

Moral Culture

By Louise Chan

“The life of a human being, perhaps 100 years, can be considered as a day when compared with eternity. Therefore, we mortals are no more than simple travellers who pass by the eternal years of an eon in a day. It is evident that no one can live more than a limited amount of time. Nevertheless, most people foolishly enslave themselves to materialism as if they could live for thousands of years. And some people strive to bequeath a good spiritual legacy for coming generations, in this way, gaining immortality. Obviously, the spirit is perpetual while material is not. Therefore, what we can do to leave behind something for the welfare of mankind is, perhaps, the most important thing in our lives. Here I leave Taekwon-Do for mankind as a trace of man of the late 20th century. The 24 patterns represent 24 hours, one day, or all my life”

- General Choi Hong Hi

General Choi Hong Hi, the founder of Taekwon-Do, scientifically developed, systemised and named Taekwon-Do as a martial art using theories, terminologies, techniques, systems, methods and rules. The result is a sophisticated and powerful form of martial art. However, it is not just the physical techniques and system of training alone that makes Taekwon-Do unique and special; it is also the emphasis on Moral Culture - when the physical and spiritual training are fused together. It is for this reason I have chosen Moral Culture as the topic of my thesis.

Moral Culture and Taekwon-Do

The emergence of Taekwon-Do came about at time when societal pressures were creating moral corruption, materialism and selfishness. General Choi had a strong sense of morality and believed that all students of Taekwon-Do should strive to become exemplary people and contribute to building an ideal society. He believed and practiced the virtues of freedom, justice and righteousness. The General refers to this moral philosophy as ‘moral culture’, the “Do” or the “way” or in Korean “Jungshin Sooyang”. General Choi stressed the need to focus on moral culture as much as the physical techniques whilst teaching Taekwon-Do.

It is difficult to define exactly what Moral Culture is, however the dictionary provides the following definitions of the words:

Moral = *ethical, good, right, decent, proper, honourable and just*

Culture = civilisation, society, mores, traditions, customs, way of life, background

These words provide a feel for what Moral Culture is about and broadly summaries the set of ideals General Choi described to help students of Taekwon-Do develop a more noble character.

General Choi referenced various religious and ancient philosophical thinking encompassing his own beliefs along with beliefs from Buddhism, Mencius, Confucius and Lao-Tzu. His hope was that students of Taekwon-Do would use them as a guide to cultivate their moral character and that the philosophy would provide guidance and encourage students to act and behave in positive ways that would ultimately result in a better society.

In fact, the names of the patterns are derived from over 5000 years of Korean history. Studying each pattern and its meaning will develop a student's understanding that Taekwon-Do is a martial art to be used only for self defence and for the cause of justice.

Starting with the tenets and student oath, students are taught elements of moral culture from the moment they step inside the do jang.

Courtesy, Integrity, Perseverance, Self Control, Indomitable Spirit.

I shall observe the tenets of Taekwon-Do

I shall respect the Instructor and Seniors

I shall never misuse Taekwon-Do

I shall be a champion of freedom and justice

I shall build a more peaceful world.

Whilst very few beginners understand the depth of the tenets and the oath, as training progresses and develops their understanding deepens and it becomes a way of life both inside and outside the do jang. Evidence of this can be seen when you contrast the way in which a white belt recites the oath with a black belt. You often see white belts reciting the words in monotone without feeling our understanding compared with a black belt who will recite with commitment, passion and belief.

Understanding Moral Culture

Morals are standards of good and bad which guide an individual's behaviour and choices. Morals can come from society, the law, religion or personal values and beliefs. They are pertinent to developing a moral character that people naturally respect. It requires discipline, commitment and belief.

The General describes moral culture through a collection of his own personal philosophies and a series of quotes from Lao Tzu, Mencius and Confucius. The descriptions are deep and philosophical requiring time to interpret and understand. Here I have attempted to interpret the essence of what the General described in the Encyclopaedia as Moral Culture.

It is the General's wish that Taekwon-Do students develop their moral character and become exemplary people who contribute to building a better society. Societies can arise in numerous ways which can determine their very character.

- A society that is ruled by a leader who is admired and trusted for their high moral character. Human beings are naturally wired to enjoy a harmonious and peaceful society created by such a leader. Lao Tzu believed that to create an ideal society of harmony and peace, it must have a leader with such high moral character who people naturally respect, follow and trust.
- A society where people admire and praise their leader in appreciation for the love and caring nature shown towards the people.
- A society ruled by laws. This normally arises in societies where the leader lacks natural authority and therefore needs to rely on laws to govern people's behaviour. People tend to conform as they fear the penalties that may be brought upon them should they violate these laws.
- A society where the leader is corrupt and misuses their authority for personal gain. The leader forces people to conform by doing whatever they consider to be necessary resulting in a society where its people despise and hate its leader. This will eventually lead to the downfall of the leader and its people.

