became a commander at the age of 16 and, after being captured and released due to his young age during a battle against the forces of Paekje, continued to mount attacks until he was finally captured and executed for his persistence in battle.

It is this spirit and commitment to the Hwarang Code of Conduct that has been described as the root of Silla's national morality and strength and it is the Hwarang warriors who were attributed with the success of Silla's defeat of the kingdoms of Paekje and Goguryeo bringing about the unification of the three kingdoms.

Although it would be difficult to draw a direct one-to-one transition between the two, it is easy to draw analogies between the Hwarang Code of Conduct and the Five Tenets of Tae Kwon Do; ***Courtesy, Integrity, Perseverance, Self-Control and Indomitable Spirit.*** Respect and obedience imply courtesy. Loyalty and trust imply integrity. Having the courage to continue implies perseverance. Prudence in the use of violence or in taking a life implies self-control. To never retreat in battle implies indomitable spirit. We will analyze each of these tenets in the next sections and discuss their applications in both our training and our daily lives.

Courtesy

Definition: Enduring respect for and consideration of self and others.
Politeness. Humility.

In the Dojang: It is easy to witness this specific definition when applied to our martial arts experience. It becomes evident the minute we enter the dojang when we remove our shoes in a sign of respect for the training facility. It continues with the bows and traditional Korean greetings as we meet our GrandMaster and all Black Belts in our progression within the school, thus demonstrating respect for their accomplishments and the rich Korean traditions we are privileged to have learned. One need only hear the echoes of *AhnYoungHaShimNeeKah* and *ConSaHomNeeDha* to realize how pervasive politeness is within the walls of our dojang. This show of respect continues with the bowing on and off the mat and in remaining quiet and paying attention whenever our GrandMaster or other instructor is conducting lessons. However, even though we stress it consistently to all students, what becomes difficult is remembering that these signs and showing of respect should never wane as we progress through the ranks. As we become closer associates and friends over the years, it is easy to fall into complacency where these displays of respect and affection are concerned. We should be constantly vigilant in this regard and always remember that our behavior towards one another is being mimicked by those we are training.

On the street: What becomes most difficult with this tenet is the ability to carry our courteous practices from within the dojang to the outside world. When one gets cut off in traffic, scowled at by a passer-by, or hollered at by a friend or associate, it becomes a challenge to be courteous in return. Human nature dictates lashing out when faced with a less-than-appropriate action on another's part. However, nothing will serve to diffuse anger more than a response such as, "*God bless you!*" or "*Have a nice day!*" My favorite commercial currently airing on TV is where one person performs a random act of kindness which another person notices. That person is then inspired to perform a similar act which another person notices. This chain continues for several individuals providing the message that politeness and good deeds can be contagious. Unfortunately, the opposite can also be true and lashing out can evoke a similar response. We must consistently strive to be courteous and polite in the face of adversity and turn an otherwise ugly situation into a pleasant experience. This ability requires strict adherence to another tenet, self-control, which we will discuss in detail later.

Integrity

Definition: Steadfast adherence to a strict moral and ethical code.
Honesty. Loyalty.

In the Dojang: It is easy to understand how honesty and loyalty imply integrity. In the dojang, no ethical martial artist would think of teaching dirty tactics to students in order to win a sparring contest. Nor would one consider demonstrating any technique that would intentionally harm their opponent in anything other than a life-threatening situation. Even when instructing students in the devastating techniques that can be employed in self-defense, emphasis is always placed on the use of only the force necessary to remove the immediate threat and to then remove oneself from the situation. Recognizing that there can be a very fine line between being the defender and becoming the aggressor, it is integrity that enables the ethical martial artist to not cross that line.

Similarly, martial artists of high moral fiber would never attempt to lure students from one dojang to join another. Even when advanced to the level of starting one's own school, it would not be acceptable to employ the assistance of current friends and students without the blessing of one's current Grand Master. Loyalty is placed high on the list of a true martial artist's list of virtues. However, this does not preclude one from studying or practicing other forms of martial arts. In fact, knowledge of other martial arts and their varied techniques can help with the development of proper technique in Tae Kwon Do. For our purposes, loyalty means being true to your dojang, your Grand Master, your friends and family, and foremost, to your self. Again, it is integrity that enables the moral and ethical martial artist to understand that meaning.

On the street: In a general sense, integrity means knowing the difference between right and wrong and always attempting to do the right thing. Outside the dojang, we regularly witness examples of right and wrong in our society. Does adherence to this tenet require the martial artists to get directly involved in each occurrence witnessed? Of course not! One must first realize that right vs. wrong is subject to individual interpretation and may not mean the same to all persons. Being a martial artist does not require or permit one to impose our will or sense of values on others. It also does not require one to interfere in areas that are not of our concern even if we believe the situation does not fit our interpretation of right and wrong. Adhering to this tenet merely means attempting to live one's life in accordance with their personal beliefs of that which is right.

Perseverance

Definition: To persist in an endeavor or undertaking in spite of counterinfluences, opposition or discouragement. Dedication.

In the Dojang: It should be fairly obvious where this fits in the dojang. Our dedication to practicing the basics over and over speaks volumes to the perseverance necessary to fine tune our skills at all levels. Constant practice of our forms from Kicho to the highest Dan form allowed demonstrates the role perseverance plays in our attempts to learn and understand the meaning of each Poomse. All too often, when we believe we have finally mastered a certain move or form, we are rudely awakened to our deficiencies by failing to place in the next tournament. We then realize it's perseverance that will get us back on the mat to continue to train and refine that which we thought we knew well. Our goal must be to continually strive to be better today than we were yesterday. Dedication to that principle will enable us to become consistently more proficient martial artists.

