

MOTIVATING MARTIAL ARTISTS: AN EXAMINATION
OF THE DRIVES AND LESSONS LEARNED
AMONG TAEKWONDO STUDENTS

by

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Abstract

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There are a large number of martial art schools operating in the Dallas-Fort Worth Area, teaching a variety of martial arts. Of all of those schools the students at the Texas Black Belt Academy chose their school, despite a lengthy travel time for some of the students. In an effort to find out why the students chose this particular school, I joined and investigated the Texas Black Belt Academy, investigating what the students were getting out of both the lessons and environment of the school. I found that the students came most often to learn self-defense, however they stayed for three reasons: the family atmosphere, the physical and mental health benefits that they received, and a sense of inner tranquility that they developed as a result of their training which equipped them to handle the stresses of their lives.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

“One!” *rustle*.

“Two!” *rustle*.

“Three!” *rustle*.

The man at the front of the room continues to count, every number followed immediately by the rustling of fifteen other people as they move as one. Barefoot and dressed in a simple uniform of loose white pants and a white tunic, with a colored cloth belt around the waist, the students steadily kick the air in front of them, aiming at their reflections in the series of large mirrors that cover the majority of one of the walls of the room. After ten counts, the instructor, dressed in a similar uniform, though with a black belt as opposed to a colored one, calls for the students to, “Switch!” before continuing to call out second set of ten. The students, in turn, begin following their instructor’s count once again, now launching their kicks with the opposite leg.

This scene, or one very similar, plays itself out on an almost daily basis, and makes up the first moments of a taekwondo class at the Texas Black Belt Academy (TBBA). Taekwondo, literally translated as “the way of the hand and foot”, is a Korean martial art that came to the United States in the 1960s and was officially inducted as a full-medal Olympic sport in 2000. Today, taekwondo is practiced in 186 countries as both a martial art and a sport, and is estimated to have over 60 million practitioners (Park, 2009, p. vii).

The study of martial arts is a popular pastime in the United States, including students of a wide range of ages, from children of 4-5 years old to adults well into their 70s. Taking up a martial art can be and is done for any number of reasons, ranging from the desire to protect one’s self, to reaping the health benefits of the exercise it provides, to participating in competitions against other martial artists. The TBBA itself is one of a number of different martial

arts schools located within Arlington, Texas, some of which also teach taekwondo, however there are others that teach different styles such as karate or jiu-jitsu.

Taekwondo as a martial arts system (usually referred to as a style) emphasizes weaponless combat – which is to say fighting without the use of external weapons such as clubs, blades, or guns. Instead, it focuses on the use of strong kicks and hand techniques, including blocks, punches, and throws. Techniques in taekwondo are mostly linear in nature, attacking in lines that come straight from the body, and are designed with the intention to end fights in as few attacks as possible. Training at the TBBA can include weapons, either how to use them or how to defend against them, however this type of training is typically reserved for advanced students or taught in classes separate from the standard curriculum.

Classes at the TBBA are taught by the school’s owner, Master Mike Johnson, who has been educating students in the Dallas-Ft. Worth area in martial arts for the past twenty-five years. Throughout his career as a taekwondo instructor, he has raised numerous students through the system of belt ranks that he employs, beginning at the white-belt level, and raising them up through gold (yellow), orange, green, blue, purple, 4th brown, 3rd brown, 2nd red, 1st red, *bodan* (red with a black stripe), and finally to the first degree of black belt.



Figure 1-1 Progression of belts

A seventh-degree black belt, out of a possible ten, in taekwondo, Master Johnson is assisted in running the school by his wife, Becky Johnson, who herself holds a third-degree

black belt. Classes are further aided by several instructors, who range from first to fifth-degree black belts, and assistant instructors, who range from 4th brown through *bodan*.

Classes are held at the TBBA every day of the week, save Sundays. Each day has at least two classes: one for lower belts (white through blue belt) and one for upper belts (purple through black belts). Each class is structured the same way: 5-10 minutes for warm up, 15-20 minutes for kicking and punching drills, and about 30 minutes for group teaching. Group teaching divides the students up by belt level so that they may work on the material that their particular rank is responsible for. Each group is led by either an instructor or assistant instructor.

The TBBA is located in a commercial building owned and operated by Master Johnson. The building is free-standing, with a private parking lot. The exterior of the school is fairly plain, with the off-white walls broken by four large windows (two each on the south and west sides of the building) and three doors (two on either end of the south wall, and the remaining door on the western one). Little of the exterior signifies that the building is a martial arts school, save for the large sign out in front, naming the school. The interior consists of three main areas: two for martial arts classes (led by one of the school's instructors), practice (outside of a formal class), and training (body conditioning), with the final area set aside as an office and waiting area.

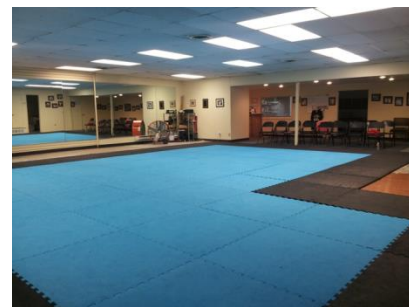


Figure 1-2 Exterior (left) and interior (right) of primary training area

The primary room used for practice has three windows on the west and south walls, with the two on the west wall blocked partially. Both windowsills are filled with trophies won by several of the black belts at the school for their high placings at local, state, and national competitions. Each one turned to face outside. Also in front of the two western windows are

wooden railings that are used by the students for balance drills. The south wall holds the remaining window, as well as the door. In the southeastern corner, five pictures are hung, showing Master Johnson's martial arts mentors and masters. While ten-foot-tall mirrors and framed pictures of the Black Belt Academy's students at various competitions cover every other wall in the room, nothing adorns the wall with the masters' pictures save for a single potted plant beneath their frames, creating a sharp contrast. The secondary training room is slightly smaller, with its only window and door covered by wrought iron bars. While not nearly as inviting as the primary room, it does provide a quieter area for students to practice. The final area, the office, is a little cluttered, but with everything in its proper place. Various pieces of Chinese and Korean artwork adorn the area, including several small statuettes of martial arts students, two paintings, and a beautifully carved wooden dragon.

Why the TBBA?

Students are drawn to martial arts for any number of reasons, and the benefits can be similarly varied. But why the TBBA? Why this school as opposed to another? A quick search on the internet shows that prospective students have well over twenty different schools to choose from in Arlington alone, offering a number of different martial arts. If one expands the search beyond Arlington into the Dallas-Ft. Worth Metroplex, the number skyrockets into the hundreds.

While each school is unique, with each master (or equivalent rank) teaching from their tradition as well as personal additions to the art, every school comes from a greater lineage. The lineage of each school may be short or lengthy, depending on the style being taught, and is defined by the master that taught the current head of the school, and who taught that teacher, and so on. In some cases, schools may maintain a mythical lineage as well, tracing the ultimate origin of their art to some legendary figure (Green, 2003, p.3-4). A large number of martial art styles originate outside the United States – taekwondo, for example hails from Korea.

Like many other sports, taekwondo has transcended the borders of its parent nation, making its way to the US. As it expanded to additional countries, a global culture began to

develop, defined by Carter (2011, p.64-70) as an expansive culture that is mostly uniform between regions, and expands across national borders. As it expanded across the world as an Olympic sport, it became regulated by several organizations such as the World Taekwondo League (who regulates how the style is taught on an international level) and the American Taekwondo Association (who regulates the style on the national level). At each successive level, the global culture began to take on slightly different flavors, with individual schools creating their own subcultures within the global culture of taekwondo. Some individual schools have also banded together to form their own groups in an effort to raise the quality of their students, as the TBBA did in joining with other styles to form the Texas Karate League.

As many schools as there are that are regulated by these organizations, there are just as many choices available to students who wish to take up studying a martial art. The students are just as varied. Table 1-1, below, lists some of the details about the student body.

Table 1-1 TBBA student demographics¹

Gender		Age		Race ²	
Male	54	10 and younger	24	White	67%
Female	36	11-20	22	Black	7%
		21-30	14	Hispanic	13%
		31-40	10	East Asian	7%
		41-50	12	South Asian	6%
		51 and older	8		
Total active students		90			

After speaking with a number of students from the TBBA, it seems that they don't all come simply for the convenience. While a number of the students live in the nearby area, others

¹ Reflects active students (having both paid their dues to the school and present at classes)

² Estimates based on race declared by volunteering students

reported coming from several of the different cities within the Metroplex, such as Ft. Worth and Irving.

Nor were they drawn to the art itself. The students who enrolled themselves in the school reported that they did so to study a martial art, not necessarily because they were looking to study taekwondo, specifically. Some of the students have even elected to cross-train in other martial arts, however they still consider the TBBA to be their “home” school.

Again, why? What is it that they get out of the TBBA that keeps them coming back, that keeps them as members of the TBBA?

After studying with the students at the school, training and sparring with them, as well as getting to know them a bit outside of the school, I believe that I have some understanding of the powerful draw that captivates them so. When talking with my own *Shifu* (Master) about my experiences with the TBBA, he made a simple comment that, on reflection, helped me understand the feelings of my friends at the TBBA. “People study something because they want to get something out of it. If they don’t have that need fulfilled, then they’ll leave.” So what need was being fulfilled?

Understanding What Came Before

Anthropologists have studied various sports, including some martial arts, through a number of different lenses, resulting in a large body of literature on the topic. While studies of the martial arts make up only a small portion of the research that has been conducted, studies from several other sports can provide some direction with their findings, and aid in better understanding the motivations of both budding and veteran martial artists.

Motivations in Sports

Authors such as Chandler (2002), Donahue (1993), and Light and Kinnaird (2002) illustrate some of the motivations behind several different sports. Chandler (2002), for example, investigates the element of conflict through the tensions between the Catholic and Protestant communities as illustrated by two high school football teams. The games that the students

engage in serve as mock battles between the two denominations, with the victors not only being viewed as superior in the eyes of their peers, but as in G-d's³ favor (p.112). Some martial arts do contain religious elements in the philosophies that they preach, which could contribute to a student's reasoning for seeking out a martial art to study. Additionally, it could also contribute to a student's decision on what style to pursue by dissuading her/him from certain arts.

Donahue (1993) instead looks at the leisure aspect of martial arts, examining the practices conducted by students of karate, a Japanese martial art. The ritualistic actions displayed were not to gain some divine favor as in the case of Chandler's (2002) work, but to craft a setting in which the instructor and the students could distance themselves from the stresses of the world outside of the school. Even if only for an hour, those within the school could separate themselves from the day-to-day through the wearing of a particular uniform, rituals to start and end classes, and the use of specialized language (Donahue, 1993, p.343). As with karate, taekwondo schools also separate themselves from the outside world. That the school can provide a haven of sorts is an additional possible motivating factor that can be considered.

Light and Kinnaird (2002) examine the religious implications of sumo wrestling in Japan, with a focus on the heavy ties between the sport and Shinto, the national religion of Japan. Religious elements are demonstrated by the ritual cleansing of the sumo rings before every round of combat and the blessing of the arena by a Shinto priest. Similar to the victors in Chandler's (2002) work, victors in the sumo ring are claimed to earn divine favor (Light & Kinnaird, 2002, p.155). Alter's (2002) study of the *pehlwani* wrestlers in India includes similarities to Light and Kinnaird's work regarding sumo wrestlers: the ring is a sacred place, and should be treated as such (Alter, 2002, p.84). The pursuit of a sacred area, one that can be protected and cared for, is another potential draw to students.

³ Alternate spelling used due to religious reasons.

Sports have also been examined as an expression of nationalism (Alter, 2002) and also of globalization (Carter, 2011). Alter (2002) takes a look at *pehlwani*, an Indian tradition of wrestling with a rich history that stretches back over thousands of years. Though not referred to as a martial art in the sense of some styles such as taekwondo, *pehlwani* bears many of the same traits that were pointed out by Donohue (1993, p.343), including the ritual separation from the “outside”, rigorous physical training centered around unarmed combat, and the inclusion of a distinctive philosophy, in this case lauding both mental and physical discipline as the supreme virtues that one should attain. Alter uses that philosophy as a frame to describe what many of the practitioners of *pehlwani* view as the greatest threat to the well-being of India: the undisciplined and spoiled youth. In opposition to this problem, practitioners use their own bodies to display what the ideal men of the nation should be: disciplined, strong, and assertive (Alter, 2002, p.88-89). With taekwondo being a system of fighting techniques that emphasizes direct and powerful movement, it is not a stretch to state that it promotes values similar to *pehlwani*, most notably discipline and strength of body. These similarities could provide additional possible motivations for studying taekwondo. Students of martial arts may also be attempting to critique a particular type of person, much the way that *pehlwani* wrestlers have.