There is no doubt that the ideal society is created by a leader with a high moral character. Confucius said "If the people are governed by laws and punishment is used to maintain order, they will try to avoid the punishment but have no sense of shame. If they are governed by virtue and rules of propriety (ritual) are used to maintain order, they will have a sense of shame and will become good as well."

Taekwon-Do places a heavy emphasis on building a moral character through moral culture, as it not only encourages a healthy body and keen mind but also good sportsmanship. The more disciplined and cultured the mind is, the more disciplined and cultured will be the student's use of Taekwon-Do and their devotion to building a better society.

Mencius believed that it is more natural for humans to want to do good and it is in our basic nature to do good. People's natural moral judgement can be influenced by materialistic urges and cravings for social power and status. While Confucius believed that people who surround a virtuous person will act in a similar way. Being a virtuous person can be defined as being moral, righteous, worthy, good, upright, and honest. To be virtuous one should practice the basic human qualities of humanity, righteousness, courtesy, wisdom, and trust.

1. HUMANITY (In)

Treat all people with understanding, kindness and compassion. Confucius describes the following as acts of humanity:

- Practice utmost prudence, modesty and discretion in everyday life.
- Devote oneself to assigned work be it large or small.
- Demonstrate sincerity with whole-heartedness to others at all times.

2. RIGHTEOUSNESS (Ui)

Be honourable and be prepared to do right by others and have the ability to feel bad when you have been unjust.

3. PROPRIETY (Ye)

Be courteous, act appropriately with good manners and respect.

4. WISDOM (Ji)

Be wise enough to know what is right and wrong when judging one's own actions.

5. TRUST (Shin)

Be true to your words and deliver on your promises, in doing so you will gain the trust of others. On the contrary, when a person does not keep to their words or promises trust is broken and the person simply becomes a liar and a cheater.

The General said that in order to become a virtuous person, a person needs to find himself and then acquire a moral character which is respected by everyone. He believed that there were two ways in which people can find himself. The first by preserving the inherently good values they were born with and the other through giving up the urge for materialistic gain. He believed one should strive for the following virtues to preserve a good nature:

- Man may occupy two positions in a lifetime – One position is to live the virtues given by heaven and the other position being their work. It is important to maintain the right balance of these two positions so the virtuous instinct you were born with guide the way you approach your work.

The desire for personal power and materialistic possessions can motivate people to act in ways that compromise their virtuous instinct. This is why it is important to maintain the right balance.

- Greed is insatiable – Be content with what you have and be generous in nature. This can only lead to self satisfaction. Greed can never be satisfied as those who are greedy will never be content. Many renowned quotes can be found referring to this ideal.

“The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil” Jesus, The Bible

With coarse rice to eat, with water to drink, and my crooked arm for a pillow - is not joy to be found therein? Riches and honours acquired through unrighteousness are to me as the floating clouds. – Confucius

“When there is no desire, all things are at peace.” - Lao Tzu

- Be humble – An arrogant or egotistical person does not gain the respect of the people around them regardless of what they are contributing. Instead, they are opposed to and alone. If one is humble and acts with modesty the respect of others will naturally follow. “He who speaks without modesty will find it difficult to make his words good” - Confucius.

- Self-criticism – Understand your faults, recognise your mistakes and take time to learn from them. By practicing self criticism one can only learn more about their nature and improve their moral character.
- Be Soft – Be soft in character, adapt and mould to the situation you are in and you can overcome anything in your path. Lao Tsu said “Men are born soft and supple; dead, they are stiff and hard. Plants are born tender and pliant; dead, they are brittle and dry. Thus whoever is stiff and inflexible is a disciple of death. Whoever is soft and yielding is a disciple of life. The hard and stiff will be broken. The soft and supple will prevail.”
- Respect of elders – Respect your elders and seniors. A society relies on respect and social hierarchy to maintain order. Out of respect for this hierarchy, social standing and the knowledge and wisdom this brings, people can live together in harmony.
- Respect the rights of others – Act with integrity and honesty towards others, respect all those around you and their rights. “Have no friends not equal to yourself” *“Do NOT do unto others that which you would NOT want others to do unto you.”*- Confucius
- Be just – Have courage when dealing with matters of injustice. There are many historical figures in both western and eastern societies who have fought in the name of justice. The General gave three eastern figures who gave their lives acting against injustice- Baek-E-Sook-Je of China, Sung-Sam-Moon of Korea and Yoshida-Shoing of Japan. Western examples include Martin Luther King Junior and Joan of Arc.
- Be frugal – Refrain from excessive luxuries and pleasures especially if you are in a position of leadership. Be considerate and compassionate towards those who face hardship, live a modest life setting an example for those around you.
- Be discreet – Be patient and thoughtful in everything you do ensuring you take time to be fair and just in your decision making. Being hasty or rash may lead to outcomes that you regret later.
- Know true happiness – Do not look for happiness in money or material items. [“Seek not happiness too greedily, and be not fearful of happiness.”](#) Lao Tzu. True happiness comes from understanding the true purpose of our lives and contributing to build a better society.

