

Taekwon Do, Me and the Thrill of a Challenge

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Introduction:

There are many aspects of Taekwon do that have helped it become a very large part of my life, and as I enter a do jang, a huge sense of belonging sweeps through me. Over the years I have developed a love for the martial art and everything that comes with it. Taekwon do has helped me grow as a person and I believe I have been better off growing up in such an awesome cultural environment. Training is a release for me and it is what I do in my free time to calm myself and keep fit. It also carries the thrill of continual challenge.

I started Taekwon do at the age of 8; tall for my age and always uncoordinated. My long limbs never seemed to do what I wanted or travel where I intended. I remember watching the black belts thinking "I want to be just like them one day". But as I continued in my training I became continually frustrated watching the other students who would pick up new techniques and patterns so quickly while I would struggle to coordinate simple movements successfully. I could never believe in myself and saw others didn't believe in my ability either. My lack of ability was not due to bad instructing, nor was it due to lack of trying and practice; some people get it while others grow into it. So why, I ask myself, did I never give up on Taekwon do? Why did I continue to come to training twice a week to leave each time feeling hopeless and slightly deterred?

Taekwon do proposed a challenge. I wanted so much to improve and be just like those black belts. I couldn't bear the thought of failure, ; I was too competitive to let something I couldn't do well get the best of me.

As the years dragged on and I continued my training, my goal of becoming a black belt seemed out of reach. I was still uncoordinated and had terrible technique, but I couldn't bring myself to give up after coming so far. Eventually with much support from family, instructor and friends I completed my goal and succeeded at my first Dan grading. Immediately, a new challenge was placed before me: compulsory tournament participation. The first challenge was to overcome my extreme case of nerves; a challenge I am yet to completely conquer. Competing was my least favourite aspect of Taekwon do as it just made me nervous and stressed out. But as compulsory meant I had no choice, I kept competing. Eventually I managed to win sparring at a regional tournament causing me to be part of the Central Districts team. Much to my disgust I was entered in every event despite having no idea what they were. The National Tournament was a completely different experience compared with our small tournaments, which involved only patterns and sparring due to lack of numbers. This was the first time I saw special technique and finally found something in Taekwon do I was good at – jumping. It was amazing how discovering this one thing changed my entire view of training. I become more dedicated and found it more enjoyable as my skills began to improve dramatically and I became more confident. By finding just one thing I was good at my whole training changed for the better.

I quickly discovered that I disliked competing as my nerves always got the better of me and quite often things end up a disaster due to plain, uncontrollable panic. On the other hand, I enjoyed the thrill of the challenge and the personal challenge to do better on each attempt that competition offered. I loved the feeling after a sparring bout, when I'd physically shake and feel the natural fighting instinct flow through my body. But this never happened to me until after a bout. I later found out about the arousal theory and that this was all the adrenaline in my blood stream. The effects of adrenaline, arousal and competitiveness on an individual vary with different people.

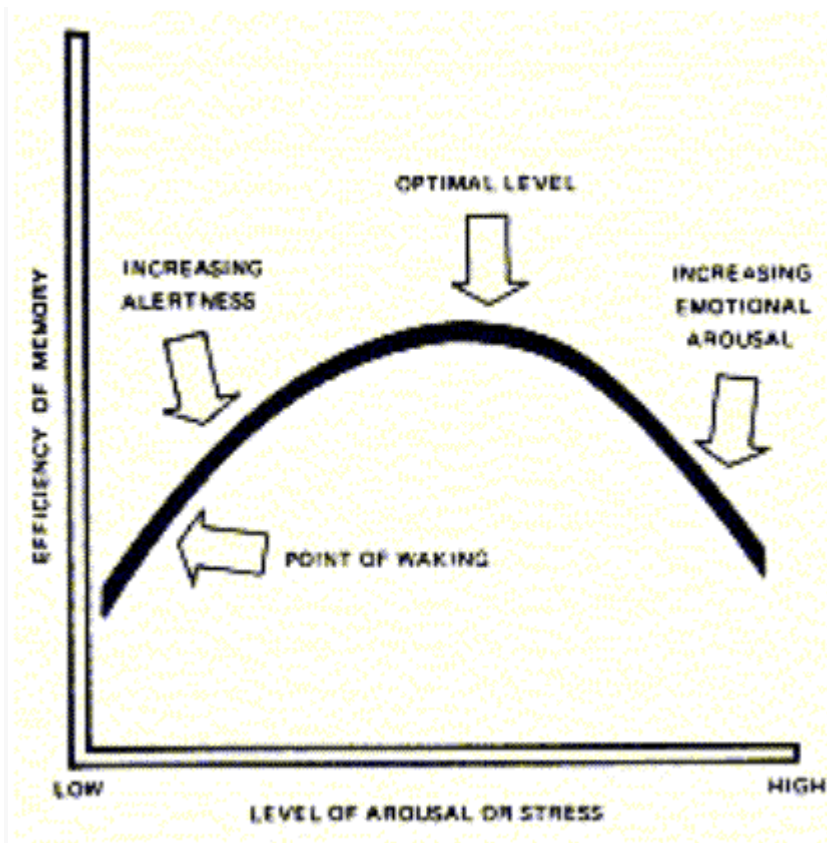
So I now attribute a large part of my staying in Taekwon do to my natural need for competitiveness and desire for challenge.

