The Future Course of the Eastern Martial Arts

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The Oriental martial arts being taught in the U.S. today, such as taekwondo, are characteristically different from those being taught in the East. The traditional modes of training still used in the East are being ignored by American practitioners. The idea of martial training to achieve artistic excellence is being replaced by the notion of winning a competitive contest. Elements indigenous to taekwondo and other martial arts, such as spiritual development (Zen teachings), awareness of cultural origins, and repetitive drilling are challenged as being impractical. In the United States, emphasis is placed on full contact training, with the focal point being the concept of "winning." Are these current changes in taekwondo and other Eastern martial arts positively influenced and therefore ideally molded for American society? The following analysis will attempt to answer this question.

The Eastern martial arts, including karate, taekwondo, judo, kempo, and kendo, are now practiced in many countries, and some of them have become quite popular in the United States. In gaining this international character, some of the indigenous features of the martial arts, each of which has a national heritage, have come under attack. In the United States, there have been great changes in how the Eastern martial arts are viewed, in how they are taught, and in what their very natures are viewed to be. For example, taekwondo, the most popular of the martial arts here, has become much less formal in ritual and language, as well as in training. There is no longer such a great emphasis on learning the Korean terminology for the techniques of taekwondo. Many schools and teachers do not emphasize, as much as has been the case formerly, the traditional Korean rituals of bowing, of attitudes towards the dojang, of handling the uniform, or of meditating. Less time is spent today in formal drills and in practicing poomse (forms) as in the past. There is a tendency for beginners to learn techniques and even poomse that were formerly reserved for more advanced students. For example, beginners often now use natural stance, and practice spin kicks.¹

To give the matter some historical perspective, one need only consider the rise in popularity of taekwondo in the United States. In the early 1960s, a few dozen Korean instructors introduced taekwondo to this country. By the beginning of the next decade, there were over 1,200 master Korean instructors in America (Yurechko, 1977). During the 1970s, taekwondo be-

¹The rising popularity of the Taegeuk poomse which use natural stance in beginning forms, whereas the more traditional Palgwe forms introduce it at the final, eighth form.
came a part of AAU and World Games activities, and was recognized by the World Olympic Committee (Min, 1981). Taekwondo, as well as karate and judo, has become part of many physical education programs, particularly on the college level.

Yet disagreements about what ought to be taught have arisen along with the phenomenal growth of the martial arts in this country. In particular, conflicts have occurred between the traditional Oriental masters and adherents of American karate styles, like those in the Professional Karate Association: the former wish to adhere in large part to customary practices, whereas the latter wish to spurn tradition in the name of progress. Joe Corley, the founder of the Professional Karate Association, has stressed tournament fighting as the end of the martial arts, and criticizes traditional tournaments. "Tournament directors still blunder along with incompetent referees, little hospitality, and all the shortcomings of the past" (1976, p. 6). Often the rhetoric is sharper:

The techniques conceived by the Masters of yesteryear cannot possibly be as effective as those created or improved on by the masters of today . . . the Top Masters of today . . . are truly physically and mentally more knowledgeable than the masters of yesteryear and the high ranking selfprofessed phonies exploiting Karate in this country. (Sakimoto, 1974, p. 34)

Even in the traditional schools, there have been great changes in what is taught. Separation between the ranks is less sharp, and there is increased stress on sparring and competition.

There are thus strong forces of acculturation and change in the martial arts. These tendencies can be seen in a striking fashion by comparing the practice of an Eastern martial art in the United States to its practice in the country of its origin. In Korea, for example, classes in taekwondo tend to be far more formal than here. The practice of the martial arts is changing rapidly.

The question that we wish to address is thus an eminently practical one that faces all teachers of an Eastern martial art, and particularly those who teach in a nontraditional environment like the United States. The problem is to what extent should the formal, traditional activities of the Eastern martial arts be preserved? To what extent should the teaching of the martial arts change to accommodate multinational settings and the changing desires of students?

