

OPPORTUNITIES

IN ITF

TAEKWON-DO

FOR PEOPLE WITH

AUTISM

Thesis made for master - grading to VIIth Degree

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A WORD OF THANKS

I want to say a word of thanks to some people who mean a lot to me and helped me through some difficult times.

First, I want to define my gratefulness to my girlfriend Petra who guided me already in many tough periods in my life. We are a good team in our extraordinary relationship, because living with someone on the autism spectrum isn't always easy. She was my best reader and critic in the process of writing this thesis.

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I also want to thank the other readers of my thesis (Michaël, Nicole and my brother Philippe) for making grammatical corrections and giving very useful feedback on the formal contents.

At last, I am thankful that I came across the Martial Art ITF Taekwon-Do, which gave me often a way out of my former mental prison: my undiagnosed autism.

Thank you.

**I DIDN'T
CHANGE,
I JUST FOUND
MYSELF**

Eddy.

PURPOSE AND MOTIVATION

- Perception without interpretation is the highest form of human intelligence -

J. Krishnamurti

PURPOSE AND MOTIVATION

Since 1990, my passion for ITF Taekwon-Do has only grown bigger as it became a specific interest that inspired not only a great part of my free time, but influenced my whole life. It went as a red thread through my existence and was always there even if everything else went wrong. ITF Taekwon-Do determines my life in a very important way and it has always done so since the start. This has everything to do with my particular attention and focus on this martial art and my way of being.

I struggled instinctively with the signs of my autism my entire life until I discovered my diagnosis 10 years ago. In the beginning, I was relieved that I finally knew where most of my problems from the past came from. I could give a place to a lot of things that were very vague before. But of course, there is another side to the medal: I realized it was a disability for the rest of my life I had to deal with. But after enough time, considerable literature and a lot of guidance, I understood that I already lived with my inability during my whole life. I began to cope more consciously with the consequences and symptoms of my autism and recognized that ITF Taekwon-Do had offered me so much for the last 30 years.

When I thought about a subject for my thesis for master some years ago, it was clear that I wanted to work something out that connected my passion with my way of being, including my disability.

So why not write something that could make a difference for other people with issues? Why not consider my own autism to speak about the opportunities that ITF Taekwon-Do has given me throughout all those years?

Accepting my autistic disability and finding the power to deal with some symptoms of my autism by doing ITF Taekwon-Do, were the biggest challenges for me to face in the previous years. That's the main reason why I wanted to write a paper about that. It is also the key line in this thesis which I will attempt to follow all the way through. I hope it can inspire more people with special needs to try a martial art like ITF Taekwon-Do in coping with the consequences of their difficulties, and to enjoy this beautiful and powerful martial art in any way they can. In a broader social setting, the opportunities I will describe later are relevant to a diversity of people with special needs and even the typical martial arts student can benefit from it.

I want to convince other people with autism that they can grow into our beautiful martial art. That they can develop some of their skills or overcome some of their physical and social difficulties by practicing ITF Taekwon-Do.

I will not conceal the difficulties of autistic people and their efforts and struggles with sensitivity, balance, coordination, cognitive problems or social-emotional issues. I will also speak about these subjects. But the focus of my paper lies on the many opportunities in this martial art for people with autism.

In the first chapter, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) will be explained in its different aspects. It is very substantial to understand the main principles of autism to appreciate the opportunities of ITF Taekwon-Do with this background.

In the second chapter, some important characteristics of ITF Taekwon-Do will be described because I like to draw attention to some detailed sides that are unique for this martial art and therefore of great importance in the context of my thesis.

In the third chapter, I'll come to the essence of my thesis in which I'll picture ITF Taekwon-Do as a potential special interest for people with autism like me, and the positive influences of ITF Taekwon-Do on autism. I'll try to explain those opportunities on physical and social level, and describe the importance of the DO for people with autism. In between, I will go deeper into some personal aspects. I will clarify my vision on teaching and coaching and will give some tips for instructors to create a safe atmosphere where those benefits for people with autism can grow.

Being who I am with my autism, you will see that my style of writing sometimes is straight and to the point, without concealing any reality. From time to time, I will use terms that are archaic or unusual, so don't judge me for not using a lot of censure in my choice of words.

1

AUTISM

- What is important is to treat everyone like an individual and learning not to generalize autism. With autism, people make assumptions, but it's very broad, and everyone's so different. You have to treat each person as an individual -

Nikki Reed

1. AUTISM

1.1 Introduction

Autism is extremely difficult to define in some simple words. That is because of the complexity of this neurological disability. I will try to label the essence of this other way of thinking with some extend definitions. By means of three psychological theories I will try to explain thoroughly the autistic way of thinking, in order to bring some clearness into this unknown world that is often misunderstood in broader society. Afterwards I will describe the consequences of this phenomenon on physical and psycho-social level.

It is very significant to recognize the principles of autism and its consequences, to see what the chances of ITF Taekwon-Do as a martial art can be in this matter.

1.2 Another way of thinking

1.2.1 Definitions

Autism or Autism Spectrum Disorder (=ASD) is a lifelong, pervasive neurodevelopmental disability or handicap that affects how a person communicates with and relates to other people, and how he/she experiences the world around him/her. Autistic people have a totally different way of thinking and experiencing the world because their brain is wired or connected differently. It's a disability that persists in all domains of life. Autistic people see, hear and feel the world in a different way from other people. If you are autistic, you are autistic for life – autism is not an 'illness' and cannot be 'cured'. Autism is also a spectrum condition. This means that, while all people with autism share certain difficulties, being autistic will affect them in different ways. There are many ways in which autism expresses itself and not all symptoms are the same for every person with autism. Some symptoms are more severe with one person and rather mild with another. Neither are there symptoms that exclusively exist for autism. That makes it sometimes difficult to diagnose an ASD, certainly in adulthood.

