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For the Love of Taekwondo

At the end of each class, our instructor initiates a beautiful sign of respect by bowing to his/her students and stating “Kahm Sa Hahm Ni Dah,” which I have been told translates to “thank you” and “my spirit thanks your spirit.” I recall hearing Grandmaster Lee tell us years ago that he is thanking us for coming to class, and I recall feeling that *we* should be thanking him, not him thanking us. However, when I was recently explaining to some new students what this part of class is and means, I realized that I was thanking them for giving me the opportunity and privilege to share with them something that I love dearly, Taekwondo. Perhaps that is the same sentiment that Grandmaster Lee had at the end of his classes.

When you love something, which has given you life, you naturally want to share it with other people. This can be exciting and frustrating when you are sharing Taekwondo, because often people you care about don't seem to like or value Taekwondo as you do. Perhaps they just can't understand it, have pre-conceived notions, or maybe even had a bad experience in their past. It is also not uncommon to invest hundreds of hours with students, only for them to leave Taekwondo for reasons unknown to us. However, loving Taekwondo means accepting that Taekwondo is not for everyone and people change. Sure, it *could* be wonderful for them, but only if they accept it. So, over the years, I have learned to love Taekwondo enough to allow it to *not* be for everyone all the time. I have found that an immature approach of forcing Taekwondo on someone, albeit with caring and kind motives, actually diminishes the Taekwondo experience the other receives. This is quite the opposite of the motive.

While Grandmaster Lee's traditional Taekwondo instruction has changed little over the years, simply because it is so incredibly honed and perfected, Taekwondo itself is fluid. It responds to each situation with ease and grace. It meets each person where they are, spiritually, intellectually, and physically, gently encouraging them to awaken their own inner ability. It is always seeing their potential best, even more than the student can see, never allowing them to feel inadequate, but rather motivated to become more in every class. It is never reactive in the human sense; It never under-responds or over-responds to a situation or applies a misguided approach. Instead it perfectly matches every situation in attitude and intensity, always leaning toward the most beneficial outcome for all involved.

Essentially, Taekwondo demonstrates to us a living, dynamic example of the 5 tenets. It courteously provides a framework for us to follow to become our best. It never wavers, demonstrating integrity, even in situations where it has to go places and do things that are uncomfortable, painful, or undesirable. Taekwondo perseveres through all obstacles and impediments with steadiness and focus, as if it were an infinite machine. It *is* self-control; Taekwondo leaves no room for personal whims or compromised standards. Indomitable spirit is the value upon which Taekwondo sits and draws its strength to never, ever succumb to darkness or a diminished future. Collectively, Taekwondo is respect, respect for the self, for our teachers, for our students, for our family, for strangers, for all humanity, for all potential, for all who gave all they had decades and centuries ago to bring Taekwondo to us, and, perhaps most importantly, respect for Taekwondo itself from which we are learning and growing.

How can Taekwondo be personified in this way, as if it were a living, breathing human? How could a martial art have all these human characteristics? Taekwondo is a set of constructs, values, and techniques which are effective in all human and natural interactions. It, therefore, allows us self-mastery, that is, ideal control of our minds and, therefore, our bodies. It is not an end in itself, but a means to an end in which the individual's noble success and healthy achievement are paramount. Being

human, living in a physical world, and needing human relationships, we can learn much about Taekwondo by imagining it human.

While Taekwondo itself is and has perfect standards, its students striving to reach its impossible goals provide the method for constant and essential self-improvement, benefiting the entire person holistically. I was once told that when you think you have mastered something in Taekwondo, you will see 1,000 more areas to improve upon. And upon believing you have mastered any of these, you will see 1,000 more areas for each one of them, upon which you can improve. This is because Taekwondo is a perfect ideal and we are imperfect people. But Taekwondo knows this and always helps us grow stronger through this struggle, never becoming daunted by Taekwondo's awesomeness.

