



ADAT, ETHICS, AND CULTURAL VALUES IN MARTIAL ARTS EDUCATION: A PERSPECTIVE ON TAEKWONDO AND TRADITIONAL SELF-DEFENSE

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ABSTRACT

The concept of *adat* plays an essential role in shaping the ethical and cultural framework of traditional martial arts. In the Malay and Indonesian context, *adat* refers to customs, traditions, and customary laws that regulate social behavior and moral conduct within society (Koentjaraningrat, 2009). In martial arts education, particularly in traditions such as Silat and Taekwondo, ethical and cultural values are integrated into physical training to develop discipline, moral responsibility, and character formation (Kim, 2015). This paper discusses the importance of *adat* in self-defense education, the ethical and cultural framework of Taekwondo, the transformation of martial arts into competitive sports, and the significance of dress codes in martial arts practice.



1. Introduction

The term *adat* in Malay and Indonesian societies refers to customs, traditions, and customary laws inherited across generations (Hooker, 2000). Similarly, the Arabic term *‘ādāt* refers to habits or traditions practiced within a community. In martial arts, *adat* functions as an ethical and cultural framework that shapes behavior, discipline, and responsibility among practitioners (Bowman, 2017).

Traditional martial arts are not only physical combat systems but also educational platforms that emphasize discipline, respect, and moral development (Green & Svinth, 2010). Therefore, ethical and cultural integration is essential for ensuring martial arts contribute positively to both individual and social development.

2. The Role of Adat in Self-Defense Education

2.1 Ethical Foundation

In traditional Malay martial arts such as Silat, *adat* provides the ethical foundation that governs training and practice (Farrer, 2009). It promotes respect toward instructors, peers, and society, preventing misuse of martial knowledge for violence.

2.2 Moral Guidance

Adat emphasizes that martial arts should be used primarily for self-defense rather than aggression (Zarrilli, 1998). Core values include humility, patience, and self-restraint.

2.3 Cultural Preservation

Martial arts also function as cultural heritage systems. Through *adat*, historical narratives and philosophical teachings are preserved and transmitted across generations (Wessing, 2006).

2.4 Social Discipline

Training environments guided by *adat* encourage cooperation, etiquette, and mutual respect, supporting moral and social development (Bowman, 2017).



3. Ethical and Cultural Framework in Taekwondo

Taekwondo is a Korean martial art that integrates physical training with ethical and philosophical education (Kim, 2015).

3.1 Ethical Principles

Taekwondo is not only a physical martial art but also a system of moral education. The five ethical principles, also known as the “Tenets of Taekwondo,” guide practitioners in their daily behavior both inside and outside the dojang. These values help students develop discipline, responsibility, and positive character.

1. Courtesy (Ye Ui)

Courtesy refers to respect, politeness, and good manners toward others. In Taekwondo training, students are taught to respect instructors, senior belts, training partners, and even opponents during competitions. Bowing before and after practice demonstrates humility and appreciation. Courtesy also encourages practitioners to treat others fairly and maintain harmony in social relationships.

2. Integrity (Yom Chi)

Integrity means honesty, moral uprightness, and the ability to distinguish right from wrong. Taekwondo practitioners are expected to act truthfully and responsibly in all situations. Students who possess integrity avoid cheating, accept mistakes honestly, and remain accountable for their actions. This principle builds trust and strengthens personal character.

3. Perseverance (In Nae)

Perseverance is the determination to continue despite difficulties or failures. Taekwondo training can be physically and mentally demanding, requiring patience and consistent effort. Practitioners learn that success is achieved through hard work, discipline, and persistence. This value helps students develop resilience in martial arts training as well as in academic, professional, and personal challenges.



4. Self-Control (Guk Gi)

Self-control refers to the ability to regulate emotions, actions, and impulses. In martial arts, students learn to control aggression and use techniques responsibly. Taekwondo emphasizes that martial skills should never be abused for violence or intimidation. Emotional control during sparring, competition, and conflict situations demonstrates maturity and discipline.