- Let your actions speak for yourself – Just as the old adage says “Actions speak louder than words”. Influential people lead and teach not only through their words but through example. Confucius said “The superior man is modest in his speech, but exceeds in his actions.” Know when not to speak, speaking only about meaningful things rather than to brag or gain a personal advantage.

- Develop peace of mind – To gain peace of mind, your mind needs to be free of trivial thoughts and matters. Buddhist or Zen practitioners do this by emptying their mind through meditation. In Taekwon-Do, it is not about emptying your mind, it is about taking time to stop and reflect on your past actions in silence, recognising your mistakes in the privacy of your own thoughts, and learning from them. This will free your mind to be calm and peaceful rather than occupied with meaningless thoughts – a process called “Jung-Joong-Dong”.

- Be firm of mind – Be determined and courageous. Have the strength to admit your mistakes, the indomitable spirit to stand up for what is right and the conviction to reach new levels and achieve great things.

- Be devoted – Be committed and dedicated to living a virtuous life and building a better society. Believe in your cause and pursue it to the end. It is with great devotion that the General was able to spread Taekwon-Do far and wide. He believed that he could develop a martial art that had powerful techniques fused with a strong moral philosophy and spread it to all corners of the world thereby help to build a more peaceful world.

Moral Culture is a difficult to define but put simply, it is a philosophy based on ethical, moral and spiritual principles of humanity. General Choi developed Taekwon-Do as a martial art to be used only for self defence and only in the cause of justice. It is therefore important students are taught methods of using the body as a weapon without abusing this knowledge. In doing so they are able to achieve spiritual discipline and technical perfection. General Choi believed that with moral culture we can not only achieve the highest goals but also cultivate a virtuous character.

In his Encyclopaedia, the General says “the success or failure of Taekwon-Do training depends largely on how one observes and implements the tenets of Taekwon-Do”. So the moral teaching starts with white belts learning the tenets of Taekwon-Do at the same time they learn how to punch. It is the obligation of both the student and the Instructor to ensure the high standards are maintained through both physical and mental training.

The General believed that activities such as travel, mountain climbing, cold showers and baths, public service and etiquette should all be a fundamental part of a student’s training through which they learn about morality.

- Travel (yo haeng) – Students can learn patriotism by travelling to noted or historical places. Take the opportunity to study and learn from these places. Understand what humans have conquered and the hardships they have faced throughout history.
- Mountain Climbing (dung san) – Students can gain a sense of victory and triumph by climbing mountains as well as strengthen their leg muscles. It can prove to students that great things can be achieved if their conviction is strong enough.
- Cold Showers and Baths (naengsoo machal) – Taking a cold showers or baths, or exercising in bare feet on snow can help students build pride and tenacity.
- Public Service (sahwe bongsa) – By taking part in community service students will learn charity, humility, comradeship, tolerance, and a sense of generosity.
- Etiquette (ye jol) – Practice a high degree of etiquette both inside and outside the do jang. Show respect to your seniors in rank whilst inside the do jang, and to your seniors in age whilst outside the do jang. Etiquette is also still important when students are visiting other do jangs.

Moral Culture in action

In an ideal world, everybody gets along in peace and harmony. However the challenges and pressures of modern day life and struggle for power have lead people to become more materialistic, selfish, driven by their own personal desires and less inclined to look after each other's well-being, or put others before themselves. With this in mind, it is important for Taekwon-Do students to maintain the mental discipline to practice and cultivate moral culture, not giving in to the urge for power or materialistic gain in all areas of their life – in their workplace, in their do jang and in their home, in their way of life.

