

Poomsae in Taekwondo: Meaning and Benefits

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Introduction

Taekwondo (태권도) is a Korean martial art, formed by the founders of the major martial arts schools in Korea in the 1950's including: Changmookwan (창무관), Jidokwan (지도관), Chungdokwan (충도관) among others. These schools still exist in Korea and are well represented across the world, but they gave up a lot of their individual identity to unify under the martial art name and syllabus that was named Taekwondo; embodied by the standards set forth by the World Taekwondo Headquarters, Kukkiwon (국기원). The one overriding principle of Taekwondo over other martial arts is that of unification and coming together as a martial arts family.

People who participate in Taekwondo are correctly referred to as Taekwondoin (태권도인), not Taekwondoka like the Japanese term Karateka, nor Taekwondoists to use a combination of a Korean term with an English suffix.

The practice of Taekwondo has a number of areas of study including: basic movements (kibon kisoool, 기본 기술), continuous free sparring (kyorugi, 겨루기), self-defence (hoshinsool, 호신술) and the breaking of rigid materials (kyeokpa, 격파). Each of these areas bring their own benefits to the Taekwondoin in terms of health, practical abilities, strength, co-ordination etc., with varying degrees of freedom of expression and creativity involved.

There is another element of Taekwondo that also results in these benefits. Due to its strict standards requirements, it is also a vehicle for unification as a result of athletes and Taekwondoin around the world striving to perform it in the same way and to the same technical standard. This area of study is called poomsae (품새). Poomsae used to be written as poomse until March 1st 1987 when it was changed by the Korean Hangul Society. The name comes from the Korean terms “poom” which means movement and “sae” which means position. It roughly translates to being in certain positions and how to move between them.

In Kukkiwon Taekwondo, there are 8 patterns leading up to black belt level (“Dan” holders, yudanja, 유단자) and 9 after black belt. Each pattern is comprised of between 18 and 40 movements generally in the north/south/east/west directions of the compass (where north is the direction the Taekwondoin faces to begin the poomsae). Each poomsae has a different meaning and with it, different connotations for how the poomsae should be performed.

Health Benefits

Poomsae combine all the basic movements of Taekwondo in to a flowing exercise. The benefits to a Taekwondoin in terms of strength are probably the most obvious. When the muscles are signalled to contract quickly in order to generate force for motions, they build strength in those fibres in a concentric manner and the muscle fibres shorten as they generate contractive force. These types of movement are included in the first poomsae for beginners, Taegeuk Il Jang (number 1, 태극 일장).

Another way of building muscular strength is isometric contraction, as popularised by Bruce Lee as a means of muscular development. Isometric contractions are those where opposite pairs of muscle such as the bicep and tricep are contracted with equal or almost equal amounts of tension. These pairs of muscle are more correctly termed agonist and antagonist pairs. An example of isometric strength development is during the upward punch (dangyeo teokjireugi, 단거 킥지르기) in Taegeuk Pal Jang (number 8, 태극 팔장).

The final way of developing strength is when the muscle is under load but is forced to lengthen. This is known as eccentric strength and an example would be the low wedging block (arae hecho makki, 아래 허저 막기) performed slowly in Taegeuk Yuk Jang (number 6, 태극 육장). During this movement, the biceps are slowly lengthened during extension of the arms resulting in a development of eccentric strength. This could also be considered as isometric strength training as the load is being generated by the paired muscle, but as the muscles are lengthening considerably (compared to Pal Jang's dangyeo teokjireugi where the angle between forearm and upper arm changes much less) it is more eccentric strength development.

Aside from the strength building implications, breathing is very important during poomsae performance. This is from a power delivery point of view and also from a cardiovascular or endurance point of view.

Taekwondoin should train so that they are correctly able to breathe in during the preparation part of the movement and exhale forcefully during the action portion of a movement. This regular breathing pattern aids the practitioner in stamina training.

