



Tang Soo Do

A Journey to a Way of Life

by
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Tang Soo Do has its origins in Korea almost 2000 years ago, but to me its existence was unknown until September 1993 when my son decided that he wanted to learn Karate at the Chatteris Tang Soo Do Club. Having always had an interest in Martial Arts, I decided to go along and watch. The watching lasted for a few lessons by which time the urge to take part was strong enough to overrule the common sense of a forty plus adult. The first lesson ; it was a lot easier watching than taking part, and the feeling of “I ‘ll never be able to do that” began to creep in, followed by definite signs of a slight error in judgement and watching is definitely easier than taking part. At the end on reflection, I had found some parts of the lesson demanding, but I had thoroughly enjoyed myself. From that day I was hooked, I found myself waiting for the next lesson almost as the last one finished.

As time passed I began to feel fitter, healthier and I had even lost some weight, but more than that I was addicted, hooked, call it what you will, I looked forward to Mondays and Fridays. By mid November I had learnt forms one and two, and the first five one-steps, when it came to free-sparring well that was different, provided my opponents were three feet tall and didn't move I was OK. Hips used to facing forwards for forty years don't take kindly to sudden twists and turns, and my roundhouse kick would have severely damaged a knee at best. The next hurdle was a mock grading (a terrifying ordeal in front of people you know) as opposed to the grading (a more terrifying ordeal in front of people you don't know) which was to follow.

None the less I survived the ordeal and I would be grading on the 12th December 1993. It was then I found out about the 'break'. Not a big thing you might say, but for someone having difficulty in curling his toes back when kicking a bag, breaking an inch thick piece of wood was just about all I wanted. I drove my family insane worrying about curling my toes back for the 'Big Break'. The day came and, along with my son and many other white belts, I attended my first grading, overwhelming, terrifying, nerve racking and many other descriptive nouns spring to mind. Am I in the right place, did they call my name, where do I stand, what should I do, what did they say? Looking back it seemed far worse than it actually was, did I break the board, yes and my toes survived.

Graded as an Orange belt (8th Gup) and less like a square peg in a round hole, my stretch gradually improved and my hips at last gained a little more movement. It was soon March, and the next grading had arrived, my nerves were no better, but I had the comfort of knowing what to do, where to be, and recognising faces and new friends from before. Orange tag(7th Gup) and training twice a week, reasonably fit, having lost almost a stone in weight and feeling different inside I was enjoying every minute of Tang Soo Do. June brings a Green belt (6th Gup); September and now Green tag (5th Gup). Wait a minute, can we go back, things are moving very fast now. I have started to attend an extra class whenever possible, to keep up with the knowledge and ability that I should now have. Whilst in my head are all the forms, hand, foot and self defence techniques that I have learnt, I feel like the tip of an iceberg, just managing to keep my head above water. How do the children manage?

Soon November arrives and its grading again. My instructor considered me ready to grade, but I admit to some reservations. Being allowed to grade for Brown belt, after a year was hard to believe. I had confidence in my limited abilities, my knowledge and understanding of our art, and knowing that I would try my utmost, I attended the grading.

Over that hurdle and now a Brown belt (4th Gup), I want the time to pick up all the things I dropped on the way, time to learn thoroughly the techniques already practised, time to understand the theory of what I have learnt, time to consolidate. In fact the philosophy of the belt system sums up how I feel as a brown belt. Reflecting on that first year, I realise that you should have confidence in your instructor to assess your abilities and push you forward at the time when you are ready. I progressed to Brown tag in March 1995, and I was fortunate to attend the European Championships held in Italy during June of that year. This was an experience I would not have missed for anything, being part of a National team to compete in another country, with all the comradeship that develops over those few days, which over two years later is still as strong.

Only as the grading for Red belt approached did I realise this time things were different, in the past I felt as though I was rushing along a path not noticing the scenery along the way. Now it was what I wanted to do, something I had prepared for, a step I needed to take. The grading over, and still wanting to concentrate on all that I had learnt over the past months, no longer did I feel swept along by the grading cycle, I felt that I must assimilate all that I had learned before moving on to the next step along a path which was becoming clearer as the time passed. Nine months later I graded for Red tag, now for the first time feeling that I had the ability to reach the goal of Black belt, the light at the end of the tunnel was brighter and clearer than before.

During the past four years Tang Soo Do has changed my life without me being conscious of the change. I now feel much more at ease with myself and my surroundings, somehow my perspective of things has changed and yet my views and opinions remain intact. I cannot imagine my life without Tang Soo Do, I suppose one way of describing it would be "a calm and peace of mind". I would not have described myself as particularly tolerant or too mindful of other peoples opinions and yet I now find myself more aware of other people and their feelings, a strong opinion co-existing with the ability to understand and appreciate another point of view.

Over the past year as a Cho Dan Bo, I have been fortunate to have another member of my family start to practice Tang Soo Do, this gave me the chance to retrace my steps. The opportunity to refine the techniques that I have learned, whilst helping someone else, has provided me with a better understanding of Hyungs and Il Soo Sik Dae Ryun. But more than that I realise that I have come full circle from my beginning in Tang Soo Do to the end of one path, retraced my steps from the beginning only to now find myself not at an end, but at another beginning.

Tang Soo!