Moral Culture in the work place

It is important workplaces encourage employees to act in a moral and ethical manner. The very nature of recognition and reward in the workplace can compel people to behave unethically or immorally in order to get ahead or gain a personal advantage over their peers. Most workplaces remunerate or promote people on personal performance so the temptation to get ahead in any way possible can be strong. People engage in selfish unethical behaviours in order to get a pay rise, promotion or recognition. Examples include people presenting others ideas as their own, withholding information from others, talking unnecessarily for egotistical reasons, blaming others, doing things to satisfy personal agenda's rather than for the good of the company or other colleagues and even outright lying or purposely misleading others.

Workplace leaders should strive to be virtuous, leading through their actions. As important as it is for societies to have a leader with a high moral character, it is the same for workplaces. A virtuous leader will also encourage those around them to act with integrity, and remain ethical and moral in their actions. There are many leadership styles I've observed in the workplace and it is certainly the more virtuous leader that is more effective. They create a happy and harmonious work environment for its people. Leaders who rely on their job position or fear are certainly less effective as individuals merely conform as they fear the repercussions. This ultimately loses the respect and loyalty of their team and creates a strained political work environment. Under these circumstances, individuals are less inclined to be committed to act in ways that improve company performance and support their peers.

Many work places recognise the importance of this culture and instil company values to help guide individuals' behaviour. These values are usually not dissimilar to the virtues described earlier.

Moral Culture in Taekwon-Do

As mentioned earlier, there is no doubt General Choi had a strong sense of morality. His belief that all students of Taekwon-Do should strive to become exemplary people and contribute to building an ideal society formed the basis of Moral Culture in Taekwon-Do. He said "the success or failure of Taekwon-Do training depends largely on how one observes and implements the tenets of Taekwon-Do".

Although students are taught moral culture through correct etiquette from the moment they start Taekwon-Do, sadly there are still times when I see examples of students behaving in ways that display either a lack of understanding or lack of respect for the moral philosophy the General was trying to impart on Taekwon-Do students. It is unfortunate to see and hear of instances where students seem to have forgotten to observe the tenets of Taekwon-Do, especially black belts, regardless of how many times they have recited this in their oath.

More specifically, the key area where I see the tenets falling over in Taekwon-Do is in tournaments. The very nature of competition means two people are pitted against each other and one is declared the winner. A competitive nature will naturally cause people to try and gain an advantage over their opponent no matter what and so we see people using the rules wrongly to create a personal advantage over their opponents. For example ripping gear off to gain a rest if one is feeling out of breath or tired, falling or running out of the ring to avoid points being scored against them, or purposely attacking a previously injured area. Other examples include a loss of self control during sparring, a lack of respect and courtesy towards their opponent by displaying egotistical or arrogant behaviour when one has won over the other. Tournaments are a true test of the tenets of Taekwon-Do in action. It is important participants in tournaments be disciplined enough to maintain a competitive spirit and still observe the tenets in order to encourage good sportsmanship.

Moral Culture at home

As humans we all enjoy a peaceful and harmonious home. Some homes are by rules, some are guided by a set of religious beliefs and some are guided on family status and some by culture. Homes that break down are generally homes that lack a moral code of conduct to

provide this guidance and structure to enable family members to live together in harmony. Regardless of where you sit in your family structure, all family members should practice elements of humanity, righteousness, courtesy, wisdom, and trust to create a harmonious home. When these elements are lost homes can become chaotic, disjoint and family members are at odds with one another.

Respecting your elders and others rights, teaching the young right from wrong not only with words but also by example, put others before yourself and be prepared to do what's right by others. Remember the tenets of Taekwon-Do are just as applicable outside the do jang as they inside. As the old oriental saying goes "One can make a peaceful home by being patient for 100 times". This will create the groundwork for a peaceful happy home that will cultivate people with a good moral character that others naturally respect.

Moral Culture – our obligation

While the philosophical concepts of Moral Culture are deep and wide, as humans we are born to instinctively know right from wrong, good from bad or kind from mean. Understanding the link between Taekwon-Do and these moral philosophies requires more thought and understanding. It is equally important to perfect techniques through physical training as it is to practice the mental discipline of moral culture. As students and teachers of Taekwon-Do it is our obligation to bring the tenets of Taekwon-Do to life through living examples not only for today's generation but for generations to come - using this moral philosophy to guide our actions and decisions; to guide our way of life. The General said that serious students of Taekwon-Do should be the eternal teacher who teaches with the body when young, with words when old, and by moral precept even after death.

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