This question bears on immediate, day to day concerns of the martial arts educator. To be blunt and concrete about the matter, in this country students are not especially interested in learning foreign terminology, in meditating, in doing lots of drills, in concentrating on only a few techniques as beginners, in training diligently and repetitively in forms. Most students tend not to be committed to a martial art for years, and want proficiency and rank advancement quickly. They also want to learn advanced techniques and forms, and often are interested in free sparring and tournaments, to the exclusion of more restricted and less public activities. How should the martial arts educator respond to these needs and desires? The instructors are particularly in a bind if their income depends on having many students. Having a sufficient income may depend on acceding to the desires of students. But the question here is not in what directions economical necessity pushes the martial arts educator. Rather the question is what direction ought the martial arts to take (in the United States); what is the best course of development for the martial arts to take?

Specific answers to this question will of course vary from martial art to martial art, inasmuch as the techniques differ. But the general relations between tradition and change, between formal training and free fighting, between long-term goals and short-term gratifications, seem common to them all. The structure of the problem is the same; the details vary.

We shall address this problem as follows: First, we shall consider a notion of what
the martial arts are, in order to specify what their essential features are, and what features they must retain, in order to continue their identity. We shall then discuss the functions of formal training. In this way it will become clear just what a move away from formal training will be giving up. Then, we shall consider the final end or purpose of a martial art in order to have some standard for judging proposed changes in its practice. Finally, we shall offer conclusions and guidelines for the future course of the martial arts.

**Martial Arts Sport**

Attempting to define the martial arts is not idle speculation. It has practical implications. For instance, talk of changing the activities that comprise the Eastern martial arts contains a hidden ambiguity. The change could be accidental or essential; that is, on the one hand, the activities could be modified with the basic structure and content remaining the same, and on the other, the activities could be transformed to such an extent that the structure is changed. In the latter case, the martial art would have ceased to exist, and would have been replaced with something else genetically connected with it. Even today there may be examples of such essential changes in the martial arts. For example, certain schools of *American karate* may have deviated so far from karate that it is a misnomer to call them karate. Thus, before proposed changes are considered in the practices of the martial arts, it would be prudent to consider just what their essential nature is, so as not to sacrifice those aspects of the martial arts necessary for their continued existence.

The following discussion will center around taekwondo. But the general features of the definition can be applied to judo, and so forth, *mutatis mutandis*, as we shall indicate afterwards.

In attempting to give a definition or characterization of taekwondo, or any other martial art, a description is sought that will differentiate taekwondo, or that art, from all else. The key is *essential* differentiation. A definite description can easily be given of taekwondo: for example, it is what X teaches at Place Y at Time t. Yet such a description is merely accidental, and quite unsatisfying. What is demanded is a characterization of taekwondo that is independent of particular contexts. For example, “taught by X . . .” is a description that depends on a particular context, and will not serve to identify taekwondo in general.

Taekwondo is obviously concerned with fighting. The conditioning and drills are geared for the development of strikes and blocks, poomse are sequences of strikes and blocks with imaginary opponents, and sparring needs no comment. Yet “taekwondo” is not synonymous with “fighting.” There are many forms and incidents of fighting that, let us hope, do not belong to taekwondo. Taekwondo is not concerned today with warfare, the organized fighting of groups. Nor is it concerned with weapons. Moreover, even if someone individually fights without weapons, it does not follow that they are engaged in taekwondo. Still, it is not completely wrong to say that taekwondo is individual fighting without weapons. Yet this statement is incomplete, and may misrepresent the nature of taekwondo.

There are of course many styles of empty-handed individual combat. What distinguishes taekwondo from the others? There are of course distinctive techniques and poomse associated with taekwondo. Taekwondo is a combination of hard and soft styles, and teaches both straightline and circular movement. It does not emphasize throws, unlike hapkido. Surely, to differentiate taekwondo from other martial arts and forms of fighting, some appeal must be made to the specific practices of taekwondo. Yet these practices change as taekwondo evolves. So it would help to look for other features that characterize taekwondo.
An obvious feature of taekwondo is, despite its international status, its Korean origin. But to characterize taekwondo as Korean has its problems. Taekwondo is practiced by people of many nationalities. Further, being Korean may not appear to be an essential, but instead to be an accidental, characteristic of taekwondo. Nevertheless, taekwondo is an institutionalized practice, and like other institutions its identity is bound up with its history. The language, the poomse, the traditions of taekwondo are all closely tied to Korea. Thus, it is not misleading to characterize taekwondo as Korean.

