

# CHOI 최재도

## ONE MARTIAL ART AND A MIDDLE-AGED MAN



It's often assumed that if you haven't already taken up a martial arts in your youth, then it might be folly to try as middle age sets in. We sent out our occasional action man **Graeme Wilcockson** to find out if it's true

**THE STUDENT**

**Charyeot : attention**

This is a bad idea. It's cold, wet and windy and I'm trudging towards the station in the evening rush hour. The London commute is something I haven't done for almost 15 years, and I haven't missed it. Surrounded by angry, sour faces in a packed train carriage I wonder whether taking my first ever martial arts class in this mood is wise. I'm stiff, irritable and tired. I do have an urge to punch things right now — but the people I'm about to meet are sure going to be better at it than me and I'm going to be an easy target.

I know nothing about martial arts. My sole fighting experience involves a one-off bout against Steven Hayter who stamped

on my match-winning conker at middle school. I took a few half-hearted yoga and tai-chi classes at university, but nothing which involved potential contact. Now I'm about to discover the world of Choi Kwang Do (CKD), a Korean martial art. Created in the late 1970s, CKD is a non-competitive form with its roots in taekwondo. Like many others, the art provides a solid grounding in self-defence and includes a number of last-resort retaliatory strikes. Its key difference is a greater focus on fluidity and flexibility than the rigid strikes of its parent discipline. It is particularly well-suited to children and older students where it places less stress on the joints; and as I have all the fluidity and flexibility of a Sherman tank, I sense I am in for a challenging evening.

**Gyeongnye : bow**

As I arrive at the South London *dojang* I'm greeted by a beaming instructor, who introduces herself as Gaia. Her enthusiasm is infectious, and any lingering doubts I have are shed within minutes. I watch the last 15 minutes of the current class, composed almost entirely of young children and note the level of respect they give the instructor. Anyone whose attention drifts is gently reminded of this need for respect. In fact, respect becomes the watchword of the evening. Respect the instructor, respect the flags, respect the dojang, respect the code, respect everyone around you. The final act is to straighten the *dobok* or uniform before leaving the floor, respecting yourself — and

## MOVE IT



I immediately feel somewhat guilty and conspicuous mooching about in my faded t-shirt and sweatpants.

As the children's class ends, I meet Mr Julian Johnson, the Chief Instructor who will lead the next session. Two other newbies and I will join the group, which is now made up of people of all ages, for a warm-up before learning some basic blocks on our own. Then we'll rejoin the class for a group exercise, before stretching and formally ending the evening.

### Chunbi : ready

The warm-up begins with bowing and reading aloud the pledge and principle values of the class; again carried out in a patient and respectful manner. The warm-up begins, and it's eerily familiar as I recognise moves and stretches from those tai chi classes all those years ago. I tell myself that if my brain can remember these moves, so can my body. It reluctantly does, but not without some serious objection from the hamstrings. Lots of high knees and elbows are introduced, and with a bit of a bead on, I'm ready to learn some blocks.

### Sijak : begin

My instructor for the basic blocks and punches is Miss Mecik. Any first name informality is set aside, but as I'm learning to avoid getting punched and because my instructor is probably very good at it, I'm ok with this arrangement. All instructors and assistants are referred to in the same formal manner, and the level of respect never wavers whether they are in the

vicinity or not.

I immediately discover that my first problem is not with my blocking arms, but with my feet. I appear to have two left ones and neither are where they are supposed to be. Miss Mecik comes over and rearranges me like an Action Man figure and I'm finally in the correct stance. Legs notwithstanding, the actual block manoeuvre is fairly straightforward and common sense. Forearm up, out and round, rotating through the shoulder and hips, deflecting the attack away from the head. As expected, it's largely biomechanics, using the entire body to generate force and momentum and eliminating redundant or unproductive movement. Like a tennis player's serve or a cricketer's bowling action, drawing power from the whole body proves far more effective than merely relying on the arm alone.

Similarly, the lower torso blocks are accompanied with twists from the whole upper body. We reverse positions, and mirror the moves with the opposite limb. I remember to keep my guard up with my other arm, and despite my head occasionally pointing the wrong way, the move starts to slowly flow into place. Miss Mecik explains that the moves are deliberately exaggerated, because in the heat of the moment when adrenaline takes over, the move naturally becomes tighter and smaller. Right now, we're quite literally going through the motions, rather than physically blocking anything.

Confident we have made progress, we move on to punches. No straight arm jabs

here. CKD is about reducing or eliminating the stress on joints, and I'm grateful to hear this. Some recent history of tennis elbow and an impinged shoulder tendon mean I'm a little wary of carrying out certain sharp moves. Miss Mecik demonstrates how to correctly throw a punch, leading from the hip and through the shoulder, but in CKD style — keeping the arm bent. We're even shown which knuckles we should be landing, and potentially on which area of the face. Thankfully, a padded mitt is produced, and I'm asked to land a punch on it. I'm immediately conscious that we're still in the leading left foot position from the blocking exercise — and I'm overwhelmingly a righty. This is about to be the weakest Southpaw punch in history. But no, with hips and shoulder engaged, I land a solid blow square in the mitt — which makes a satisfying thud. It seems I hit better than I block, and I'm not sure what that says about me. I repeat this a few more times, and we switch stances for the other fist. Again, thud, thud, thud. My naturally more familiar right hand makes even better connections.

