

MY LIFE AND TAEKWONDO

By Margaret S.
The Studio

I can only write about my life and Taekwondo by including The Studio and specifically Master Amitis Pourarian. Nearly four years ago I met Master P when I interviewed her for a story on her new no-contact program, Wise Warriors. Her enthusiasm woke in me that desire for the physical pursuit that Taekwondo entails, and I joined.

Good things start with desire and come to be with effort. My Taekwondo journey is the same. Taekwondo wasn't entirely new to me when I started at The Studio, since I had gone up through red/black belt some 12 years or so earlier with a different school. A broken hand and life circumstances resulted in my not achieving black belt at that time, and when I heard about the Wise Warrior program, I saw the possibility of accomplishing my goal of reaching black belt. Through The Studio I was able to do that.

In the period between attaining my black belt and the present time, life has continued in all its myriad ways and forms, some pleasant, some not so. It is always our choice how we respond to what is happening around us and to us, how we take it, how we fight it, and how we allow any adversities to sap our energy or to bolster our strength. Taekwondo helps us to choose the way of growth.

I am not an athletic person, but I like to be physically fit and Taekwondo fills something in my life that I don't get any other way. Working out at the gym, or carrying out home exercise programs have always failed with me because they are boring, progress is hard to measure, and there is something missing. Taekwondo provides a way to remain physically fit while adding other aspects to a full and active life that are not there with other methods I have tried.

I cannot overemphasize the influence that Master P has had in my continuing in Taekwondo. My personal contact with her has been limited, since I have only so much time at the school, and Master P has not always been my instructor. But have one lesson with her and it will be unforgettable and stick in your mind for a long time. Her humor, her physical skill in the art of Taekwondo, her never-failing enthusiasm for the work, her ability to know and care about every student in The Studio, is amazing.

Master P and her understanding and practice of her art, in spite of my own limited contact and understanding of her particular journey, has somehow had an influence on me that belies the obvious. This is not an advertisement for Pourarian's Taekwondo, this is an essay on my own life with Taekwondo, but The Studio has been an integral part of that. I didn't just go to the Studio for my lessons, I completely unintentionally and unknowingly, at first, became part of something that adds to my life in ways I did not expect. My Taekwondo journey would have been completely different in any other setting, and most likely, would not even exist. But even from the point of view of my incomplete experience, Master P and her school exemplify the best in Taekwondo in all four areas of life's goals: spiritual, mental, physical, and social.

Spiritual: The spirit of Taekwondo, like any spiritual pursuit – perhaps any pursuit in any category of goodness, generally is not something you acquire all at once. You cannot buy spirit, or steal it, or borrow someone else's. Spirit begins as a seed inside. It starts with desire and grows with nurturing and care. As it grows, you begin to notice that it is there. To me, the martial spirit is that can-do spirit that makes you continue when things are hard. It is unlike the connection with God, but it is related. In my mind, martial spirit is the part of our spirit which helps us to go forth and conquer. The spirit that says have confidence, stand up for yourself, do not let yourself be overcome. The spirit that says whatever your talents and abilities happen to be, you can improve on that, you can do right, and you can grow.

Pourarian's fosters the martial spirit. The student oath of Pourarian's Taekwondo is different than for other schools, and it illustrates what is unique about the dojang.

Pourarian's Taekwondo Student Oath

- I will have the confidence and discipline to take on responsibility and be accountable for my actions.
- I will respect, support and show loyalty to my family, dojang, and community.
- I will be compassionate and make a positive difference in the world.
- I will commit to my own personal growth and development.
- I will practice living in a state of peace and gratitude.
- I will exemplify the spirit of Taekwondo.
- I will be fierce and fearless yet humble.
- I will contribute to the posterity of Taekwondo by inspiring others.

There is no life without spirit, and all of those statements have something important to do with spirit. Being intangible, spirit is difficult to write about, to point out, identify, and nail down, but you can see it in others, and recognize it in yourself. While not something physical that can be touched and handled, spirit is, I think, the most important element of any human enterprise. It begins with desire and grows by effort. It diminishes when it is not fed, and the way to feeding the spirit is not easy. It requires diligence, mindfulness, awareness, a search for the truth.

Master P exemplifies the martial spirit in the way she approaches life. Every moment is a new one with her, she is never mindlessly repeating what she has done before, but is always thinking, growing, exploring. Her whole being is created new each day. Watching her perform in the art of Taekwondo you can feel the spirit powering all her actions, giving her performance a dimension that transcends the physical. The example inspires and motivates, and this has been my experience at Pourarian's: the chance to encourage and grow that intangible but obvious martial spirit.

Mental: The mental part of Taekwondo includes memorization: tenets, oath, Korean words, and most of all, the forms and how to do them right. It encompasses the building of the brain's ability

to connect with the body in ways it has not done before. This is more difficult when starting late in life, when many parts of your daily activities have fallen into habitual patterns.