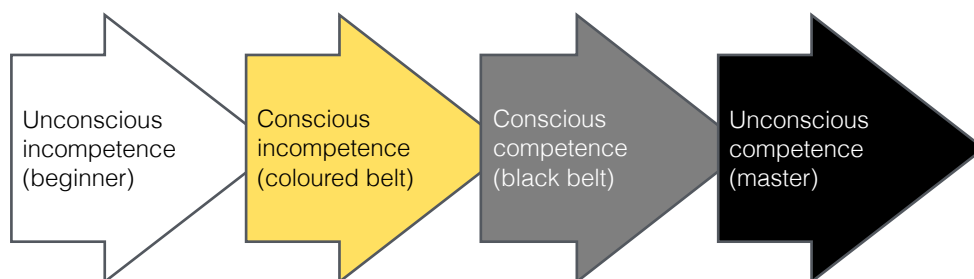
The hard exhalation also enforces the tightening of the abdominal muscles which aid in providing higher levels of kinetic linking to deliver more power. Kinetic linking means that the power delivered is not just that of the moving/striking body part (where $\text{Force} = \text{Mass} \times \text{Acceleration}$ or " $F=ma$ "). Due to the strength of the body all the way down to the floor it means that you include the mass of all the body parts, therefore the force developed can be dramatically increased.

When beginners perform poomsae it is very much a memory exercise or a mental exercise in ensuring they are fixing all the mistakes highlighted by their instructors. Over time they add more power, but in coloured belt

students and low dan ranks there is always a large amount of the mental capacity diverted to purely performing the movements with accuracy. When a master performs poomsae his mind is free of the conscious decisions surrounding movements.

This ties in with the “Four stages of learning” proposed by Noel Burch in the 1970’s. A beginner does not know how they are doing or have the ability to perform the skills very well. After a while they comprehend how much they do not know, bringing about a humbling time for them. Eventually, after applying enough of their master’s corrections as they reach the early dan ranks, they are able to put in a good performance using good techniques, providing they are fully concentrating. When they approach/reach master and the kodanja (high dan holder, 고단자) ranks performing poomsae becomes very natural. The master performs the poomsae without much conscious thought, only stopping to correct issues when the performance didn’t feel right - a high level of skill exists and does not require conscious effort.

This can be interpreted as, using Mr Burch’s terminology:



The final physical benefit after strength, endurance and breathing, mental concentration and natural skill development is balance. When the beginner first joins a Taekwondo class they generally have issues with maintaining their balance during simple kicking, let alone the multiple, jump or flying kicks found throughout the poomsae. There are also sections where the balance must be maintained whilst the Taekwondoin stands on one leg and effectively waves their arms in opposite directions. This requires great core strength and a developed sense of balance coupled with highly dexterous muscles of the foot, leg and hip.

However, when done correctly, even the beginner poomsae of Taegeuk Il Jang (number 1, 태극 일장), Taegeuk Ee Jang (number 2, 태극 이장) and Taegeuk Sam Jang (number 3, 태극 삼장) can provide many benefits to developing balance. For example, to turn correctly during poomsae the weight must be shifted to the ball of the foot with the body weight positioned correctly and then swiftly turned before the foot is put in to the next seogi (stance, position, 서기) in the poomsae.

Using the movement in Taegeuk Ee Jang (number 2, 태극 삼장) as an example, where the practitioner has performed a right arm rising block (eolgool makki, 얼굴 막기) and then pivots on their right foot, turning

through 270°, to land in a correctly dimensioned and balanced stance with their left foot correctly placed. Beginners do this by pivoting on the heel or without due consideration for body weight management causing either over or under turning, or incorrect foot placement when they do turn. With practice this becomes easier as the core strength and sense of balance improve.

Different Ways of Performing and the Meaning of the Different Poomsae

Each pattern has a different symbolic meaning and each has a progression of how this meaning relates to the type of movements in the pattern or how they are performed. Some patterns require large strong movements, whilst others have more rapid flowing combinations like those found in Chinese Kung Fu.

The coloured belt poomsae (taegeuk, 태극) are all based around the trigrams that traditionally surround the Korean um-yang symbol (also called taegeuk) on the Korean flag. Each trigram has it's own meaning, but they all are composed of the same basic constructs - three horizontal lines one above each other, each being either broken or unbroken. Each of the taegeuk poomsae have foot movements and eye directions along these lines.

The black belt poomsae (yudanja poomsae, 유단자 품새) follow different shapes for foot movements and eye direction, with the shape relating to the meaning of the poomsae. Each of the black belt poomsae builds on the characteristics needed of a Taekwondo grandmaster. It is my understanding that no other set of forms or patterns in any martial art has the same progression, designed on how practitioners develop as their skill increases. In Appendix 2 I compare how Karate's kata and ITF Taekwon-do's tul series compare to the progression of technical requirements and physical attribute building that Kukkiwon's poomsae provide.

Taegeuk Meanings and Symbolism

Taegeuk 1 represents the principle of heaven and light (gon, 건) and is represented by the trigram ☰. The beginner is full of potential, but hasn't yet built physical substance.