Autistic people have another way of thinking and an unusual learning profile with unexpected up- and downward peaks. Each individual has his own cognitive style. Some have problems with their memory by not retaining relevant information. Others think more in pictures instead of words (visual way of thinking). Some are highly talented and have a better start in moral development with unusual ideals: they get easier upset with injustice or dishonesty and are extreme worried about nature disasters. They are often perfectionists who set high demands for themselves and cope badly with frustration. Important breakthroughs in science and art have been realized because of people with another way of thinking and with many of the cognitive qualities you can find in autistic people. This is only a very small group.

The exact cause of autism is still being investigated. However, research suggests that a combination of factors – genetic and environmental – may count for differences in development. On four different levels, there are factors that could arise and are important to take into consideration: genetic level (=genotype), neurobiological or anatomic level,

neuropsychological level and behavioristic or clinical level (=phenotype). On each level, environmental factors play also an important role; I will come back to that.

In 95 % the aetiology (=investigation of the causes of a disease) is unknown, but it is a heterogeneous, strongly genetic determined neurobiological disorder with still many secrets. Scientists are still searching for a biological marker. It is also hereditary from one generation to another, that's why there can be a lot of autism in a family in one way or another. A 'crazy uncle' in the family can sometimes point out there is a dash of autism in the game ... Autism is not caused by a person's upbringing, their social circumstances and is not the fault of the individual with the condition. More or less 1/166 persons of the population is autistic. There are far more boys than girls. But a lot of people (mostly girls) are not diagnosed and stay under the radar in that way. Less than 50 % have a mental retardation.

Other conditions are sometimes associated with autism or simply exist together with autism. Hereby scientists speak about co-morbidity. These may include motoric disorders, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), or learning difficulties such as dyslexia and dyspraxia. Those other conditions can also be found separately with other members in one family. Autism is very often accompanied by a secondary mood disorder such as anxiety disorder (most of all), depression and problems with anger-regulation. A lot of adults with autism have also clear symptoms of a compulsory disorder or often develop an addiction problem.

But not only genetic issues play an important role here; also environmental factors are very important. Some adolescents and adults are aware of their differences and little success on the social playfield. They get harassed often or even bullied, which makes them very uncertain. Those things can lead easily to feelings of low self-value and depressive feelings. They are already very sensitive for tension, anxiety, frustration and emotional exhaustion because of their sensory and psychological profile. These secondary problems can frequently be found with autistic people as a consequence of their disability or as a result of coping with their condition.

Combined with autism, a mental handicap or retardation, a normal capability, or even more than average talents can appear. Autistic people may have language development disorders or learning disabilities, which can affect all aspects of someone's life, from studying in school, to learning how to wash themselves or make a meal. People can have different 'degrees' of learning disability, so some will be able to live fairly independently - although they may need a degree of support (sometimes their parents or a partner) to achieve this - while others may require lifelong, specialist support. However, all people with autism learn and develop. With the correct kind of support, all autistic people can be helped to live a more fulfilling life of their own choice. People from all nationalities and cultural, religious and social backgrounds can be autistic, although it appears to affect more men than women.

Some professionals may refer to autism by a different name, such as autistic spectrum disorder, classic autism or Kanner autism, pervasive developmental disorder (PDD), high-functioning autism (HFA), Asperger syndrome (AS), childhood autism, autistic disorder, atypical autism, PDD-NOS ... Since 2013, they are all combined in one term for diagnosis: Autism Spectrum Disorder (=ASD). I will only use this term or call it simply 'autism' in my thesis.

At present, there is no 'cure' for autism. However, there is a range of interventions – methods of supporting learning and development– which people may find to be helpful to cope with the consequences of their autism. There are now a great number of approaches and counselling available for people with autism and parents and professionals may find it difficult to decide which tactic is best-suited to their individual circumstances. It is important to remember that although different methods have been known to work for some people with an autism spectrum disorder, they have not been evaluated on a long-term basis and for others they simply don't work. Cognitive behavioristic therapy is one of the most vital treatments to conquer those symptoms, correct their thoughts and feelings and control their emotional energy. Often medication is also needed to help them out of their immobile situation or longer. Physical therapy is furthermore applied as part of an overall 'treatment'. For some (parents) it is a long search for the right service, there are serious waiting lists for counselling, there may be financial problems or other obstacles can appear in reality. Sometimes people try alternative biological or psychological interventions. But all those methods try to decrease the consequences of the disability for which there is no real cure. For some people it may be helpful, for others not.

On the other hand, many people on the spectrum need a lot of help in daily life, so there are many caretakers engaged with autistic people. The intensity and quantity of professional aid can vary a lot between individuals and depend of their particular circumstances, intelligence, support from their family or friends, personality and character, age, wishes and symptoms.

An Autism Spectrum Disorder is characterized on behavioristic level by a triad of disabilities. Autistic people experience difficulties in social interaction and communication (1), suffer from sensory sensitivity (2) and have restricted and repetitive behaviours, activities and interests (3). The manners in which these disabilities express themselves are connected with age and intelligence; they are specific and qualitative and pop up in a very early developmental phase. Unusual reactions on sensorial stimuli and non-specific behaviour problems appear also. The autistic developmental profile is mostly very disharmonic and unpredictable.

All these characteristics and symptoms are nevertheless the consequences of another way of thinking, which I will clarify with a few important psychological theories.