So far, taekwondo has been characterized as the Korean form of individual fighting without weapons, with certain techniques and poomse (that can be specified by looking, e.g., at training manuals such as the books put out by the World Taekwondo Federation). Yet this characterization seems too narrow. Taekwondo is surely more than fighting, even when certain techniques are used. What of the claims that taekwondo is a way of life, a certain attitude; that taekwondo, though concerned with combat, is more than that? The above characterization of taekwondo seems somehow too belligerent, and does not seem to account for the claims that engaging in taekwondo promotes good character and nonviolent attitudes. We need to amend this characterization. Let us put a label on those aspects of taekwondo that are claimed to be beyond mere fighting—and call them “art.” (What it means to be an art shall be explained below.) But given that these aspects are somehow artistic, we can define taekwondo as: the Korean martial art, using no weapons, and practicing certain techniques and poomse. The particular techniques and poomse have to be mentioned, in the definition, in order to distinguish taekwondo from forms of fighting involving grappling, like judo and wrestling, and from other Korean styles, like Hwarangdo and Hapkido.

Similar definitions can be given for each of the other Eastern martial arts. The definition is constructed from three elements: (a) the institutional origin of that activity, (b) the techniques and moves constituting that activity, (c) the phrase “martial art,” which denotes those aspects of that activity that are not directly concerned with combat and that have some justification to be called artistic (Weiss, 1971; Kuntz, 1976).

What criteria can such definitions provide in order to ensure that modifications in the activities of an Eastern martial art do not destroy it as such, by deleting some essential feature of it? The second element, namely, reference to the particular techniques, does not help, since the very issue at stake is change in those very techniques. In more theoretical terms, the definitions proposed are static, and the problem at issue is one of dynamics and change. Still, the first and second elements do offer criteria: (a) attention must be paid to the national origin of the martial arts, and (b) attention must be paid towards its character as martial art. The latter criterion will be explicated, by considering why the term “martial art” is used.

However, the second element, reference to the particular techniques, was found necessary to define as Eastern martial art. So there is indeed a difficulty here: How can a martial art change any of its techniques and still remain the same? This problem is crucial. Its resolution will be discussed at the end of this paper and yields a perhaps surprising conclusion: ultimately, there are not that many different Eastern martial arts.

Responsibilities of the Martial Arts Educator

To put the matter in practical fashion once again, martial arts educators today in the United States are confronted with the problem whether to change traditional and formal exercises of the martial art in response to current desires. As mentioned above there is a general disinterest among the students in formal drills. Even in sparring there are changes; an interest in full-
contact or tournament sparring has grown at the expense of other approaches towards free fighting. So, in effect, the teacher must make the decision whether to continue the emphasis on formal techniques, like poomse or katas.

In order to make such a decision the instructor must determine the function and purpose of these formal drills. It is immediately obvious that they serve, at least indirectly, to increase competence in sparring. However, if that is their only purpose, the martial arts educator has no commitment in continuing to teach them. If he/she finds other techniques that enable the students to spar more effectively than they did when they were taught in the traditional way, then, on the contrary, the teacher is committed to giving them up. Furthermore, American students tend not to have the cultural background and discipline to enable them to like and appreciate formal, repetitive drills. Therefore, there is a presumption on the side of abandoning the formal drills for something more congenial to the students—but this follows only assuming that the sole purpose of formal techniques is to increase fighting proficiency. But, above we claimed that a martial art is more than a proficiency in fighting. Instead, it is something more, an art. So it could be that formal techniques have something to do with art, as well as with fighting.