Taegeuk 2 represents the principle of the lake (tae, 태) and is represented by the trigram ☵. The broken line at the top indicates that in the top of the pattern, the movement is not a step-then-step action (unlike the first two sets going side-to-side). The beginner is building a little force now, lakes can erode rock given enough time, it can kill people by drowning but this likely won't be instantly.

Taegeuk 3 represents the principle of fire (ee, 이) and is represented by the trigram ☲. The broken line in the middle shows that the middle side-to-side set has no step-then-step, it is only a slide forward to extend the stance. This pattern of a broken line in the trigram representing a lack of step-then-step motions continues through all the taegeuk poomsae. Fire is instantly powerful and deadly and the practitioner now has more ability to use force, however they haven't developed the control and stability yet to know when to use it responsibly.

Taegeuk 4 represents the principle of thunder (jin, 진) and is represented by the trigram ☳. Thunder is now distant destruction, the knowledge that danger is present but is less raw and less risky to the bystander.

Taegeuk 5 represents the principle of wind (son, 손) and is represented by the trigram ☴. Wind is everywhere, it is a constant flow throughout the world. There is power present when needed, a tornado for example, and there is a calming influence when required, such as a cooling breeze on a summer day.

Taegeuk 6 represents the principle of water (gam, 감) and is represented by the trigram ☵. While the lake principle has already been described, this covers all forms of water including clouds. The amount of water in the world is reasonably constant, but changes form as required due to the “hydrologic cycle” or “water cycle”. This shows that once you have the power, it will always be present, available when required but not always easily visible.

Taegeuk 7 represents the principle of mountains (gan, 간) and is represented by the trigram ☶. Now that the practitioner has the power, they can develop the stability so in the future they will be able to show others how to develop their power.

Taegeuk 8, the final poomsae for coloured belts, represents the principle of earth (gon, 곤) and is represented by the trigram ☷. The earth is the foundation upon which everything is built. Once this stable foundation is in place, the practitioner is ready for the dan levels or black belt ranks.

Yudanja Poomsae Meanings and Symbolism

Koryo, the first poomsae for black belt holders is named after the Goguryeo (고구려) kingdom in Korea which lasted from 918 to 1392. This era was later renamed Goryeo (고려) and was the basis of the name for the country - Korea. The meaning of the pattern is the principle of Seonbae (선배) which means “learned man”.

After the students have progressed through the (in Taekwondo age terms) childhood ranks of the coloured belts they have become a learned man and are ready for the start of their working career. The Chinese character for Seonbae is the same as the movement lines for the poomsae.

Keumgang is the next black belt poomsae and means diamond, which has the properties of "hardness" and "clarity". The Keumgang Mountain exists on the Korean peninsula, which is regarded as the centre of the national spirit. The Keumgang warrior (Keumgang Yeoksa, 금강 역사) as named by Buddha, represents the mightiest warrior. Both lend a position and movement in this pattern in the shape of Diamond block (keumgang makki, 금강 막기) and the Mountain block (santeul makki, 산틀 막기). The poomsae movement line is symbolic of the Chinese letter for mountain (山). The pattern should be performed powerfully and well balanced so as to befit the black belt's dignity.

Taebaek is the name of a mountain where Tangun, the legendary founder of the nation of Korea, reigned the country. There are numerous sites known as Taebaek, but Mt. Paektu is the background for the naming of the Taebaek poomsae. This poomsae is the third physical attribute required of dan holders. After the knowledge of the learned man in Koryo and the strength in Keumgang, this pattern requires speed and fluidity.

Pyongwon means a plain or field. It is the source of life for all creatures and the field where human beings live their life. This is represented as the first of the mental ranks of the dan holders and is the shortest of the dan poomsae. As this is the poomsae for 4th Dan holders in Korea, it clearly shows that the time for this practitioner is best spent nurturing his own field (his new dojang full of students).

Sipjin refers to the decimal system and the number 10. After spending years training his students in the dojang as a new 4th Dan, hopefully the instructor now has some of his own black belts to assist in training new students, thus enabling him to focus on his own ability now. Often, as they go back to hard training they find that they have had a ten-fold increase in ability. This is due to the fact that they have had to find different ways of explaining things to students and simplifying technical requirements down the simplest understanding.