Carter (2011), instead of looking within a particular country, instead looks at the popularity of sports as they travel between nations. A key distinction Carter makes is between the globalization of sport (its physical spread across various nations of the world) and the global aspects of sport (the shared culture of sport, at times transcending the notion of the nation). The perceived homogeneity of “global sport” exists within the over-arching concept of globalization (Carter, 2011, p.64-70). When teased apart, Carter (2011) describes global sport in two manners, the first being, as already mentioned, the shared culture of sport, where some elements of behavior either are or become associated with a sport. In his chapter, Carter cites the “culture of hooliganism” (p.65), the collected behaviors of soccer fans across the world. This reification of common behaviors among soccer fans conceals the second description of global

sport: sport as an international business. International business, in regards to sports, does not in fact promote a homogenous culture across the world, but instead gives the illusion of similarity between fan groups through the exchange of sport-related commodities. While Carter was discussing soccer at the time, martial arts have similarly spread from different countries into a global market. As described by Park (2009, p.vii), taekwondo is practiced in 186 countries and is currently listed as an Olympic sport. Similar to the culture surrounding soccer, there is a seemingly homogenous culture for popular styles of martial arts, just as there is a market for each of those styles (usually expressed through the schools that teach the styles). Being a part of a global community forms yet another potential draw for students to participate in styles such as taekwondo.

Downey (2010) examined something a little different among the practitioners of capoeira, a Brazilian martial art known for its swift but distracting movements, consisting of deft spins and turns designed to confuse the opponent's ability to predict where attacks are coming from. Though the capoeiristas (as students are called) are extremely dexterous, able to display dazzling skill and balance through their art, the Brazilians that he interacted with utterly failed to be able to do something as simple as catching a tossed set of keys. The reason was not due to any physical ineptitude, but because the motion was far removed from any training that the capoeiristas had engaged (Downey, 2010, p.298). Instead of being able to move instinctively to catch something, they had to force their body to do something unfamiliar. The movements of taekwondo can be seen, at a glance, as very different from capoeira, utilizing straight, direct movements as opposed to capoeira's indirect, distracting ones. Taekwondo students can have just as much difficulty with unfamiliar, non-linear movements as the capoeiristas did when attempting to catch a thrown set of keys. Seeking particular techniques or skills is an additional possible motivation to learning a martial art.

Sport and social behavior is another topic examined by many social scientists. Collins and Kay (2003) examine social exclusion through sports. While this includes some well-

publicized examples such as sexual discrimination or disqualification due to some physical limitation or disability (p.97-98), sports are also used as means of indoctrinating young minds to particular modes of thought. This can reinforce certain opinions such as that girls are not as good at sports as guys, or that boys have to behave one way or another, which relates to cultural notions of proper gendered behaviors of athletes. Behaviors that conflict with the expected norm, such as women participating in sports beyond adolescence were seen as, prior to the 1990s, “unfeminine” or “deviant”. Participating in martial arts could be construed as speaking out against or in support of traditional gender roles.

Downey (2005 & 2008) emphasizes that sports, and in the case of his studies capoeira, also have the capacity to serve as a celebration of a particular culture. Capoeira was created by African slaves brought to the Americas during the height of the slave trade, and has since become a symbol of the capoeiristas’ heritage, shared through the art, if not by blood (Downey, 2005, p.55-73; Downey, 2008, p.204). Taekwondo is a Korean martial art, however it is practiced by students from multiple ethnicities. At the same time, some elements of Korean philosophy translate through to the students, such as the *taeguk*, a symbol on the Korean flag that will be elaborated on further in Chapter 2, although in a slightly different context.

While the above works all represent valid motivations behind individuals taking up sports, my experiences with the TBBA have led me to believe that only some of the above holds true for the students of this school. While everyone that I had contact with had their own reasons for joining and continuing with the TBBA, three main motivations quickly came into focus: family, health, and tranquility. Of the three, health and tranquility are touched upon above through the anthropology of sport. Only family is not addressed.

Family Matters

A point I wish to emphasize regarding family in relation to this paper is that very few of the students that I involved myself with at the TBBA were related by blood – instead, their ties of kinship are created through their shared experiences as students of taekwondo, much as

Weston (1991, p.109) describes homosexual families forming close bonds through shared experiences and symbols within the gay community. My use of the term family, however, is analogous to the concept of the American nuclear family (father, mother, children).

The role of the father is best described by Townsend (2002), who describes the primary job of the father to be nurturing through protecting and providing for his children (p.50-80). That said, fathers can perform this task in any number of ways such as by providing income for the family (Benokaitis, 1985, p.243) or by being physically and emotionally present for the children (Lutwin & Siperstein, 1985, p.278-281). Part of being there for the children is the father's participation in family time (Smeeding & Marchand, 2004, p.26).

Sharing events is an additional source of solidarity. Meals in particular are good times for families to get together and provide an opportunity to deepen relationships or for new relationships to be forged. Whiteside (2004, p.75-76) notes that stepfamilies in particular have complex kinship connections due to the large number of individuals that are involved. That said, there are those that claim that what many American's think of as the family dinner is a fabrication (Jackson, Olive, & Smith, 2009, p.132). Even so, the efforts that some families will go through in order to have a family dinner generate tighter bonds anyway.

What is to Come

The following chapters will be examining each of family, health, and tranquility in depth, how the environment at the TBBA fosters each one, encouraging their development as the students grow within the art. The following information was gathered through participant observation, a powerful tool for conducting ethnographic research, and is characterized by becoming a part of the community that you are observing, at least enough that they are comfortable with you documenting the goings-on in their lives (Bernard, 2006, p.342-386). By documenting close interactions with the students, working alongside them as they practiced in class, being there through belt tests, competitions, and social events outside of the school, I was able to establish a strong relationship with the students and instructors. Observations

gathered in this method are recorded in the form of field notes over the course of six months at the TBBA.

Additional information was gathered through nine unstructured interviews with students that volunteered from the TBBA. Similar to my conducting the participant observation, I had to establish a rapport with the students by interacting with them both inside and outside of class. Similar to the field notes for my participant observation, the unstructured interviews were recorded (audio recorded and transcribed), and were conducted in an open manner, with a few key questions and the rest developed as the conversations progressed, allowing the volunteers to add their personal views of the school and those that they train with. By the end of my research period, I had nine interviews: four women and five men. All of the students interviewed were at least at the orange belt level, and most of them were above 2nd red. A survey was also administered, collected from volunteers. The survey was designed to better focus my efforts to gather data, especially during the unstructured interviews.

Chapter 2 will begin with a close look at the family formed by Master Johnson and the students. In addition to the teacher-student relationship that is maintained within the classes, close relationships are formed between the members of the TBBA off of the training floor. Between shared meals, social events, and offering support to others, students get to know one another, bonding more as family members than as colleagues. Competitions between the students help them sharpen their skills and create an interesting closeness. Mr. Corben, one of the school's black belts summarized the bulk of sparring classes at the TBBA for me, "...you fight each other, and then you go out to dinner afterwards."

Chapter 3 will look at the health benefits gained by the students as they train in taekwondo. Health, in this case, extends beyond simple physical well-being, through that is certainly a component. Instead of just looking at physical health, I will be looking at both the mental and physical aspects trained and developed by the students as they train with the TBBA. The mental and physical components of taekwondo training come together in the students, one

balancing the other. Without the balance that they form, it is doubtful that the students would see the benefits that they do from the training.

The fourth chapter focuses on the calm that the students gain from studying and practicing taekwondo. Over the course of gathering data, I had the opportunity to sit down with several students, all of whom mentioned the inner strength that they obtained through the workouts, the sparring, and from interacting with each other. In one case, a student found a means to conquer social anxiety. In another, he found a way to keep his cool during a particularly difficult period in his life. A third found a power within her to push through the doubts and uncertainties that have proven an obstacle in her past. All of them attribute the source of that confidence to their experiences with taekwondo and, perhaps more significantly, being at the TBBA.

All three taken together form, from my perspective, a well-rounded image of not only what draws the students' desires to study at the TBBA, but what keeps them there. This image will contribute to the anthropology of sport and will expand upon the literature regarding martial arts. The ties of kinship forged by the students reveal an aspect of taekwondo that has not been elaborated on in the current literature, and form a necessary complement to the both the physical and mental benefits of the training.

Chapter 2

The Texas Black Belt Academy – Come Join the Family!

While the Texas Black Belt Academy (TBBA) itself is a business, the slogan “Come Join the Family!” adorns the t-shirts sold by the TBBA, demonstrates how Master Johnson intends to model his school. By modeling his institution as a family, he illustrates his intention for the members of his school to form close relationships with one another, ones that exist outside of the school as well as inside of it. But what does it mean to be a family?

Sadly, there is no single answer. For some, an idealized image is presented in the television series *Leave it to Beaver*, which aired in the 1950s and 1960s: a heterosexual married couple, with the father as the breadwinner and the mother as the homemaker, with at least one child (two, in the case of *Leave it to Beaver*). This example illustrates the “package deal” concept of family, where the parents come together through the institution of marriage for the purpose of having and raising children (Townsend, 2002, p.2). In this image, parenting is heavily gendered, with the man being the authority in the household, and the woman playing a nurturing, supporting role. This image held dominance in the US for most of the early and mid-20th century. Gaining momentum in the 1960s, alternate definitions of family have been coming more and more to the fore, where family members are no longer necessarily bound in the same way.

Several examples that have contributed to the continuously evolving concept of the family include homosexual couples, dual-earning households, adoption, immigration, and reproductive technologies. Homosexual couples, for example, do not always have access to the institution of marriage in the United States, something that had been part of the previously dominant definition of family in the US. Dual-earning households, where both the husband and wife work outside of the home (Benokraitis, 1985), or households where the wife is the breadwinner and the husband the homemaker (Lutwin & Siperstein, 1985) have challenged the

previously established gender roles as depicted in *Leave it to Beaver*. In each of these examples an ideologically powerful concept of the family is challenged, leading to new definitions of what exactly it means to be part of someone's family.

For some of these new definitions, a redefinition of kinship is key, which relies more on close interpersonal relationships more than on much consanguineous ties. Sahlins (2011a, 2011b) provides a very succinct definition, one which I will be making use of for the duration of this chapter: a mutuality of being. Sahlins (2011a, p.10-15) used the phrase "mutuality of being" to define kinship in order to emphasize that those bound by such ties are intrinsic to one another's existence. That closeness can be a matter of blood, or it could be due to close interpersonal interactions. In either case, the sharing of life experiences and memories results in a bond that allows one to empathize with the other, to support each other during trying times, and to share joyous occasions. I do wish to clarify that this definition is not exhaustive, nor does it reflect the depth of detail that Sahlins delves into. I am merely summarizing his work, as it applies to the redefinition of family.

In addition to Sahlins' definitions, other authors such as Weston (1991) describe the idea of kinship as fictional – kinship has no intrinsic value. Instead, it is meaningfully constructed by individuals through particular symbols. In her case, Weston (1991, p.109) noted that symbols such as blood or love were used to tie families together, drawing lines of kinship to connect each member with each other. Her emphasis, in examining the families formed by gays and lesbians, was that individuals will consciously utilize symbolic demonstrations of love, shared history, mental or emotional assistance, and signs of enduring solidarity to build a network of kinship that can and does extend beyond blood relations. The families that were formed were done so because its members chose to make themselves a family.

Just as Weston (1991, p.109-110) described the symbols of solidarity and support that forge bonds of kinship, the environment crafted by Master Johnson at the TBBA is designed to foster feelings of kinship between those that practice there. Master Johnson, as the head

instructor, takes on a role similar to that of the patriarch that heads the family. Similar to the image of the “man of the house” that dominated in the 1950s and 1960s, Master Johnson leads the school, guiding the students through their development and passing along his values and skills.

The students, in turn, are like his children and are siblings to one another, with older brothers and sisters (the instructors and assistant instructors) and younger ones (the regular students). The students do pay Master Johnson for the ability to practice at the TBBA and to learn from him, however the analogy holds: just as a child will do chores around the house to help her or his parents, the students, through paying their dues, support Master Johnson and the TBBA.

The Head of the Family

Master Johnson is the head of the school, much as the patriarch would be the head of the household, but that describes his position in the school more than it does his actions. What is it that makes him the school's father figure?

Townsend (2002, p.50-80) describes provision, protection, endowment of values, and emotional closeness as the four primary tasks of the father. Each task is crucial for a family's survival, creating a healthy environment for both the parents and the children and ensuring that they grow and develop together. Just as a father would, Master Johnson sees to each of the tasks in order to ensure an ideal environment for the students of the TBBA to grow together.

Provision

One of the most important jobs that a parent has is to provide for their children and their family. As mentioned earlier, the father was expected to be the primary, if not the sole, provider for the American family up through the 1950s and 1960s. His job was to ensure that their family had food, shelter, and utilities at all times, supported through his livelihood (Townsend, 2002, p.68-76).

While Master Johnson may not be responsible for feeding his students, he does fill the role of the providing father by ensuring that the students have a place to practice and learn. In addition to providing the building that houses the TBBA, Master Johnson is also responsible for furnishing the students with the equipment used for practice: floor mats, punching and kicking bags, and practice weapons (foam bats, rubber knives, plastic guns) are just a few examples. He even maintains a small store within the school so that students can purchase athletic equipment for sparring or spare uniforms. Whatever a student needs to practice, Master Johnson either has it prepared or can get it ordered.

Protection

A father should be able to ensure the well-being of their children. He can do it through directly confronting and neutralizing a perceived threat, or it could be through simple instruction of how to handle specific dangers (Townsend, 2002, p.60-68). In Master Johnson's case, protection is offered to his students primarily through his instruction.