While Taekwondo itself is impeccably amazing, it requires a human translator and facilitator to bring it into the practical understanding which we need. For us, that person is Grandmaster Lee, our teacher. He always teaches us first through his demonstration of character of Taekwondo. He shows us that respect is always to be paid, but visibly and when we think nobody is watching, to all students especially the newest ones wearing white-belts. He never allows his own ego to overshadow Taekwondo itself, for doing so would be a direct contradiction of all he is and teaches. He gives of himself all he humanly can in ways that teach us to grow and never become dependent upon him or anyone else. While still an imperfect human, he pushes himself harder than anyone I have ever met to excel and provide for us an example from which we can draw strength to face life in the Taekwondo way. Truly, he shows us his love for Taekwondo in a way leaving no question in our minds that we must also be our own best!

How does Taekwondo deal with that which gets in the way of growth? Taekwondo meets everything, both those we perceive as good/growing/healing as well as those we perceive as bad/dangerous/detrimental with the same love. It is never unwilling to "go there" to the place where

growth can occur. Even when something appears to be an impediment to growth, it defends itself from this opponent, but never wishes to harm it, but rather to help it learn and become better. It is very much like the analogy of a dark room which has light outside, where the door is cracked open a very slight amount and the room suddenly fills with light! Whereas a lit room with darkness outside has its door opened a bit or even a large amount, and the light in the room doesn't diminish to darkness at all, but instead even fills the outside darkness. This is Taekwondo's approach to life, truly a loving one.

Taekwondo offers us so much to learn! For the newest student wearing a white-belt, it helps us learn that using our bodies feels good when exercised. As we progress to yellow-belt, we learn that we can do things we never thought possible. Then as green-belt students, we learn that there is more to this than we originally thought. Blue-belt students learn that they can *be* more than they ever thought. As we pass through red-belt rank, we learn that we are indeed powerful and confident, yet must temper this with control at all times. At black-belt rank, we learn that everything we learned was just the first chapter of a life-long book, as we embark on chapter two of sharing that which we have come to love so dearly.

Cherishing that which we love means protecting it, nurturing it, and sharing it. Taekwondo is no exception. One of the greatest joys in life is helping someone else accomplish their own goals through Taekwondo. It gives meaning to our own journey, highlighting all we have learned from our own struggles as well as propelling us forward. As the spirit of Taekwondo grows in our hearts, so does our passion for protecting it, nurturing it, and sharing it with everyone we care about. In addition, our circle of care expands as we teach others, forming the special "Taekwondo Family" which Grandmaster Lee fondly talks about so often.

When our motive is love, not ego, we are truly honoring not only Taekwondo itself, but Grandmaster Lee and all those who came before him for millennia who passed down their cherished martial art into our hands. We must carry on their legacy in a way that would make them proud, upholding all that Taekwondo values while remaining dynamic to meet every student with courtesy, compassion, and kindness to their viewpoint. We must allow our love for Taekwondo to motivate us forward.

If we ever allow our own ego to interfere, we are tainting Taekwondo and disrespecting Grandmaster Lee and all those who came before him. While we have a responsibility to provide impeccable instruction, we must vigilantly guard ourselves from thinking that *we* are important. We *must* remain humble at all costs, to ensure that our students receive the purest form of education possible.

Grandmaster Lee always demonstrated this in 1000s of ways. I recall a student interrupting him one time during sit ups, asking "How many should I do?" Rather than reprimand him or even answer him, Grandmaster Lee asked him, "How many do you think you need to do?" When the student answered the question, Grandmaster Lee smiled and said, "that is the number you should do." He truly empowered the student to *own* his training and demonstrated to all of us that even our 9th Dan Grandmaster is humble to his students, never ever thinking, believing, implying, or stating that *he* knew better for his student than the student did for himself. Of course, in Taekwondo, Grandmaster Lee likely did know better, but he took that opportunity to teach everyone, perhaps himself included, to honor the individual student over his own pride or ego. While such a simple example, Grandmaster Lee spoke a profound statement of love toward that student and all of us in his character.

I have learned that as much as I love Taekwondo, it has truly always loved me more and continues to do so! The same is true of my teacher, Grandmaster Moo Yong Lee, whom I will cherish and honor as long as I live.