

What Tae Kwon Do Means To Me

By Michael Jordison ~ Lamoni, Iowa - November, 2009

Tae Kwon Do is something that has interested me ever since I was a young boy of about 10. A friend of mine from Elementary school, who struggled with what we now would classify as ADHD, had been enrolled in a Taekwondo program and filled my head and other friends with stories of kicks, punches and forms that he was learning. Not being an outgoing individual and with low self confidence I never pursued it for myself, leaving my only experience with Martial Arts limited to the Silver Screen and play acting as “Ninjas”.

My interest waned until a couple of years later when this word, Tae Kwon Do, resounded once again in my ears; this time from some cousins from Creston, Iowa. During an annual family Christmas dinner my head was once again filled with exciting stories of strange sounding words, kicks, punches, blocks and this time something new: tournaments and sparring. I listened as this whole family had become involved in the “sport” and was participating in tournaments where they “fought” other people. It was both an exciting and yet frightening concept to me. Growing up, feeling insecure with low self-esteem, I longed to have the courage to do something bold like this. For by this time “conflict” (which is what sparring had sounded like to me) with others seemed just too difficult to face in my adolescent world. And once again, Tae Kwon Do fell out of my consciousness.

Looking back, I was probably just like most kids, struggling with an identity crisis, trying to deal with the changes going on in my body; scared that I was the only one going through these things and not willing to bring them up to *anyone* lest they think I was some kind of “freak”. Along with that “invincible” attitude that seems to just develop on its own, I developed the impression that there was something wrong with me. This impression continued with me well into my adult years and became a part of me -like the scar on my face- something that I never thought about anymore consciously, but yet influenced how I acted and responded to others.

Insecurities in myself as a youth led, as they often do, into an attitude that tried to compensate for them; at times with an overbearing presence and imposition of my will, and at other times through an attempt at humor, either at my expense or another's. The feeling of no real self worth played itself out in strange ways. Although capable of making excellent grades I never pushed myself to actually study and work toward academic success. I declined an invitation to join the National Honor Society. It wasn't that I didn't want to succeed. I did. In fact I wanted recognition and positive reinforcement in my self worth. But by not putting forth the effort to excel in what I did, I didn't have to worry that I was going to fail- being "less than perfect". I convinced myself that I was satisfied with just "good" and never brought myself to try for the "best that I could do".

Unfortunately this attitude impacted everything I did; music, sports, relationships. All of these I was blessed with talent for but I left myself just to raw natural talent, never trying to excel, always putting forth less than 100%. Though I received many awards for the things I did in school I was never satisfied within myself, because I knew that I hadn't put everything out there- laid it all on the line. It also paved the way for creating the habit of not finishing things. Perhaps partly developed through genetics or learned behavior as much as anything else, this is one bad habit that has bothered me the most. And it is one that I have tried to overcome the most.

Just a few years ago, Tae Kwon Do became a familiar word again. By this time I was married and had children, and though I was still in many ways the same insecure and flawed child, I had become a bit wiser and (some might argue this) more mature. Three of my nieces and three of my cousins (all quite younger than I) had enrolled in a Taekwondo program in Blue Springs, Missouri. Once again, old feelings swelled within me. Gosh, wouldn't it be great if there were somewhere near me where I could try this, I thought. And over the next few years I watched as all but one, through hard work and perseverance through difficult circumstances, stood at attention while their instructor tied their newly earned black belt around their waist.

When the fall of 2005 arrived, with it brought word that a new wellness studio was starting up in Lamoni. One of the classes to be offered was Tae Kwon Do. Again, the old feelings began to swell as I thought that perhaps this was finally my chance to claim a missed opportunity. I have never regretted the decision to enroll in what I believe has been a life changing opportunity.

Under the tutelage of Mr. John Meek and Mr. Tom Strade, I have learned many important things that not only apply to my understanding of Tae Kwon Do, but of life in general. As an ordained minister in the church of Jesus Christ I have long felt the connection between the physical world and the spiritual. Both are connected inseparably in the composition of mankind, each impacting the other in various ways. I have sought to discipline my body to move and function according to the methods of Tae Kwon Do, but have learned that those same disciplines are honed within the mind as well. This may seem an obvious understanding, but some things have to be discovered practically, not just conceptually to really sink deep in our understanding.

Through example I have learned that perfection does not always come as we expect it- without flaws, but rather is a state that is perhaps more fluid than we might at first believe. For me, perfection is what is attainable according to our limitations, which are as different as the noses on our faces. To achieve perfection in Tae Kwon Do for *me*, is to be able to discipline myself to perform to the best of *my* ability. I have learned that it is okay to make mistakes, and to even be wrong at times, but that in the end to make the corrections and to do the best that I am capable of at that moment. If only I had learned that as a child and had applied it to everything that I did. I have to believe that I would have tried so many more things. Without mistakes and perseverance, perfection is not attainable for anyone.

Courtesy and Integrity have always been at prominence in my life, I suppose from having learned them from my father and mother. Not so much that I can recall being instructed specifically, but rather through my upbringing and their expectations. Through Tae Kwon Do, this expectation of myself has been reinforced over and over to give respect to all people, without prejudice or bias. It has been a

pleasure over the last 4 years to see people of various backgrounds and abilities, whom some might be quick to judge unfairly, work to attain something very special and personal. And it is done in a way that their struggles and eventual triumphs are shared with the rest of the class. Yes, Tae Kwon Do is a personal discipline, but I feel that it also affords that same individual the opportunity to share of him/herself. We are all connected. As the saying goes, "No man is an island".

The only thing that any of us actually have is 'what we do'. We alone are responsible for our own actions, good or bad. Perhaps the hardest thing for us to learn as humans is self-control; to know limitations and boundaries and to have the ability to rein in our inclinations or unwonted desires. I have learned that self control is not something that is explained and then carried out, but is something that must be conditioned and honed again and again. How much easier it is to understand how to control our mind and inclinations, when we have an understanding on how to use finesse and experience to control our movements.

I can't honestly say what having an indomitable spirit means to me. It seems that I still struggle with things that at times seem out of my reach. But through each of the tenets of Tae Kwon Do meshing together I feel the strength to press on, not just through this Art, but through application in life as a whole. For someone who has struggled with getting things finished, the earning of a black belt symbolizes a victory over this major hurdle in my life. Not that I expect that all will be finished once that goal has been met, but it will be a victory on the journey that is as long as life itself. I hope that it will grant me encouragement and strength to overcome many other challenges that I face, today as well as in the future.

Regardless of the outcome, I have fully appreciated the concern, patience and dedication each and every week of my closest instructors: Mr. John Meek, Mr. Tom Strade, Master Peggy Slatten, and Master Terry Hall, and all of the others throughout the Two Rivers Martial Arts organization who have shaped my understanding and development thus far. And there are many who have yet to earn their black belts that I have appreciated so much with their determination and perseverance. I have truly been encouraged as I watch each one grow and develop, from the smallest to the tallest.

And of course my journey could not have begun or even been sustained this long without the support of my family. Many nights of training are not only a sacrifice for myself, but for my beautiful wife and children as I am pulled away from them and responsibilities for an hour or two here and there. Although I would love to have them all join with me I understand that each must follow their own road. And I trust that one day they will look back and see how Tae Kwon Do has impacted their father for good and perhaps decide to take up that journey when the time is right for them.