As intuitive as it sounds, learning self-defense in a martial arts school, the teaching incorporates more than simple technique. That said, technique is still important. After all, anyone can throw a kick. It takes practice to throw it well, and training to throw it right. Correct technique is vital for any student of martial arts – not only does it allow a particular technique to be effective, it also protects students from injuring themselves by accident.

The risk of injury is important for all students to be aware of, however it is particularly stressed for upper belts, who stand a very real chance of injury at competitions due to the speed and increased power of strikes. A bad turn or an improperly aimed kick, such as one that strikes the knee when it was supposed to be aimed at the torso, can result in serious or lasting injuries.

In some cases, the lessons are fairly straight-forward, delivered through short discussions or lectures by Master Johnson during classes. One of the more memorable examples came from a class following one of the tournaments the students participate in, where

Sam, one of the brown belt students, was injured after taking a nasty blow to the head. In this example, Master Johnson's goal was to ensure that future injuries were less likely, and therefore discussed the importance of training defensive skills, as well as offensive ones:

Master Johnson: [Speaking to a lower belt] In a fight, say you throw a punch. It misses. What do you do then?

Lower Belt: [student doesn't have an answer]

Master Johnson: You throw another one. Say your opponent throws a punch instead. What do you do?

Lower Belt: Block it.

Master Johnson: And what happens if you miss?

Lower Belt: Throw another block.

Master Johnson: [grinning] Nope. [points to an upper belt]

Upper Belt: You get hit.

Master Johnson: Got it. So what do we do? We practice so we don't miss our blocks.

In Sam's fight, the final strike ended the match with a knock-out, but the blow itself is not what decided the round. It was a combination of multiple strikes over the course of the bout that gradually took their toll, allowing Sam's opponent to get that last kick to the head. The point that Master Johnson was trying to impress into his students is a vital one to understand when it comes to defense: a strike avoided or blocked is one that is not hampering your performance.

In the above example, Master Johnson is trying to instruct the students as a father should: with a lesson in awareness of what happened and how to avoid to in the future. He did not say "Oh, well he just did it wrong." Instead, he brought up the topic in a manner without putting anyone on the defensive. He begins with the lower belt, the person who has the least experience, to make sure that they are aware of the message that he is trying to get across. By including the upper belt, he ensures that the elder student knows the point that Master Johnson is trying to get across and can set an example for the younger students.

An additional facet of the training provided by Master Johnson includes awareness of one's surroundings as well as one's capabilities. Each student is expected to be able to defend one's self from their first day as a white belt and onward, though a white belt, admittedly, is unlikely to be particularly skilled in such a situation. As students gain experience in taekwondo, they are taught to expand their awareness through sparring, taking numerous factors into account that may impact the current fight. There is no limit to the number of things that can influence a self-defense scenario – a survey that I conduct with fifteen of the students at the TBBA yielded twenty different factors that the students concerned themselves with, and that was after I condensed similar responses into categories (such as speed of strikes and speed of self into the heading “speed”). The sense of awareness honed by the students is introduced by Master Johnson and then developed through personal experience – something demonstrated by a tendency for higher-ranked students to list more variables on the survey that I provided than lower-ranked students.

As part of his instruction, starting his students down the path of developing that awareness, Master Johnson concerns himself teaching with nine major factors for consideration regarding self-defense: the distance between you and your opponent, the terrain, the atmospheric conditions, the time of day, the number of opponents, the presence of weapons, the type of attack, the presence of non-combatants, and whether or not the opponent is a skilled attacker. When I spoke with several students about the different factors that Master Johnson focused on, using some hypothetical scenarios, I was given very similar responses, though not quite uniform. The differences between the responses, however, are attributed to the individual students and their personal experiences. Even with those differences, however, the similarity that the students' responses share suggests that the lessons that Master Johnson imparts on his students are being successfully transmitted.

Regarding distance, for example, every student felt comfortable when the opponent was far away from them. They could move as needed and control the fight by manipulating that

distance. As the hypothetical opponent got closer, the student's felt less confident due to the restriction. At the same time, several of the male students stated that once the opponent passed a certain point as he was getting closer, their confidence goes back up. In the case of these students, they identified as close-range fighters, preferring punching to kicking. Once the opponent came within punching range, their confidence in their ability to handle the situation increased dramatically. Thoughts on the terrain were similar, with greater confidence in open areas, however closed areas were fine if they were familiar, such as someone's home. Students are given experience with both factors by the design of the sparring classes held by Master Johnson. By having numerous one-on-one matches fighting simultaneously, students are forced to get in close, stay close, and watch their surroundings, which allow them to adapt better to similar situations.

Both weather and time of day also saw some very similar responses. The better visibility was, the more comfortable the students felt. At the same time, two of the students that I spoke with identified low-visibility as not much of a challenge. Whatever the visibility is, both you and your opponent are in the same boat.

With sparring in classes being primarily one-on-one, the students felt most comfortable when facing a single opponent. With additional opponents, however, the students began to rely on techniques to control the opponents' movements more and more. Positioning opponents so that they get in each other's way, focusing on the closest threat, and being aware of potential obstacles in your surroundings are all methods that Master Johnson emphasizes to be able to handle rough odds. Prior to the belt test in June, for example, Master Johnson demonstrated some of the group management tactics himself, leading by example. With three candidates to test for *bodan*, it was imperative for them to be familiar with these tactics. At first fighting all three of them on his own, Master Johnson turned each skirmish into a one-on-one fight by keeping his target in between himself and the other two. After a few minutes of demonstration,

he had each of the red belts practice it, letting them get a feel for the timing and range that they would need to do the same thing.

Not a single student reported increased anxiety regarding opponents with no weapons or with blunt weapons. The rules for blocking them were the same: stop the arm and you stop the attack. Knives and guns were met with higher levels of anxiety, especially guns, however each of the students noted that they have had training in disarming opponents. The challenge was that with either of those types of weapons, the chances of getting out unscathed are next to nothing. As a way to prepare students for the danger of armed combat, part of the curriculum for upper belts includes self-defense techniques for either disarming or otherwise neutralizing incoming weapons. Interestingly, the students felt no anxiety at all regarding the nature of the attack. It could be from the front, the side, or behind, and it would make no difference – they had training to handle each one of those. It all came down to whether or not the first attack from the opponent landed and whether or not it was a debilitating strike. If it wasn't, then they felt that they could then control the fight from there. Similar to the weapon disarms, students are trained from white belt and up in a series of self-defense combos, each designed to handle a particular type of attack. Being grabbed from the front is one of the first scenarios that students are taught to handle, with being grabbed from behind coming soon after. By the time that students have their orange belt, they begin practicing blocks and counters through short, quick combos called one-steps. The ideal result is that, for an attack coming from any direction, each student should be able to react appropriately and handle the threat.

Other threats, like non-combatants, were seen as a non-issue. If they are not a threat, then they are terrain, barring the need to protect someone like a child. Skilled opponents, those who have had some kind of martial training, and unskilled opponents were responded to in a similar manner – they are an opponent, watch their movements, and respond accordingly. All of the students that I spoke with were aware of the difference between the two types of fighters and knew that they would have to fight differently for each. The unskilled attacker, for example,

is more likely to come in swinging and is less likely to be predictable, however it is also likely that they will not move particularly efficiently, making them easier to stop. A skilled attacker, on the other hand, is more likely to be cautious, but is also more likely to be predictable. That said, sparring in class pitches you against an opponent with martial training, which familiarizes you with that type of situation. In either case, with the skills provided by Master Johnson, they felt more than comfortable in being able to handle either one.

Whatever the scenario, whatever the variables, the skills taught by Master Johnson give the students a toolset for them to protect themselves. Ms Ree, when speaking of her own child, emphasized that the martial skills taught through taekwondo at the TBBA are vital. Her daughter would know how to defend herself, building and developing those skills as she grows up and begins to experience more and more of the outside world. In much the same way, Master Johnson expresses a heartfelt desire to see his students, his children in the art, learn about the options that are available to them and understand where they stand in the various scenarios that could potentially crop up.

Endowing Values

In addition to the lessons regarding using techniques in combat, offensive and defensive, some lectures will spread out beyond martial arts and into what one could call life lessons. Discussions on respect and on control (over your actions or the self) are just some of the examples of the topics that he covers. Often the discussions will be conducted during class, either during each class' warm-up or during the drills at the beginning of the class. Occasionally, such as after a particularly hard workout, Master Johnson will speak after the main part of the class, as everyone is cooling down.

Actions that go against the values that he teaches are met with a reprimand in an effort to correct future mistakes. One of the instructors, Ms. Ree, described to me one instance that occurred several years back, when she was still a brown belt. During a sparring match between herself and a lower belt, she accidentally struck him in the face. In sparring, strikes to the face

are considered illegal in competitions, can potentially be very painful with a risk of injury, and demonstrates a lack of control on the attacker's part. Not only is it inconsiderate of your fellow students, but it is directly against Master Johnson's teachings. That said, it was an accident. However by virtue of being a brown belt, and therefore an assistant instructor, it was an accident that she should have been able to avoid. At the end of that sparring class, Master Johnson spoke to her as the class was ending. As she described it, it was like having a father disappointed in his child:

We were lining up and he came up and he got really close. He didn't yell. He was like, 'We do not ... You're an upper belt. You need to act like it. We do not ...' and I just ... I wanted to die right there on the floor because it was like a reprimand. I wanted to cry."

In this example, Master Johnson was the stern father. Ms. Ree, though a black belt now and one of the instructors at the TBBA, still feels a great deal of shame regarding this event, however the source of that shame is not in the mistake that was made. It happened, it passed, and she learned from it. Instead, the shame that she feels comes from disappointing Master Johnson, and is something that she was very vocal about never repeating.

Emotional Closeness

Unlike his other three tasks, Townsend (2002, p.54-60) was not able to distill the essence of emotional closeness because of its subjectivity. Instead, he focused on what fathers were doing, as opposed to how, in order to demonstrate the importance of emotional closeness. One father that Townsend examined, for example, defined expressing that closeness through spending a great deal of quality time with his children. Another defined it as sharing special events such as going to a baseball game. A third described it as emotionally being there for their children, whether he is physically there or not. The definition of closeness is fluid, and, as illustrated by Townsend, difficult to pin down.

Master Johnson also strives to achieve a sense of closeness through several methods. Being there and maintaining the school that he provides the students represents a large portion

of his efforts. Martha, one of the red belts at the school, remarked on some of her earliest impressions of Master Johnson and the TBBA, when she first came to the area from Houston:

I noticed that one of the things that kind of stuck out was their attention to detail. Back home, when I took the class, the guy who owned the school, I only saw him once or twice a week, and I saw two things: one, that I actually saw Master Johnson teach – he's the owner of the school, and he's actually on the floor teaching. ... The actual- this is what a master does. And I'm like "wow". And he introduced me to Mrs. Johnson, and he said that she was his wife and she would be helping him out and it's like... "wow". And just the attention to detail, the atmosphere, you can almost immediately tell that it's a family atmosphere. And the other schools, the structures that they used were good, but I expected, after seeing that, that if you were the owner of the school, you don't teach. I mean, at the kickboxing school, the guy taught some, but not a lot. I mean he was always in the office, working on some paperwork...

In this, Master Johnson is seen as the head of the school. He is not, however, simply the headmaster. Instead, he is on the floor, working with and building relationships with the students under his tutelage, with the aid of his wife, who plays matriarch to Master Johnson's patriarch.

In addition to individual actions, Townsend describes the results of emotional closeness in terms of children's reactions to their father. Expressions of love and respect were the most common examples that he provided. Martha's thoughts on Master Johnson and the school follow very much with Townsend's descriptions:

Yes, this is a business and you have to make money, but you still get a sense that they care about teaching the martial arts where you being able to defend yourself, but also care for you as a person and what's going on in your life. Seriously, honestly, care about you as a person. It means for all of us being there ... There have been times where all of us have gone through things where we hurt, whether it be a mental, physical, financially. You're there for the person, just like you would for your blood. ... It's a really honest ... you care. That means that when any of us see that the other one is hurting, you really want to be there for the person because, one, you know they're going to be there for you. They've been there for you. You just want to repay that back. For Father's Day, I wrote about Master Johnson, Happy Father's Day to the head of our family. He literally is. It trickles down from him. He really does care about everybody. Everybody, to Master Johnson and Mrs. Johnson, we're like their kids. It's genuine. It's genuine. That's why, especially when it comes to them two, a lot of us go out of our way to help them out however we can, because they really genuinely care.

As Martha points out, it all comes back to Master Johnson. The family feel is there because he assumes the role of the father, not because the students place him on a pedestal. He is there for the students, both as a teacher and as a means of support, much as Townsend (2002, p.57)

describes one of the father's methods to develop emotional closeness with his children as being emotionally available. In response, the students look up to him as a source of stability and wisdom as they grow in taekwondo and in life. The picture below shows one example of Master Johnson's closeness with his students. Following two of his students' graduation to black belt, he was gifted with this framed picture, showing both of them standing with him after they successfully tested for their black belts.

