

# Taekwon-Do Patterns and Sparring as a Form of Self-Defence

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Taekwon-Do is, first and foremost, a form of self-defence. Bearing this in mind, the ultimate goal of Taekwon-Do should be to give its practitioners the capacity to successfully defend themselves should they have to do so. In order to achieve this, practitioners of Taekwon-Do are taught techniques and practice the applications of these techniques through a series of fundamental movements, patterns and sparring. In this essay I discuss the progression of fundamental movements to patterns, and patterns to sparring, as well as the various different types of sparring. I also discuss how all of these are relevant to self-defence, and how they each emulate a different aspect of a real-life self-defence situation so as to aid a student in preparing themselves should they ever be faced with such a situation.

A student new to Taekwon-Do may wonder what application these fundamental movements, patterns and different forms of sparring have in a real-life self-defence situation. New students may also be confused by what we call "self-defence", which usually refers to "releasing techniques", as all of Taekwon-Do is applicable to self-defence in some way.

It is highly unlikely that a person would be able to successfully defend themselves in a situation requiring self defence, simply by performing a perfect Taekwon-Do pattern. The first and most obvious reason for this is that patterns are very specific in their order of movements and, unless the attack fits this profile perfectly, the pattern will be mostly ineffective. The second reason is that, even if a technique is relevant to the situation, timing and distance are crucial for the success of any attack or defence. In patterns there is only an imaginary opponent. Because of this, practising patterns alone is not enough to achieve the ultimate goal of Taekwon-Do as a form of self-defence.

Practitioners of Taekwon-Do practice a range of different forms of sparring, each of which has a specific purpose, and all of which contribute to achieving the ultimate goal of Taekwon-Do. Proper timing and distance is vital to these forms of sparring.

Although patterns utilise only an imaginary opponent, they are still extremely valuable when it comes to learning and practising new techniques. When a student learns a new pattern, they are taught new techniques, and their applications. Teaching the applications of techniques in patterns is important so that the student can keep the application in mind when performing the technique in the pattern, and so that the student can confidently use the technique in a sparring or self-defence environment. However, patterns are such a valuable tool for learning and practising techniques mainly because they allow the student to learn how to maintain their balance and generate power in the movement while maintaining control so that by the time they use it with a real opponent, they are able to control this technique.

Before a student learns any form of sparring with a partner, they are taught a pattern, along with the only form of sparring which can be done alone: three-step sparring. General Choi Hong Hi describes three-step sparring in the Condensed Encyclopedia of Taekwon-Do as "an exercise for

familiarization of correct attack and defense techniques" which emphasises that this is a very basic form of sparring. The reason this is taught first is the student must first learn how to perform the techniques which they have learnt while maintaining proper balance, and how to generate power without losing control of the technique. Only after they have achieved this to an acceptable degree are they taught the same form of sparring with a partner. This is the first opportunity the student will have to apply these techniques, and they will also learn why the techniques are applied in that way. For example, it is fairly common for a new student to block a high attack such as a high punch, as opposed to a downward attack, with a forearm rising block. Although this will work, with proper guidance the student will realise that an outer forearm high side block is a more effective block, as it also leaves their attacker relatively open to counter attack without leaving the student open and undefended.

As a student rises through the grades, they learn more techniques in new patterns, and more complex forms of sparring in which to practice these techniques. From three-step sparring alone, they move onto three-step sparring with a partner. These are the simplest forms of sparring, and due to their simplicity, they allow students to learn proper distance and timing through proper use of stances. The placement of the feet is very important in three-step sparring, as the two practitioners, an attacker and a defender, must maintain the same distance at all time if the blocks are to be effective. If they move closer together, the blocks will have to be executed at an earlier stage of the attack, and the attacker will find it easier to keep control over his technique and maintain balance. If they move further apart, the block becomes pointless, as either it will miss the attack completely, or will not effectively break the attacker's balance. This simple concept is vital to all forms of sparring, which is why we must constantly return to our three-step sparring in order to maintain this proper distance in the more complex forms of sparring.

In three-step sparring, emphasis is placed on correct timing and distance of defensive techniques, which depends on the distance and timing of the offensive technique it is blocking. Although there is a counter-attack in the three-step sparring routine, it is usually done at the same distance as the last block. The next form of sparring a student will learn, two-step sparring, not only places emphasis on correct timing and distance of defensive techniques, but also on correct timing and distance of offensive techniques. The reason a student learns control first through defensive techniques instead of through offensive techniques is so that, by the time they are required to control their offensive techniques they are already able to control their defensive techniques to a certain degree. Having this degree of control over their techniques, a student will find it much easier to control their offensive techniques as well.

