

The Lessons of Tae Kwon Do

By Miranda Theriot

Sitting here reflecting upon my Tae Kwon Do journey, I wonder how I can sum up in to words my general feelings about martial arts. Now that my second degree test has finally confronted me, I have come to realize that all these years, Tae Kwon Do has taught me lessons that largely dictate and define my life at this point on the cusp of my seventeenth birthday. It's incredible for me, and for my teachers I'm sure, to think of the metamorphosis I have undergone since I first put on a white belt at the tender age of nine and a half. I have developed as a person even since my first degree black belt, which took place while I was in the process of coping with my ungainly middle school years. Looking back on my younger self, I seemed so young but yet it's humorous to remember how grown up I felt with my complete seventh grade education and crisp new black belt. No doubt I will think the same thing of my current self in another four years though. I am glad that I have been able to gain so much from Tae Kwon Do that I can apply in my everyday life.

The first lesson every martial artist must learn is that stances are the base for everything that they will learn. I'll admit, as a white belt it seemed trivial to me to expend so much time on minute details, but it was well worth it in the end. I've had to attempt to explain to students that they must learn the basics before they move on to being the next karate kid. Being a young person myself, I understand the feeling of frustration and general dissatisfaction when you are told by your elder things like "walk before you run" and "you'll understand when you're older." I believe this is why some kids and even some adults have difficulty maintaining their interest in Tae Kwon Do. All I can tell them when learning their stances is "there was even a time when Grand Master Rankin himself was a white belt, and he had to learn exactly what you're learning now." Stances are the most essential thing in Tae Kwon Do; without a strong stance you cannot hope to have strength and stability in the rest of your body. Just like in martial arts, without a strong stance in life, you're just asking to be pushed over. Plant yourself firmly, whether it be in your family, in your friends, or your beliefs, but standing strong is key to staying upright and staying afloat in this world. It's been a long, painful process, but through Tae Kwon Do I have become much more calloused, and significantly harder to knock down, quite an improvement from the frightened, meek person that I was and now, in martial arts and in life, standing in a good, solid stance is as natural to me as breathing.

The second lesson is to always strive for self improvement. In all my years of being the person to avoid passing the ball to at all costs in soccer, basketball, volleyball, or basically any sport seen as "good" and "important," in high school society, I have been able to observe quite a bit. I have come to the conclusion that martial arts (or at least the type of martial arts we do at Mountain Academy) is the only sport that I

have encountered in which the main purpose is not to win, but simply just to improve oneself. Don't get me wrong, those sports have plenty of good lessons as well, and hold the potential to produce good, wholesome people, and I like winning as much as the next person, but in Tae Kwon Do, it's refreshing to have that pressure taken away. I, and those who find that team sports do not appeal to them, are attracted to Tae Kwon Do for the opportunity to better themselves without feeling the need to best someone else. Also, others who don't understand my view may not understand that I in no way consider Tae Kwon Do a completely solitary sport. It's as much of a team sport as football, or basketball etc. in that we create an atmosphere in which everyone feels like a family member, especially within our black belt community. I always feel so welcome, and, it may be cliché, but I feel as though I truly belong. It may not be that way in other schools, so I feel very fortunate to be a part of the Mountain Academy family. We work to improve ourselves and help others improve as well, which is a good way to go about life in my opinion. Obviously, life is not without competition, and I can even understand those who say that a little competition is healthy for a person, but to build the strong, family bonds that I find in martial arts, we need to be able to understand that we all benefit more from standing side by side, rather than standing against each other. Even in sparring, when we are physically against each other, we can be punched in the face and still be able to say "that was a good punch," and even rejoice in that person's success.

Another lesson is respect those with more knowledge than you, but do not disrespect those with less. Like mentioned earlier, we're all just trying to get better and to learn. Those with more knowledge should share it willingly and enthusiastically, and respect the student in their pursuit of learning. Since I have become a black belt, it has been interesting to me to be able to play both the role of the student and the teacher. I'll admit, that did cause me some problems when it came time for me to get ready for my second degree because it was more difficult to find time during class to just purely practice on my own when I had students in need, or even if I didn't, in these few short years I have developed an instinct to watch over and help my "baby ducklings," as they often are portrayed in my mind, even if they didn't seek me out. I find now that I love to teach and have very seldom met a student who was bothered by my age after the first class. In class, Gilpin, Lakewood, or Idaho Springs, no matter where, we treat each other not only as students and teachers and people of different colored belts, but as friends. Even in Gilpin, where we don't necessarily live very close to one another, the members of my class are often a part of my everyday life, especially seeing as one of the students is my sister and another is one of my best friends. In Mountain Academy there is a bond between us all as people that isn't affected by belt color anymore than it is affected by gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, or any other differences we might have. I hope to go into the outside world maintaining these bonds form in this unique atmosphere, and make anywhere I go as close to this as a I can.

Finally is my idea that attempting to break a brick can represent any obstacle I may be faced with. Others heavier and stronger than me may not know this problem,

but there have often been times that I have thrown all of my weight against a brick and have it not break, and other times it crumbles the second I touch it. I cannot be sure of what causes this to happen, but I think it is closely linked to my mindset during the attempt. There are times when I'm "in the zone" and feel as though I can do anything, and then there are those days when perhaps my mind is in other places or I find myself hesitating. This is the same for any other hurdle I face in my life. I find that all I can do is when faced with a brick, physical or metaphorical, is throw myself against it completely and hope it breaks. In life that's really all you can do, give it your all and hope it's enough. Sometimes it breaks easy, and sometimes it just won't budge, and all I can do about it is try again next time and not let the brick break me. Life is full of obstacles and complicated problems, and not all will break easy, or even at all.

I'm sure there is much more I could mention here, but I'll leave it at that. Like I've said, Tae Kwon Do means a lot to me and has made significant changes to my life, and at this point I couldn't imagine myself without it. I feel prepared and ready to take the next step to my second degree black belt. After first degree, there was no question in my mind that I would continue, and the natural next step has presented itself to me, and when the next step will appear can only be seen in the years to come.