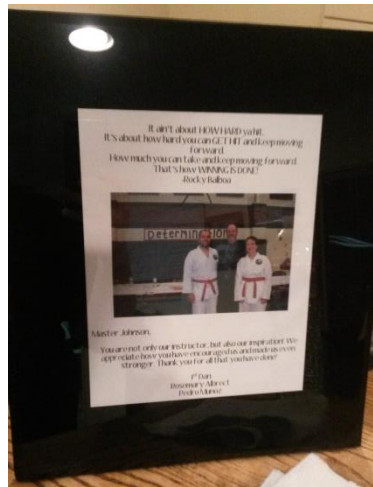


Figure 2-1 Framed picture from black belt test

Being away from the school for a time does not diminish Master Johnson's role as the father of the TBBA. Students who have left, for one reason or another, visit the school every often, sometimes after being gone for years. In each case, they stop by to visit with Master Johnson, maybe to pick up a class or two. Master Johnson even has reunion workouts at least once a year, inviting old students from all over to come back for a visit. Each of these special classes sees the main workout floor filled to capacity from, holding over fifty students at once.

The Siblings

Jurich, White, White, and Moody (1991) evaluated the internal structure of families through four different theoretical lenses: intergenerational, structural, behavior, and strategic. The evaluation was an effort to determine which of the four was a better lens to look through in order to understand families. Instead of finding one particular perspective that gave the most

comprehensive description of the family, Jurich et al. (1991, p.258-259) note that each of the four have their place, each revealing something a little different about how families function. The structural approach that they examined speaks the most to how the students function as a family, both inside and outside of the classroom, by describing the constructions of boundaries between the students and instructors (dividing the roles between them). Clear distinctions between the roles, such as that of the father and child (or instructor and student, in this case) function best when present and enforced, but not rigidly so.

If Master Johnson is the father of the TBBA, then the students would be the children. There are two arenas in which students interact: inside a class and outside. While some of the interactions between the students are the same in different settings, there are several differences present. The most visible difference is the distinction between instructors and students while on the class floor, which is mostly forgotten outside of the school.

In Class

The hierarchy created by the belt ranking system plays a large role in how the students look at each other. Students can be divided into three categories: younger students (white through purple belt), older students (blue through *bodan* belt), and instructors (black belt). Students from fourth brown belt through *bodan* belt share an additional distinction in being assistant instructors to the younger students.

Regular classes, as opposed to sparring classes, are very much a learning event, with clear distinctions between student and teacher. In the beginner class, for example, the instructors and assistant instructors divide up the students by belt rank so that they can focus on teaching them specific material. It is always one instructor or assistant instructor per group, with the goal of the person leading that group teaching the material that students will need to know for their next test to advance.

Assistant instructors, being both students and teachers, occupy a space similar to that of the older sibling – able to teach, but still growing. Like an older sibling, they are responsible to

helping to bring up the younger ones, by reinforcing lessons taught by the parent (or instructor). Similarly, the younger students are respectful of the older students, accepting and absorbing what they teach, much as younger siblings learn from older ones (Stoneman, Brody, MacKinnon, 1984). For Stoneman et al. (p.624-626), younger siblings may or may not initiate learning, however they are more often than not the learner, as opposed to the older sibling who is the teacher. That is not to say that there is no teaching going from younger to older, however. As Stoneman et al. acknowledge, the younger sibling can in fact take on the role of the teacher, making the relationship between siblings more fluid than a formal teacher-student relationship. In a similar manner, upper belts typically impart technical knowledge to lower belts, such as how to properly execute a kick, punch, or block. At the same time, it is possible for the lower belt to teach the upper belt, though it is typically not as direct. For example, a newer student may need something explained in a manner that the upper belt is not accustomed to, and will then help them find new ways to approach the topic.



Figure 2-2 Students practicing together

The sibling relationship changes slightly when looking at sparring classes. Sparring matches are short one-on-one fighting matches fought with light-contact. In practice, sparring matches are about two minutes long, with any two students potentially fighting each other. Here, there are no longer assistant instructors; just older students, younger students, and instructors. Even here, however, the term “instructor” does not carry the same kind of weight as it does during a regular class – there is no formal teaching occurring during sparring. Instead, students work with each other in sparring matches to hone their skills. That said, rank is still respected in

this situation, with lower belts waiting to be invited to fight by higher belts. Aside from that, it is entirely possible, and quite likely, to see a black belt sparring with a fresh orange belt, just as a significantly older sibling may play with a much younger one.

While score is kept in competitive sparring, there is none in practice fights, other than the occasional comment for a good tag. There is, however competition between the students, either paired up (with a higher belt), or paired down. In either case, sparring is a chance to put the skills that you have been practicing into use, and can be a good site of growth within the art. For higher belts fighting against lower belts, it becomes an opportunity for them to help bring the lower belts up, to help teach them by doing. This type of teaching is not so terribly different from the older sibling modeling behavior for the younger siblings. By demonstrating techniques and using them on their younger counterparts, older students can not only show them what can be done while sparring, but help them get a feel for it as well.



Figure 2-3 Martha fighting during belt test sparring match

Martha, when discussing this method of teaching, brought up Roland, one of the red belts at the school:

[He] is really cool to fight. He manages to have an amazing balance of fighting hard but gently at the same time, if that even makes sense. He will throw punches and kicks, and he'll throw a lot of them. Sometimes he'll soften up. Every once in a while he might knock one in. Then he comes back. Then he comes in. He's great at pushing you without making you afraid. He's pretty cool. I like being with him. Even with one-steps and things he'll not give you something. Then he'll tell you, "Okay, do this to get me." You'll see if it works. He'll lighten up just enough to have you go through a move, and then he brings it back up. He's great to work with.

Roland, being one of the assistant instructors, is very conscious of his relationship to the younger students. His job is to help them maximize their potential in the art, however pure instruction is not enough to help the lower belts advance. The movements can be very technical, and Roland is more than capable of explaining all of the little nuances, however he is also aware that telling someone to do something is not enough, and strives to help younger students learn the feel for specific techniques, focusing on when and how to use them. By guiding instead of instructing, he builds a relationship with each student outside of the role of the teacher, similar to how a big brother would. Teaching is part of the job, but it is not the whole of it.

This sense of guiding helps an interesting kind of trust to form through the sparring. Because the matches lack the aggression that one experiences in competition or in the world outside of the classroom, you can stretch your wings, so to speak, trying new things. Having the freedom to try something new against an actual opponent, who will allow you to try (though, granted, your opponent will generally not just stand there and take it), is something that you cannot experience during regular classes or a competitive match. Sparring practice is a safe place for students to work with each other, helping one another to reach a new height. That students can pummel on one another and then sit down and just hang out with each other is a manifestation of that feeling of safety and security with one another.

Out of Class

Before and after each class, students can be found in the seats that are to the side of the training floor, chatting about whatever topic comes to mind. Sometimes it will be the goings on in their personal lives, sometimes it will be the latest movie to come out. Upcoming tournaments or tests are also a point of conversation. Sometimes the students will speak with each other simply to commiserate, especially when the students in question were college students, or to share a particularly exciting piece of good news. When I asked Martha her thoughts about why she stays after class, she said it was the actual sharing that she stayed for,

not so much to have someone listen. It was about being together. This description fits almost perfectly with Kremer-Sadlik, Fatigante, and Fasulo's (2008) examination of "family time". In their work, Kremer-Sadlik et al. evaluate what constitutes family time among families in the United States versus those in Italy. While Italian communities intersperse their family activities with their daily lives, involving members of the community as well, families in the United States treat family time as something that is almost sacred. It is held as separate from daily life, and is something that is scheduled in advance (Kremer-Sadlik et al., 2008, p.304-305). Similarly, the students at the TBBA come together at specific, scheduled times such as after class, such as going out to get something to eat together, or a particular event. Some events would occur on an almost monthly basis, such as Kids' Night, Rangers' Night (baseball), Guys' Night Out, or Ladies' Night Out.

Guys' Night Out, for example, was a semi-regularly scheduled event, always run alongside Ladies' Night Out. Guys' Night Out consisted of a bunch of the guys getting together (Master Johnson and about 8 other people) for dinner and then heading over to one of the students' house to hang out. Not a whole bunch of planning on our end, which became something of a joke between me and a couple of the other guys. Dinner, we all agreed, was a must, however. It wouldn't be a Guys' Night Out if we did not actually go anywhere.

Following the theme of a family dinner, defined here as members of the same family sitting down for a meal and a crucial part of "doing family" (Jackson, Olive, & Smith, 2009, p.131-132), we wanted a place where we could sit around and enjoy ourselves; a place with a comfortable atmosphere. We settled on a BBQ restaurant not terribly far from the school, called Bone Daddy's. As we ate, the conversation moved around, touching on a number of topics. Between life's happenings, competitions, and action movies, the conversation kept us there for a good while. Nice as both the food and the conversation were, it seemed that the simple fact of everyone being there together was much more important. Being the newest member of the family present, I had some concerns going in about the conversations being too "in" (referring to

conversations that could not be followed by anyone outside of the TBBA family), so that only those who had been around a while would be able to follow, let alone participate. Those concerns turned out to be groundless.

When we finally left, we headed to one of the red belts' house, not far from the restaurant, where we divided up, two playing on his Nintendo Wii, the rest of us playing a board game called King of Tokyo. Appropriately, it was a fight-oriented game, each player controlling a monster in parody of the old Godzilla movies.



Figure 2-4 The TBBA family playing King of Tokyo

The goal of the game was basically “King of the Castle”, where you tried to defeat all of your opponents by taking over and holding Tokyo. Sadly, I lost spectacularly. The game, however, was surrounded by laughter, even when a player was in danger of being knocked out. Being knocked out usually resulted in even more laughter, even that of the person who just lost. There were no ill feelings – it was game night with the family, with brothers. Fun as Guys’ Night Out was, not every instance of the family getting together is as jovial.

Through Thick and Thin

Not all events where students come together are pleasant ones – some of the students have faced some difficult times. Some were surprises, others were events that simply didn’t go quite as planned. As an example, Sam, one of the school’s brown belts, wanted to participate in a full-contact fighting match. He had actually been interested in it since he was a green belt, wanting to try what he was learning in a real combat situation, not just one where there was no

real threat from the opponent other than maybe a black eye from a hit that went off target. As he put it:

Yeah because being in the sport and the art was fun for me, but I think a lot about what would happen if I really did need to use the skill set and we talk about it in class quite a bit, but I've never felt like I was really at that point where I could defend myself if I needed to. You know all these things, and you practice them to a certain degree, but what is it like to have someone hit you as hard as they possibly can? What is it like to almost be knocked out and have to still defend yourself?

Master Johnson, playing the role of Townsend's (2002) protective father, refused to allow him to fight in a full-contact match at his current level, and had him wait until he at least obtained his brown belt. Lacking the experience in competitions and sparring at the time, Master Johnson felt that a full-contact match was too risky. Once passing that threshold, he had Master Johnson begin cross-training him in muay thai, a very close-quarters martial art that originates in Thailand. Once Master Johnson felt that Sam was ready, he began to help him train and condition himself for the fight, supporting him through the strict training regime and even helping him find a fight that he could participate in.

After much preparation, the night of his fight came. A fair number of members of the TBBA come out in support for him, including his wife, Master and Mrs. Johnson, and several of the instructors and students (myself included). When his fight finally began, he came out pumped and ready. He and his opponent met in the middle of the ring and began their match. Back and forth they went, trading blows. As they approached the climax of the fight, his opponent moves backward, opening some distance between them, and launches a devastating kick, sadly catching Sam and causing an instant knock-out.

Almost as one, everyone got up from the bleachers and rushed to the side of the ring (or at least as close as we were permitted to go) where on-site medical personnel were examining him. After a short time, they were able to bring him back to consciousness, however they got an ambulance to take him to the hospital for a more thorough examination. While not everyone could go to the hospital with him, both Master and Mrs. Johnson did – parents

concerned for their child – and stayed with him until he was discharged during the wee hours of the morning.

One concussion and a fabulously-colored black eye later, he was back at the TBBA, making jokes and hanging out with the students there – he was not back in class until much later. Several of the students even started a poll on Facebook regarding several pictures taken of different students, who had all gotten black eyes at various competitions. The vote was to see who had the best black eye. It was a close race, but our brown belt won in the end. While I admit that it seems a little odd to refer to a serious head injury as a subject of humor, it does not seem out of place when one thinks of the family atmosphere of the TBBA. Do siblings not tease one another, especially when something may be bothering them?

Conclusion

Just like the father with his children, Master Johnson and his students at the TBBA come together to form closely connected network of individuals, sharing experiences, both good and bad. Like the image of the Townsend's father (2002, p.50-80), Master Johnson passes along his values to the students while providing them a safe environment in which they can learn freely – that the TBBA is a business as well adds to the emulation of Master Johnson as the father. The father is a provider, earning money in order to help see to his family's needs (Benokaitis, 1985). The money paid by the students (and thus earned by Master Johnson) contributes to the upkeep of the school. On top of being a provider, Master Johnson serves as a strong emotional support, which, as noted by Lutwin and Siperstein (1985, p.269-270), is a strong part of playing the role of the father.

