

The Five Gifts of Tae Kwon Do

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In this, my black belt essay, I feel it is appropriate to discuss five gifts I have received from my practice of Tae Kwon Do. These gifts are both evidence of the inherent power of Tae Kwon Do, as well as its applied effect on lives. These gifts are (a) getting in-shape, (b) strength and speed, (c) self-confidence and self-control, (d) pride, and (e) life. While this essay is told entirely from my life's perspective, it isn't as much about me as it is a testament to the remarkable benefits Tae Kwon Do has had for me and how it can give the same gifts to other people.

As I discuss each gift, I'll explain its meaning to me from the (a) physical, (b) mental, and (c) character perspectives. It is as though I'm looking at the gift through different lenses, focusing on different attributes of the same gift. In addition, I'll explain an example of one of my teachers who I feel exemplifies this gift the most or contributed to my receipt of this gift most.

In looking at these gifts through the physical lens, it occurred to me these are the things I am doing physically. Most observers of Tae Kwon Do likely think the entire art is physical because they can see the kicking, punching, blocking, forms, sparring, and breaking. But there is so much more to Tae Kwon Do, as I'm just starting to get a glimpse. Of course, this physical aspect comes first and truly does have incredible merit, as I'll explain herein.

As I looked at my gifts through the mental lens, the thinking component, I realized that I have received incredible benefit in this regard also. Practicing Tae Kwon Do certainly requires as much mental effort and energy as it does physical. Just as we condition our bodies, our minds are also conditioned through our training. In fact all achievements, from executing a proper punch to building a

skyscraper, must occur in the mind first. In Tae Kwon Do, our mental investments are also repaid well with mental gifts.

Finally, the character lens is effectively my being. When practicing Tae Kwon Do wholeheartedly, improved character will form. This occurs because Tae Kwon Do requires proper repetitive mental focus to perform physically. This mental focus also builds mental habits, which dilute and minimize old or conflicting habits. When actualized and employed, these habits form character. This character gives an exponential set of additional gifts, allowing us to live successful lives and leave nourishing legacies behind after we die.

My First Gift: GETTING IN-SHAPE

To anyone who knew me in 2004, when I returned back to Tae Kwon Do after practicing as a teenager, I was horribly out of shape. I had been told by a doctor that I was morbidly obese, weighing 297 pounds. I promised myself that I wouldn't hit 300 pounds, which is a promise I kept! Tae Kwon Do was a way I knew I could get back into shape, because by taking my daughter, Jacqueline, to classes, I would have to attend too and couldn't give in to the numerous reasons I would often concoct for not attending. Also, I knew that once I showed up and class started, I would have to persist through it, sort of like being strapped into a roller coaster for the duration of the ride.

There are numerous physical benefits I received from this gift, some of which are: (a) the ability to walk up a flight of stairs without being completely out of breath, (b) the ability to quickly get out of bed without spending 5 minutes trying to overcome the pain of my body, (c) the absence of chronic knee and ankle pain I had felt for years, and (d) loss of 80+ pounds, with healthy eating habits, too. In addition, I noticed that I need less sleep than before and can now do all sorts of physical work at home and at the office. In fact, I started as the only employee in my e-commerce business' warehouse

receiving, lifting, moving, and packing boxes of inventory, which I certainly could not have done prior to receiving this gift.

The mental benefits I received from this gift include the ability to sleep better and think more clearly. In addition, I had taken the first step to taking care of myself and I was very pleased with my results. My commitment to myself grew stronger as I continued to succeed at bringing myself and daughter to class on a regular basis.

As I felt better about myself and saw my physical and mental improvements, my character improved. I became much more hopeful and my outlook on the future was much improved. I got better at resisting the extreme emotions of helplessness and over-optimism. Instead, I became more realistic as I began to feel I was preparing myself for the future. As a result, I set a goal to continue with Tae Kwon Do for the rest of my life and to work to emulate the character that I respect in our school's leaders.

Mr. and Mrs. Viveiros are my teachers who have very much exemplified this gift to me. I remember training with them in 2004. They always worked hard in every class and were genuinely kind, caring, and thoughtful people. We were supporting each other in our efforts to get in-shape. Now that they have carried on the business operations of United Tae Kwon Do, I'm more proud of our school than ever!

My Second Gift: STRENGTH & SPEED

Through the previous gift, getting in-shape, I received my second gift, strength and speed. It was only natural, as I got in shape, I got stronger and faster. I thought this was only physical, but I now see how this gift had both mental and character benefits, too.

I found my body getting tougher. Things that hurt before didn't any longer and I found my endurance improving, too. In fact, I started to feel like I had a chance to defend myself should a dangerous situation arise, even if it was just running away!

In fact, I was very surprised at how much my body could do. This awareness carried over to alertness and focus, two mental benefits of this gift, which have helped me in numerous ways, especially in business. Being alert to market changes and being able to focus on executing a plan in the midst of distractions are critical in business, as well as life, and they were greatly strengthened by this gift.

With the physical and mental strength and speed benefits, I saw myself persisting and enduring more in the trying situations of my life. The habit of awareness gave me character which notably increased my perception of my environment and its opportunities and threats, not only in self-defense, but in family, business, economic, and global senses, too. I see myself responding to life immediately, as if by reflex due to the deep conditioning of Tae Kwon Do training in my life.

Master Lord is my teacher who exemplifies the gift of strength and speed the most. Not only is he incredibly strong and fast, but he has mental alertness and focus which I strive to emulate. He has so often taught me to make contact when I work with him so that I could learn to focus, and likewise he makes contact with me, teaching me toughness, awareness, strength, and speed.