Jitae means a man standing on the ground with two feet, looking over the sky. A man on the earth represents the way of struggling for human life, such as kicking, treading and jumping on the ground. However because he is looking to the sky, as if to take off, he is imagining a wider viewpoint than he is used to. This is the last of the mental set of the three poomsae in the black belt series, representing that the practitioner is getting ready for the three highest ranks; those of policy setters who regard Taekwondo as a community and family as a whole, rather than their own small part of it.

Chonkwon means the Heaven's Great Mighty. The start of this poomsae for me symbolises the hatching of a new bird, the stretching out of their wings and the flapping of wings to take off. A lot of the movements in the pattern are much more fluid than previous poomsae have been, showing that now the practitioner is beyond the rigidity of the system and is ready to help define it.

Hansu means water, it is the source of substance preserving life and growing all the creatures. As the practitioner has now spread their wings and is helping to build community, setting policies for all of Taekwondo they will now find some people are not as accommodating as they could be. They must learn to flow around these blockages, slowly wearing them down like erosion to make the flow as smooth and streamlined as it could be.

Ilyeo means the thought of a great Buddhist priest of Silla Dynasty, Saint Wonhyo, which is characterised by the philosophy of oneness of mind(spirit) and body(material). It teaches that a point, a line or a circle ends up all in one. Therefore, the poomsae Ilyeo represents the harmonisation of spirit and body - the essence of martial art, after a long training of various types of techniques and spiritual cultivation for completion of Taekwondo practice.

Benefits and Progression

The coloured belt poomsae series builds up physical ability in a clearly defined way, unlike any other martial art series.

Taegeuk 1 - this poomsae has no turns over 180°, which would be difficult for a beginner to do. There are also no exactly 180° turns from a long stance, making it easier to maintain/shift balance, except for the final joonbi position. After kicking, when the practitioner is standing on one leg, there is no landing in long stance. This makes it easier for practitioners to maintain their balance and hold their knee up after kicking, rather than risking falling in to an extended position. There are no complex combinations to speak of in this pattern, all movements are done on a single count with the exception of after the kicks (as a beginner standing on one leg after kicking for too long is not wise).

Taegeuk 2 - this poomsae adds landing in a long stance after kicking, requiring the building of core strength to control this without falling forwards. There is a 270° turn at the top of the pattern into short stance followed by a much easier 180° turn. It is very easy for inexperienced practitioners to do this by spinning, rather than correctly controlling their weight and pivoting under control. The last section of the pattern is a repetitive combination which enables the practitioner to learn combinations, while keeping them simple).

Taegeuk 3 - it is now time for a new stance to be added, back stance. This is where the back knee is bent, and it is the first time that a stance is extended instead of simply stepped from one to the other, and it's important that it transitions to long stance with a completely straight knee. Combinations of movements are performed by double-punching throughout the pattern and in the end section. A challenge for beginners is to change the repetitive combination half-way through the final sequence (two of one combination, followed by two of a different combination).

Taegeuk 4 - adds in simultaneous actions, initially in the 2nd and 4th movement with the pressing block and strike, then in to the inward knife hand strike and rising block (swallowform and neck strike, 제비품목치기). By this point students are able to do individual movements, however combining them and getting the starting positions for both hands correct is difficult. Timing it so that the hand and feet finish moving together is also more difficult when both hands have to move at the same time. Kicks now get more advanced, adding in side kicks - two in a row which is technically challenging for this level as the standing foot has to rotate considerably on each. Also, for the first time a kick is added where the weight is brought back after execution rather than stepping down forwards. This is more difficult to control balance than simply moving forwards with the kick.

In the top section there is a reverse-handed inward block in back stance which is difficult for beginners. The difficulty lies in practitioners getting their stance correct and being able to rotate their body sufficiently far round for the block to be effective. In the previous grade, students often have a T-shaped back stance which, while it's a mistake, can easily be overlooked depending on the student's challenge level and the instructor's ability. In Taegeuk 4 the student cannot get the correct body position and middle block placement without having a correct stance. The student also has to learn to use the palm to block strikes. This is also known as a parry in other combat styles, using a redirection as opposed to a hard impact caused by forearm or knife hand blocking.

Taegeuk 5 - adds in the ability to retract the weight to the rear foot of the long stance, more correctly known as the "forward inflection stance". This requires a sharp explosion of the front thigh muscles and excellent balance control. Two new striking parts are introduced in this pattern - the elbow front and the hammer fist (in two different directions). In Taegeuk 4 the practitioner learnt to execute multiple simultaneous hand techniques. In this pattern they learn to execute a relatively difficult kick (side kick) and a hammer fist that has been learnt for this pattern. The finishing movement is another exercise in advanced balance management: the feet should move quickly, not leaping up or bounding forward, but more like a swift two footed step. Lots of beginners jump over or hop. When they first manage to change their style to stepping down quickly, they then over-balance forwards.