The students help each other as they learn taekwondo as brothers and sisters in the art. The shared experiences, both good and bad, contribute to the feelings of kinship (Sahlins, 2011a; Sahlins, 2011b; Weston, 1991) shared between the students. Spending time with one another inside and outside of class all contribute to the close feelings that the students share with one another, as well as with Master Johnson. The experience of teaching one another as

siblings do (Stoneman, Brody, & MacKinnon, 1984), sharpening each other's skills through mutual practice, brings them together on a physical level, and the roles of instructor, assistant instructor, and student organize everyone into structured roles, dividing the older and younger siblings (Jurich, White, White, & Moody, 1991). The resulting distinctions create a large extended family, one that continually grows and changes as new siblings are adopted (Whiteside, 2004). Emphasizing the expansive family, the school is a special place to train, apart from the outside world during class, just as some karate classes are (Donohue, 1993), however the TBBA never has the sense of being exclusive. New students are always welcomed, and students who have left the school are encouraged to return. In fact, Master Johnson, every few months, organizes a reunion workout, open to all current and former students.

On top of the family relations, this family-oriented structure provides a clear method of transmission of techniques between the students, from Master Johnson on down, without the need to rely on a mythical lineage or folk history as was described by Green (2003). Instead, the students learn by example, the student in the lead demonstrating and guiding her or his younger siblings, just as the capoeiristas do (Downey, 2003).

In addition to the relationships forged through both teaching and learning, events such as family dinners (Jackson, Olive, & Smith, 2009) or planned family time (Kremer-Sadlik, Fatigante, & Fasulo, 2008; Smeeding & Marchand, 2004) bind them together emotionally. There is some degree of segregation between the students during these events. Ladies' Night Out and Guys' Night Out are an example of this – while they occur simultaneously, they are held completely separately. This division happens to be along gender lines, much as is the case with the segregation discussed by Collins and Kay (2003, p.97-112), however this is the only example where events outside of the classroom are divided as such. Tournaments, tests, and family dinners are all open to everyone.

The students, no matter their experience level, all come together to form a family with its own unique feel to it. While not immediately apparent when attending events that only include members of the TBBA, it becomes increasingly visible in more open environments, such as tournaments. In tournaments, the students present from other schools demonstrate some traits in common with the students from the TBBA, suggesting that some elements come from a global culture of martial arts, as Carter (2002) suggests regarding cultures of sport in general. Examples include the solidarity of the students, mutual respect between competitors, and the physical skills obtained by each student. Where the TBBA differs is in the quality of the students – which is raised by virtue of the students constantly honing their skills against one another – and a subtle difference in the degree of solidarity between the students. Instead of merely being from the same school, there is a strong sense that each student knows exactly what each competitor went through to prepare for the event, which in turn lets each student share feelings of success for a good performance, or hurt for a less-than-stellar showing.

That said, wins and losses all result in something positive. In the case of wins, the memory itself becomes a source of both praise and pride. Aside from the trophy, however, there are rarely any other benefits – certainly no spiritual boons, as was described regarding sumo and Shinto (Light & Kinnaird, 2002) or regarding the favor of G-d (Chandler, 2002). A loss, on the other hand, invites the students to come together to help raise the competitor's skill level for the next event, and possibly sooth a bruised ego. Like good siblings, there is usually also a healthy dose of good-natured teasing to accompany the training.

The system clearly works. That the students think so highly of Master Johnson, as Martha does, is a direct result of his method of teaching and the environment he has worked to establish at the school. Similarly, it is unlikely that Sam would have been as insistent, or as successful at receiving cross-training for his full-contact match, or even having that match in the first place. Between the resources provided by Master Johnson, the emotional support, the

values he teaches, and the protection he offers, it does not seem like much of a stretch to see him as the father-figure of the TBBA.

The family environment, along with the strong push for the students to better themselves both physically and mentally, strongly contributes to the development of the students. A portion of their training involves looking beyond the technique and improving on each student's physical and mental capabilities. Finding one's limits, pushing through them, and experimenting with what does or does not work are facilitated by the family environment that is crafted by Master Johnson, who provides each student with a safe environment in which they can practice and learn, both from him and from each other. Without the sibling-like relationships forged between the students, it is very possible that the collective skill levels of the students would diminish, not using one another to push each other and sharpen their skills. The relationships forged between the upper and lower belts and between the instructors and the students make the TBBA what it is: a family.

Chapter 3

Healthy Body, Healthy Mind

Taekwondo, as it is taught in the United States, is a martial art that originated in South Korea. In paying homage to that origin, the flag of South Korea hangs in the north-western corner of the main training floor at the Texas Black Belt Academy (TBBA). On a field of pure white, the flag of South Korea bears five different symbols: the *taeguk* and four trigrams – pictograms that consist of three lines, some broken and others whole. The *taeguk*, at the center of the flag, is a circle divided in half by a sinuous line, with the top half colored red, and the bottom blue – this is a variation on the Chinese *taiji* (more commonly referred to in the US as the *yin-yang*), a symbol used in Taoism to depict nature's balance. The four trigrams are identified as heaven (three unbroken lines) in the top-left corner, earth (three broken lines) in the bottom-right corner, fire (two solid lines with a broken line in the middle) in the bottom-left corner, and water (two broken lines with a solid line in the middle) in the top-right. All five symbols express a similar idea: everything, no matter how seemingly complex, is balanced by an opposing counterpart.

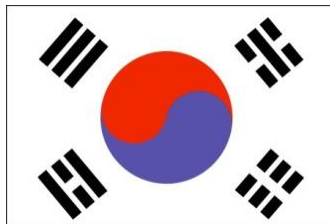


Figure 3-1 Image of the Korean flag showing *taeguk* and trigrams

Vannini and Waskul (2006) explore the dualism of the mind and body through the lens of body-image. As they define it, the body-image, as it is typically thought of in psychology and sociology, is a construction of Cartesian dualism, separating the mind and the body. They propose a holistic approach by elaborating on the concept of body-ekstasis, where one

undergoes a continuous qualitative evaluation of the aesthetic potential of one's body (Vannini & Waskul, 2006, p.188-190). In this definition, the body is used as a tool through which to develop one's sense of self, through either sensual or communicative experience. The body itself is the tool through which the ekstatic image of the body is developed. That image is embodied by an individual, who then interacts with those around them. Those interactions result in responses, which are interpreted by the individual, further developing the ekstatic image of the body. The process, as Vannini and Waskul describe it, uses information from the mind to affect the body, which in turn takes in sensory information, affecting the mind further. The flow from mind to body and to mind once more is continuous and never-ending, with all of the information gathered contributing to a constantly evolving sense of self.

Just as Vannini and Waskul emphasized the importance of both the mind and the body working together as one unit, and in keeping with the symbolism of the *taeguk*, training at the TBBA involves both the mind and body of the students. Exercises, drills, and sparring are the main tools utilized to develop the body, and as the body is trained, so is the mind.

The Ideal Body?

If part of the goal in studying a martial art like taekwondo is to expand on the capabilities of the body, then what is the ultimate goal? Is there are particular body-type that students strive for? Sport and its relation to the body has been a subject of study for decades, with some authors, such as Alter (2002), identifying a particular build that was sought by practitioners. Alter's (2002, p.88-89) wrote that those that practiced *pehlwani*, there was a definite goal: to create a masculine body – one that was strong, able to stand firm. For Alter, this body represented the discipline and assertiveness that practitioners of *pehlwani* wished to carry forward.

From my experiences with taekwondo through the TBBA, and in opposition to Alter's (2002) *pehlwani* practitioners, there does not visibly seem to be a particular body-type

emphasized. True, images in the media, which often represent a students' first impressions regarding martial arts, suggest otherwise. Fans of old martial art action movies like Bruce Lee's *Enter the Dragon* may recall seeing images of the fighters as they play their roles in the movie. In *Enter the Dragon*, for example, Bruce Lee is seen shirtless, his muscles on display. In addition to his physical conditioning, Bruce Lee is shown to have a slight build, suggesting greater speed. The traits of power and speed are vital to the application of martial arts in combat, and are evidenced by any number of male characters for martial arts movies (such as the character of Liu Kang in *Mortal Kombat*) and video games (such as the Monk in *Diablo III*).



Figure 3-2 Bruce Lee⁴ (left) and the Monk⁵ (right)

Female martial artists display that strength and speed in their own way in the movies, such as the actress Lucy Liu in the movie *The Man with the Iron Fists*. In this case, strength and speed are less evidenced by obvious muscularity and more by bearing and posture. The body is depicted as either slim or toned, suggesting good physical condition, and suggests speed, but not physical strength in the same sense as the male image. Instead the sense of strength comes from an aura of control that they exude: straight-backed, head held high.

⁴ Image retrieved from http://blackraidergdamsa.blogspot.com/2012/06/blog-post_6914.html

⁵ Image retrieved from <http://www.thehealthygamer.com/2012/06/01/diablo-3-monk-leveling-guide-levels-30-45/>

In the cases of both the male and female martial artist, the media depicts particular body types for each: strong and flexible for a man, and poised and supple for a woman. My experiences with the TBBA, however, has shown that these ideals are perpetuated by the media, and not so much the students. Master Johnson, for example is a tall man, and undoubtedly physically fit, however he does not have a particularly muscular build. Mrs. Johnson is short, with a slight build. Mr. Corben, in contrast to the image set by Bruce Lee, has a rather stocky build and is heavier-set. Roland, like Mr. Corben, also has a stocky build. Josh, one of the school's red belts, is very tall with long arms and legs, but is slim, not muscular. Of the people named, only Josh has a red belt. Mr. Corben and Roland both have their first degree black belt, Mrs. Johnson has her third degree black belt, and Master Johnson has a 7th degree. The skill level of each does not seem to be linked to their body type. Looking beyond the school, I have seen students get together at competitions who, again, do not fit with the media's image. This suggests again that the body type, while a necessary consideration for a fighter, does not determine their skill by virtue of emulating one of the media's ideals.

The TBBA hosted a competition on the University of Texas at Arlington campus in March of this year. The competition was open to all members of the Texas Karate League (TKL), and organization created by nine different martial arts schools in the Dallas/Fort Worth area to promote friendly competition between different schools. Competitions run by the TKL follow a particular standard for event structure and judging, ensuring that no matter which school hosts, everyone will be held to the same standards during the competitions. The event in March was the first tournament that I had attended with the TBBA – my only preconception was that a large portion of the TBBA would be participating in the competition. The event itself was divided into two competitions: forms and sparring. Each competition was further divided into age brackets, separating children, adults, and seniors, and then divided once again into men and women's brackets. The forms competition has students executing a particular set of choreographed moves, decided on by the competitor beforehand from a list of sets available to

them. Sparring competitions were fairly short matches, and scored by the number of clean hits each participant makes on their opponent's body (or head, for black belts). The limitations, while sometimes a little cumbersome, are put in place for a reason. In addition to seeking to minimize the risk of injury to each competitor, the restrictions on the types and targets of strikes serve to emphasize each student's control over their body.

While I was unable to get an accurate count of the number of participants at the competition, the event filled up a college regulation-size basketball court – it was crowded. Despite the crowd, I was able to get a good look at many of the competitors. Tall, short, heavy, thin, muscular, slim, male, female – just about every combination of traits was in evidence. In addition, no one set of traits seemed to have a distinct advantage over another.

As an example, forms competitions, being the execution of a choreography of techniques, do not require high levels of strength, or even unusual amounts of dexterity. Anyone can do their form in the competition, provided that they have learned the list and order of techniques, and have sufficient skill to perform them. Height, weight, reach – none of it matters, save for what is necessary for each technique's execution. Scoring is determined by the skill employed in each technique, how well each move is "sold" (how convincingly it was performed), and the smoothness of the performance. That said, balance is necessary, as is dexterity, so proper training was a must for each student. Aside from that, however, there did not seem to be a particular ideal body that the students were striving for.

Sparring is a little bit different, where one's physical capabilities matter a good deal more. Even here, however, one's physical build is not necessarily an advantage or disadvantage. Mr. Corben, for example, has a shorter reach than Josh, one of the red belts. Josh, being extremely tall (with much longer limbs), has a very long reach, and trying to hit outside of that reach is simply not going to happen – he would be able to hit Mr. Corben before he could even reach Josh's body. As a result, he would need to move within Josh's range, close

enough to where any counter that Josh could make would be extremely awkward – he would need to back up to open more space to attack with comfort. In this manner, Josh's longer reach would actually work against him. Conversely, if Josh is able to open up some distance between them, then Mr. Corben would once again be at a disadvantage.

Once again, it does not appear that any particular body type has a concrete advantage over another. True, a taller person would have a longer reach, but as with the example of Mr. Corben and Josh, that can be worked around. Again, it comes down to the training that each student undergoes, and the experience that they build by competing in tournaments. As they train, they learn about their own capabilities, which is then processed and utilized by the mind.

Instead of a particular physical body-type, I suggest that the students are seeking something internal instead (as opposed to externally visible). The students undergo a great deal of physical training, however the purpose of the bulk of the training is not so much to build physical power as it is to develop an enduring, disciplined body. Vannini and Waskul (2006, p.194-195) emphasize that the ekstatic body is not static. Instead, it is dynamic, always changing and developing based on the stimuli interpreted by the individual – in this case by the experiences in sparring and the training of the students. The physical exercise, in combination with the learning experiences shared by the students, contribute to the students being able to develop their own being – body and mind – as durable and disciplined.