1.2.2 Theory of Mind

The psychological term 'Theory of Mind' (ToM) means the ability to recognize and understand thoughts, beliefs, desires and intentions of other people in order to make sense of their behaviour and predict what they are going to do. It's also been called 'mentalizing' or 'mindreading'. Autistic persons are not able to recognize or understand the signals of other people -in which they show how they think or feel-, on a level that accord with their own age and intelligence. They suffer from 'mind blindness'. And with the difficulty of predicting other behaviour, the problem arises how to anticipate on the behaviour of other people. It means that they do not always know how to react or respond in an appropriate way in a certain situation. There is an absence of flexibility in the real world: people with autism lack the 'intuition of mind' (rather than the basic theory) to cope spontaneously with daily live situations. If they have the time to think about things, or somebody else pushes the

'right (context) button', they can often figure out for themselves what is going on in that particular situation. But then the moment to respond or react has gone already because people switch very often to another subject or matter. E.g. not understanding irony, not taking his turn in a conversation, not knowing or using the information the other already had in the conversation ... are some concrete examples of problems in the case of empathy, pragmatic and diverse other aspects of the social and communicative development. The empathy can grow with the rising of the age, but how we behave in a social situation is not only determined by ToM, but also by the perception of social signals, by our motivation and energy of the moment, by emotions, memory, sensory disturbances and by the context (repetition, confidence with the social situation, structure, number of involved persons).

I myself do not speak naturally and cannot interpret the whole picture when somebody else wants to know something or I miss information about what the other already knows about the situation. In social contacts I am very naïve because I cannot imagine that other people use a hidden agenda. It's hard for me to put myself in the perspective of someone else and sometimes it's difficult to make the difference in perception between myself and the other. Joint attention is not my thing and I learned to avoid eye contact in a subtle way. Sometimes I think I already told something I didn't or that others know all the information they need. I cannot ask for help or things I need at a certain moment. I am not always aware of the risk when dangerous situations pop up, because I sometimes do not pick up signals from others or from the environment (e.g. lack of interaction, facial expression and volume of voice). In a conversation I usually am silent, but I can also interrupt other people or hang on to unimportant details so that others are getting bored. Other questions I take literally or I use a kind of echolalia to answer them. I don't feel intuitively what the other needs or how someone else is feeling: do they need an attention, some security or a compliment at a certain moment? Interpretation of the context stays very difficult for me, I learnt a lot during the years but application in real life doesn't run smoothly and costs lots of energy.

Of course there are methods to develop the above skills and with age people learn a lot by copying their fellow 'neurotypicals' (= people without autism). But it is a reality that autistic people will never do this quick and spontaneously (by intuition) and always uses the slower, rational, analytical way (by intelligence) to come more or less to the same results. They have more attention for the physical than for the social world and will describe events less based on emotions than on the bare facts. There is a neurological explanation for that and other parts of the brain are active in performing these ToM-abilities. There are deteriorations or lacks in ToM-abilities, but no total lack of empathy: they find the feelings and thoughts of other people important, but are not always able to recognize the more subtle emotional signals, 'reading' the more complicated emotions or react appropriate.

In daily life, autistic people have problems in reading the message in the eyes of others and have the intention to take everything literally what other people say. Because they are extremely honest, have a strong feeling for social justice, keep strictly to the rules and don't know when something is embarrassing, they are often seen as rude. They can't see that others want to help them and are sometimes paranoid and anxious or extremely uncertain. This can lead to physical and emotional exhaustion because of the big psychological effort to cope with a lot of social information in a short time. Their reaction speed is very slow because of above reasons. It's comparable with understanding a strange language: if the other speaks too fast, you can only understand bits and pieces.

There are strategies to improve these ToM-abilities like Social Stories, special cognitive trainings, Comic Strip Conversations or certain computer programs. They can stimulate the recognition and understanding of certain emotions. Or they try to measure the intensity of feelings on a scale or learn to recognize facial expressions via photos and drawings. But people with autism will learn the most by practicing in daily life, especially when they have persons with whom they feel comfortable and have a lot of confidence. Those persons can give them some feedback on their behaviour and explain the context of the social situations. Imitation and training in 'joint attention' could also help to expand their abilities. 'Joint attention' is the triadic coordination of attention between two persons and a third event, object or person. Both persons must be conscious of the attention of the other person for the same event, object or third person. E.g. two people are standing next to each other. One sees a balloon in the air and points at it. The second one is therefore looking towards the place the first person is pointing at and then looks back to the other (eye contact). Then they both know that the other has also seen the balloon without saying a word to each other. In an ITF Taekwon-Do sparring match there is a lot of communication by joint attention between the umpires. Between the jury president and the centre referee, there must be eye contact at all times. And in the beginning of a match, the centre referee looks at the four corner referees to see if they are ready. They must nod with their head to confirm that.

1.2.3 Executive Functioning Theory

Executive functions are those functions that are responsible of controlling the actions of human beings. With 'actions' we understand not only motoric actions or movements, but also attention, and even emotion-regulation and thoughts.

Executive functions are related with the ability to plan and organize, working memory, the ability to inhibit an impulse control, self-reflection and self-monitoring. It also includes the awareness of time and the ability to set priorities, insight in complex or abstract issues and the realization of new strategies. These cognitive functions are seen as more important in the development of a human being than their IQ (=intelligence quotient), according a study by the National Institute of Health (UK). They have a huge influence on the learning abilities of children and adults. Creativity, flexibility, memory, concentration, self-control and discipline are considered as important parts of the Executive Functioning. It is a domain where autistic people score very inadequately and it has a lot of consequences in their functioning in daily life.

My problems with those functions are especially noticeable in the planning and organization of daily life. I need a lot of structure but I cannot install that on my own or even follow it. In practice, it's my partner who organizes my daily life. I often arrive too late at appointments because I cannot finish my morning ritual within the previewed time. I stick with reading the newspaper or I stand under the shower too long. Going from one activity to another is not easy and interpreting the time that it takes neither. Executing instructions or tasks is not a problem at all; on the contrary, I cannot deviate from the given orders. The same goes for navigating through the traffic. It can lead to precarious situations. Cooking and shopping are obviously tough and go very slow. Choices give me stress in shops and the sensory overload makes it only harder. In my free time I cannot decide sometimes what to do or when to stop with a special interest. There are too many choices. I know my way to the supermarket and

to the library, but I get into trouble when I have to go from the supermarket straight to the library. I learned a lot about many issues, but the application in reality of that knowledge is always tricky.