In two-step sparring, the attacker will perform a pre-arranged series of offensive techniques, and the defender will perform a series of defensive techniques followed by a single counter-attack. The series of techniques performed by the defender can be either pre-arranged or non pre-arranged, depending on the situation. The series of techniques performed by the defender, however, will always be one of several different pre-arranged series of techniques. Two-step sparring is an intermediate step between three-step sparring, and one-step sparring.

One-step sparring consists of defence against a single attack, followed by a single counter-attack. General Choi Hong Hi describes the secret of one-step sparring in the Condensed Encyclopedia of Taekwon-Do as "to deliver a completely accurate speedy and decisive blow at

the opponent's vital spot at the right time with the right weapon while defending against the opponent's attack effectively." This emphasises the importance of correct timing in one-step sparring. One-step sparring is an approximation of a real-life self defence environment: you are attacked, so you block or dodge the attack and finish the encounter with a single counter-attack. The most apparent differences between one-step sparring and the real-life situation it emulates, is that one-step sparring is practised in a controlled environment, and both practitioners are normally aware of which techniques their partner is going to use.

An exercise which better emulates an actual self-defence situation is practising one-step sparring without knowing the attack or defence beforehand. Pre-arranged one-step sparring should still be practised, as a student first needs to become proficient at controlling their counter-attacks before they should be required to perform them under pressure. Only once a student has practised their patterns and sparring enough to be confident that they can choose an appropriate defence and counter-attack quickly enough to react to an unknown attack, without losing control of it, they should practice one-step sparring without prior knowledge of the attack or defence.

Both pre-arranged and non pre-arranged one-step sparring can be built upon to form two distinctly different forms of sparring. Non pre-arranged one-step sparring leads naturally into free sparring, through an intermediate form called semi-free sparring, and pre-arranged one-step sparring leads naturally into pre-arranged free sparring.

Semi-free sparring begins with a pre-arranged set of movements, and then becomes non pre-arranged before completion, allowing the student to decide on the spot which techniques to use without being in a high-pressure environment. General Choi Hong Hi states in the Condensed Encyclopedia of Taekwon-Do that "Semi-free sparring is the last stage before the student enters into a free sparring." It is again a better approximation of a real-life self-defence situation since, if a student is attacked, they would not know beforehand how they are going to be attacked.

When I talk about free sparring here, I am not referring to "points free sparring" which is used to compete in tournaments, but to what is regularly referred to as "grading free sparring". Free sparring is not as precise as any of the forms of pre-arranged sparring mentioned before, mostly because proper blocking techniques are not commonly used. Rather, more emphasis is placed on a student's ability to control their offensive techniques while maintaining proper timing and distance with an unpredictable moving opponent. In free sparring, little emphasis is placed on blocking every attack correctly, as in free sparring a student is more mobile than in pre-arranged sparring and able to move away from incoming attacks. Instead, students are expected to showcase a wide variety of attacks, all performed with control. General Choi Hong Hi states in the Condensed Encyclopedia of Taekwon-Do that "In sparring focused blows, speed, power, balance, and strong and accurate blocking, skillful dodging and attitude are taken into consideration."

Free sparring can also be practised against multiple opponents, which attempts to emulate a real-life self-defence situation. In this situation, the outnumbered student should focus on their position relative to their opponents, so they do not become surrounded and are able to deal with their attackers individually. Becoming proficient at free sparring against multiple opponents will make it much easier for a student to deal with multiple attackers, should they ever need to do so.

Pre-arranged free sparring could be described as a mix between one-step sparring and patterns. The Condensed Encyclopedia states that "the participants follow a prepared scenario that enables them to skillfully exhibit a wide variety of techniques without fear or injury." Just as in a pattern, a pre-arranged free sparring routine is a specific set of techniques that has the purpose of defending oneself successfully against an attack. The main difference is, however, that pre-arranged free sparring is performed with a partner, who is taking the role of the attacker. Because of this, the offensive and defensive techniques must coincide, showing proper timing and distance, until the attacker is subdued by a successful counter-attack. By the time a student is required to practice pre-arranged free sparring, they should also have the ability to control their offensive and defensive techniques to the degree that they can be executed with full power without causing injury to themselves or their opponent, and all the while maintaining proper distance and timing.

So, we have all these different methods of practising Taekwon-Do techniques, but how will they help us if we ever have to actually defend ourselves in a real-life self-defence situation? The purpose of these various methods of practice could be described as building good habits, and the ultimate goal is for these techniques we practice to become instinctive. This means that, if we are ever attacked and required to defend ourselves, we should be able to instinctively execute a correct block with power, balance and proper timing and distance followed by an appropriate counter-attack, which is sufficient for achieving "victory with a single blow". This ultimate goal requires many years of practice, but we do not necessarily have the chance to practice for many years before an unexpected situation arises where we have to defend ourselves.