

Three Principles of Hapkido Combat

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Thirteen hundred years ago, as told by Bong Soo Han, during the Silla Dynasty of Korea, there existed an elite organization called Hwarangdo. Living in common quarters, groups of young men under the strict discipline of the equivalent of our knights in the middle ages underwent intense drilling of their minds and bodies in techniques of self defense.

This Spartan discipline was the beginning of Korean martial arts as a style and a form. The various schools of hand-to-hand combat can still be found depicted upon the stone remnants of the Silla Dynasty. Suppression by the cultural mores - "respect the letter and despise the sword" - made this an art of self-defense only. The descendants of Korea's first rugged martial arts disciple began to prize other idols foreign the fighting arts. Intellectual learning and lofty positions in the government became the order of the day.

Only the staunchest and hardest martial artists sought secrecy and the pure way of fighting arts. They took refuge in China, Indochina and India, where as monks hidden away deep in mountain monasteries, they continued to study and perfect their hand-to-hand fighting systems. Hapkido descends directly from these monks and is actually a combination from many of the martial arts, taking the best from each and adding the special kicking and hand techniques of its own. Thus, from karate it derives power; from judo, smooth leverage; from aikido, the use of the "flowing power" or ki and what the Koreans term ghi.

Although the chronological history of hapkido reaches back only a short time, the art holds definite origins with Korea's fighting monks and Japan's royal combative art as explained by Han. In 1910, Yon Shul Choi went to Japan and studied from Shokaku Takeda a martial art called tai-to-ryu-aiki-jujitsu - a blend of aikido and jujitsu that was only taught to royalty. Choi returned from Japan to post World War II Korea after just two years ago; he has been teaching hapkido in the Los Angeles area as well as advising on a few action productions the productions in the Hollywood motion picture industry.

When Han was a teenage student of Yong Sul Choi back in Korea, he recalls an aged monk who came to watch the initial classes. The monk said nothing and just sat there observing the practice sessions. The students knew he had something to say and would speak about it in time; nevertheless, they persisted in asking the aged Buddhist priest what he thought of their techniques. Breaking his self-imposed silence of many days, the monk began to explain some unusual kicking techniques grounded in ancient Kireqan tek-gyun (kicking principles). The monk got up to demonstrate and he executed some fantastic kicks that had never been thought of before by the hapkido practitioners. These kicking techniques were designed to be part of the fighting handed down from teacher to student down throughout the ages in the mobutnain monasteries. One of only six to be certified by Yong Sul Choi, Han was able to master and incorporate the monks' kicking techniques into what was to become an integrated hapkido system. When he first arrived stateside, Han joined up with Sea Oh Chi, another of the six original students of that

master. They taught together for a while, and then went their separate ways to teach at their own schools. Bong Soo Han now runs his own dojang (studio) on Westwood Boulevard near the University at Los Angeles campus and its there he is attempting to make a start at proselytizing the new-to-the-states martial art form. Hapkido as Han teaches it specifically uses and directs an opponent's power to one's own advantage by utilizing three basic hapkido principles: meeting force with minimum of force to deflect and not clash with the adversary's power; circular motion countering and attacking; and the hapkido water principle.

Besides dodging, the best way to avoid the thrust from a spear is to deflect the projectile in flight, rather than meeting it head on to stop it. Relating this to the fists of a larger, stronger opponent, the same principle can be applied. In defending himself from flying fists and kicks, the hapkidoist relies on deflecting the initial crush. By grabbing, jerking or pushing at key points of the opponent's body to jar him off balance, the hapkido practitioner is then able to counterattack with the slicing water principle, utilizing brute force.

The centrifugal force of spinning top illustrates the circular attacking, principle of hapkido. It is said the fastest route between two points is a straight line, but when one is concerned with power, due consideration to velocity and the time it takes to attain maximum speed and force must be given. So, like a discus thrower winding up for his toss, the hapkidoist will pivot his body, extending his striking blow for the slicing contact. A fast running river as it rushes down the mountain is similar to hapkido's water principal. The river cuts its own path down the slopes of the; mountain and the water wears down, pulverizes and slices across the face of the peak, not stopping for anything. These three principles combine to help the practitioner avoid the force of one or more opponents though the use of smooth flowing defensive movements that were created to maintain the position of advantage. It is a special way of not only using the opponents force, but also his mind and his body so that when added to one's won force it constantly keeps one in a winning position.

This three-pointed philosophy is the core of hapkido. The art is similar to aikido in that the practitioner used the momentum of the opponent to overcome an attack. The opponents own momentum, is used to nudge him off balance, and then the circular moving attacks are used. This is where brute force is actually used. The technique is used with full power, as the principles, of water is integrated with the follow through: the total penetration of the opponent's defense without stopping. To get the proper feeling of continuity, hapkidoists might use targets such as cardboard, punching bags and the like for practice. So in hapkido, the combining of the three basic principles is the essence of every technique.

Hapkido techniques are not for competition explains Han, as he mentions, that each attack is used with full force. A graphic example of power Han uses occurred during the photo session after this interview. Han demonstrated a pivoting wheel kick on his student Mike Shigezane, and when Han followed through, it was no act as he sliced his heel into Shigezane's jugular with full force, knocking his student over into a full cartwheel. Mike

got up smarting and dazed, but game to try it again. Fortunately, the photographer felt one take was sufficient and the demonstration went onto something gentler.

Not that hapkido is all rough and tumble as an art. It has its brutish aspects when defending against brute force, but for the most part, Han tries to set forth a gentle doctrine. Watching Bong Soo Han teach and explain the technical and philosophical aspects of hapkido, one wonders how one so gentle and soft spoken can generate so much force and power. There is little doubt that Han could toss his whole around the room if need be. But his calm, relaxed outward appearance belies the latent potential of his deadly art.

The power of hapkido's counters and attacks is too forceful for the tournament arena, and Han believes that the techniques of this art would be severely limited by competitive roles. In other words, there are many maneuvers within the context of this martial art that might be successfully used in a self-defense situation, but for obvious reasons must be eliminated or modified to conform to tournament rules, thereby limiting the hapkido practitioner to a certain static set of permissible techniques and reducing his effectiveness in the ring.

Also, Han adds, tournaments would be too dangerous if one used realistic technique with realistic power. The present use of control in tournaments is actually valueless in Han's opinion because it teaches the practitioner nothing about self-defense. In a sense, control is an extraneous factor which becomes the goal in competitive fighting as it stands today. Besides, mentions Han, tournament fighting turns good practitioners into self-seeking, egotistical fighting machines that are only out for the win.

The most important aspect of hapkido's fighting philosophy is avoidance of pre-set forms of fighting, especially the punch-kick-block method of practicing combinations. Hapkido impresses on the student the necessity of continuous flowing attack. Once the situation for self-defense arises, the hapkido practitioner must keep his defense up and his counter-attacking sharp until the opponent is completely stopped and disabled from doing further harm. The action must be fluid and the rhythm of combat must be kept at a flowing pace.

But the goal in martial arts should not be self-defense explains Han, but should also be a guideline to living. This encompasses the striving for self-confidence and self-control of the mind through the discipline of dedicated practice. This is how one integrates that three basic principles of hapkido combat, or any martial art for that matter, into a personal self-defense regiment.