

The Importance of Trust and Moral Culture in Modern Society

(In fulfillment of the requirements for promotion to 9th Degree)

“Without trust a person loses all principles and dignities and becomes a liar and a cheat.”

—General Choi Hong-hi

The ambition of the human race has changed.

We live in a world that has been invaded by technology and material consumption, while our society has come to value possessions over people, and quantity over quality. Yet, we strive to lead a life defined by the beliefs and values of our founder—beliefs that we learned from our own masters and strive to instill in our students today.

Those who do not practice the traditional teachings of General Choi Hong-hi may not understand the significance of moral culture in TaeKwon-Do. Throughout his writings, however, the focus is consistently on the development of good character above physical conditioning. From the initial definition of his art, General Choi explains that TaeKwon-Do is “...the use of the body in the method of self-defense...through intensive physical and mental training.” Specifically, it is this “mental conditioning that separates the true practitioner from the sensationalist...” (General Choi, p. 15). Moreover, in the Philosophy of TaeKwon-Do, General Choi states that “the utmost purpose of TaeKwon-Do is to eliminate fighting...with a power that must be based on humanity, justice, morality, wisdom and faith” (Choi, Vol I, p.88). Accordingly, the importance of moral virtue is seen throughout the *Encyclopedia of TaeKwon-Do*, from the Tenets and Student Oath, to the meanings of the patterns, the system of ranks, and training activities.

To emphasize his point, General Choi went so far as altering the very *nomenclature* of the word used to describe his new art. Originally written as one word—**Taekwondo**—there was no distinction between the three components comprising the martial art. In order to create this

distinction, General Choi changed the spelling to three separate words: **Tae Kwon Do**. In due time, realizing that even more emphasis was needed to distinguish between the physical and mental aspects of his art, the word was rewritten to the way we know it today—**TaeKwon-Do**. Through this simple change in nomenclature, we clarify both the separation—and, more importantly, the *connection* (denoted by the hyphen)—between the physical and mental components of TaeKwon-Do. In other words, before he even taught us to punch or kick, it was our founder’s wish to teach the importance of our commitment to the standards of moral culture. Unfortunately, this is a concept eroding from our society and even amongst the most faithful of practitioners.

In developing TaeKwon-Do, General Choi Hong-hi relied on the ancient lessons of Eastern philosophy: teachings of wisdom, righteousness and honor from the schools of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, among others. Moral culture, he asserted, is “the endeavor and process of becoming an exemplary person such as Confucius...and thus contribute to the building of an ideal society” (General Choi, p. 26). This ideal society, he equated to the definition given by the Father of Taoism, Lao Tzu:

“[a society] in which the ruler is of such high moral character that he can rule naturally, not by interference or fear, but by appealing to the good nature of his people who, by merely doing their duty, can live freely in peace without fear or anxiety” (General Choi, pg. 26).

Seeing as our moral principles are the first lessons of TaeKwon-Do put into practice, I believe we should, as practitioners of TaeKwon-Do, be guided by the standards of this “ideal society,” either in the development of TaeKwon-Do students, as an organization, or as a society as a whole.

This ideal society, the General asserted, is cultivated through the teaching and practice of moral culture, defined in the *Encyclopedia* as adherence to the elements of Humanity, Righteousness, Propriety, Wisdom and Trust—words that, as practitioners of TaeKwon-Do, we are taught and then teach to others, but often forget or ignore in the interest of ambition or power. However, in the absence of these fundamental points, an ideal society is not possible, and we are forced to live with the alternative.

Other, substandard forms of society were identified by General Choi, including the *legalistic society* in which the ruler, lacking moral authority, uses laws to govern the people, thereby losing contact and trust with his people. The worst kind of society, he insisted, is one in which “the ruler, through deception and trickery, misuses his legal authority to further his personal ambitions and impose his rule upon his people by force...” (General Choi Hong-hi, pg. 26). I firmly believe that, of all the principles involved in moral culture, the most important—and yet the most forgotten—in building an ideal society is trust. It is this loss of trust the results in a divergence from the ideal society and leaving us with a substandard alternative.

Our *Encyclopedia* defines trust as “the ability to keep one’s words and promises, not only to one’s friends, but to everyone in general.” In reality, trust is a fundamental principle that affects every aspect of our society. Where there is genuine trust between people, there are no barriers, no laws, no contracts or locks that prevent us from interacting freely. Unfortunately, in the current state of our society, the word trust is ready to disappear from our dictionary.

We live in a world dictated by rules and regulations, lawsuits and disclosure agreements; and we are governed by countless limitations preventing us from acting as free people. In a world where a “gentleman’s agreement” could once be honored to the point of maintaining international relationships, the strength of the spoken word has become almost meaningless. Contracts and signatures easily overturn honor and integrity, as promises are reneged, taking advantage of laws and loopholes, in the interest of personal gain, while harmless errors become the basis for daily lawsuits and the ruin of relationships and alliances every day.

It is most unfortunate that we not only see this pattern in the general public, but by the practitioners of the very art that holds us so accountable to the principles of honor and integrity. In so doing, we have left behind the very principles on which TaeKwon-Do was built.

Certainly, there are parts of the world where trust and honor continue to be held in great esteem. In countries with a high level of morality, such as Japan, one can still leave their bicycle unattended, without a lock and when they return from work they will find it where they left it; people in this society still honor the motto: “If it doesn’t belong to you, do not take it.” Granted, Western

society is exceedingly different from the lands that gave us Eastern Philosophy, but even in a legalistic society such as the United States, we put great faith in honor and trust. In a court of law, we lay our hand on The Bible and swear to tell the truth. It is trusted that we will be honest and, if found to lie, such perjury is punishable by law.

It is here where the concept of trust is closely linked with another, better known, concept in TaeKwon-Do: Integrity—the ability to know right from wrong. In many ways Integrity and Trust are indistinguishable. For example, if you give your word to someone, you should know it's wrong to go back on that word; it is even worse to lie, claiming that you never gave your word in the first place. When we are true to our words, we build trust. When we are honest, righteous and courteous...we build trust. And when we have trust in one another, it breeds *future* trust.

It cultivates a moral society.

Sadly, the ambition of human beings for power and possession of earthly things has set aside the concepts of honor and integrity, and the feelings and values of people. In the absence of this confidence, we are destined to constantly watch our backs and must be prepared at all times to sleep with the enemy.

I have not lost hope, however, in the possibility of carrying out the wishes of our Founder and striving for an ideal society. I try to bear in mind at all times the lessons given by General Choi Hong-hi and hope that I am able to contribute—even with a mere grain of sand—to building trust in our students and cultivating a world of freedom and justice.

References

General Choi Hong-Hi. 1983. *Encyclopedia of TaeKwon-Do, Vol. 1*. International TaeKwon-Do Federation, Ontario, Canada.

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