Attention deficit can also be a difficult issue to handle. The ability to hold the attention, to focus on relevant information, to lay the attention on another issue and to encode the attention (to remember where the attention was focused on) all seem to be problems for autistic people. It sometimes depends on the motivation: when intensively concentrated on their special interest, almost in a trance, autistic people can function with gigantic attention. Extremely difficult is to end the thing they were occupied with and switch to another objective, especially when the current one is not yet finished.

1.2.4 Central Coherence Theory / Theory of Context Blindness

People with autism have a weak central coherence; they don't see and/or understand the greater picture, the context, the conclusions or the big lines. Their perception is fragmented; they see the world as less integrated because they lack the built-in form of coherence, so they look more analytically than holistically at the world. Most are good in the perception of details and as a result, they miss the whole concept. They don't see the forest for the trees, but they have usually a good eye for details. What is relevant, the essential, the red thread or the intention ... to purify these things out of the whole picture, is a huge challenge for people with autism. So this style of information-integration psychologists call a 'weak central coherence'. They have a lot of problems to see patterns in daily life and meet many confusing moments because their whole life seems to be a chaos. That is why fixed routines, times, routes and rituals can help to create order. Repetitive behaviour can be very relaxing in this context.

Not being able to interpret or misinterpret contexts is an explanation for 'wrong' answers or inappropriate behaviour. Sometimes I cannot apply what I learned in a different context or do not think about it to do so. That's why I learned to apply ToM in my former work as a psychiatric nurse, but not at home. What I learned in training and education, I sometimes cannot apply it in another situation or setting. The first thing I notice in a love letter, are the writing mistakes. It is far stronger than me. I always see the details before the whole picture. On a high mountain with beautiful scenery, I am at first reading the booklet of the trip instead of enjoying the landscape. In time, I learned to play with language to conceal my disability in this matter. I can sometimes turn it into a joke. When I am on holidays, it is even more difficult to interpret contexts and I can find myself in rather dangerous situations. E.g. swimming in a fast river isn't the same as in a swimming pool. Recognition of a station or restaurant is sometimes difficult and I sometimes do miss important facts in a film. The same counts for most of the happenings in daily life. That's why I often cannot answer questions to the point or I will tell a story in a very uncomprehensive way.

The theory of 'Context Blindness' of the Belgian pedagogue and autism-specialist Peter Vermeulen is an adaption and further explication of this theory of Central Coherence. It is a shortage in the ability to use context spontaneously and unconscious in delivering significance. E.g. Tears on somebody's cheek may refer to grief, happiness, reveal of an allergic reaction or happens after peeling an onion ... What is a 'good' birthday present? ...

Can you touch somebody's hair? ... All depends on the context of that unique situation, person, place and time. Context is the whole of contextual relevant elements (it can be also a detail). Blindness means not using the context rather than not seeing the context: e.g. not using the forest to see the trees as trees. Autistic people are less sensitive for context in their deliverance of significance. This doesn't mean that they cannot lay links or relate to other things or persons, neither that they can't reason logically. But it gets difficult when they have to cope with multiple relationships at the same time. The significance of things can change according to the altering context. Each stimulus can have different connotations and autistic people don't think like that. For them, things have a fixed meaning, so this difference makes things very confusing. When the significance is not immediately clear, complete or straight-away, the context needs to be 'activated' and made explicit in a very conscious way by a trusted neurotypical. E.g. being together with more than two people makes it difficult to oversee the conversation and the diverse interactions. Groups may therefore be very confusing to autistic people. They will often be quiet or say the wrong things.

The consequences of that other way of thinking –clarified by the above theories– appear on behaviouristic level. I will describe both physical and psycho-social aspects in the following parts.

1.3 Physical and psycho-social consequences

1.3.1 Sensorial and motoric aspects

However autistic people live in the same physical world as non-autistic (=neurotypical) people, their perceptual world seems to be deeply different: it's another way of perception. They have unusual sensory-perceptual experiences. Those experiences could relate to hyper- or hyposensitivity, fluctuations between different volumes of perception or difficulties with the interpretation of a sense. Differences in how we experience the world lead to another sort of knowledge about the world. Autists can do nothing about it, they even can't know they see or hear the 'wrong' things. Normal links between objects and events are not understandable for them and can be intimidating, confusing or frightening.

The world can be pretty crushing for people with autism. When lots of stimuli in different senses assault the brain, normal people filter those incentives in a natural way. Autists cannot filter enough and will be 'attacked' by their surroundings in a scaring manner. In the context of e.g. traffic, they must screen the correct signs and don't focus on all the details they experience in the streets. Otherwise, it could be very dangerous for them and for others. People with autism maybe too stunned to focus on the right signals because of their difference in perception. I will show some examples in the different senses why people can become extremely overwhelmed and how they may cope with it.

Patterns of sensory-perceptual experiences are never exactly the same with autistic people, which makes it even more complicated. The experiences themselves are not unique for people with autism. Everybody can sometimes have a strange feeling or a comparable experience, especially when tired or under influence of medication (or drugs). The unique thing about the experiences is the intensity and continuity: for people with autism these are 'normal' experiences. Autistic people appear to percept things as they are, they can literally

see things without interpreting or understanding, they can 'see the world as it really is'. This is not limited to the visual aspect only, but also for the other senses. Neurotypicals see or hear the things they expect to see or hear; they are e.g. very sensitive to (optical) illusions. For autists, there sometimes is an inability to make a difference between foreground and background. Often relevant and non-relevant stimuli cannot be separated or filtered out of the entire context. If even a small detail is being changed, then the whole picture is different and no longer familiar. Autistic people can be very vulnerable for sensory overload, caused by the inability to filter irrelevant information, delayed processing or fragmented perception ... which can result in anxiety, confusion, frustration and stress ... leading to more hypersensitivity. It can lead to tiredness (especially in noisy, bright places), withdrawal, sudden outburst of self-abuse or difficult behaviours, nausea or even vomiting (after excessive movements or emotions).