From what I have seen at both the classes and at the competitions, there is no externally visible ideal body-type that martial artists strive for. Yes, many of them seek to improve their bodies through the exercise and the training, attempting to get into better shape or conditioning their bodies, but efforts towards that end seem geared more towards optimization than towards idealization.

Developing the Body

Awareness of the Body

The optimization of the body, in this case, does not refer to pushing the body to some unparalleled height, becoming a paragon of physical perfection. Instead, I use the term to describe something that each student at the TBBA learns as they progress through the art: that each person's body is different and that those differences can be worked with to create a method of movement that is best for you and you alone. The human body can only move certain ways due to its structure, and even then unique quirks are present, such as having a longer reach due to being taller or movement restrictions due to an old injury. It then falls to the student to either learn to work with or through those quirks in order to develop their own method of movement. One could say that it takes a proper balance between the mind and body to be able to make the most out of the training: too much emphasis on the mind (not properly training the body) can hinder the execution of techniques; too much emphasis on the body (not properly understanding one's body) can lead to injury.

Learning what a student's body can or cannot do is a matter of developing one's internal awareness – which can be construed as an application of the *taeguk*, utilizing the mind to impact the body. The students at the TBBA develop internal awareness through their training at the school and by applying one's skills such as through sparring. Using the example of Mr. Corben and Josh once more, Josh, by virtue of being taller than Mr. Corben, is able to strike from a greater distance. In addition to that, his longer legs and lighter frame allow him greater potential for maneuverability. At the same time, he has to be aware that because of his lighter build, he is more vulnerable to a well-grounded opponent (one with either greater weight or with a better stance to preserve his balance). Launching a kick at a well-grounded opponent, if Josh does not compensate with his technique, is very likely going to push him off of his opponent, upsetting his balance and putting him in a dangerous position. With Mr. Corben being both

heavier and shorter, he has a more solid build than Josh, which also means that he can take a hit to the body from Josh, likely without sacrificing his balance. Taking a hit in this manner, as Mr. Corben pointed out during one of our conversations, is perfectly fine with him if he can get in close and start punching his opponent. He knows his body and its limits, has trained and worked with them, and understands what exactly he can do with his own body – the balance of the *taeguk* in actual application.

Intensive workouts are an additional source of awareness, though granted it is only available to black belt candidates. Intensives are done six to eight weeks prior to black belts tests, which are in turn held biannually. Each intensive workout is designed to bring the student to their physical limits, such as by having them fight person after person, non-stop, for an hour and a half. The goal of working the students so hard is three-fold: to raise their stamina to push their threshold of exhaustion further back, to muster the willpower to be able to push through that exhaustion so that they can handle any adversity, and to get the students to maintain their technique in the face of exhaustion.

Each of the three purposes of intensives relates directly to the necessity of maintaining the balance suggested by the *taeguk*. The first relates directly to the condition of the body and its physical ability. Between the stresses exerted on the body through the training as well as the trials experienced in our hectic world, higher levels of endurance directly relate to a having a greater stability in one's life –they get more from workouts by exercising harder or longer. Being able to push through fatigue, on the other hand, is a thing of the mind. With the ability to ignore exhaustion, students gain a valuable tool to handle stresses or crises that may crop up in their lives (this will be elaborated on in the following chapter).

Both are vital for those who seek advancement in taekwondo – should a student be forced into a situation where they must fight, there are no time-outs. You cannot ask an opponent to wait while you catch your breath. The further back you push the threshold of

exhaustion, the greater your chances of ending the fight on your terms. At the same time, being able to push through exhaustion is a necessary skill as well, otherwise the fight ends as soon as you tire yourself. The two together create the third purpose: maintaining technique in the face of exhaustion - being able to keep throwing your techniques effectively for as long as you need to. Should a student be forced to fight, being able to maintain technique means that, even if the power of your strikes drops, you are less likely to injure yourself or strike where you didn't mean to, granting an advantage to those who did not receive similar training.

During the course of intensives, each student is given a set of exercises, not unlike those experienced in a typical class – the key difference is the degree of difficulty and the amount of time each exercise is maintained. In the face of the resulting exhaustion, it makes sense that the students would find what works for them and what doesn't. As Mr. Corben put it:

And, you know, until you get up against that wall, where you're forced to fight through it... it definitely has an impact on you. I mean, [my daughter] had that moment, I had mine along the way, and I'm sure that everyone who goes through that does. Where "it hurts worse to throw this punch than to get hit, how am I possibly going to get through this?" And you find a way to do it.

In one of the workouts that Mr. Corben described, he and several other students were in a circle around him. He had to move around the circle, fighting the person in front of him only with punches, while the person behind him with only kicks. As exhausting as the exercise was, he was able to push past his fatigue and complete the exercise, something that he feels he is better for being able to do. Without the mental discipline to force through his limits, Mr. Corben would have been stuck at *bodan*, or "black belt purgatory" as he phrased it. At the same time, the mental effort would have counted for nothing without the physical endurance he had developed through training. It was the combination of both that allowed him to complete the workout, which in turn helped him get on the path to getting his black belt.

Conditioning the Body

Outside of the intensives, even regular classes can be quite taxing. Each class is an opportunity for the students to strengthen their bodies through several different exercises. A typical class, for example, starts up with some simple warm-up exercises which serve to loosen the muscles and joints, reducing the chances of injury from the following workout. The first five to ten minutes of each class is devoted to the warm-ups. After the warm-up come the drills.

The drills in each class follow a fairly uniform pattern, covering about ten repetitions of different kicks and punches, one set on each side of the body. The emphasis of the drills, however, vary slightly between the classes. The drills can be speed-oriented, with the instructor setting a quick pace in order to help the students execute techniques more quickly, or they could be endurance oriented. Endurance drills, unlike speed drills, are carried out at each student's own pace for a certain amount of time, set by the instructor. The goal of endurance drills is to be able to continuously execute techniques at a reasonable pace for as long as necessary. An additional focus is seen in the balance drills. Balance drills, as the name implies, seeks to help students improve their sense of physical balance by executing different kicks in slow-motion or by having the students hold a kick at full-extension so that their legs are completely straight. Other classes forego drills entirely in favor of cardio workouts to improve overall physical fitness.

In each of the examples of physical training, the students are placed in a setting where the classes, taxing as they are, ultimately aim to improve skills necessary to practicing taekwondo. Simultaneously, the exercises seek to build up the students' physical fitness levels so that the students, regardless of how often they are able to come to class, are able to feel that they are benefitting directly from the training. Ms. Ree summed her feelings on the workouts in one of our interviews:

Actually, it's fun. It is like afterwards, you just want to like not move, but in the scheme of things, the improvements that you go through ... it's ... Because you get more, not only better, but you get ... You didn't think you could get any better, and you do.

In this, Ms. Ree is referring to the constant improvement in her skills in taekwondo do and in her own physical fitness. As she pointed out during that same conversation, she had taken a break from practicing shortly after gaining her black belt. During her hiatus, she put on a bit of weight, which was eventually lost upon coming back to regular classes – over eighty pounds worth.

Ms. Ree is not the only member of the TBBA to remark on the physical health benefits reaped from studying taekwondo. Sam had a similar story to tell, after he left high school:

I was also really out of shape. At my heaviest I was 211, and I had stopped doing anything physical at all, and the way I viewed myself, I had a different mental image. To me, I still should have looked like and felt like I did in high school. It was really strange when I saw myself. It didn't look like me. I thought Taekwondo might be a way to take control of myself again.

In this, Sam is expressing the same concept that Vannini and Waskul (2006) emphasized in their work, that of the ekstatic body. The body image changes over time, based on sensory input as well as external feedback. In Sam's case, he held on to an image of himself from high school, which was modified by an external source (his own reflection), which in turn prompted his seeking a way to return to an image similar to that which he held of himself in high school. Like Ms. Ree, Sam also was able to use the heavy exercise in the classes to manage his body, shedding the extra weight, and gaining the strength and skill that allowed him to compete in his full-contact match that I described in Chapter 1.

Conclusion

In regard to the mind and body, my experience with the TBBA has shown it to be more complex than I anticipated. Success in taekwondo comes down to the individual to determine the benefits gathered. That said, the students seem well aware of the benefits that they are reaping. They have a clear idea of what they are capable of, and, especially in the case of the

black belts, where their weaknesses are. Understanding both allows them to play towards their strengths, to utilize them in competition or in friendly sparring matches, or to cover up weaknesses.

Unlike Alter (2002) and his experience with *pehlwani* wrestlers, or the images presented in the media (Lu, 2011), there is no one body-type that is strived for in taekwondo, however this is mostly in an external sense. The students do strive for a durable, disciplined body. That said, what is deemed a durable, disciplined body varies from student to student. From my discussions with them, it ultimately comes down to what a person can or cannot do, either due to physical limitations or to their own bodies in relation to others. There is additionally a sense of fitness that is sought, to tone and train the body to be able to practice taekwondo, however that fitness, again, is not bound to a particular image.

The individual techniques, on the other hand, are mostly uniform. There is some slight variation between older and younger students, however this is the difference between those still learning the basics and those who have been working with a particular skill set for years. Specific skills and habits are encouraged and trained, such as keeping one's hands up to protect the face and head while maintaining a fighting stance. Others are discouraged, such as keeping the hands open when in a defensive position (having the hands open can lead to injured fingers). These techniques are developed in much the same way as the capoeiristas (Downey, 2010), by practicing those movements (or avoiding certain movements or positions) indefinitely.

The lessons in discipline and awareness that the students receive, however, are not limited to simply the body. As described by Vannini and Waskul (2006, p.188-190), the ekstatic body is a dynamic thing, with both the mind and the body working together as one that determines the state of one's being. As we will explore in the next chapter, many of the lessons learned here, such as personal limits, as well as expanding and pushing through one's

exhaustion, are beneficial in less tangible ways, such as managing stress or handling life's challenges.

Ultimately, the students take away from their experiences lessons learned both with the body, through physical training, and the mind, through application. It is the successful incorporation of lessons of the mind and body that allows the students to succeed in taekwondo. Favoring one or the other, as mentioned earlier, can lead to improper technique or even injuries – striking that balance is what makes them successful as students or instructors.

Chapter 4

The Eye of the Storm

The question that brought me to the Texas Black Belt Academy (TBBA) for this project was, “What motivates the students to take taekwondo lessons?” What brought them to the school in the first place? What is keeping them there? So far, we have looked at both the family environment and the health benefits that the students enjoy, however both are mostly limited to interactions either within the school or among other students. What are they taking away from their studies?

I have gotten a number of different responses from students when I ask them what they feel the most valuable thing that they have gotten out of studying taekwondo is. I asked Shelly, one of the brown belts at the TBBA, what she thought the most valuable thing that she got out of taekwondo was. At the time, we were on the road heading to Strawn, Texas, on our way to a black belt test being administered by Master Roy Kurban, Master Johnson’s teacher. After thinking on it for a bit, she gave me a rather interesting answer:

There are other things that you can argue that come into play in the big situations. I mean, if I ever get attacked, I’m much likely to fare better than other people, but day to day I feel like a bigger person. If anyone argues with me or talks down to me, I have an inner stillness telling me that I’m capable of handling this.

I’ve done much harder things on a daily basis, and as unrealistic as it is to expect that any argument that you have might devolve into fighting, I really do have a voice in the back of my head that says, “Fuck him. You can kick his ass.” If someone really messes with me, I am able to stay perfectly calm because I know that were it to devolve to blows, I would do pretty well and it’s silly and unrealistic, but that’s how I feel.

Shelly is not alone in describing the tranquility that she feels from studying taekwondo. Mr. Corben, one of the TBBA’s black belts, described a similar feeling of stillness, developed through his studies at the school:

You know, I get asked a lot, when people find out that I practice taekwondo, “Well, have you ever had to use it?” and I’m, “Well, not really in the sense that you’re talking about.” You know, I’ve never had to defend myself on the street or anything, but I use what I get from it every day. You know, whether emotionally or, you know,

stuff at work, life, whatever. It just makes a... it just kind of slows everything down. It boils down to the control of the fight-or-flight thing.

In both students' cases, studying taekwondo has given them a source of tranquility from which they can tackle life's challenges. It could be said that the United States fosters a culture of fear – the news media is saturated with tales of danger and death and entertainment television airs programs showcasing violent crimes. Fears and insecurities, as well as unforeseen circumstances, are opponents that every person must find a way to wrestle with. The calm that both Shelly and Mr. Corben refer to is but one tool at the student's disposal, and one that is honed through their studies in taekwondo. Interestingly, from speaking with the students, it seems that the sense of calm is more valuable than the actual fighting skills. As Roland put it, "Yeah, we learn to fight, but... we learn to fight so that we don't have to fight. You know?" Yes, combat is an option, but it is not always a necessary one – maintaining your composure to handle high-stress situations is much more valuable.