5. Indomitable Spirit (Baekjul Boolgool)

Indomitable spirit represents courage, confidence, and the refusal to give up in the face of adversity. Practitioners are encouraged to stand up for justice and remain strong even under pressure. This principle teaches mental toughness and bravery, helping students overcome fear, hardship, and challenges with dignity and determination.

Together, these five principles form the ethical foundation of Taekwondo training and contribute to the development of responsible and morally disciplined individuals (World Taekwondo, 2021).

3.2 Cultural Practices

Taekwondo preserves many traditional Korean cultural practices that strengthen discipline, respect, and unity among practitioners. These customs create a structured learning environment and connect students to the historical roots of the martial art.

Bowing

Bowing is one of the most important practices in Taekwondo. Students bow to instructors, partners, and the dojang before and after training sessions. Bowing symbolizes respect, gratitude, humility, and mutual trust. It reminds practitioners that martial arts training is based on honor rather than aggression.

Use of Korean Terminology



Taekwondo classes commonly use Korean language terms for techniques, commands, and counting. For example:

- “Charyeot” means attention
- “Kyongnye” means bow
- “Kihap” refers to the shouting spirit yell

Using Korean terminology preserves the cultural identity and traditions of Taekwondo while creating a sense of authenticity and global unity among practitioners worldwide.

Dojang Etiquette

The dojang (training hall) follows strict etiquette rules that encourage discipline and order. Students are expected to:

- Arrive on time
- Wear clean uniforms
- Listen respectfully to instructors
- Maintain proper behavior during training

These practices teach responsibility, patience, and self-discipline. Respect for hierarchy within the dojang also reinforces humility and appreciation for knowledge and experience.

Overall, cultural practices in Taekwondo help shape moral behavior and preserve the traditional values of Korean martial arts (Moenig, 2015).

3.3 Belt System

The Taekwondo belt system represents a student’s progress, knowledge, discipline, and personal growth. It is not based solely on fighting ability but also reflects commitment, attitude, and moral development.



Purpose of the Belt System

The belt system provides students with clear goals and motivation throughout training. As practitioners improve their techniques, discipline, and understanding of Taekwondo principles, they advance through different ranks. This progression encourages continuous self-improvement and lifelong learning.

Meaning of Belt Colors

Different belt colors symbolize stages of growth and maturity. Although systems may vary slightly between organizations, common meanings include:

- White Belt – Represents innocence and the beginning of learning
- Yellow Belt – Symbolizes the earth or foundation where skills begin to grow
- Green Belt – Represents growth and development of techniques
- Blue Belt – Symbolizes the sky, reflecting expanding knowledge and ambition
- Red Belt – Represents danger and caution, reminding students to control their skills responsibly
- Black Belt – Symbolizes maturity, mastery, and deep understanding of Taekwondo

Responsibility and Character

Advancing in rank also increases responsibility. Higher-ranked students are expected to demonstrate leadership, humility, and good moral conduct. Black belts, in particular, serve as role models for junior students and help maintain the values and traditions of the martial art.

Therefore, the belt system functions as both a technical and ethical progression system that emphasizes personal development alongside physical skill (Kim, 2015).

4. Ethical Purpose of Martial Arts Training

Martial arts training serves purposes beyond physical combat and self-defense. It is designed to develop moral character, emotional discipline, and social responsibility. In



Taekwondo, training encourages practitioners to become respectful, confident, and responsible members of society.

Self-Defense and Responsibility

Students learn self-defense techniques to protect themselves and others when necessary. However, martial arts ethics emphasize that these skills should only be used responsibly and never for bullying or unnecessary violence. Practitioners are taught to avoid conflict whenever possible and seek peaceful solutions.

Moral Development

Taekwondo promotes values such as honesty, respect, humility, patience, and discipline. Through regular training, students learn to control their emotions, respect authority, and develop strong ethical behavior. The structured environment of martial arts training reinforces positive habits and responsible conduct.