I make a distinction between seven (out of 10 in total) sensorial systems: visual system (the sight), the auditive system (the hearing), the olfactory system (the smell), the gustatory system (the taste), the tactile system (the 'external' feelings and 'internal' sensations), the vestibular system (balance) and the proprioceptive system (own posture, coordination and movement of the body). The unusual sensory-perceptual experiences can occur on any of those sensorial systems. A person's sense can be intensified or hypersensitive: the channel is too open, so too much stimulation gets in for the brain to handle. Or it can be under-sensitive or hyposensitive: the brain is deprived because the channel is not open enough. Both can appear at the same time for different stimuli. Inconsistency of perception is the fluctuation between hypersensitivity and hyposensitivity. It can be very confusing for autistic people and it often appears. It can be extreme unclear for their surroundings what is going on at these moments. E.g. it may look for neurotypicals perhaps like an FM radio that is not exactly tuned on the station when they are driving down the highway: sometimes it comes in clearly and sometimes not.

1.3.1.1 Sight / vision

Some autistic people experience very intense stimuli for bright or flickering lights in their surroundings. They must be aware of PC/tablets, windows, mirroring or coloured paper, projectors or sudden changes in lightening. Bright TL-light in shopping malls, sport halls or supermarkets can be very disturbing. They sometimes cope by wearing dark sunglasses or special (Irlen) glasses, even inside. Busy crowds (e.g. stations, sport facilities) can be overwhelming because of the many visual (and auditive) incentives. In these environments (physical and mental) guiding can be necessary to prevent overstimulation.

Staring at turning or flickering objects, or even at their own fingers, can sometimes be a sort of self-stimulating behaviour for those who are rather deprived from outside stimuli.

I use frequently sunglasses –even inside the house- to cope with the bright light of the sun or other lights. On the other hand, I feel attracted by soft light, changing colours and moving lights. Little things like a hair or piece of dust can attract my attention and must be removed. I wandered a few years with glasses that were not adapted to my eye sight: it was clearer for others than for me that I needed another and more adapted pair.

1.3.1.2 Sound / hearing

An autistic person may find certain background sounds, which other people ignore or block out, unbearably loud or distracting. This can cause anxiety or even physical pain. It sometimes helps to use a headphone, mp3-player or ear protection. Listening to music can shut off the outside noise and the advantage is that they are in control of the sound. It can also appear the other way around. Sometimes they don't hear alarm signals from other people or machines while everybody else is already alert about what is going on. Or they don't notice the difference between the sound of a telephone and the doorbell. Noisy surroundings can be very disturbing or irritating. Often autistic people cannot follow a conversation if there is too much noise in the room, or if there are multiple conversations going on. A conversation with three people or more can already be too much to follow.

I do not seem to hear things when radio and television are both on too loud. I cannot distinguish different sounds like the doorbell, the phone or the bleep of the oven. I do not seem to notice the difference between an ear infection and an ear dot, and localization of echoes is difficult. In busy places like a station, festival or restaurant I get easily overwhelmed, irritated and tired; I prefer to sit in the corner or next to the sidewall to have a better control of the surroundings. Background noises can be very disturbing. I sometimes don't notice it when a sound suddenly disappears. On the other hand, I often am fascinated by certain hums or returning resonances from music.

1.3.1.3 Smell

Some perfumes, odours or aromas can trigger a kind of dislike for someone or something in a very unconscious way. Some smells can be enormously overwhelming for autistic people, while they cause little influence on the average neurotypical. The opposite also appears. Sweat or the odour of other human beings can also be overpowering. It is of course very difficult to change anything about that.

I cannot stand some smells like the aroma of hot milk or pudding. Others I do not notice like when something is burning or scents very bad. I have the habit or intention to smell at myself or other people and things because of my hyposensitivity for scents.

1.3.1.4 Taste / flavour

Taste has a lot in common with the other senses (e.g. the mouth touch, smell). It sometimes seems that children don't like certain food because of the flavour, but it can be the texture or small pieces in the food which they are bothered with. It can even be the colour of the food, or the way it is divided –separated or not– on the plate.

I sometimes eat things that are out of date or not edible any more. I don't bother about hot or cold food, strong flavours or when a meal is badly prepared. I often eat the same diet and sometimes I have the ritual to lick at objects or people because of my hyposensitivity for flavours.

1.3.1.5 Touch / feeling / sensations

Some people can be very sensitive for certain texture of clothing, especially labels in fabrics, while others are fascinated by some materials with special surfaces. E.g. wearing a t-shirt under the dobok can sometimes prevent some irritating feelings. For children (and even adults) there are a lot of playthings on the market to give them special tactile experiences. Sometimes they like to chew on something or play with a gadget (E.g. a fidget spinner) in their hand.

I can hardly bear soft touch and prefer hard pressure or approaches. I do not like wearing shoes and on the other hand, I like some pressure on my feet (e.g. somebody else standing on my feet). I like to feel objects and knock onto things and walls. I am fascinated or irritated by certain fabrics. Sometimes I can barely deduce the pressure in a touch or movement. A shoulder knock or giving a hand to someone can often be too hard or too soft. When I watch TV or read a book, I don't feel a knock on my shoulders. I like to touch certain materials or textiles, and in some cases, I invented own words which represent my tactile impressions. I don't like cloths that are new or just washed. After a long day or in a busy context, I cannot stand soft touch.

Until now, I focused on the 5 "external" senses of the body, well known by everybody.

I will continue with the (5) "internal" senses of the body, which are less known by most people. Sometimes they are difficult to differentiate from each other. Nevertheless, I try to maintain a schedule to keep an overview. In fact, you can distinguish 5 internal sense-systems: 'interoception' (=organ-functioning: hunger/thirst/need to go to the toilet), 'nociception' (=pain-experience), 'thermoception' (=temperature), 'balance' (=equilibrium/stability) and 'proprioception' (=body-positioning).

