

# Learning to be a Survivor: The Liberating Art of Tae kwondo

Linda C. Pearson



## Apprentissage de la survivance: l'art libérateur du Tae kwondo

Une femme sortie troisième aux compétitions internationales de 1978 raconte sa transformation à partir de victime de l'agression mâle à praticienne experte dans l'art de la défense personnelle.

Like a lot of women I started martial arts training after I had been attacked. Although I had been luckier than a lot of women in that I had escaped being raped, the experience left me shell shocked. In 1966, in London, England, I had met a man at a dance who chatted me up and offered me a lift home. On the way he stopped the car in Hyde Park and attacked me. I remember distinctly that he was crazy. He was blabbering nonsense while I tried, with panic rapidly expanding in my chest, to talk what was happening into something else. When he grabbed me, I knew I should hit him in the groin. (Even my mother had told me what to do.) Except that I couldn't do it. He was telling me he was going to rape me and beat me, but I didn't want to hurt him. Even while I struggled pathetically with him, I had the sudden and horrible realization that, if it were between him and me, clearly it was going to be him. Only luck saved me. In my struggling my elbow hit the door handle, which was concealed in the customized interior. I leaped out of the car and ran like hell. He tore after me, I think until I flagged down a passing vehicle.

'Please,' I panted to the man at the wheel, my hair dishevelled and my dress torn, 'Help me, please, there's a man. . .'

One of the women in the back seat leaned forward. 'Just drive on,' she said, and they drove away and left me.

My two methods of handling danger had been to talk my way out of it, or to solicit help from others. In this instance both had failed, and I hadn't been able to resort to violence in my own defense. Even as a pre-women's liberation, 1966, flower-child, I knew it was a sad statement on how I valued myself when I chose the survival of a vicious, calculating, mentally unbalanced man over myself. When I realized this I knew I had to learn to fight for myself. Martial Arts seemed a likely way to learn how to be a survivor.

The first martial art I tried was a hapkido class taught at San Francisco State University, where I was a student. Hapkido is

a very complicated Korean style which combines throwing, falling, kicking, punching, and breaking. I was the only female in the class and the instructor expected the same performance from me as the other students gave. At the time I agreed with him, so I sweated, strained and felt embarrassed and scared a lot. I couldn't do one push-up and I was very stiff from a lifetime of avoiding activity. I was like a kid with a reading disability who simply can't keep up with the class, no matter how she tries. Of course, I gave up hapkido.

I didn't try a martial art again until I came to Toronto and took Tae kwondo. Tae kwondo is another Korean martial art, which I am convinced, is by far the easiest for women to learn. About 70% of all the aggressive techniques involve the legs, and all movements, including punches and the blocks, are powered by the hips. Because women tend to have large hips and long legs, they can adapt well to this sport.

Actually, women are suited to Tae kwondo for a number of reasons. For one, they have never been taught how to fight and so they don't have a lot of bad habits to break and unlearn. Also, women tend to be more flexible and graceful than men. Many have studied gymnastics or ballet and that puts them at a distinct advantage, since Tae kwondo is much more like dancing than hockey or football.

Speaking for myself, however, I was at no advantage at all. I had no previous athletic training in anything, and I began the whole business feeling too old, too uncoordinated—and just generally hopeless. I wore false eyelashes to class for three months because my mascara smeared when I sweated. I couldn't get used to sweating a great deal, yelling unintelligible phrases, and ruining a great hairdo for an hour in the dojo.

But I stuck with it. Partly, I was able to because the instructor was wonderful. I had heard about Mr. Park Jong Soo in San Francisco, and it was because of his reputation that I looked him up when I came to Toronto. Mr. Park is one of the world's greatest martial artists. His grace, agility, control and power are inspirational. However, it was probably his ability to judge his students' limitations, and his patience that made him the best instructor for me. Through Mr. Park I learned to train hard and regularly, and have patience.

Within a matter of months I began feeling very differently about myself. For one thing, I had the sense of well being which comes from regular, strenuous exercise. I developed an

agility to my movements and a resistance to fatigue and stress. For another thing, I began to look better. I noticed a line down my stomach where the muscles were pulling in, and my buttocks, which had always been flat and shapeless, were becoming firm and round. My feelings about my body were indicative of an overall change in my perceptions of myself. I began to feel like a person to be reckoned with, strong and competent. I began to feel powerful, emotionally and physically. Like most women, I had begun training with no notion at all of my own physical power. I vacillated between thinking either that I lacked the strength to crush an ant with a fly swatter, or that, if I smacked someone, he would disintegrate like the Wicked Witch of the East. The first time I accidentally made hard contact, I was prostrate with remorse. My sparring partner had stepped in as I threw a punch and I struck him square in the solar plexus. I was terrified that I had done him some unspeakable damage, but he only gasped a bit and said that would teach him to keep his block up. A sweet soul.