Taegeuk 6 - in most stances in Taekwondo the body is twisted so the shoulder of the lead-leg is forwards. In Taegeuk 4 the student learnt to be able to twist it to be equally square during the reverse-handed inward block. In Taegeuk 6 they learn to counter-rotate it so the opposite shoulder is forward, during bituro makki (twisting block, 비틀어 막기). A turning kick is added in this pattern, with the added difficulty that (normally) the power generated in turning kicks comes a rapid rotation of the waist/hips. This is not possible when the body position is already counter-rotated. The first slow movement is added in this pattern, a low cross block (arae hecho makki, 아래 헤쳐 막기) from parallel stance (naranhi seogi, 나란히 서기).

Taegeuk 7 - tiger stance (beom seogi, 범 서기) is learnt for this poomsae. Often students new to this position tend to incorrectly turn the rear foot out to 90° due to their practice with back stance up to this point. Describing this position as a cat or tiger about to pounce helps to understand why the feet both point forwards. In previous poomsae students have had opportunities to pull their opponent onto a strike (the elbow in Taegeuk 5, the turning kicks in Taegeuk 6) learning from the beginning to generate power by twisting the body. However, in this poomsae there's a really nice sequence where the student has to learn to twist their body to both literally pull the opponent forward and strike forward from that position. This teaches students about not wasting body motion or adding excess movements and to move naturally from one position into the start of the next one.

Taegeuk 8 - The student has integrated kicking into their poomsae before this point and now there are two key advancements; the first being combination kicking - the jumping double kick at the start of the pattern and the switch jumping kick at the rear of the pattern. The other key advancement is the use of the front foot rather than the rear which has been used in every pattern up to this point. There are also "empty steps" in this pattern, where there are steps performed for distance management only rather than performing a technique on each step (slow punches, combinations at the end with only one hand).

All About The Pace

There are a few slow movements during the Taegeuk poomsae series, but there are a lot more in the black belt patterns. Their presence is undeniable, however the reason for having them does not seem to have a simple universal reasoning - unlike the other technical and philosophical areas of poomsae practice.

Most people have a simple explanation, there are slow movements purely for artistic reasons. The poomsae shown by Taekwondoin are not a violent pursuit and have a lot in common with a modern dance in terms of grace, balance and flowing movements. So some masters consider the slow movements in poomsae just that,

an artistic expression in the middle of a pattern. Those same masters often advocate doing the movement slowly without tension, as a breathing exercise while developing a complete circle of hard/fast and soft/slow to show balance in the form.

A different set of masters see them as a physical pursuit, a chance to ensure every muscle is strong as the movement is performed with tension throughout the motion. By doing this contraction throughout the major muscle pairs (e.g. bicep and tricep are an antagonistic pair - each contracts moving the lower arm in the opposite directions) they are all given an equal workout, with the added benefit of maintaining the core tension, building strength in the minor stabilising muscles.

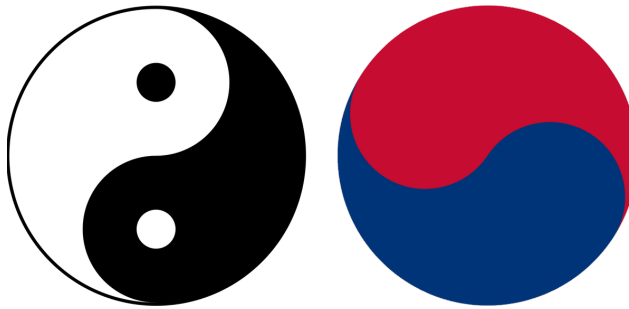
Finally, some grandmasters feel that the slow movements are a chance to build internal power. This is defined as the contraction and strengthening of the fascia throughout the body that forms connected lines from head to toe. It is believed by some that developing this internal power allows for strong movements without the use of “external power” (contraction of the major muscles). This is often practiced by Tai Chi or Kung Fu practitioners, but is not commonly taught in Taekwondo. Some Taekwondo grandmasters advocate the practicing of Taekwondo in a similar way to Tai Chi, slow and balanced rather than fast - practicing in this way may develop this fascia or connective tissue.