As a preliminary for considering this suggestion, it must be noted that there are several senses of “art.” In one sense, every skill, no matter how acquired or practiced, is an art or \textit{techne}. But in this sense, it does not mean much to call a form of fighting a martial art. There is another, more profound sense of “art” that is more relevant. In this sense, sculpture and dance are arts, whereas carpentry, as commonly practiced, is not. This is the notion of High Art, wherein the artifact or artistic production has contact with the sublime and divine, beyond that contact found in ordinary life. So the question is whether a form of fighting, like taekwondo or judo, is an art in this sense.

Note that in a (so-called) Eastern martial “art” there are formal techniques. For example, in taekwondo there are drills and, above all, poomse. These poomse are, as said above, aids to sparring in that they teach the student how to combine movements in a smooth yet powerful sequence. But these poomse are also viewed as an activity in their own right; a student of taekwondo also does poomse for the sake of doing poomse. If the individual’s main interest in taekwondo is poomse, then the goal in taekwondo may be considered to be akin to the goal of a dancer. However, perceived even in this way, taekwondo differs from dance. There is still a connection with fighting; movements in poomse are explained with reference to fighting. For example, a sequence may be “low block-tiger mouth to the throat-front kick to the middle.” Dance may be mimetic, but not necessarily of any recognizable activity nor only of a specified subject. Moreover, poomse remain effective training aids for fighting, as well as being “dance” forms (Kuntz, 1973).

The nature of poomse justifies the claim that taekwondo is an art in the strict sense, insofar as the goal of taekwondo need not be fighting competence only. That is, some of the formal techniques used to acquire fighting competence are such that, although they are effective for that purpose, they are also goals in themselves. In effect, the training of taekwondo, or another martial art, is such that the desire for fighting competence can be transformed and sublimated into the desire for competence in an art form. The fighting ability does not disappear: a competent practitioner of the formal techniques is presumed to be an effective fighter; if not, then the competence in those techniques is in question. Yet, the goal for which one desires martial arts training may change, from wanting to know how to fight, and to fight, to wanting to engage in an art form, and also to know how to fight.

So, it is clear why some but not all forms of combat are martial arts. The signal differ-
ence between a martial art and other forms of combat is that what one gets out the martial art can be something additional to fighting skill, whereas the result of training in other forms of combat is generally fighting skill alone. It is then the presence of the formal techniques, like poomse, that makes it possible for a form of combat to be an art form, by channeling interest in fighting in such a way that artistic enjoyment is gained at the same time as fighting prowess.

Thus, it follows that formal drills are essential to an Eastern martial art as art. Without drills or forms, it would lose its status as art. To be sure, any activity can be practiced artistically, but without some formal structures and institutions, the would-be artist must create his/her own formal structure to change it into an art. But then the original activity is not an art itself; it is transformed into an art. Thus, criterion “b” provides a test for whether an activity is a martial art: there must be explicit, formal drills that are practiced as having some status in their own right.

It is also clear now that the formal techniques serve a function additional to being training aids for sparring. They have also an artistic end. So, the martial arts educators, when they decide whether to deemphasize formal training, are in effect deciding to place less importance on the artistic side of their style.

Establishing Pertinent Goals

There is one more step that we must take before we can deal with the original problem raised in this paper. That is to make some determination on what the ultimate goal or end of a martial art is. Without such a determination, we cannot evaluate proposed changes in a martial art. We need a standard for judging conflicting proposals.

We have already determined that a martial art has two goals, proficiency in combat and artistic accomplishment. Further, we need to say something about the more profound, spiritual side of a martial art. This is a subject too extensive for us to discuss fully here. Still, we shall make some remarks (Back & Kim, 1979).

To begin with, note that there is a strong historical connection between the Eastern martial arts and Zen (or Sun) Buddhism. Certain goals of Zen are sought after in martial arts training. In Zen, it is stressed that one must not stop and ponder one's actions, but that one should flow from one action to the next. For the Zen Buddhist as for the fighter, stopping and thinking through a situation discursively is undesirable, as it results in hesitation that might be fatal.