My Third Gift: SELF-CONFIDENCE & SELF-CONTROL

As each gift continues to grow, it is as though it spills over offering other gifts. Through the previous two gifts, getting in-shape and speed & strength, I received my third gift, self-confidence and self-control. I join this pair as a single gift because they are like two sides of the same coin. As self-confidence grows, I control myself better because I know what I can do and therefore don't have to do it unless I choose to. As my self-control grows stronger, I build my self-confidence because I see myself able to accomplish exactly that which I have set as a goal for myself.

Physically, I can handle myself much better in case of a physical confrontation. Hopefully my confidence shows through enough that the risk of a physical confrontation is minimized, too. I noticed I am walking straighter and taller, and I no longer feel weak or at another's mercy in my day-to-day life.

I can remain much calmer, mentally, by not operating out of fear of being weak, but out of strength of knowing. In fact, I find that I don't have to argue or even fight to win. Now, I can see walking away as winning, usually bringing even greater benefit to all involved. By overcoming fear, I feel I now can handle nearly every one of life's challenges successfully.

This has translated into improved character because my desire to prove myself to other people, which had been based in fear, is subsiding. I can maintain a more relaxed state of life, knowing I can be strong in a second, if necessary. Practicing this has helped me break free of old limiting beliefs and habits, which were effectively buttons on my character that other people pushed to trigger behavior from me. Now, I am much more in control of myself, and I like it.

Master Nowak exemplifies this gift most for me. He always exudes such a high level of self confidence that it rubs off on his students. He never shows any fear and always maintains incredible control. By training with him, this gift has taken root inside of me. He helps me feel that being myself is a good thing, even if I make mistakes; I don't have to be perfect.

My Fourth Gift: PRIDE

Through the previous gifts of getting in-shape, speed & strength, and self-confidence & self-control, I received the gift of pride. This is not the egocentric type of pride which is boastful, power-hungry, and destructive. Rather, this is a self-directed pride in the results of the work I have done and continue to do. It is a knowing that I am doing the right thing for me and am pleased with myself for doing this.

Physically, this gift has manifested itself in several ways. First, I now very much like what I see when I look into the mirror, rather than wishing I was someone different. Second, I have a strong desire to take good care of the person I'm working so very hard to build. Third, I strive to be an example for others who might be overweight or out of shape. Each of these is a way that I am proud of myself.

I have also found that I like myself more. By testing for black belt with Grand Master Lee, I am finally accomplishing something I started 25 years ago, which feels great! In addition, I find that this gift of pride manifests itself mentally for me when I am proud to do what I think is right, just because I think it is right!

The character aspect of this gift for me is all about my family. I truly enjoy seeing Jacqueline and Svita improving themselves in so many ways through their practice of Tae Kwon Do. I am proud of each of their accomplishments and pleased with their ever-increasing abilities to manage confrontation. Also, I really enjoy sharing this experience with them!

My example of this gift is Master McLaughlin. She has been such a wonderfully supportive force in my life. Through her example, she is always proud to do a good job and do it right. She never hesitates to give extra time to her students to help them understand the details of a technique or its practical nature. Her classes are what helped me to progress at the speed which was right for me. Until I knew my body well enough, she kept me safe from hurting myself, too. I am proud to be Master McLaughlin's student.

My Fifth Gift: LIFE

Through the gifts of getting in-shape, speed & strength, self-confidence & self-control, and pride, I have received the gift of life. One may say that I already had my life, but what life did I have before, when I was so out of shape I couldn't bend over to tie my shoe and so self-deluded that I would act as

though I was overly confident because I was really afraid inside. I found myself craving affirmation from everyone because I didn't really know or like myself very much. This really wasn't much of a life.

Physically, in life, it is said that we're all really dying. But, if the path to death is decay, through Tae Kwon Do I have experienced the opposite of decay: improvement. In this sense, life is the opposite of death, not just a path to it, and I am alive! Through Tae Kwon Do, I can now better defend my life in a fight, and likely I've added 10-20 years to my life by being in shape.

I have learned to respect the natural law which states that if we don't use the gifts we have been given, we'll lose them. I had been given my body, but let it go in so many ways by not taking care of it. Now, I'm using this gift of life and finding that, as a result, I am given more. The more I train, the better I feel, the more stress I relieve, and the more peaceful are my days. What a gift!

Another natural law states that we become that which we think. Through this and the other gifts, I think the best of myself and others, and we become our best! I can now see others at their best, too. I can afford to be kinder, feeling much less threatened in my life. Hopefully I can use my developing mental gift of life to successfully avoid ever needing to use my physical gifts in a fight. Knowing what to fight for and what not to fight for has always been difficult for me because everything seemed so important, but now I'm learning how to discern priorities better, too.

Through the character gift of life, I am able to accomplish one of my life goals: to leave no regrets at the end of my life. To me, this will be a life well-lived. To accomplish this, I must leave a legacy, which I do through sharing and teaching others about the success principles of life which I have learned. Certainly Tae Kwon Do has taught me many success principles which I hope to continue learning, practicing, and sharing.

Grand Master Lee exemplifies the Gift of Life best. His incredible physical, mental, and character strength allow him to be gentle, kind, and selfless when teaching others. By being so strong, he never

has to act out of fear of hurting his own ego. Rather, he can open himself up, while retaining total control, and give himself to his students in a way that his spirit can deeply nourish, inspire, and encourage them. I strive daily to replicate Grand Master Lee's model into my life with continued practice, application, and determination.

As I conclude this essay, I am deeply impacted by how much benefit these Five Gifts of Tae Kwon Do have helped me. I really wasn't aware of how many ways my life is better as a result of my training at United Tae Kwon Do with Grand Master Lee and all his teachers. I'm thankful for the exercise of writing this essay because it forced me to investigate and evaluate my relationship with Tae Kwon Do.