



How to Pick a Taekwondo (Martial Arts) School

When I joined my Taekwondo organization, I had no idea what I was joining. I was very lucky. Now, after 45 years in the same organization, my friends ask me how to choose a martial arts school. Based on what I've learned, here are some factors I recommend considering.

First, does the school focus on the traditional martial art of Taekwondo, which draws on lessons passed down over the centuries, or is it a school where the instructor has created his own style, based primarily on his own experience and what he thinks will be effective? A school that practices traditional Taekwondo will focus not only on sparring, but also on the fundamentals: basic techniques and forms (to develop speed, power, balance, and accuracy), one-step sparring (to develop timing and the ability to judge distance), sparring (to integrate all of these with movement), and breaking (for confidence and focus). While you might want to start sparring on your first day in class, a school that allows you to do that is not laying the foundation you need; for example, how can you start sparring before learning the proper way to perform basic kicks? Without a solid foundation, skills cannot solidify and form the framework on which more advanced techniques can be built.

Another way you can tell if the school teaches traditional Taekwondo is to learn about the instructor's philosophy and heritage. Does the instructor treat others with respect, including both his students and his master instructor? Instructors grounded in traditional Taekwondo will show respect for their own instructors and will be able to trace their Taekwondo lineage back through generations of masters and grand masters. And they will continue to stay in contact with their own instructor, to continue their own learning. So, asking a potential instructor about his instructor, and about his instructor's instructor, can help you identify whether that potential instructor is following the traditional path of Taekwondo. And of course a master instructor should be someone you (and your kids, if you are thinking about Taekwondo for them) can respect as a role model not just in Taekwondo technique, but also in other aspects of life.

Traditional Taekwondo instructors will also emphasize that the art should be used only to defend yourself or others and will encourage helping those less able, rather than having a cut-throat approach. Consistent with this, traditional Taekwondo promotes a disciplined but supportive, family atmosphere. Further, traditional Taekwondo instructors will not focus solely on tournament-style fighting (which often emphasizes speed over power and concentrates more

narrowly on how to score points), but rather will work with their students on all elements of Taekwondo as a lifetime discipline.

You should also find out whether the local instructor is part of a larger organization that supports him. For example, being part of a larger organization may mean you will be able to benefit from guest instructors or seminars. And access to a larger organization also becomes important for testing for black belt. Traditionally, black-belt tests should have at least three judges, and they should be independent from the master instructor whose students are being judged, so a larger organization will have more master instructors to draw on. And if you have any intention to be in the martial art for the long run, then this is an important consideration, as increasingly higher-ranking judges are necessary for promotion to higher degrees of black belt.

You should also think through a number of practical considerations. One is cost. Costs may include fees for classes, for tests, for uniforms and equipment, and maybe for other things. Ask for a fee schedule. And to understand some of these costs, you may need to know how often tests are held and how many tests it takes, for example, to reach black belt (which may depend on how many belt colors the school uses). Some schools require students to enter into a long-term contract, even though they know that most beginners quit before earning a black belt and so will be stuck paying fees even after quitting. In contrast, traditional Taekwondo does not guarantee promotion from one belt to the next within a set time limit. Quite the opposite: in traditional Taekwondo, students must practice at specific belt levels for a minimum amount of time before their instructors will consider promoting them. Advancing to a higher belt is based on the student's progress (which varies from student to student), not on the mere passage of time. Another practical consideration is the school's longevity. Unfortunately, some instructors open up a school in a store front, but can't afford to pay the rent and so eventually close, which may leave you, the student, stranded, despite all the time and effort you've put in.

In evaluating a school, you should be sure to watch a class. Is it disciplined or unstructured? Traditional Taekwondo requires focus and concentration to advance and avoid injuries, so seeing how the instructor controls the class is important. Do the students respect their instructors and higher belts? This may vary somewhat based on ages of the students, but respect, discipline, and concentration are key. And when and how long is the class? This matters not just so it will fit your schedule, but also because there is a lot to learn and practice; indeed, it is important that students attend most every class, since topics missed may not be repeated again soon, if ever.

In the end, trust your gut. You should feel very comfortable asking these questions. A good instructor understands the importance of a good fit with his or her students. If the above questions are answered to your satisfaction, then this class may be a good fit. If not, keep looking. And if at any time before black belt you become uncomfortable, then consider a change. Talk to the instructor

or the master instructor. But don't wait too long to make that decision. In traditional Taekwondo, once a student becomes a black belt, the student and instructor have a mutual obligation to each other for all things related to Taekwondo, which means that changing instructors after black belt may be difficult.

As I said at the outset, I was lucky when I picked my school, even though I didn't at the time know what to look for. But now that I do know, I hope these thoughts will help you make a wise decision.

Grand Master Rick Warren