From the very first form, from the basic kicks, stances, blocks, and punches, Taekwondo asks you to move your arms this way while moving your legs that way, all the while doing certain movements sequentially and others simultaneously. When you get used to moving one way, the next form may ask you to do just the opposite and the difficulty and frustration start all over again as they did with the first form you tried. You start at the beginning with each form to develop muscle memory and create brain pathways. One form becomes habit, and the next one mixes it all up again. This constant challenging of the very way you move, stand, react, I think is the most important in keeping the brain able to think clearly and react quickly.

Master P is especially good at keeping those new pathways opening up and developing. Every class includes some new way of looking at Taekwondo, a new way to approach it, a new way to make it fun, and a new exercise or game that challenges you to follow a pattern in a way you haven't done before.

Physical: The physical is the most obvious aspect of Taekwondo, the one you most likely think about when you consider martial arts. It follows the pattern of other sports: continual and progressing practice to develop your skill and ability to perform. Starting out, I have been awkward and slow, and by practice and time spent, this improves. I'm thankful that the emphasis is on increasing our own ability because, as in any other skill, comparing your efforts to the experts can be more than daunting. While I cannot ever aspire to match the experts in martial arts, I can keep improving on my own performance day by day, and there is a great satisfaction in movement, the use of the body, the development of skill.

Martial arts are indeed an art, as well as a sport, and each person who practices Taekwondo does it in their own unique and personal way, just as an artist will put himself into a work they create. What you create of yourself in Taekwondo will be different than what someone else creates.

I am thankful for this physical aspect of Taekwondo, because I can see the difference in my strength, flexibility, endurance, from what I know it would be if I had not participated. Each form progresses in difficulty. We have goals that we have to reach, and tests that we must pass to progress. All these things keep our Taekwondo journey fresh and real, and motivate us to continue. There is no being bored with Taekwondo, you are too busy trying to achieve that kick, or get that movement right that you have a habit of messing up. The requirements keep us able to move even as we progress in age and our abilities tend to lessen, not advance. Taekwondo is demanding enough and has enough variety that it continually adds to our abilities as it maintains the abilities we have.

Master P exemplifies the physical side of Taekwondo as well. Watching her test for 7th level was an experience! Fast, powerful, and effective, her skills are as inspiring as her instruction. In daily instruction at the dojang, we don't see her skills at the highest level, because she is not performing, she is focusing on her students and their needs. But when we do see her perform, it is with amazement that we watch and admire. But Master P exemplifies the art in every way. She doesn't do things to show off, she does performances and demonstrations in a context that

always shows her to be, indeed, fierce and fearless, yet humble. She emphasizes that she also is always working to improve. And she always considers each student seen against their own abilities and accomplishments, never comparing one student to another in performance and aptitude.

Social: The social aspect is one that I never really sought out, but it unavoidably grew on me as I participated in the dojang. In Wise Warriors, it has been a joy to work with the great spirits that work beside me in this effort. When we tested and passed for our first degree black belt, it was as if my own experience had been doubled and tripled by accomplishing it with others. Their efforts were inspiring to me, and their overcoming of their own challenges in life. Not only in Wise Warriors, but in all the classes in which I have participated, the cumulative effect of the joint effort adds not only to the experience, but it keeps me going. I work longer with more effort and strength in the group than I would on my own. Belonging to the dojang, cheering for others, seeing our school overcoming in a tournament, all creates a special camaraderie that I feel is unique to our dojang. Certainly, I did not feel it when I was in a different school, in my previous experience. Loyalty and responsibility come in to this aspect as well.

Master P also exemplifies the social part of Taekwondo. She takes an interest in each of her students. In a class, she lets students know what they can improve, and she tells them something they are doing right, so that they know and are encouraged. No matter how much the school grows, she knows each student by name, and knows their strengths and weaknesses. She keeps track of students' progress and notices if they decline. Master P provides social events, school-only tournaments, kids camps, family activities, dance parties, and the annual summer picnic event. She encourages every aspect of the growth of her students.

Though I have emphasized the importance of Master P and The Studio, all this is not to gain points with Master P – she's way too clearheaded and advanced for that, anyway. The point is, that my life in Taekwondo has been influenced more than anything by Master P and her dojang. I cannot overemphasize the importance of Pourarian's Taekwondo in my life with Taekwondo. With a different owner and master, nothing would be the same. My Taekwondo journey would be entirely different or, most likely, entirely nonexistent. Her choice of tenets and student oath, that as far as I know are unique to her school, appear to be what she follows and strives for in her own life. She provides an example of those tenets and qualities and actively and effectively teaches them to her students. Every day, in hundreds of different ways, she upholds UWTA standards and furthers the growth of her school and her own pilsung.

During one of her Food for Thought sessions, Master P said that when people ask her why she does all the things she does – which includes many accomplishments outside of Taekwondo – she tells them this. She comes from a part of the world where women are not allowed to do many of the things she has accomplished. So being here, and being able and allowed to do much – that's what she does. She does it because she can, and she knows what it is like not to be able, and not to be allowed. She wants to use this freedom to act according to her desire and will, to achieve what is important to her. And she wants to share it with others.

Nothing personal, Master P – it's just all true. You inspire. And with that inspiration, we can all be helped to make the most of ourselves and reach out for our own pilsung.