

‘Kyuk-pah’

In the early days of Tae Kwon Do, experts practiced ‘kyuk-pah’ – breaking – as a part of their regular training. By repeatedly breaking wood, roof tiles and bricks with their bare hands and feet, these practitioners forged their focus power and mental concentration while improving their confidence in overcoming perceived limitations. Even the Buddhist warrior monks of ancient times practiced ‘kyuk-pah’ as part of their martial arts training. The monks preferred not to practice their techniques against one another because they supposed that the risk of harm was contrary the fundamental teachings of Buddha. So, the monks used ‘kyuk-pah’ as one way to improve and refine their striking techniques.



Figure 1: Grandmaster Walsh demonstrates his famous focus power by destroying a stack of 12 roof tiles. Grandmaster Walsh's calm expression and relaxed posture during his amazing breaking feats became his trade mark during his third term of study in Korea.

Nowadays, ‘kyuk-pah’ is seldom practiced in the majority of do-jang. It is mainly reserved for use in Tae Kwon Do demonstrations. In fact, Tae Kwon Do demonstration teams owe much of their fame to their spectacular breaking of wooden boards using the Art’s unique range of spinning and flying kicks. High-flying, crowd-pleasing team breaking demonstrations have become one of the more recognisable trademarks of modern Tae Kwon Do.

But, it seems that the original essence of ‘kyuk-pah’ is in danger of becoming lost. Traditionally, ‘kyuk-pah’ was always more than a show of jumping ability and kicking accuracy. It was a means

of developing the ability to focus the mind and body to overcome a seemingly impossible obstacle. Essentially, what was once a very personal training method and test of character is now mostly performed for the entertainment of spectators.

For example, today's demonstration teams use paper-thin plywood boards (instead of regulation one-inch pine boards) to ensure that attempted breaks look successful no matter how impractical (though spectacular) the technique may actually be. On the tournament circuit in Seoul, South Korea, it is now commonplace for demonstration teams to strap tiny firecrackers to the back of their plywood boards to simulate the loud crack that real one-inch pine boards make when they are broken. The latest Korean craze is using speedy kicks to pop confetti-filled balloons – the only catch being that the balloon is in fact popped by the holder when he squeezes a cleverly disguised sewing needle into the side of the balloon. On the ISKA tournament circuit in the United States, competitors routinely use specially manufactured concrete blocks in their breaking demonstrations. These blocks are 'scalloped' at the back – the result being that they have less breadth at the point of impact making them far easier to break. Also, excess sand is usually added to the concrete mix, reducing the density of the concrete and the required power to break them.

To a Tae Kwon Do practitioner, it is very important that 'kyuk-pah' is practiced in a way that reflects the ideals and philosophy of the martial art itself. If not, 'kyuk-pah' becomes corrupted into a means of flattering the ego (at best) or even a deliberate deception of the public (at worst), both of which are contrary to the true spirit of Tae Kwon Do. And since 'kyuk-pah' is usually practiced by senior students and leaders of the Art, it is even more important that it is practiced faithfully.

In the purest sense of 'kyuk-pah', the complete destruction of all breaking materials is unimportant compared to the control the practitioner shows when voluntarily placing themselves before such seemingly impossible odds. Hence, the merit of a practitioner's performance is judged according to the grace and poise they show under substantial pressure, the correctness of their technical movement and, most importantly, their detachment from caring whether all the materials are broken or not at the completion of their technique. This last characteristic is what separates Tae Kwon Do 'kyuk-pah' from modern demonstration breaking. What matters most in true 'kyuk-pah' is not the external appearance of success (i.e. breaking all the materials), but rather the internal personal growth achieved by the practitioner having attempted something that seemed impossible to the rational mind at the outset. Lessons such as these are what make Tae Kwon Do more than a fighting art. They elevate Tae Kwon Do to a 'way' of living.

In the late 1960's and early 1970's, Grandmaster Terence Walsh, now an 8th Dan Black Belt in Tae Kwon Do and Hapkido, helped popularise Tae Kwon Do in Australia through amazing feats of power breaking.

"I began practicing 'kyuk-pah' when I was learning Tae Kwon Do in Seoul [South Korea] in the 60's. In the old days, it was a common training tool to help develop real focus power and confidence. I would challenge myself by practicing 'kyuk-pah' at the end of most training sessions.

"I would come back to Sydney every year on my holiday and people would ask me to show them Tae Kwon Do. The best way I could think of to demonstrate the spirit of Tae Kwon Do was to show them 'kyuk-pah' techniques – simple fore-fist punches and knife-hand strikes against big stacks of roof tiles. At the time I was breaking 16 construction standard roof tiles with a single blow on a consistent basis", says Grandmaster Walsh.

"People were amazed. It wasn't that I could break the stack of tiles or pile of bricks, but that I would even attempt something so out of the ordinary in a calm and confident manner, totally believing that something so difficult could be done so easily."

However, the Grandmaster feels that the original spirit of 'kyuk-pah' and its value as a training tool is in danger of becoming lost.



