

Hapkido: It Can Be Soft and Circular - Or Hard and Swift

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Look up the word eclectic and the dictionary will inform you it has two complementary meanings: to select the best from various doctrines or style; or being composed of elements drawn from various sources. It's an apt definition of that Korean style of martial art known as hapkido ("the way of coordinating inner energy").

Hapkido is an art that bears striking similarities to aikido and jujutsu in its use of joint locks, throws, chokes and pressure point attacks. Viewed from another perspective, it is the very epitome of a "hard" style with forceful kicking technique similar to tae kwon do. Indeed, hapkido embodies those two terms so often used in describing martial art: it is both "soft" and "hard". In hapkido, technique is conditional the tactics are determined by the situation, by the available fighting space and by the nature of the opponent and combinations are on hand to fit the appropriate conditions.

Or, as Bong Soo Han, the noted Santa Monica-based instructor whose personal knowledge of hapkido spans four decades, says, "It is this which I love about the art of self-defense called hapkido: it is so broad and it offers so many choices."

The art of self-defense - that is hapkido's purpose. And as Han points out, all self-defense "is situationally unique. Some people believe they can defend themselves by relying on two or three techniques. I do not believe that. Think how many different situations you can find yourself in."

Han expounds on this point: "What if you are confronted in a phone booth? There will not be room to even swing your arms. Space is too limited. How do you handle that situation?"

The hapkido practitioner, with his eclectic repertoire, will probably have an answer. And Han, with a slight shrug and a smile, explains that "you must determine the opponent's weak side - mental and physical - and attack it." In terms of tactics that could mean a pressure point attack followed by an attack on the joints - an elbow lock for example.

"Or," Han continues, "You may find yourself confronted in a parking lot. There is plenty of space to maneuver. You can use kicking techniques effectively in such a situation. After all, the leg is the longest and strongest part of the body."

All self-defense tactics, then, depend on the situation - and the ability to "read" opponents intentions. "You have to know the opponent," Han points out carefully. "Can you escape easily? There is nothing to prove in a physical contest. Is the opponent deadly serious - or can you apply a wristlock, and frustrate his intention? Or is he all out? Is he trying to hurt you badly? If he is, then you must knock him down - you must hurt him before he has the chance to hurt you ... knock him down swiftly."

Thus in hapkido the practitioner has a wide range of options to tailor to his specific situation, options ranging from the discreet, to full-powered strikes intended to put an opponent immediately out of action. Yet Han cautions "that some people think you can learn a technique and go out and use it. It takes years to understand the art - and self defense is as much mental attitude as physical technique."

Mental attitude - it's a term that's common to most martial arts and most martial artists. In terms of the real application of the term, Han says, "It is not so important what technique an opponent uses against you. The most difficult opponent is one who has experience in street fighting - he's tough." Han adds, "He never gives you a chance, an opening. There is no he situation - he is committed."

"You must have mental awareness - to avoid him if at all possible. And if you must, to fight him. Once you make up your mind, there can be no hesitation. There must, be instinctive reaction and total commitment there is hesitation or doubt the fight is without a blow being struck."

One half of hapkido's eclectic nature lies in its emphasis on circularity and deflection, of "flowing" with an opponent. This is the water principle, so-called because of its linkage to the character of water... being soft and flowing in nature, but of considerable power. "The water principle is the most beautiful thing we learn in hapkido," Han says.

It is embodied in the style's theory, of combat: "Never resist an opponent," Han says calmly. "Flow with him and redirect his force. It is the principle of yin and yang, "If you attack me - if you throw a punch you are yang, aggressive. But your punch will reach a point of richness - extension. Then yang becomes yin. If I have flowed with the opponent, at that very moment when the yang is transformed to yin, I am in a position to become yang - aggressive. I counter. Flow, in harmony with the opponent. Go around him. Redirect his force and use it against him. That is the water principle."

In this manner, hapkido is very similar to aikido - they share some of the same historical roots - and to tai chi chuan. In aikido focus is flowing with the opponent and turning his force against him. In tai chi, one stays with the opponent, flowing with his motion until the opponent is overextended and off balance - the "point of richness" Han mentions. But there the similarities end.

"Yes, hapkido shares much of the same philosophy," Han agrees. "Flowing with the opponent, redirecting his motion. But they are also like day and night. Aikido is much more passive - and it lacks the hard counters, the kicks. The counter in hapkido is hard - most of the time it depends on what you want to do. It is true: you can throw the opponent, you can lock his joints, stun him with a pressure point attack, and lock him down. You can also kick or punch, which we stress the majority of times."

Han returns to hapkido's theory of circular defense. "Deflect the opponents force. Go around him. Before the opponent can recover this motion, counter."

"You can sidestep an attack," Han admits. "But if you sidestep, you may be too far away to counter effectively. But if you go around the opponent, you are in position with your counter and he is helpless."