But for the purpose of this thesis, I will not make different paragraphs for the first 3: I keep those listed under this paragraph as 'sensations'.

For 'balance' and 'proprioception', I made additional paragraphs because of the importance of those systems in the context of martial arts like ITF Taekwon-Do. Explanation of these items will follow in those paragraphs.

Sometimes autistic people are not aware of their own body signals (hunger, thirst, pain, temperature, the need to go to the toilet, sweating...). People who are hypo-sensitive may not feel extremes of temperature or have a high tolerance for pain. Their surroundings must be very attentive when an accident happens.

Especially the feeling and interpretation of internal stimuli is very difficult for me and causes sometimes problems. E.g. I cannot always feel if I am hungry, thirsty, cold or warm. I sometimes feel at my belly to check if I have to go to the toilet or not. I prefer to walk with bare foot even when it freezes and forget to put off my sweater when I perspire. I am hyposensitive for pain and cannot interpret very well the signals of being sick or hurt. I sometimes forget to eat when it is not on my schedule. The problem is that those things contain some health risks.

1.3.1.6 Balance / vestibular system

The vestibular system, which is part of the inner ear, is the sensory system that provides the leading contribution to the sense of stability and spatial orientation for the purpose of coordinating movement with balance.

Some kids (or adults) have difficulties with the vestibular system so that their feeling of balance, coordination and the manner in which they move are disturbed. They suffer with gravity when their feet are not on the ground and feel disorientated if they have to change their body posture quickly.

Others find it fantastic to move in eight-lanes or hang up-side-down. There can be problems with the interpretation of information about the position and the movement of the body in relationship with the environment, the ability to hold a certain stance and to keep the balance.

In addition, we will see that problems with balance are very close related to those of the proprioceptive system. E.g. people with autism have the intention to keep moving in their own rhythm, not like neurotypicals do as soldiers in a parade. Some may rock, spin or flap their hands to stimulate sensation, to help with balance and posture or to deal with stress. Some people can show self-stimulating behaviour to wake up their own nerve system (shaking, turning, and waving with the body, hands or fingers).

I struggled my entire life with those balance issues. Taekwon-Do helped me a lot to improve that problem by doing lots of stability exercises, but it has its restrictions. Like everybody else, I have my proper limits, but they are also regulated by autism borders.

1.3.1.7 Proprioception / motoric system

Proprioception is the ability of the organism (the brain) to perceive the position of the own body and body parts in space via pressure-sensors in all the muscles and joints. We also know through this system how heavy something is and we can regulate our level of alertness. People with sensory sensitivity may find it harder to use their body awareness system: in all cases, there is a hyposensitivity present in this system. That system tells us where our bodies are, so for those with reduced body awareness, it can be harder to navigate rooms, avoiding obstructions, stand at an appropriate distance from other people and carry out 'fine motor' tasks such as tying shoelaces or putting the right pressure on a pen. Motor skills are the skills needed to move your body or parts of your body. Some people on the autism spectrum have poor motor skills (especially the fine motor skills) and are not handy. For example, some people with autism find it difficult to stand upright or to hold a pencil between their fingers and thumb. My handwriting is chaotic and clumsy because of the inappropriate pressure on my pen. Sometimes autistic people clash against objects or other people, have the tendency to fall down, have a low conscience of their body position in space, do not hold objects properly in their hands or drop things often, they have a low/high muscle power or less control about it, like to turn around or move the upper body in waves ...

The loco-motoric system, especially the fine motor skills, but also the abilities like jumping and running, can show deviations or can be delayed in the case of autism. There can also be problems with balance, posture, power, speed and body coordination (eye-hand or eye-foot). Some people with autism have dyskinesia, which is difficulty or distortion in performing voluntary movements. Others have hyperkinesia, which are excessive voluntary movements.

Development stimulation and teaching abilities by playing with lots of variation can be helpful for kids to improve their skills in these fields. Several studies show the efficacy of sensory and motor interventions for children and adults with autism. But it is a scientific area in which more methods should be developed and more investigation should be done to improve the motor skills and evaluate and develop the coordination. By training (e.g. martial arts) for years in these fields, the improvement can be spectacular. Balance and proprioception are the most 'trainable' senses of the body, but the fundamental problem never totally disappears. Heavy pressure on the body by means of clothes, shoes or simply weighty things to lay under, can sometimes release some stress. Occasionally jumping helps also to give some proprioceptive (and vestibular) input. You can never give enough proprioceptive input and techniques or materials to increase the comfort. But the initial problem is unsolvable, of course. Nevertheless, the input of strong (active or passive) proprioceptive inducements on a regular base –not constantly- is a *conditio sine qua non* for a better coordination, power-regulation and emotion-regulation in the future. Active incentives are e.g. pushing, lifting or tearing things; jumping; wiping; fitness; yoga or martial arts. Passive encouragements are e.g. deep pressure; massage; heavy objects etc.

By doing Taekwon-Do for many years, my body learned a lot about balance, posture, movement and proprioception. The same counts for the fact I played theatre for years and learned how my body is on a stage and opposite another person. In other situations of daily life, I often bump into other people (e.g. against my girlfriend at home) and cannot interpret distances very well (e.g. traffic situations). Sometimes I am surprised to find someone close behind me or next to me. Without noticing, I stand in the way of other people when I'm not paying attention. For me, the difference in positioning between outside and inside a building is very diverse: I cannot orientate myself (e.g. seen from a different angle or position) and I often lose my way in a well-known environment or context. There is a combination of tactile hypersensitivity and proprioceptive hyposensitivity, which is very common for people on the autism spectrum.