Although Mr. Park actively discourages his students from hurting each other, accidents do happen. I can't recall the first hard blow I took, but I have taken my share. Some of these have made me angry and some, too, have taught me to keep my block up. There have been others that have simply made me cry. I was very ashamed the first few times this occurred. I bowed to the flag (a necessity under any circumstance) and fled the dojo to hide in the washroom. More recently I have continued with whatever I have been doing with tears running down my face.

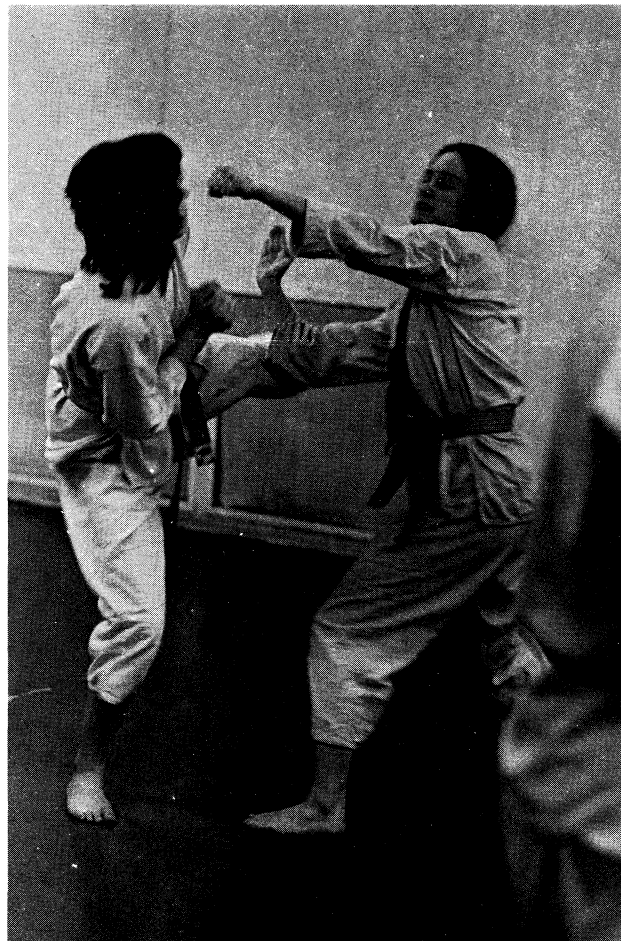
I think the male students appreciate having women at the club. Tae kwondo is a sport which tests everyone's mettle, makes all students aware of their fears and weaknesses. Because the women speak freely about their vulnerabilities they help the men to be more comfortable with theirs. Also, Tae kwondo is

nonsexist in that it clearly rates students by skill, not sex. Bowing to women with higher belts is a liberating experience for some of the men, who otherwise maintain only traditional relationships with women. In turn, the women have profited from the respect and comradeship we have shared with the men. As a girl I was never an athlete. I never joined a sports club or learned about team spirit the way boys do in the Little Leagues. It was in Tae kwondo, as a woman, that I became one of the team and part of the club. This camaraderie often has been the force which sustained me when professional pressures would have made it easy to give up training.

I am as proud of my black belt as I am of my Ph.D. in Psychology. Quite frankly, in some ways it was harder for me to get. Although I worked hard in Psychology, academia was a familiar area. Tae kwondo tested me on an entirely different nonverbal level. I had to experience my fear close up and I had to learn to overcome it. I am confident there will never be for me another episode like that one in London. In fact, several years ago four men stopped me in an alley and threatened to pull me into their car. This time I didn't try to talk my way out of danger, or look frantically about for someone to help. I didn't even think. Instead, still clutching my brief case, I dropped into fighting stance and waited for the first one to make a move. The four of them looked from one to the other in astonishment. Then they drove away.

Dr. Pearson is a Psychologist in private practice in Toronto. As well as a career with counselling women, she conducts individual, marital (sexual), and family therapy. She has lectured extensively on the Psychology of Rape and has taught Rape Defense to Women.

A first degree black belt in Tae kwondo, she placed third in the women's division when she represented Canada at the World Tae Kwondo Championships in Oklahoma City last October.



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