Leadership and Humility

Senior practitioners often mentor junior students, helping them improve their skills and confidence. This develops leadership qualities such as communication, patience, and responsibility. At the same time, Taekwondo teaches humility by reminding practitioners that learning is continuous regardless of rank or achievement.

Emotional and Mental Discipline

Training also improves emotional stability and mental focus. Sparring and physical challenges require practitioners to remain calm under pressure, control aggression, and maintain concentration. These skills can positively influence behavior in everyday life, including school, work, and relationships.

As a result, martial arts training contributes to holistic character formation by integrating physical, mental, and ethical development (Green & Svinth, 2010).

5. Transformation into Competitive Sports



Over time, many traditional martial arts, including Taekwondo, have evolved into organized competitive sports. This process of modernization, often called “sportification,” has significantly influenced training methods, objectives, and public perception.

Changes in Training Priorities

Traditional martial arts originally focused heavily on self-defense, discipline, and survival skills. However, competitive sport systems prioritize scoring techniques, athletic performance, speed, and tournament success. As a result, some practitioners focus more on winning competitions than on practical self-defense applications.

Rule-Based Competition

Modern Taekwondo competitions operate under standardized rules to ensure fairness and athlete safety. Certain dangerous techniques, such as strikes to vulnerable body areas, are prohibited. Protective equipment and electronic scoring systems are also used to reduce injuries and improve judging accuracy.

While these rules create safer and more organized competitions, some scholars argue that they reduce the realism of combat situations because practitioners cannot use the full range of traditional techniques (Jennings, 2010).

Positive Effects of Sport Development

Despite criticisms, the transformation into a global sport has brought many benefits:

- Increased international participation
- Greater cultural exchange
- Recognition in international sporting events such as the Olympics
- Improved professionalism and athlete development

Competitive Taekwondo has introduced Korean martial arts culture to millions of people worldwide and encouraged intercultural understanding (World Taekwondo, 2021).



Balancing Tradition and Modernization

One of the biggest challenges in modern martial arts is maintaining traditional ethical and cultural values while adapting to modern sports systems. Many instructors attempt to balance competitive training with teachings on respect, discipline, philosophy, and self-defense to preserve the original spirit of martial arts.

6. Dress Code and Symbolism

The Taekwondo dress code reflects important cultural and ethical values. The uniform and protective equipment are not merely practical items but symbols of discipline, respect, equality, and tradition.

6.1 Uniform Elements

Dobok

The Taekwondo uniform, known as the dobok, symbolizes purity, humility, and commitment to training. Its simple white design traditionally represents a beginner's openness to learning and moral cleanliness. Wearing the dobok also creates unity among students regardless of social or economic background.

Belt

The belt represents rank, experience, and personal growth. As students progress through different belt levels, they demonstrate increasing technical skill, discipline, and ethical understanding. The belt serves as a visible reminder that martial arts development requires continuous effort and responsibility.

Protective Gear

In competitions, protective gear such as headguards, chest protectors, gloves, and shin guards is used to ensure athlete safety. The use of protective equipment reflects the ethical principle of minimizing unnecessary harm while promoting fair competition and sportsmanship.



Together, these elements reinforce discipline, professionalism, and respect for martial arts traditions (Kim, 2015).

7. Conclusion

Adat, ethics, and cultural traditions play a central role in martial arts education. Both Silat and Taekwondo demonstrate that martial arts are not only systems of combat but also important tools for moral, cultural, and personal development. Through ethical principles, cultural practices, disciplined training, and symbolic traditions, practitioners learn values such as respect, perseverance, humility, and self-control.

Although modernization and competitive sports have transformed many martial arts practices, preserving traditional ethical teachings remains essential. A balanced approach that combines modern sport development with cultural and moral education ensures that martial arts continue to contribute positively to individual character formation and society as a whole.



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