Personally I believe in a combination of the first two points of view. I believe that the slow movements add balance to the pattern and certainly aid in the artistic expression of Taekwondo. In addition to this, I believe they should be performed under tension to give the physical benefits to that style of contraction/movement. This allows grading examiners a good way to judge the confidence and skill of the candidate. Expert level practitioners should be confident in performing the movements to the required number of seconds, but lower level practitioners often either hurry them or use jerks in movement rather than smoothness to fill the time.

Philosophy During Poomsae

The central element of the Korean flag (known as Taegeukgi, 태극기) is a half-red, half blue disc. The disc is slightly swirled to represent how each force sometimes dominates the other side but eventually the other side regains balance. This central element is known as “um-yang” (음양) and uses the same Chinese characters as the yin-yang symbol common in Chinese philosophy and Taoism. However, the design differs. Yin-yang is always shown in black and white and generally presented in a vertical split between the two halves, whereas Um-yang is always shown red and blue, and generally presented in a horizontal split with the red (yang) on top. The other main difference is that the yin-yang symbol has a small circle of the opposite colour within each side to show that nothing is ever pure, for example, not solely evil or good there is always a mixture. In

Um-yang there is no such circle, it's purely about the two halves and the fact that they are contained in the same outer circle shows the same concept.



Yin-yang

Um-yang

This philosophy of opposites is clearly demonstrated through Taekwondo basic and poomsae techniques. For example every hand technique has two phases of movement: the preparation phase where the hands are moving from their previous technique to the “starting line” of the new technique and the action phase where the hands are moving to the final position of the new technique.

The preparation phase should be done relatively slowly and with relaxation; this mirrors the concept of um which is soft and flowing like water, circling around things and combining or joining of actions. The action phase should accelerate rapidly to generate maximum force (force equals mass multiplied by acceleration); this mirrors the concept of yang which is hard like rock, a focussed and unyielding determination, using hard angles to cut through softer materials and distancing, gaining the correct range for maximum effect.

Poomsae and all Taekwondo basic techniques demonstrate this philosophy. If students learn about this philosophy they will learn that there are times for both phases. It is not that students should choose a side and stick to it, rather they should choose in any given moment which is the right philosophy to take and when is the right time to change it.

Strangely for a combat system with a strong military background and a points based sport that rewards attacking, it is relevant to point out that each poomsae begins with a defensive action. This is to remind us that as human beings we should take the noble path, beginning with the concept of defensiveness and safety before going to aggression and destruction. As relates to um-yang, the patterns are actually reasonably well balanced between defensive and aggressive actions.

Determining which is defensive and aggressive can be subjective. After researching, I have found that in my opinion the patterns are between 30% and 60% defensive, with Taebaek being the most aggressive and Jitae being the most defensive. A couple of the Taegeuk poomsae came close to those crowns though with Taegeuk 3 being only 31.3% defensive and Taegeuk 6 being 54.8% defensive. The average is 45.2% defensive motions. I've included a table of these considerations as Appendix 1.

An interesting fact to note is that all of the poomsae start with a left handed action. This is believed to symbolise, given that most people are right-hand dominant, that you should start off gentle and only use greater power when it is deemed necessary. When discussing this with my students they questioned it as they said that Pyongwon's first movement is a right hand low knife hand block (sonnal arae makki, 손날 아래 막기). However, when we went through it together I quickly pointed out to them that the first movement was actually a step with the left foot in to a shortcut low wedging block (sonnal arae hecho makki, 손날 아래 헤초 막기).

Benefits Specific To Children

There is no doubt that children's bodies are not just small adult bodies. In comparison to adults, children lack in muscular strength, core stability, co-ordination and concentration. This means that it can be difficult for children to achieve the same accuracy and performance standards as adults (although there are some notable examples where they have).

The first few patterns are reasonably easily achievable to a good standard by young children, but when the student starts to progress through Taegeuk 4 upwards it can be difficult for children to master the co-ordination required to perform simultaneous hand techniques. Even simple hand techniques can be difficult if the child is unable to concentrate sufficiently on what both their hands are doing at the same time. For example, during poomsae when the child performs a low block their non-blocking hand may not retract fully to the waist or their fist may not be fully clenched, even when they perform it correctly during line drills. The reason is that their mental capacity is taken up with remembering the sequence of movements, the direction of travel and the "active" hand. Children generally do not have the mental capacity to deal with the non-blocking hand in an accurate manner resulting in approximations of positions.