Adrenaline and the Arousal Theory:

Adrenaline is a hormone which is released in response to stress, excitement, environmental conditions or an emergency situation. Some people gain this release during physical exercise or competition. When secreted, the hormone boosts the supply of glucose and oxygen going to the muscles, increasing the individuals' mental alertness and physical strength. As the adrenaline is released a feeling of euphoria fills the body and there is a feeling of extreme awareness and calm which elevates concentration.

This can happen in conjunction with something called the arousal theory. This is the theory that different individuals perform better at different levels of arousal and that every individual seeks to find its optimum level. It is also closely related to other concepts such as anxiety, attention, agitation, stress, and motivation. Environmental factors such as the noise level, temperature, comfort, etc can also affect the level of arousal depending on the individuals' preference to environment.

This is the arousal curve.



It shows the optimum amount of arousal for an individual during physical exercise is at a mid level of arousal. Performance is best at optimum arousal and the further away from optimum arousal, the more performance can be hindered dramatically. A state of under-arousal causes the individual to lack motivation and energy toward the task ahead of them, whereas if a point of over arousal is reached it can become difficult to return from this state. Symptoms of over arousal can include hyperventilation, bad nervous energy, extreme pacing and eventually, loss of energy.

The level of arousal needed for any task differs for each task undertaken. It is generally lower for more difficult or intellectual or cognitive tasks and higher for tasks requiring persistence and endurance.

Once this level of optimum arousal has been achieved while competing, there is a certain difference in outlook on competing. As opposed to dreading and fearing the upcoming event an amount of excitement is felt knowing that you can perform to the best of your ability. Of course achieving this optimum arousal for every competition is very hard as external factors affect it so greatly. Knowing about the adrenaline rush and levels of arousal has helped me significantly in more recent competition.

Competitiveness:

Taekwon do brings such a diverse range of people, all with different levels of competitiveness. I would consider the people to come into the three categories - non competitive, average

competitive and over competitive. This is a general assumption as people can be between the categories.

Non competitive people are the people who love Taekwon do for the social environment and train for themselves for reasons such as fitness or family. These people may compete, but are generally not worried about the outcome. Because of the lack of concern towards outcome, this category of people can sometimes lack the drive and motivation to learn and practice new techniques and patterns.

People with an average amount of competitiveness are the people who tend to love to train and enjoy practicing in order to improve. They compete in order to learn new skills and enjoy winning, yet it is not the end of the world if they don't. These people learn well as they don't take comments critically and take a challenge seriously without the compulsion to triumph over peers. They generally are also the most honourable in defeat.

Over-competitive people are those who strive for perfection in techniques in any discipline they choose. They either go to the extremes of loving or hating to compete because they feel a constant need to win. These individuals can sometimes be perceived as having bad sportsmanship. They are also the ones who "beat themselves up" about losing as they put themselves under much more pressure than others. They usually have much more drive than most individuals, but are prone to give up after trying only once, in situations that appear too hard.

Most people will have different aspects of life fitting into all three of the categories and this is what keeps us grounded and controlled. I know that I would consider myself to sometimes be verging on over-competitive. I don't strive for perfection, but I do struggle with losing and become quickly frustrated at not being able to do things easily. I find it hard to overcome the thought of failure because I know the negative thoughts can cause a certain amount of doubt in ability, directly affecting my performance. But failure does provide a certain amount of new challenge, mainly not to fail next time. I also enjoy tasks which I have no desire to achieve in, as it allows a certain amount of relaxation for me and I love to watch others strive at areas that I don't excel at.

Conclusion:

Even though I was mildly competitive as a child beginning Taekwon do, I believe that it is Taekwon do that has amplified my competitive nature. It is something that I strongly care about and that has become such a large part of my life. Even though I feel the drive to win and improve at things outside of the martial art, the more I achieve in Taekwon do, the more I want to find new areas that provide a challenge to improve.

At times I think it is good to fail, as it shows ourselves and those who look up to us as black belts that we are only human. Every one makes mistakes and it is not the end of the world. As remembering back to my coloured belt years, seeing a black belt make a mistake, whether during a pattern or being told off, proved to me that these people weren't as supernatural as I once thought and that my dream of one day being in the ranks of our black belts was a little less far-fetched.

Many people along the way have helped to accelerate my need for challenge and competitiveness. During early training it was the gentle encouragement to continue and of persuading a child not to give up just because they were not instantly good at something. Then it was continued by people having the faith in me that I never had and my not wanting to let these people down. Lastly at some point it has come to people forcing me against my will to continue after I've tried to give up. Without people to help get us back on track at times where an individual's need and drive is lost, is the most important in helping us continue in training. If this has to be done by offering a competition or by any other means depends on the individuals' personal competitive nature.

Even after 12 years of training, there are still new challenges continually arising. As I grow, new opportunities present themselves, and with them new challenges are offered to keep me motivated. Whether it is a new tournament to train for, the learning of new material as I progress through the ranks, or whether it is my developing skills as a proficient instructor and coach, challenges can be found in abundance. It is the never ending stream of challenges that reminds me of how much this great martial art can provide.