1.3.2 Psycho-social aspects

1.3.2.1 Communication and interaction

Communication, language and speech are some of the most important functions in our human existence. Nevertheless, deviations in them form an essential aspect of autism. Understanding (receptive) and speaking (expressive) language can function very differently and can be extremely challenging in daily life for autistic people. They have difficulties with interpreting both verbal and non-verbal language like facial expression, gestures or tone of voice. Many have a very literal understanding of language and think people always mean exactly what they say. They will usually understand more of what other people say to them than they are able to express; and they may struggle with vagueness or abstract concepts.

How small the syntactic or semantic ability (the formal aspects of the language) may be, the pragmatic ability will always be smaller. The theoretical knowledge can be big versus the usability in practice. That seems to be a universal characteristic for autistic people, some never learn to talk and others are poorly motivated to do so. Some use idiosyncratic (= peculiar and individual) words based on unique associations that makes them bizarre for the listener. It can make their language very original but consider it as a shortcoming in the communication. Idiosyncratic or eccentric words show a lack of interest or necessity to share a broader context with the listener. It suggests the inability to mentalize. Echolalia (= repetition of vocalizations made by another person), difficulties in language-development and problems with some words (mixing 'you' and 'me' or 'this' and 'that' or 'here' and 'there') are also typical symptoms of this process. Sometimes the written language is easier for them because of the lack of eye-contact and more time to think and interpret about the contents of things. Other more verbal and intelligent autists seem to have an odd way of speaking or the tendency to speak in black-white terms, even though they can speak fluently. Nuances that depend on the context (relevance, attitude and intention of the speaker/message) can be very difficult to comprehend. E.g. they may know the whole dictionary of a certain language and even the grammar but are unable to use it adapted to the context or in reality.

Some can't speak at all or have fairly limited speech and reach for objects, or are looking at or taking your hand to the object they want. Others use pictures, specific sign language or visual symbols to express themselves; they are sometimes able to communicate very effectively without speech.

Some of them are late in talking but when they start, they can occasionally speak multiple words or sentences. Others will have good language skills, but they may still find it hard to understand the expectations of others within conversations, perhaps repeating what the other person has just said (this is called echolalia) or talking at length about their own interests. It helps if other people speak in a clear, consistent way and give people on the autism spectrum time to process what has been said to them. Others can't keep themselves to the social rules of beginning, continuing and ending a conversation. Nevertheless, some can learn by extend training how to listen, to give and receive compliments or critical comments, when and how to interrupt somebody or how to change subject. It stays a challenge to 'act like that' and sometimes there is someone else needed to 'save' the conversation. A lot of things are taken literally and expressions, irony, sarcasm, sayings ... can be very confusing. Prosody (=characteristics of speech) such as a different accent, tone or

voice can matter a lot in understanding the other in a totally different way: autists have problems with that. Other people (neurotypicals) need to learn to speak clearly, straight forward and without unnecessary subtleties when they talk with autistic people; and give them the needed time to think about what they are going to say, to formulate an answer to a question ... because they don't have a natural conversation talent. The social language is like a strange language for them.

1.3.2.2 Emotions

Autistic people often have difficulty recognizing or understanding other people's emotions and feelings, or expressing their own. Such difficulties can make it very hard for them to navigate in the social world. They may appear to be insensitive because they have not recognized how someone else is feeling and seek out time alone when overloaded by other people. They do not look for comfort from other people or appear to behave 'strangely' or in a way thought to be socially 'inappropriate', as it is not always easy for them to express feelings, emotions or needs.

They sometimes feel they have no protection against emotions and therefore they often hide themselves (withdrawal inside themselves or their special interest) or misuse alcohol or other drugs to reduce the anxiety or fear. Their emotional development leaps behind on those of neurotypicals and their (emotional) vocabulary can be very limited as a child. The way they express their emotions is little subtle and varied. That is also proved by some neuroanatomic investigations in the brain. Other investigations show that 'face-blindness' (=prosopagnosia) can play a role in some extent for autistic people, because they look at faces like they do with objects: very fragmented and detailed, not seeing the whole facial expression and the context. Some autists have huge difficulties recognizing other people's faces. Another aspect of autism can be psychologically described as 'alexithymia', meaning somebody is not fully able to recognize and describe feelings. To complete the problem, autists have often a restricted vocabulary to describe more subtle or complex emotions and to support others in an emotional way.

1.3.2.3 Relationships

Difficulties with social interaction can mean that autists may find it hard to form friendships or relationships: some may want to interact with other people and make friends or step into a relation, but may be unsure how to go about this.

It sounds logical, but when an autistic person is alone, there are no qualitative limitations in the social interaction. There are no peculiar things in their speech or language, and it is one of the most effective manners to refuel emotionally for people with autism. It can be pleasant, especially when occupied with his or her special interest.

With two people, a so-called one-to-one situation, it is more or less doable to follow the conversation and interact properly when they use their intellectual powers to interpret the social signals and non-verbal communication. Three people seem already too much to follow everything what is going on. Bigger groups are not preferable and can be very annoying and

confusing. Normal social occasions have a duration that is too long for autistic people; they prefer meetings which are short and well-organized with a clear purpose.

Social isolation is a major problem for autistic people. Some may prefer to be on their own or lack the skills to engage with others. Some find it difficult to maintain contacts due to a lack of understanding of small talk and other conventions of social behaviour. A bad experience in a social situation in the past may have been generalized and the autistic person is then trying to avoid a repetition of this negative experience. Some may need a higher level of support for activities than their family or friends are able to provide. Others may live independently without social network or support workers or don't know about suitable activities in their local area. E.g. when supporting a person with autism who feels isolated, a lot of explanation can be needed to answer all his questions: the 'why' must be well discussed. Some autistic people may need time to themselves if they find it difficult to be around others for long periods of time. It is important to respect this. But it is also worth talking about the benefits of having a network of contacts for when they want company or need support. Their motivation will be of great importance here, some can be socially motivated while others don't feel the need for that.