The reason Taegeuk 4 and upwards are more difficult is due to movements involving two active hands, demonstrated in the swallowform and strike (jebipoom mokchigi, 제비품 목치기) and movements where the active movement is against the direction of the body turning, for example, the backfist strike during the side kick in Taegeuk 4.

In conclusion, it can be said that practicing these movements involving co-ordination, core strength and muscular strength along with the mental abilities of discipline and concentration during childhood can be of great benefit. It can provide children with a solid foundation to build upon when they reach adulthood. Benefits of practising the poomsae side of Taekwondo can also have positive effects on other sports a child may participate in, alongside improvements seen in academic studies due to the enhanced mental abilities.

Criticisms of Poomsae

A problem other martial artists have with Kukki-Taekwondo poomsae is that there is no official syllabus for deeper applications of the poomsae, aside from the obvious motions being performed. In Japanese Karate the practitioners (karateka) refer to this as “bunkai”, the Korean equivalent is “boonhae” (분해).

The officially Kukkiwon DVDs show a selection of the movements in each poomsae, but Karate often has a set of more subtle applications of each movements that the cursory or low level practitioner would not understand. For example, they explain that a rising block (eolgol makki, 얼걸 막기) may be a strike to the jaw and an inward block (momtong makki, 몸통 막기) may be a hip throw. Japanese Karate practitioners are instructed to imagine those alternative (deeper) alternatives when performing the poomsae.

In 2001, Iain Abernathy’s “Karate’s Grappling Methods” started the modern popularity of considering alternative applications for pattern movements. This was followed in 2006 by “Ch’ang Hon Taekwon-do Hae Sul” by Stuart Anslow, describing the movements in ITF Taekwon-do’s hyung, tul or patterns. Seeing a gap in the market Simon O’Neill published a book called “The Taegeuk Cipher” in 2008, describing his interpretation of movements in Kukki-Taekwondo poomsae and how they could be applied more creatively.

It is important to note that none of the authors mentioned above present their choice of system as the official meaning behind the movements. Notwithstanding, this does not stop some martial arts instructors citing them as proof that there is a hidden system of meanings and it’s being withheld from non-Korean Taekwondo students. They also imply that the founders of the kwans or schools that unified to form Taekwondo, having mostly learnt Karate, never reached ranks of a level high enough to learn these deeper meanings.

I disagree with this. I feel that whilst it may be a fun mental exercise to imagine other things that Taekwondo techniques can be used for, to imply that they are missing, being withheld or that Taekwondo poomsae in themselves don’t offer enough benefit is insulting to the creators of the kwans. Taekwondo has a richer

syllabus compared to other martial arts, so I feel this comes either from jealousy from other martial artists or a lack of understanding in our own practitioners.

Another reason that poomsae is not enjoyed by as many practitioners as we would like is that some people view it as unrealistic for self defence. The directions of movement and combinations used are a bit contrived and would leave the practitioner somewhat unprotected during defence (partially due to the non-active hand being “out of the action”).

Finally, some people believe that poomsae does not allow for individual practitioner’s creativity or expression. The judges and organisers of Taekwondo poomsae competitions have tried to reverse this by making presentation worth 60% of the marks for a performance. Nonetheless, to the untrained eye understanding the difference in presentation between performances is next to impossible; at that level most of the practitioners performances are indistinguishable.

The WTF has recently launched a “creative poomsae” competition too, allowing practitioners to create their own poomsae and express their individuality. There are certain mandatory aspects to the performance but it allows people to freely express themselves.

While this may help popularise Taekwondo poomsae competitions, I feel this is unnecessary for the practitioner. As discussed, with the principle of um-yang, all things must be in balance. This includes both the regimented approach (accordance to standards) in the specified poomsae and the freedom of expression during self-defence, step sparring and free sparring portions of Taekwondo practice.

Appendix 1 - Percentage of Defensive Motions

Below is a list for each pattern for the number of defensive and aggressive motions.