One of the experiences that the follower of Zen seeks is samadhi (mushin). In this state of consciousness, there is no dichotomy of you and the situation, nor of perception and action. Rather, there is “you-in-the-situation.” For example, during sparring, when your opponent tries to strike you, if you should attempt to follow and concentrate on his striking, your concentration on the entire situation (“you-in-the-situation”) is lost, and you will probably lose. Instead, you should strive for a sort of field awareness, in which your opponent's move is noted and dealt with, without thinking on it consciously to the exclusion of other events in the field of action.

In an Eastern martial art, samadhi is appreciated and is sought systematically. The constant drilling techniques and forms are designed to eliminate the need for consciously thinking about the next step. There is constant exhortation in sparring training to stop thinking and to act without hesitation. Emphasis on concentration and on power focus is similar to the Zen techniques of meditating on an object to increase perceptivity. Indeed, meditation is commonly practiced at the beginning and ending of a traditional class. Of course, all these practices merely create an environment that is extremely favorable for the appearance of samadhi. As Zen teachings stress, such state of being cannot be generated mechanically.
Now, given that these more profound features have consistently been part of a martial art, and given that they contribute to fighting prowess and to artistic expertise, there are strong reasons to preserve them in any reform of a martial art. These more spiritual aspects are approached mainly in meditation and in formal techniques at present. So, the present move away from concentration on drills and forms would be a movement away from the more profound aspects of the martial art, if nothing is offered to replace their function.

Consequently, there appear to be four criteria for assessing changes in a martial art: (a) whether the national or cultural origin of the martial art would be ignored, (b) how those changes would affect the development of fighting skill, (c) whether those changes would enhance or detract from artistic aspects of the martial art, (d) how those changes would affect spiritual development, to the state of samadhi. No doubt, for most martial arts educators, these criteria are factors of varying importance. That is a matter of individual style. But for the martial art to retain its identity as martial art through change, it is essential that all these criteria continue to be satisfied.

Maintaining Essential Traditions and Goals

This paper started with the practical problem of how to determine whether the current changes in the martial arts ought to be endorsed. There is currently a need to judge whether it is desirable to eliminate tradition and ritual, and drills and forms. This problem can now be addressed.

First, consider tradition and ritual. It is part of the nature of a martial art to have a certain national character. The ritual and language of a martial art reflects that character. Therefore, there is a need to maintain some traditional aspects of a martial art.

Next, there are the drills and forms. These are quite necessary for the martial art to maintain its status as an art and its claim of a deep, profound nature. There are thus strong reasons to emphasize these aspects of a martial art, despite current opinions to the contrary. Likewise, there is strong reason to continue the practice of meditation.

There remains the problem of which traditions and rituals, which drills and forms. As mentioned above, there is a tension between a static definition and dynamic change. Traditions and rituals seem particularly liable to change, for they are embedded in certain local customs. But when a martial art is taken away from the setting of its origin, traditions and rituals, especially those concerned with language, lose much of their original significance. There are, then, fairly strong grounds for countenancing changes in the ritual of a martial art. Yet, some elements of its tradition need to be flourishing. It is up to the martial arts educator to seek those elements.

As for drills and forms, these too have changed over time, even in their original cultural setting. Whether there should be changes in the drills and forms, or whether the old ones should be continued depends on to what extent the various alternatives satisfy the needs of fighting skill, artistic mastery, and spiritual depth. Once again, each martial arts educator must make the decision; particular circumstances may well determine which forms and drills will serve these functions the best. Yet, in choosing drills and forms, the educator must be aware of how important they are, and of the goals they serve.

It may be, then, that there are fewer Eastern martial arts than is commonly thought. An art can be differentiated only by cultural tradition or by principles of training. The latter are more important. Furthermore, there do not seem to be many distinctively different principles of training for the ends of fighting skill, art, and spiritual development. There can be many different styles, or modes of presentation, of a martial art, but the basic approaches appear to be few.
References