On the street: It should also be fairly obvious where we can find examples of persistence or perseverance in our daily lives. How many would achieve a college education if they didn't persist through the four plus years of higher education? How many sports figures would make it to the major leagues in their respective sports without the constant dedication to practice? And how many young athletes would make it to the Olympics without the constant attention to each repetition of a specific technique? We must accept the fact that it is through consistent failures that we learn where we need to concentrate our efforts in order to improve. Without a commitment to perseverance in our daily efforts, we would merely float through life with little chance of reaching the goals we all have the ability to achieve.

Self-Control

Definition: The ability of a person to exert their will over the inhibitions, impulses, emotions or desires of their body or self. Patience. Discipline.

In the Dojang: Although this can mean many things to different people in different situations, this begins in the Dojang with merely paying attention to the instructor when on the mat. One must remain at attention or in the ready stance without motion until the instructor allows you to do otherwise. In activities, this can translate to maintaining a calm demeanor when performing badly in forms practice or getting caught with a harder-than-expected blow when sparring. It can also be as simple as not responding angrily when someone says something you consider inappropriate or that you just do not like. Remembering that all criticism in the dojang is intended to be constructive makes it much easier to maintain the proper attitude toward perfecting technique. Any martial art requires years of patient practice to even begin to understand and start to perfect. Without self-control, one would get frustrated quickly and move on to other endeavors.

On the street: Carrying self-control from the dojang to the street often proves to be a very difficult task. First, it takes a great deal of discipline to make the trek to training when you've had a long and tiring day. There is always something else we can be doing or an excuse we can use to prevent us from training and that is usually when we need the training the most. When we discipline ourselves to push past our desire to remain home, the benefits of working out will help us to feel better both physically and mentally. Beyond our training, how tempting is it to respond with some level of rage when someone cuts us off on the highway nearly causing us to have an accident . . . especially when we have loved ones with us in the vehicle? Who of us have not been tempted to lash out at a spouse or friend when they do something that angers us? Even the discipline necessary at times to resist that second donut can be a daunting task! In those situations, it's easy to understand how self-control can make us the better person. But how does one summon up the self-control necessary to achieve that end? If one can remember to adhere to the first tenet explained earlier, courtesy, it becomes much easier to overlook another individual's shortcomings or their lack of the virtues we, as martial artists, aspire to maintain.

Indomitable Spirit

Definition: Having the right attitude and maintaining inner strength regardless of winning or losing. Not allowing one's principles to be broken, defeated, or conquered. Bravery. Courage.

In the Dojang: From the story of the Silla Hwarang warrior Kwan Chang in the battle of Hwangsan against the forces of Paekje to the tale of Leonidas and his 300 Spartans at Thermopylae against the superior forces of Xerxes, examples of the courage defined by indomitable spirit can be found throughout history texts. Although these examples certainly

apply, is this the type of courage we envision when we talk about this tenet? The answer becomes clearer if we draw a comparison with the earlier tenet of perseverance. If you think of perseverance as the *physical effort* required to face and overcome opposition, indomitable spirit can be thought of as the *will of the soul* necessary to achieve that effect. It's having the will to continue to train while overcoming an injury. It's the ability to maintain a competitive attitude in the face of overwhelming losses. It's recognizing that victory or defeat is not the end to which we aspire; it's the process of preparing and learning and continuing to improve all aspects of self.

On the street: Everyday life is full of challenges and many of us have survived our fair share of disappointments and tragedies. If you've ever lost personal property to fire or flood, experienced the catastrophic loss of close friends or family members, suffered through the life changing events of job loss and lifestyle re-orientation, you don't need to have explained the role indomitable spirit played in seeing you through the difficulties! Many people resort to their personal relationship with their respective God to summon up the courage and bravery necessary to overcome what seems to be overwhelming odds at the time. Regardless of where one manages to obtain the inner strength, when doing one's best against all odds, this is the essence of indomitable spirit!

Conclusion

We've discussed the origins of our tenets and how each applies in both our training and everyday life. I'd like to conclude with how adherence to our Five Tenets in general can fit within our lives regardless of our other religious and philosophical beliefs and life choices.

When the Buddhist monk Won Gwang Bop Sa outlined the Five Commandments for Secular Life that serve as the foundation for our Five Tenets, they were based on Confucian and Buddhist principles. But the principles found in these tenets are not exclusive of Eastern beliefs. We often talk about the differences between Eastern and Western philosophies, but a thorough review of both will uncover striking similarities. These same similarities can be found when studying the five major religions of the world; Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It is insignificant whether one is reviewing the basic beliefs of Confucianism, reading from The Law Code of Manu of Hinduism, or studying The Ten Commandments of Christianity, the common ideals of courtesy and respect for self and others, loyalty and integrity in daily behavior, and discipline and control in dealing with others can be found throughout all religious and philosophical teachings. Likewise, one can find many examples of the importance of perseverance and continuance in the face of overwhelming odds throughout The Bible, The Qur'an and many other religious texts, as well as in documentaries of both Eastern and Western histories. The HwaRang of Korea, the Samurai of Feudal Japan, the Knights of the Round Table, the cowboys of the Old West, our space pioneers, and many other examples have provided us with numerous stories of bravery and courage in the face of all odds. This is evidence that adherence to the same principles defined by our tenets resonate throughout history in all cultures, faiths, and time periods.

One can easily draw the conclusion that our personal preferences and beliefs play a very small role and are, possibly, inconsequential in our efforts to find peace and harmony in our daily lives. However, strict adherence to the Five Tenets of Tae Kwon Do can fit with and complement any of our religious and philosophical beliefs and greatly assist us in our efforts to achieve our goals on the path to a better self.