Poomsae	Defensive	Aggressive	Percent Defensive
1 Jang	8	10	44.4%
2 Jang	11	12	47.8%
3 Jang	10	22	31.3%
4 Jang	13	15	46.4%
5 Jang	16	16	50.0%
6 Jang	17	14	54.8%
7 Jang	17	15	53.1%
8 Jang	14	20	41.2%
Koryo	18	29	38.3%
Keumgang	16	13	55.2%
Taebaek	12	28	30.0%
Pyongwon	14	15	48.3%
Sipjin	21	21	50.0%
Jitae	21	14	60.0%
Chonkwon	17	18	48.6%
Hansu	13	22	37.1%
Ilyo	13	14	48.1%

Appendix 2 - Comparison with Japanese Karate and ITF Taekwon-do

Using the kata (Japanese term for their forms) listed by the Japan Karate Association (<http://jka.or.jp/en/>) as the largest Karate association in the world, I compared how the techniques progress through from the beginner's pattern Heian Shodan to Bassai Dai (the pattern for Dan-holders in Karate).

The Japanese kata do not have the same sense of progression in skill development that Kukki-Taekwondo poomsae have. For example, the first kata, Heian Shodan, has beginner students stepping off from the four directional lines at 45° angles, using hammerfists and knife hand blocks and retracting their stances like Taeguk 5 (however, not as much of a body weight shift). The first kata has no kicking at all, but in the second kata, Heian Nidan, the student is straight in to simultaneous hand striking while side kicking as seen in Taeguk 5 without a much simpler progression through kicking techniques. It also has counter twisting of bodyweight comparable to Taeguk 6 and scissor blocks resembling Taeguk 7 (although without body twisting to add power, the removal of this makes the move simpler to perform).

Heian Godan, the 4th Kyu kata has a large/high jump in it, landing in a powerful downward cross block. The theory behind this movement is jumping over a weapon attack to the feet. Although this feels as if it would be the least efficient way of dealing with a weapon attack (with a preference to either cutting in close or extracting out of range).

The 3rd Kyu (Kup) kata, Tekki Shodan has a resemblance to pyongwon with numerous side to side stepping and backfists reinforced under the elbow - it even starts from the same joonbi position.

Overall there are a lot of similar movements between Japanese Kata and Kukki-Taekwondo poomsae, however the absence of a logical progression of technical difficulty is apparent. The last two kata before Dan grading, Tekki Nidan and Tekki Sandan are remarkably similar in terms of the movements performed and the feeling of the pattern, and a lot of the other kata jump around in technical difficulty and don't progress in the same linear way. The kata are also longer on average than Kukki-Taekwondo poomsae having a mean of 26 movements for each of the first 8 patterns, compared to the Taeguks averaging 21.

ITF Taekwon-do's patterns, called Tul, are a cross between the two. They have better progression in technical requirements than Karate's kata, but still (in my opinion) do not match Kukki-Taekwondo's logical path.

The first ITF tul, Chon-Ji, is a very good pattern for beginners. It is very simple involving mainly low blocking and punching, with a couple of inner-forearm blocks. However, there are no kicks in this pattern which is surprising for a Taekwon-do pattern. The second tul, Dan-gun, again progresses nicely. It gets a little advanced quite quickly as it requires knifehand strikes, simultaneous both-arm blocking, a small weight retraction step but the movement between stances is not too difficult, so this would be a good progression. The third tul, Do-san, does not seem to advance much aside from the addition of a front-kick (ap chagi), and a turning-backward-step - the tul does not include many new techniques or requirements.

As the practitioner learns Won-hyo, there is a sense at first that things are going to get more difficult, but Yul-gok is next. This pattern is very dull and repetitive with the main elements comprising of sitting stance punching, front kick and inner-forearm blocking. There is a target-hitting elbow strike, but that is the only saving grace in the tul.

Then the practitioner learns the pleasant start to Joong-gun, but is quickly let down as the movement between stances in this pattern seem to involve a lot of returning to a stable, almost feet together position before stepping out. This does not require the core strength that some of the higher Kukki-Taekwondo poomsae do, so seems a little out of place in the progression, as does the next tul, Toi-gye. This poomsae is very repetitive and should be something a high-Kup practitioner should be able to do relatively easily.

The last two tul Hwa-rang and Choong-moo are more interesting, with Hwa-rang's rapid footwork sections and turning kicks and Choong-moo's back kicks and jumping side kick. The 360° jump and spin seems a little strange (there is no real action after landing) making it feel like the high jump in Karate's Heian Godan but intentionally made a little harder. It is as if the creator of the tul did not have the understanding of the reason behind Karate's Heian Godan jump.

ITF's tul are even longer still, averaging 29 movements over the first 8 patterns. They seem to be generally better at providing a road-mapped journey for practitioners in terms of technical and physical development than Karate, but in my opinion Kukki-Taekwondo's Taegeuk series is by far the best.