Fear Itself

When asked what got them interested in studying martial arts in the first place, about half of the students that I spoke with described some kind of fear as their primary reason for starting. Ms. Ree, for example, suffered from being physically bullied by an older boy when she was a child. In an effort to help her daughter defend herself, Ms. Ree's mother enrolled her in the American Black Belt Academy, where she met Master Johnson, prior to his opening up the TBBA. Within six months, she had obtained her orange belt in taekwondo and felt confident in her ability to use the basic self-defense techniques that she had been taught. Armed with her sense of confidence and the knowledge that she was not helpless, she no longer suffered at the hands of a bully. She continued on to obtain her black belt four years later, and is now one of the instructors at the TBBA.

For other students, social anxiety was a major motivator. Sam, for example, spoke with me about his occasional struggle with it. Even entering a room with a handful of unknown people can present a challenge. For him, practicing in taekwondo became a way for him to work

through those feelings by externalizing them into something that he can deal with more directly.

As he put it:

Like ... when you're faced with a situation and you look at yourself for a second when you have a physical manifestation of your struggle like taekwondo. It's easy to imagine yourself doing other things, and just having that confidence has really helped me out a lot just to be more focused in getting a job, and just being able to assert myself and reach my goals.

Sam used taekwondo as a means work through his anxieties, focusing himself and allowing him to be more assertive.

Like Sam, Martha would often self-sabotage her own efforts, convincing herself that there was no way that she would achieve her goals and that she should just not bother trying.

When asked to describe what would go through her head, she said:

... I have always been a person... a jack-of-all-trades-type person, and I haven't really excelled at anything because either I get lazy or... the other thing is that I will lose confidence and I will stop. I'll go "No matter how much you practice, you can't get better." So I've been my own worst enemy. ...It's me facing myself.

In the past, as she mentioned to me, those negative thoughts have caused her to miss opportunities in her life. While not an example from studying taekwondo, one such opportunity presented itself when she played basketball. On her own skill, she was able to touch the backboard when doing a layup, a two-point shot in basketball where the player launches the ball from right below the net and bouncing it off the backboard to score. One of Martha's friends, on seeing this, suggested that she learn how to dunk the ball, increasing her jump height enough to be able to touch the rim of the basket. Despite his urgings, she had convinced herself that she could not make a slam dunk – she was simply too short to make the necessary height. Without the experience that she gained through practicing taekwondo, the internal argument ended with her walking away, convinced that it was an impossibility. With her training, however, those inner conversations turned out very differently. "This [taekwondo] is the ultimate fear that I can face."

When asked what it was about taekwondo that allowed her to face her doubts, she was unable to pin it down to any one thing. She talked about several factors that all contributed, such as the thrill of competition and the stress she releases through the workouts, but one stood

out above all the rest: the other students. While they were certainly supportive of her, what made her pause and really reconsider was that she was a role model. Being a red belt, she is an assistant instructor, which means that the younger students looked up to her. As an assistant instructor, it fell to her to break down the individual techniques and teach them to younger students – to pause and make sense of what they are trying to do.

Awareness

In the previous chapter, we looked at the awareness that the students develop as they train in taekwondo. By subjecting themselves to both physical and mental strain, they are able to identify their own personal limits and learn to work with them to their advantage. While the mental strain can be utilized to develop internal awareness, it can be, and is, expanded upon to develop each student's situational awareness. Situational or external awareness expands beyond the confines of the physical body and relies on the sensory information gathered by the body. It allows the students to maintain a dynamic understanding of their surroundings and is honed through the practice of self-defense techniques and sparring. In both cases, knowing your surroundings, where people and objects are placed in relation to you, and how you yourself are currently feeling (physically and emotionally) are vital in self-defense scenarios, as is being able to maintain your focus in high-stress environments, combating everyday issues, so to speak. Maintaining that calm center allows one to manage those difficult scenarios. For the purpose of clarity, I will distinguish between external and internal awareness, however the two are exercised simultaneously, not separately.

External Awareness

There are a number of “household names” among martial artists, such as Chuck Norris and Bruce Lee. Different names will hold differing amounts of significance, depending on the school in question. Jim Harrison, one of those names, is an “old-school” martial artist. Reminiscing about some of his favorite fights, he recalled one episode that took place in a bar. His opponent was coming after him and, as he gets ready to charge, someone off to the side

calls out, "Hey, watch out! He does karate, so he kicks." The guy, thinking, "Alright, I've got this," prepares himself to fight his opponent. Harrison, having heard what the guy in the peanut gallery said, rears back in an obvious show to kick the guy. The instant the guy's hands drop down to block the incoming kick, Harrison lashes out and smashes the guy with a punch to the face.

The story regarding Jim Harrison brilliantly illustrates something that Martha, Ms. Ree, Sam, Shelly, and Mr. Corben all identified: awareness does not simply apply to combat. Instead, it is an important skill that can be utilized in any scenario to help a person find a way through. In the case of Jim Harrison and his unfortunate opponent, Harrison's awareness of his surroundings led him to pay attention to the bystanders of the fight, which in turn let him note the advice being offered to his opponent. Convolved as it sounds, his knowing that his opponent knew that he knew martial arts became his greatest weapon, allowing him to make a one-hit knock-out.

Admittedly, examples like Jim Harrison's story are uncommon. Fights simply do not crop up that often. Still, a number of students reported the benefits of awareness that they have gained. Roland, for example, described his training as a good eye-opener. With his mind open to the possibilities for various situations, he can look at a parking lot and pick out things ahead of time, whether they are possible threats, obstacles, or something else entirely.

One of the things emphasized in taekwondo is that the world is not always a nice place – it is full of potential hazards and people have vulnerabilities. Being able to identify them is an extremely useful skill for anyone, however it is especially so for those more likely to be victimized. McCaughey (1997, p.89-90), for example, identifies women as a particularly vulnerable group due to the power inequalities between men and women in the United States and, due to that power inequality, the rape culture that the environment in the US fosters. Master Johnson makes it a point to regularly hold women's self-defense classes for students from both inside and outside his school. In addition to basic techniques for stopping or injuring

opponents, a portion of the class is devoted to teaching participants to identify vulnerable locations and situations. One of the biggest, I was told by Martha, was the parking lot.

It is not uncommon for attackers to push their targets into their cars to either hinder or completely incapacitate them. For her personally, those lessons have been taken to heart – she looks behind her before opening her car door just in case. That said, unless she is in the process of getting into the car, she spoke without any qualms about how to defend herself in that situation. Even getting into the car, there are answers, though it would definitely be a difficult situation.

An additional source of that awareness comes from personal experience. While some students may have unfortunate encounters that spark the need for that awareness, none of the students that I worked with had those experiences. Instead, the students that I worked with often had “what if” scenarios that made them think about it.

Martha was kind enough to share one of those “what if” moments with me. Several years back, she was with a guy friend of hers. He tried to kiss her, but she didn’t care for him that way. In this particular case, the guy was completely respectful of her wishes and backed off, but, as described earlier, what if he didn’t back off? The guy wasn’t exactly small, for one – he was at least six feet tall with a pretty solid build. Could she fight him off if need be? When he had gotten as close as he did?

Being a “what if”, there is no definite answer, however she used the awareness sparked by those questions as a launching point for some of her training, going out of her way to work with some bigger guys in sparring to see what she could do. She let them get in close, she kept them at a distance, she let them take the fight to the ground, all to see where her options lay. As she put it, when thinking back on the awareness of herself and her opponent that she developed through that training, “I always protect me.”

Awareness is further honed during the sparring classes that are held at the TBBA twice a week. The classes do not directly address the topic of situational awareness, aside from the

need to be able to focus on your opponent and where you are in relation to them, however awareness is still trained by the nature of the classes themselves. Each sparring class will often see a fair number of students participating in one-on-one sparring matches – the most that I have seen at once was ten simultaneous matches. During those matches, students were moving around the room, trying to maneuver into a good position to strike at their opponents.

When it is just two people moving around the room, maneuvering is not particularly challenging. When it is twenty people moving around at once, however, the dynamic changes completely. Not only is each student bound by limitations of space, but they have to be able to track any potential obstacles (typically about three or four other pairs of students), stationary obstacles such as the walls of the room, and their opponent. Slipping on any one of these, more often than not, will allow the opponent an opening to slip through their guard for a strike. The value of finding that internal stillness comes to the fore here, allowing the student to block out extraneous information such as background noise or matches taking place across the room, note the significant information such as movement immediately nearby, and act.

Just as students need to be able to juggle the obstacles within the sparring classes, they need to be able to transfer that awareness to the world outside of the classroom. The world, being a chaotic place, throws challenges and hazards at people without warning. The external awareness honed by the students through sparring is a vital tool to be able to react and sufficiently protect themselves from potential harm.

Internal Awareness

Each student takes their own path to learn about themselves, and, for some, the path is more difficult than others. As was discussed in the previous chapter, every student has their own personal take on taekwondo based off of their physical build and experiences. A large part of the internal awareness is learning what exactly one's body can do, such as taking a hit or having a long reach. At the same time, a vital piece of internal awareness is the status of the body. In a fight, for example, the pain from an injury is a warning sign that damage has been

done to the body and that the injury needs to be protected to avoid further trauma (evidenced by the instinct to retract or cover an injured area).

Mr. Corben, to use him as an example once again, had a particularly trying time trying to achieve his black belt. After he had made his way to *bodan* belt, he began his intensive training for his black belt test. Intensives, unlike standard classes, are designed to push what the body can endure, to be able to fight through limitations such as exhaustion. Following an intensive workout, Mr. Corben would get these blinding headaches, which were severe enough for him to seek medical attention.

As it turned out, he had developed a tumorous mass along his spinal cord – one of the nerve cells had begun to grow out of control and the compression from that mass was causing the excruciating pain. Due to its location, operating on the mass would not be a simple process. At best, his doctors told him, the surgery had about a 25% chance of resulting in either partial or total paralysis. Not good odds. Even more worrying than that, the surgery was not going to be that simple, nixing the problem with a single go. The mass had growths coming out of it, each of which would need to be removed one at a time. Each portion of the process would be another roll of the dice, another 25% chance of paralysis.

On top of the risks, the surgery would involve lasting damage, removing a portion of the spine to get at the problem in the first place. If it went as the surgeon expected, that would prevent the student from being able to practice taekwondo in the future – one strike to the damaged area, or maybe even a decent blow to the head, would further damage him, possibly resulting in paralysis.

Even with the surgery being mandatory – between an early grave and a *chance* of paralysis, there is not much of a choice – the mental stress of knowing what is going to happen, what you very likely will be giving up, is no small thing. As mentioned, Mr. Corben had already reached *bodan* rank, meaning that he had already made a time investment of several years. Having his *bodan* rank means that he was a candidate to earn his black belt, the test for which

he had been testing for when this problem surfaced. Now, with a very risky surgery in front of him, he may be forced to give up an activity that he deeply enjoyed.

By using that calm learned through training at the TBBA, Mr. Corben was able to keep himself centered, to keep the stress from overwhelming him. He was able to use that sense of self-control to steel himself for the surgery and push through it. The surgery, as it turned out, went better than could possibly be imagined. Not only was the problem fixed in one shot – the tumor had not progressed enough to force multiple attempts and instead was removed all at once – but the surgeons didn't even have to remove as much of the spine as they thought. After recovery, he would be able to continue with taekwondo, or any other physical activity that he may want to do.

The surgery delayed his black belt test for over two years, but he was finally able to test. One of the happiest memories for him, in addition to finally being allowed to test by his doctors, was taking that test. After what he had gone through, the stress of the test was literally nothing. At the climax of his test, when he was supposed to do his brick breaks, he affixed a picture of the tumor to the center of his target. He only left rubble behind, symbolizing a major trial in his life, not just overcome, but beaten.

Conclusion

As I mention at the start of this chapter, a number of the students such as Ms. Ree, Martha, and Sam all came into the art with some kind of fear or illness. Through their studies, they were slowly able to eliminate those concerns and, while they are likely still there in some fashion, each one of those students now possesses a toolset to deal with that turbulence.

Sam, for example, still contends with social anxiety. His experiences at the TBBA and his relationships with the students and instructors helped him begin to fight those anxieties back. With his additional experiences as he grew in taekwondo, he found a center, a calm, that gave him an additional method to defeat the anxiety that he felt. After all, how could meeting a

room full of people that he is unfamiliar with be harder than pushing himself through the exhaustion of sparring and practice?

In Mr. Corben's case, as he journeyed to receive his black belt, he was forced to deal with a large amount of mental stress and anxiety. Despite that, he used the support that he received from Master Johnson and the other students, as well as what he learned from his experiences at the TBBA to slow everything down, to find a way to set aside the stress and tackle the problem. The calm achieved by setting aside that anxiety became an incredibly powerful tool that helped him to find his way through his trials and finally to obtain his black belt in taekwondo. In each of these cases, recognizing the fears and anxieties that brought the students to the martial arts and the cultivation of both internal and external awareness contribute to their calm that they can handle anything that may come down the road.

The sense of calm developed by the students of the TBBA is not very far removed from the sense of pride and confidence (some would say arrogance or swagger) developed by students of capoeira (Downey, 2005, p.118-135). In learning how they can move, how they can defend themselves and fight, the students are able to gain a mastery over themselves, which in turn results in a strong sense of self. That sense translates into the calm reported by the students at the TBBA.

