

Nam Wah Pai Kung Fu

And Beginning Taekwon-do as a Black Belt

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Introduction

This essay is intended to share my experiences and give my point of view based on those experiences. I wish to give a brief overview of Nam Wah Pai Kung Fu and comparison with Taekwon-do.

Nam Wah Pai Kung Fu

Grand Master Sim Pooh Ho, 10th degree gold belt, founded Nam Wah Pai Kung Fu in Singapore in 1964. It is a mixture of five styles of martial arts; Tai Chi Chuan, Sing Yi, Pa Kua, Wu Jiao and Northern Shaolin art.

Currently around the world there are branches in Singapore (World Headquarters), New Zealand, Malaysia, Taiwan, Germany, Chile, Argentina, Ecuador and Japan. Master Steve Kitson, 7th degree black belt in 1979, established Nam Wah Pai in New Zealand. Master Kitson died in 1989 and was recognized as one of New Zealand's greatest martial artist, being later inducted into The New Zealand Martial Arts Hall of Fame in 1997. New Zealand currently has nine clubs nationwide from Whangarei to Invercargill.

Nam Wah Pai consists of basic kicking, punching and free sparring similar to Taekwon-do, and as students progress up through to red belt they also start learning weapons such as the bo (staff) and broadsword. Weapons are learnt with basic techniques and katas (patterns) after finishing the empty hand katas. From 1st degree black belt upwards, students are required to create their own weapon katas for gradings, to reflect the skills that have been learnt and the level they have reached. Students own katas are choreographed with their own choice of weapon, which is not restricted to the bo and broadsword.

The true essence of Nam Wah Pai is not found in the physical discipline, however. It is in the internal strength training. This involves breathing exercises done daily from brown belt upwards to channel the body's natural chi energy. This is intended to be used for self-defence and health. Senior instructors in demonstrations have broken coconuts with their hands and have had baseball bats broken over their shins (without injury) using internal strength.

I began Nam Wah Pai Kung Fu in 1988 when I was ten years old after seeing a demonstration in my scout hall. I progressed through the junior ranks (yellow, green, blue, red, brown belts and tips) until the black belt grades. I became an instructor and because Nam Wah Pai's organization is considerably smaller than ITFNZ, my progress began to stagnate. The size of Nam Wah Pai in New Zealand meant that there were a lack of seniors to ensure regular learning of new material

and overall development. Sometimes black belt gradings were even combined with coloured belt gradings. It was seven years after obtaining my black belt that I graded to 2nd degree black belt. Those circumstances have made me really appreciate ITFNZ as an organization and value all the opportunities it provides its members.

Nam Wah Pai was very strict with discipline and etiquette, which developed respect through the ranks. When students began Nam Wah Pai, they were given the rules and regulations. These rules were mostly for to ensure safety and to prevent students abusing the privilege of learning the art of Nam Wah Pai. One of these rules stated that students were not to attend clubs and tournaments of any other martial art without the express permission of the chief instructor. Although I didn't know it at the time, this policy was to become of special significance to me in later years.

Starting Taekwon-Do

One of my best friends at college was a black stripe at the Tauranga ITFNZ club under Mr James Rimmer. We spoke a lot about the differences between our arts. I was very interested to learn more and went along to try it out. Although it was against Nam Wah Pai's policy not to learn other martial arts, I continued at Taekwon-do as it was on the off nights of Kung Fu.

I remember Mr Rimmer showing me walking stances. In Kung Fu we were always encouraged to go as deep as we could in stances, so in Taekwon-do my stances were too deep. This is an example of one of the many things I had to unlearn. Another example is pulling punches back to the hip rather than the shoulder, the theory was that it created a straight line to the target. Sine wave was obviously new to me, but things like kicking, flying techniques, flexibility and remembering the sequence of patterns came easily because I had been doing that in Kung Fu for years.

My interest in Taekwon-do grew quickly and I was a green belt before I knew it, despite knowing that I shouldn't really be doing it. It was interesting to contrast techniques and the theory behind them. This was helpful in free sparring where I had to make my own mind up about what techniques to use.

In Nam Wah Pai there is a stance called forward stance, which is the equivalent of Taekwon-do's walking stance. The difference is the depth, and in forward stance the feet are inline rather than at shoulder width to maintain a side facing. In Kung Fu we used to kick as high as we could, so that when we had a lower target, it would be easier. It was also good for flexibility, which we worked on a lot in the form of partner stretching several times a night and doing the splits before each break.

After I graded to 1st Dan in Taekwon-do I was beginning to have considerably more commitment to both martial arts, not just in terms of training, but also responsibility, as I was instructing in both. The time was coming when I would have to drop one of the martial arts in order to focus more fully on the other, and become more involved in the organizations. Although I was favouring Taekwon-do, it was hard to think of leaving Kung Fu, which I had done for so many years. After a year or so of wrestling with this decision, it was soon taken out of my hands.

The Chief instructor of Nam Wah Pai discovered that I was a black belt in Taekwon-do, and was therefore in breach of Nam Wah Pai's policy that did not allow members to practise other martial arts. One night at the Hamilton club of ITFNZ where I was taking a class, the chief instructor of Nam Wah Pai arrived to deliver a letter of expulsion from the international Nam Wah Pai organization. I was not offered the opportunity to explain or defend my choices and I was banned from practising Nam Wah Pai henceforth. I accepted this consequence, as I had known that I had been breaking their rules through out the years. In the end, it was a relief to have the decision made for me. This occurred three weeks prior to my 2nd Dan grading for Taekwon-do.

In Retrospect

In Taekwon-do I enjoyed being a student again after years of feeling as though I was stagnating under Kung Fu. Even now as a black belt, I still feel like a student as I am still always learning and progressing. All the events offered mean that there are always things to do and jobs to be done within the organization. I enjoyed my time in Kung Fu and its focus on speed and flexibility. I still consider Nam Wah Pai as one of the best martial arts available in New Zealand. I also enjoy Taekwon-do's emphasis on technique, power and realism in self-defence.

Thinking back I don't regret my decision to begin Taekwon-do, I feel grateful for the experience of both martial arts and am glad I was introduced to Taekwon-do and to still be doing it. I feel the experience has been a very unique one and hope it will help me to be a better martial artist and instructor.

I would lastly suggest to instructors who receive beginners like I was, to be careful in watching for bad habits that may not be typical of someone completely new to martial arts.