Figure 2: Grandmaster Walsh training with his son, Master Rodney Lee Walsh. In this picture, Grandmaster Walsh snaps a house brick with a knife-hand strike before the brick topples from the holder's palm.

"At the moment, Tae Kwon Do practitioners show breaking techniques where there is no real doubt that the material can be broken. Certainly, showing a jumping kick is spectacular show of skill which takes years of practice to develop, but even a person in the crowd could step in and snap a

5mm thick piece of plywood with their fingers. Fancy breaking of weak materials is only a show of kicking dexterity – certainly it is an impressively athletic thing to do – but it is not a real test of character. You can show the same skill by hitting a kicking paddle. Power breaking – old school ‘kyuk-pah’ – is the only type of breaking that provides a proper test of character and focus”, he says.

“In Tae Kwon Do, ‘kyuk-pah’ must be made on a material that is difficult for the practitioner. The technique itself can be the most simple in the syllabus, but the breaking materials must be hard enough to provide a challenge. There must be some doubt whether the practitioner can actually break the materials or not. If not, the breaking is just a demonstration of skills they have previously attained. There is no growth of the person.

“Breaking should help a student increase their human potential. The practitioner should be learning to control his or her fear of injury or failure and becoming familiar with committing themselves so completely to a difficult task that they achieve an inner calm and total resolve to follow through with something that seems impossible. That is the real value of attempting ‘kyuk-pah’ in Tae Kwon Do”, says Grandmaster Walsh.

However, Grandmaster Walsh does not discount the value of breaking demonstrations. He says that ‘kyuk-pah’ helped attract and inspire the first generation of Australian Tae Kwon Do instructors – even himself.

“My involvement in Tae Kwon Do came about in the early 60’s after I read in a newspaper that a man had broken a brick with his bare hand. I was amazed. That man was the great Karate master, Mas Oyama – the most famous exponent of breaking techniques. I’ve always tried to emulate his power”, says Grandmaster Walsh.

“Kyuk-pah is a skill that is unique to the traditional hard style martial arts like Tae Kwon Do and most styles of Karate. It is something that should be taught from 1st Dan onwards and practiced consistently by senior Dan grades. I am 64 and still practice tile and brick breaking to keep my technique and spirit sharp”, he says.



Figure 3: Grandmaster Walsh breaking 3 one-inch pine boards with a spear hand strike.

So, what ‘kyuk-pah’ tips does the Grandmaster have to offer? His top five are as follows:

1. Never attempt any power breaking techniques without proper instruction and long term training in the physical and mental aspects of Tae Kwon Do. On top of this, you must understand that power breaking itself is a specialised skill that requires particular instruction and training from your instructor. Never assume you can teach yourself how to break – you will injure yourself. Breaking should enhance your training, not impair it.
2. Condition your striking points as part of your regular Tae Kwon Do training to avoid injury when striking (in breaking or in self-defence). For example, the regular practice of knuckle push ups and striking of a canvas bag filled with sand are simple ways of toughening the bones and skin of the fist. Don’t neglect wrist strength exercises – strong and stable wrists will be able to withstand the enormous pressure imposed on that joint during breaking. Again, ask your instructor for guidance and occasionally have your instructor supervise your personal training to ensure you are practicing safely. Don’t practice conditioning techniques sporadically. Be consistent.
3. When you come to attempt breaking, strike fast, deeply and with total physical and mental commitment. You must believe you can complete the breaking feat. Don’t strike if you have any doubts – you will only injure yourself. Power breaking (where you are challenging your present skill levels) is far more mental than physical. If you can’t control your fear and completely focus your energy on the task at hand, return to more basic Tae Kwon Do training until you can.

4. Understand what makes breaking materials harder and more dangerous to break. Knowing the physics of breaking is just as important as having good technique. For example, adding spaces between two or more one-inch pine boards makes the breaking of multiple boards much easier (and for this reason is frowned upon by 'kyuk-pah' purists). The overall density of the breaking materials is reduced and if you don't have the necessary focus power to break through all the boards, at least some of them will be able to give way. The same applies with roof tiles, etc. When your abilities improve, you can attempt multiple board breaks without spaces, but you should understand that tightly packed boards are significantly harder to break and that you must break through them all in order to avoid injury.
5. Always choose your breaking materials carefully. For example, never strike a brick or concrete slab without first knowing its density and construction. Grandmaster Walsh recalls in the mid-1980's, how he demonstrated his trademark downward knife hand strike on a stack of two house bricks in country NSW. To his surprise (and pain), the bottom brick snapped while the top one remained still. Later, one of the spectators struck the brick repeatedly with a hammer only to find out that it was re-enforced with steel rods. If you are unsure about the construction of your materials, find out!

Grandmaster Walsh says that with dedicated practice, a male Black Belt should be able to break (at a minimum) 10 roof tiles with a downward punch, 8 roof tiles with a downward knife hand strike and 3 one-inch pine boards (no spaces) with a horizontal elbow strike and side thrust kick techniques.

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