Han smiles. "There is the old saying: 'To catch a tiger, you must go to the tiger's lair.' So in defense. To be effective, you must flow with the opponent. You must read his force - this will let you know what force you must apply as the appropriate counter. Then, because you have stayed with the opponent, the counter is ready and quick."

There are several practical applications to what may sound, to some, as nothing more than a piece of esoteric Asian philosophy. As Han points out, "If your counter is going to be strong and hard - look at your position. If you have gone around an opponent, his back and side are exposed to you. You can strike swiftly to vital points. If you are going to lock the opponent, you have flowed around his motion - you can easily apply a joint lock or you can throw the opponent with little force. He is already moving. You add a little strength to the movement and redirect it - it takes little force - and the opponent will go flying."

Hapkido's eclectic approach also makes - it suitable as a self-defense style for people of varying sizes. "There are many approaches to martial art. But by learning the principles of leverage and working the joints, you can redirect and defeat an opponent who is larger than you. It may take more effort but it can be done.

"In many styles, hard blocking is encouraged. This works well against someone of your own style who is your size. But what happens if you meet someone who is stronger? There can be problems right away. Is your force sufficient to block his blow? If yes, fine ...

"But," Han points out, "If you redirect the opponent - it doesn't matter what his size. This also applies to pressure points. There are 360 major pressure points where you can strike with effectiveness. Whether a person is big or small, we all have bodies that function the same way. Size becomes, Unimportant."

One other interesting facet to hapkido is the absence of forms from its training regimen. "I try to teach all ("all" meaning, techniques that span the spectrum from hard to soft, kicks to aikido-like throws) the various fundamentals," Han explains. "After that, the students develop 18 individual techniques and how to expand and adapt them to situations. Of course, a great deal of stretching and flexibility exercises are called for even to kick. What good does it do to kick if you injure yourself and the technique has no power? There are also questions of developing speed, timing, balance, focus and reading the opponent as you flow with him." Han adds in an aside, "Just to kick takes years to learn. That's one way.

"Then comes holds - defending against chokes, locks - how to escape by using the wrist and shoulder, using leverage to unbalance the attacker and directing his own weight against him. Hapkido is endless." And, as Han adds, "After 35 years of practicing this art

I feel I am just beginning to learn..."

Sparring is part of training. And, at the black belt level, sparring against multiple opponents begins - which adds new information and insight to the self-defense applications of the art.

"First of all, the most important thing you must realize is how to use these people (the opponents) psychologically. Second, I always face you - no matter how many opponents I will be facing one. Third: see who the leader is - and move on him decisively and hurt him when you do it, do it. No hesitation, no analysis. Always remember: when you have made up your mind, go for it. No hesitation, no doubt: either run or attack. That is the essence of self-defense.

Moreover, as Han points out, "There is always a problem of overconfidence. If you are overconfident, your opponent has an opening - and if he is experienced he will use it. There will be no second chance. That is why mental discipline is so important and always stressed in all martial arts. You should never look down on another. You should never be filled with your overconfidence. If you are overconfident your awareness is not there.

Hans is as well-noted for his martial art choreography and acting as he is for his hapkido. It's an emphasis that is slowly changing. And he adds, that, in the years since 1968, "one only used to accept students who were in hapkido, dedicated to hapkido. I no longer believe that if someone is teaching a different style, and wants to come and study hapkido and adapt techniques not found in his style, I will teach him. I believe knowledge is good - and more knowledge is better.

"There are no superior styles of martial art," Han says. "This point has been made many times by many people. Styles... they are growth. They develop because of people originally because of their race, and the geographical area in which they lived, and what they saw and mimicked from others. And there is always the question of the person some prefer using their hands; others their feet. But no martial art is better than another. The benefit from all martial art is in your approach to the art and to training. It is something you have to learn in a lifetime."

Han reflects for a moment. "Martial art is a lifetime endeavor. It is body and mind as one. For example, you train your kicks - train for years, mentally and physically." The goal is spontaneous movement instinctive. Beyond hesitation or analysis. When someone attacks you - or in sparring situations - to go back to the example of kicking - "you see the opening and feel the opening your opponent has made and before you can think you feel the kick sliding - and the kick has slid in. It is spontaneous action; mental and physical discipline in instinctive action."

"That is the ultimate goal in martial art - that spontaneous action, that unity." Then, sitting forward, Han says, "Yet we must be aware that of 11 the individuals who are striving for that goal only a very few will attain it.

I do not know if I have attained it or will who knows? We hear of our ancestors being capable of such feats, of attaining such a goal. But we must remember that life was simpler in the past. One could - and might have to, to survive - train with such single mindedness of purpose.

"Our lives today, our society, is more complex - more complicated. Even if one is in the profession of martial art, there are so many other necessary things - things one must do to survive, to support one's self. And among students today, one must recognize that the art is only a part - not the whole - of their life

There is only a slim chance of attaining the perfection we seek. But we do benefit from the self-control, the mental and physical discipline, calmness, analytical ability - and senseness. I do not believe there is any other way that can bring so many great benefits.