Whatever fears a student bears when they come to the TBBA, the lessons and environment both help the students find a way to take control away from that anxiety and center themselves emotionally. That said, it does not get rid of those fears completely, or at all in some cases. It has been stressed both at the TBBA and in the literature (McCaughey, 1997) that there are vulnerabilities that one must deal with. In McCaughey's case, she emphasized that women in general are particularly vulnerable. Master Johnson stresses that anyone can be vulnerable in any situation. The solution is to be aware of one's surroundings and one's self, so as to reduce that vulnerability. By doing so, that fear, if not erased completely, is at least dealt with to the point that the student is able to maintain that emotional center.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

The Texas Black Belt Academy (TBBA) includes 90 active students. Those students run the gambit from white belt all the way through 7th degree black belt. From a true beginner to those advanced enough to have earned the title “Master”. Each student began their training in taekwondo, if not at the TBBA, for various purposes, and continue to study for any number of reasons.

Over the course of this work, I have sought to understand why the students of the TBBA chose their school, and why they continue to train there. I began, assuming that fear was the end-all answer. That the students sought martial training because they were afraid – afraid of the dangers of the outside world, or afraid of a particular challenge that they were facing (as would be the case for bullying). If they stayed, it was either because that fear persisted or a new one took its place. After all, why else would one feel the need to study a method of fighting for self-defense?

My time with the students was short, barely six months, but my time with them allowed me a great deal of insight into not only their motivations, but into what they are getting out of their studies as well. They came to the school looking for self-defense, for exercise, for experience, or for the art itself. They stayed because they found something: health, balance, and a family.

The health benefits of studying a martial art like taekwondo as undeniable – hour-long workouts will benefit anyone when done as regular exercise. With most students working out two to three times per week, every student gets a pretty good series of cardiovascular workouts for each week. Beyond the physical benefits, students learn a great deal about themselves and what they can or cannot do. They learn about their own limits, how to work with them, and how to overcome them.

In learning how to identify and push past one's limits, the students are able to find a sense of tranquility in their day-to-day lives. The tranquility, however, is not in the sense that they are utterly calm, but that they feel equipped to handle any situation that may crop up, be it an upset colleague or a serious medical condition, and therefore do not lose control of themselves. Regardless of the severity of life's challenges, the students at the TBBA all have the same skillset (though with varying degrees of magnitude) to fall back on, allowing them to both maintain their composure and move forward.

All that said, it appears unlikely that the students would receive the benefits that they do, certainly not to this degree, if it were not for the sense of family fostered by Master Johnson and all of the students at the TBBA. The family atmosphere is felt by all of the students, and provides the ideal set-up for the students to maximize the benefits that they receive from studying taekwondo. Not only do they have a safe environment in which they can practice against each other freely, they form a support network with one another so that, whatever comes, the students all have a group to count on – something which compounds on the skills already learned that help maintain the sense of tranquility discussed in Chapter 3. Of the nine students that I sat down with for face-to-face interviews, all but one of them described the family feel of the school as the primary reason that they continue to study at the TBBA – the one who didn't simply wanted Master Johnson as his instructor.

Concluding Thoughts

The Family

The family formed by the students at the TBBA is not, save for a few very rare cases, forged by blood ties. Instead, they form a network of support based off of shared experiences. At the most visible level, the students all practice together in the nightly classes. They all go through the same drills and exercises. Even on the occasions when the drills are changed up a bit, such as due to a number of students being of differing belt ranks (higher ranks are

responsible for more techniques), there is a sense of sharing due to the linear nature of belt advancement – all upper belts have been where the lower belts are, and all lower belts will eventually get to where the upper belts are. The shared experiences and symbols are central to the descriptions of kinship that Sahlins (2011a, 2011b) and Weston (1991) use. The experiences themselves are valuable, as the other benefits attest, however it is the sharing that brings the students together.

Additionally, the classes are structured so that the students at some point or another, will interact with each other, either for instruction or for sparring. In either case, the students all have a chance to test themselves against one another, pushing each other to sharpen their skills in a safe, protected environment. Instruction is accomplished in a manner similar to older and younger siblings (Stoneman, Brody, & MacKinnon, 1984), with one leading and the other following, leading by example. The concept of leading by example is not necessarily unique to the TBBA – Downey (2008) illustrated that students of capoeira also use this method of teaching, however there is a clear Master-student relationship. At the TBBA, the relationship is between peers, not so much between a teacher and a student, and fosters the feeling of kinship.

Interactions between the students are not limited to the classes. It is not uncommon for some of the students to simply sit down after class and just talk. Going out to dinner as a group was rarely out of the question as well – planned out or spontaneous, the family dinners usually ended with everyone gathering at one of the students' houses just to hang out. Even though Jackson, Olive, and Smith (2009) stand by the statement that the family dinner is a fabrication, the sharing of a meal, not to mention the conversation and good humor that follows. It is worth noting that while a good many events (especially meals) are spontaneous, there are some that are scheduled regularly such as Guys' or Ladies' Night Out. For these, time is set aside almost a month in advance for everyone to be able to arrange to come together for the event – something that is not far removed from the notion of "family time", which is held separate from

the rest of the time spent together (Smeeding & Marchand, 2004; Kremer-Sadlik, Fatigante, & Fasulo, 2008). No student is excluded, be they new students, active students, or inactive students – as a result, the extended family of the TBBA can be complex and lengthy. At the same time, they are all family (Whiteside, 2004). Reflecting that inclusion, events that are apparently segregated as Guys' and Ladies' Nights Out are occur simultaneously, preventing true segregation among the students, something very different from the notions of social exclusion described by Collins and Kay (2003).

In addition to the sibling relationships developed by the students, they each form a relationship to the patriarch of the school. Master Johnson, as the father, has the tasks of providing an area for the students to practice in, helping them protect themselves, passing along his values, and showing emotional support for each of his students (Townsend, 2002, p.50-80). A small part of those tasks is only possible due to the input of the students – his providing the school for the students, for example, is only possible because of the dues that each student pays. Through his teaching, he is able to financially provide for the family (Benokaitis, 1985) by taking those funds and pouring them back into the school. As the father of the TBBA family, Master Johnson takes on other hats besides the simple provider. Teacher, guardian, and supporter (Lutwin & Siperstein, 1985) are all roles that he must fulfill, and each role is determined by his relationship to the students of the TBBA, just as the father's role is determined by his relationship to his children (Jurich, White, White, & Moody, 1991).

The students do enjoy spending time with each other, and will go out of their way to do so. Even in the not-so-joyous times, the students will band together, as they did following Sam's full-contact match. Every member of the TBBA gathered around him and his wife until he was back on his feet – while not everyone could go with him to the hospital, Master and Mrs. Johnson made it a point to be among those that went with them. Even after Sam was cleared by the doctors to return to class, the students watched out for them (though this generally took the form of sibling-style teasing).

Between the support offered by the students of the TBBA and the lessons taught by Master Johnson, a secure environment is formed in which the students are free to experiment and practice what they learn through taekwondo. The support encourages them to push their limits. The practice allows them to learn more about their own bodies and capabilities without fear of repercussions. Together, they allow the students to grow in taekwondo.

Health

The classes themselves are grueling, straining the body in an effort to improve aerobic fitness, physical balance, and dexterity. In addition to the physical strains, students are forced to face a number of mental stresses simultaneously, such as flinch reactions and perceived limitations. Unlike *pehlwani* wrestlers (Alter, 2002, p.88-90) or martial artists in the media (Lu, 2011), students at the TBBA do not seek an ideal body. Instead, they seek to work with what they have, and expand on their own abilities through constant, consistent training. Those skills, as Downey (2010, p.298) describes with capoeira, are developed and honed in the tradition of the style, as led by Master Johnson.

In Chapter 2, I describe how the students strike a balance between the mind and body as they train. Their body is strengthened by working to the point of exhaustion, and the mind by training right through it. The two together help each student improve as they train in the art. The perspective of the ekstatic body, as described by Vannini and Waskul (2006), illustrates the benefit of developing the body and mind as a single entity – while they discussed the concept using the descriptive term “body image”, the two authors are describing a comprehensive understanding of the body and mind together as it constitutes an individual at any given moment of time. Unlike body image, which is static, taking a snapshot at a particular moment, the ekstatic body is instead dynamic, constantly changing and evolving.

Sparring helps a great deal in striking that balance. As with the regular classes, students are placed in a position where they will gradually wear themselves down to exhaustion through participation in consecutive one-on-one mock fights. Not only is it experience with an

actual application of the techniques that the students learn, it helps train them to recognize what they are or are not good at, and what they can do to be most effective. Moving in a manner that tires you out fast may not be the best option, so each student finds their own most efficient manner of combat. Even once that efficiency has been found, however, a student must still be able to push past fatigue and continue for as long as necessary.

Being able to stay afloat in the tempest that is mental and physical stress is a must – a student that loses their focus in the middle of a fight is likely going to be hit. Without the tranquility that a student can develop through training in a martial art such as taekwondo, losing that focus can be very easy. While developing that internal calm may not be easy, the students are more than able to support each other while they train, encouraging each other to find better ways to improve themselves, including by practicing maintaining that focus.

Tranquility

Tranquility, as I demonstrate in Chapter 3, is not about being apathetic or minimally emotionally involved. It is not about being able to avoid or ignore a fear that has been troubling you, or by separating yourself from the distractions of the world at large, as described by Donahue (1993, p.343). It is about being able to maintain your emotional or psychological center and deal with stresses as they come. Anyone in a vulnerable position, old or young, male or female, can become a target for violence – the lessons taken away from the TBBA can mean the difference between keeping a level head and panicking, which in turn can mean successful self-defense (McCaughey, 1997). It can be developed by practicing one's internal or external awareness, both of which can be strengthened through regular classes or sparring.

Training the body and mind together help develop that inner sense of tranquility, stemming from the knowledge that you are prepared to handle any threat, be it tangible or not. Once again, sparring is an effective means of developing tranquility through the training of both internal and external awareness. Internal in that it allows one to understand what is going on within their own bodies – how they feel. External is all about knowing what is going on around

each combatant. Who is moving where, how fast, and why are all questions of external awareness and each contributes to the development of tranquility. The combination of internal and external awareness grants each student the ability to find their own center, to develop a calm sense of self, much as capoeiristas are able to develop a confident self through their own studies in capoeira (Downey, 2005). Understanding one's surroundings and one's own feelings removes much of the stress from one's mind, allowing them to more clearly focus on the task (or any task) at hand.

What Does it Add Up To?

I began this project looking for the one thing that inspired students at the TBBA to take up and continue studying taekwondo. I began operating under the assumption that fear, and therefore the desire to learn self-defense was the answer. With martial arts being a popular recreational activity in the United States, I thought that learning what the students were so afraid of would be particularly enlightening, possibly revealing past or current issues with bullies, or fears that come from the negative news presented by the media (shootings, terrorist attacks, crimes).

Some possible motivations were also suggested by the literature regarding both sports and martial arts. Religion (Chandler, 2002; Light & Kinnaird, 2002), a sanctuary away from the outside world (Donohue, 1993), and expressing a particular body-image as an ideal (Alter, 2002; Lu, 2011) are just a few of the examples that cropped up. Another possible motivation for students was to become part of a larger community – with taekwondo being an Olympic sport, it has an international following and, therefore, a global culture (Carter, 2011). As my research progressed, I found that not all of those motivations really applied to the student body. For example, there is a global culture among taekwondo students, however within that culture there exist subcultures that are unique to each school. As a result, the global culture was not really a draw – it was the culture of the individual school. Similarly, the students all receive a health

benefit from the workouts, however there is no particular body-type being strived for – simply a durable, skilled body.

As it turns out, the fears that I expected to see were in fact present, however they were severely understated compared to what I expected. Instead, what keeps the students' attention is more complex, involving a combination of kinship ties developed between sibling students and the lessons actually taken away from the training. In the case of taekwondo and the TBBA, the developed family ties are especially strong, existing outside of the classroom and, in the case of some students, even outside of the city or state. Students that become a part of the family at the TBBA remain a part of the family, no matter where they go or how long they've been gone. Master Johnson even hosts reunion workouts, where he will invite all of his old students back to the school for a family reunion of sorts, followed by a grueling workout and over an hour and a half of back-to-back sparring.

On top of being a part of the family, every student walks away, even if they've only been there for one class, with something learned that can be applied. At first, it is strictly martial techniques. As a student grows in taekwondo, however, as they begin to spar and really interact with the other students, other, more subtle lessons come to the fore. Training both the body and the mind in an effort to establish a balance between the two, developing the sense of tranquility, these are things that don't really begin to develop until after a student has reached their orange belt at least – well after a student has begun to become acquainted with the TBBA's family – and really solidifies by the time they reach their 4th brown belt

Granted, not every taekwondo school is going to be like the TBBA. In addition, this study does not take into account any of the other thousands of martial arts styles that exist in the world. At the same time, taekwondo represents one of the most widespread martial arts in the world, being taught in 186 countries and including over 60 million practitioners – it was even made into an official Olympic sport (Park, 2009, p.vii). If the students of a single school in the United States reaps benefits such as those that have been described over the course of this

work (family, mind and body, and tranquility), what does this imply for the remaining students in the world. Do they also see similar benefits? And other styles? Both good questions, and ones that merit further investigation.

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