

Hapkido Statement of Philosophy: A Reflection on the Water Principle

“Water shapes its course according to the nature of the ground over which it flows; the soldier works out his victory in relation to the foe whom he is facing.”
(Sun Tzu, “The Art of War”)

During my study of Hapkido it seems that the water principle has been the basic tenet of hapkido that I have had the most trouble applying to my techniques. While I certainly don't profess mastery in the principles of circular motion and non-resistance and I have yet to have the sort of epiphany that Master Hayes described in his 4th Dan Statement of Philosophy concerning non-resistance, I believe I am able to do an adequate job of identifying and incorporating circular motion and non-resistance in my techniques where applicable.

On any given Tuesday or Thursday evening in the Iowa City Dojang, it is usually pretty apparent as we work through techniques like the white belt arm bar or the windmill that we are utilizing circular motion. Whether it is the wide radius circle of a Tasmanian wave or the more compact arc of a head twist, circular motion is readily visible.

It is also clear as we practice the sacrifice throw and run through the gamut of pushing techniques that non-resistance is a key component of those defenses. Rather than meeting strength with strength we are yielding to the opponent's force and allowing that force to power the technique, to move their center in the direction in which it was already travelling.

I have found it to be more difficult to visualize the water principle in action. This statement of philosophy will only scratch the surface of what all the water principle entails. In part, the water principle is about adaptability and flow.

The introductory quote by Sun Tzu at the beginning of this paper is a good description of the concept of adaptability as it pertains to “the art of coordinated power”. The Hapkido practitioner needs to be flexible and allow the opponent's attack to dictate the defense. This defense will take into account the weaknesses of the opponent and the strengths of the defender. This needs to be done dynamically as the attack unfolds and in a manner such that as the situation changes we are able to vary our defense accordingly.

Let's examine further what is meant by adaptability. It is common, especially during practices over the summer for sweat to interfere with your techniques. Who hasn't, at one time or another had their hands slip during an outside breaking balance? The water principle states that we should be able to adapt to this and seamlessly move on to another technique. During an inside breaking balance, we may find that we have failed to off-balance the attacker sufficiently and that we need to use our knee on their bicep to complete the maneuver and take our opponent to the ground.

A second aspect of the water principle deals with flow. Flow can be interpreted in many different ways. Master Cody's December 1, 2001 Statement of Philosophy gives a fairly comprehensive description of flow during a technique. As she states: "I believe that flow comes from seeing the technique as one seamless movement, a movement that begins from the moment your attacker moves toward you." Flow can also be the way we move around the opponent, attacking at the weakest point as during a Korean two-step. Or it can be the shown during the (theoretically) smooth transition from one technique to the next. Picture an outside breaking balance leading to an around the waist throw, or a policeman's come-along transitioning into a clothesline. In both of these cases the progression from one technique to the next is most effective when it is done in one continuous motion where the individual techniques become one fluid sequence.

Preparing for my recommended black belt test provides a good opportunity for reflection on those fundamental principles inherent in the Hapkido techniques that we practice. One of my goals as I continue my training is to gain an increased awareness of the water principle and more thoroughly integrate it into my repertoire. I believe that I will be on the road to achieving this when I can consistently and smoothly flow from one technique to the next adjusting as the scenario changes.

It is relatively easy to script a set of motions during practice – perhaps a chicken wing to policeman's come-along, to a clothesline. Successful application of the water principle entails the ability to ad-lib in response to the actions of the opponent and also in response to mistakes and mishaps that invariably occur in real life.

Works Cited

Cody, Beth. "Statement of Philosophy". December 1, 2001.
<http://www.iowahapkido.org/>.

Hayes, Brian. "4th Dan Statement of Philosophy". <http://www.iowahapkido.org/>.

Tzu, Sun. The Art of War. Trans. Lionel Giles. New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2003.