A kick is introduced, leading with the ball of the foot, not the toes — as anyone who has encountered coffee table legs will understand. Beginning and ending on the ball of the foot, mine is more of a lunge and a stamp than a kick, but I retain my balance. I find myself wanting to kick with the wrong foot and it takes a conscious effort to use the correct leg. I remember to keep my guard up though, which aids in staying upright as well protecting the head.



**Kaysok : continue**

After a short break, we move to the main group and practise blocking techniques. As uber-newbs we're only allowed to poke each other with padded sticks, but it's fun and adds the missing element to the exercise. Soon we're blocking and deflecting with greater intensity and trying not to pre-empt each spongy assault. It helps to remember that the whole body is doing the block, not just the arm.

Everyone is then partnered up, with each pair issued a heavy, padded shield. The attacker is to throw a trio of three-punch combinations at the shield, followed by a kick. High attack, low attack and high again — then kick, switch stances and repeat. Miss Mecik is my partner again. (Note to self: don't miss.) I launch a flurry of punches at my padded target with a good speed, weight and rhythm. Not bad — but I've forgotten something. Oh yes, the kick. Feet, don't fail me now. But inevitably they do, as I use the wrong foot once again. We repeat the exercise a number of times, and I start to get into the habit of switching feet.

The sting has gone out of my punches a little, and I'm leaden-footed, but I'm thinking less about the move, and instead just doing it. As before, employing the whole body, not separating into arms and feet, means the move flows much more instinctively. Of course, by 'much' I mean 'marginally'. But in the space of an hour, I'll take it as progress. We're then encouraged to vocalise our punches, using a shout or *kihap*, which aids breathing throughout the routine, so I give it a go, and it helps. One

last round and I batter the shield with a flurry of combination punches and lunge/ stamp it for good measure — using the correct foot. A good place to end.

**Kuman : finish**

The class comes to a close with some more group stretching, and it's here I that start showing my inflexibility. Particularly in my lower back. It's not painful, just a solid mass of intransigence. I try to push through it, breathing deep into my back, but I'm acutely aware of what I've neglected for years.

**Haesan: dismiss**

The class ends and we stand in a neat formation, bow, adjust our dress accordingly and the class breaks. Everyone then bows individually to each other, even to the evening's still slightly dishevelled interloper.

I thank my instructors for their time, as I genuinely have enjoyed the evening. I walk back to the station, mulling over the past hour. I feel good. It's been a moderate aerobic workout, not too intensive but enough to get the blood pumping. I've learned a couple of practical moves, and stretched a number of long-neglected muscles. I'm relaxed but not tired, and the irritability of the outward journey has long since evaporated. In fact, I can't deny that overall, I'm feeling pretty good about the evening. The term holistic gets bandied around too much, but in terms of a complete physical and mental exercise it's hard to fault what CKD sets out to achieve.

**THE TEACHER**

Chief Instructor at MA&Y, Mr Julian Johnson, told *Optimum Nutrition*: "We take into account [new students'] fitness levels, age, experience and what they hope to achieve in taking on this type of activity. Our martial art utilises both aerobic and anaerobic high intensity drills, so had Graeme been with us for longer or another class, he would have experienced a different set of self defence/fitness drills."

To illustrate the fitness levels needed, Mr Johnson describes watching a woman being tested for her 3rd degree black belt. "She had done nearly three hours of intensive testing — aerobic endurance and anaerobic drills — and they bring on three 'fresh' black belt instructors to attack her at full pace." This, he says, involves throwing kicks and punches at her "flat out".

He explains: "This drill highlights an ability to react and defend yourself when you feel totally drained mentally and physically. Complete with multiple attackers. It is a hell of a test. In two years' time I will have the pleasure of taking [it]."

"We do not do competition as it can be seen as 'points scoring' and this does not necessarily work on the street. What Choi Kwang Do tries to create is realistic scenarios that would help the 'average Joe' young and old, deal with bullies/attackers and multiple threats. Real life self defence. If you see a boxing match or a cage fight, they are essentially two incredibly skilled fighters fighting each other — this is years of training with the aim of knocking out the other person. On the street it is usually two drunks pushing and shoving each other. A true martial artist never starts a fight, although they should have developed the skills to end it — ideally in a non-confrontational way.

"Obviously, we cannot throw Graeme into a scenario with black belts attacking him in his first class, so everything is done in stepping stones to build and develop speed, awareness, strength, conditioning, reflexes, technique, etc. This is why we have a belt system." He adds: "Choi Kwang Do removes the injuries and ego involved with competition to create a more supportive and balanced environment to train. We have specific drills that deal with practical self defence. Everyone who trains has similar goals of improving their fitness, well being, and learning a life skill in self defence. Choi Kwang Do offers all of that and more."

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