For many people with autism the world is a very confusing place. Routines can provide reassurance and comfort, but can limit social interaction with other people. In time, a person may move on to getting to know the people they see regularly. Practicing a few bits of small talk, such as 'How are you today?' can help to reduce anxiety about making social contact with people. Really belonging to a group can be something quite different than not being closed out of the group. For autistic people this is balancing on a thin line. Finding connection with others is not easy when you have limited social skills, are a bit unhandy and possess a different learning style.

Autistic people say the world often feels overwhelming and this can cause them considerable anxiety. In particular, understanding and relating to other people, and taking part in everyday family and social life can be harder if you're autistic. Other people (neurotypicals) appear to know, intuitively, how to communicate and interact with each other. Autistic people may wonder why they are 'different' and frequently feel their social differences. They often do not 'look' disabled. Parents of autistic children regularly say that other people simply think their child is naughty, while adults find that they are misunderstood.

1.3.2.4 Patterns of behaviours, interests and activities

Autistic people have restricted and repetitive patterns of behaviours, interests and activities. The world can seem a very unpredictable and confusing place to autistic people, who often prefer to have a daily routine so that they know what is going to happen every day. This routine can extend to always wanting to travel the same way to and from school or work, or eat exactly the same food for breakfast or lunch.

The use of rules can also be important: it may be difficult for autistic persons to take a different approach to something once they have been taught the 'right' way to do it. They may not be comfortable with the idea of change, but may be able to cope better if they are prepared for it in advance.

Many autistic people have intense and highly-focused interests (specific interests), often from a fairly young age. These can change over time or be lifelong, and can be anything from art, sports or music, to trains or computers. Some autistic people may eventually be able to work or study in related areas. For others, it will remain an unlimited hobby or passion. An interest may sometimes be unusual. One autistic person loved collecting rubbish, for example; with encouragement, this was channelled into a job in recycling and the environment. It is the unusual attention, time, profoundness and intensity someone spends on it, which determines in how it will grow out into a specific interest instead of a hobby. Up to a certain level, this counts for everybody. But the amount of dedication in which autistic people submerge themselves into the subject and the intensity by which they attach themselves to their project, makes it a specific interest. Also the fact that they are never able to be busy in a superficial way with the subject of their occupation, characterizes this kind of interest. For some people with autism, time spent with their specific interest can sometimes be the only time that they have some relaxation, no stress or a clear mind. Autistic people often report that the pursuit of such interests is fundamental to their wellbeing and happiness.

A specific interest fulfils different functions:

- A way to conquer fear
- A source of pleasure
- A way to relax
- A base for an identity-feeling
- A base to create another world
- A base for certainty
- A way of understanding the world
- A hobby
- A communication subject
- A sign of intelligence or special abilities

All above arguments can be of benefit for the person itself –if well controlled– but also for society in general. To build friendships with people with the same interests (with or without autism) can be an advantage. To look for work or a hobby in the same atmosphere as the specific interest can be of great importance for the future. And if ITF Taekwon-Do can grow out to become such a specific interest, then people with autism are able to develop their skills in the beautiful martial art I am going to describe in the next chapter.

2

ITF TAEKWON-DO



INTERNATIONAL
TAEKWON-DO
FEDERATION



2 ITF TAEKWON-DO

2.1 Introduction

Most of the following items in this part of the thesis are based on the contents of the Encyclopedia of ITF (=International Taekwon-do Federation) Taekwon-Do written by our founder general Choi Hong Hi. They are worked out in function of the purpose of this thesis and therefore focused on how to manage ITF Taekwon-Do for persons with special needs like autism.

It will not be new for people who are familiar with ITF Taekwon-Do, but I like to accentuate some specific facets that are unique for this martial art and therefore of huge importance in the context of my thesis and for the clarifications in the following chapter.

I believe that ITF Taekwon-Do as a specific interest can be a help for many people with autism in a lot of different areas. There are however some conditions: relatively small groups, passion for the martial art, at least one or more people where they can look up to or have admiration for. All those circumstances are almost integrated in the (specific) interest that ITF Taekwon-Do itself often is for its (autistic) practitioners.

2.2 Taekwon: physical aspects (“the way of the foot and the fist”)

2.2.1 Fitness and training (“the scientific way”)

According to the Encyclopedia, “Taekwon-Do uses the hand and foot techniques also for health reasons, relating the skilled application of punches, kicks, blocks and dodges to lots of physical fitness. In training, all the muscles of the human body are used. Continuous training is essential to keep oneself in top form and physical condition. From the use of one’s muscles, it will be possible to connect all available power generated by every muscular contraction. Repeated emphasis is placed on regular training, in order to master the techniques of attack and defence.”

“Good health is one of life’s most treasured possessions. Taekwon-do can help to realize to keep good health by practicing individually or in groups without the use of weights or special equipment (economic advantage of Taekwon-Do). The entire system of the body, from the fingers to the toes, is brought into play. It’s high repetition, low resistance movements develop a longer, leaner and more flexible musculature. Such muscles have more of their areas close to blood supply routes, therefore producing maximum endurance and wellbeing. The typical training regime raises the pulse rate and oxygen characteristics of the heart and lungs over an extended period. This increased ventilation is called ‘aerobic training’ and provides a lot of benefits for heart, lungs, blood supply, blood vessels and blood pressure. It promotes better sleep and waste elimination. The training tends to be a normalizer of body weight and the estimated calorie consumption for a strong Taekwon-Do workout is about 600 calories per hour.”

Muscular strength, flexibility of joints, muscles, ligaments and understanding the mechanics and techniques of body movements ... are only a few developments that ITF Taekwon-Do has to offer. There are extra benefits in comparison with other sports: there is the ability to change the direction of movement, move the body quickly from one place in space to another, broaden the peripheral vision, and increase the concentration and the ability to avoid distraction.

'Focus' requires that we have balance and the effort of dynamic energy when we concentrate all the power at one point in space. Combinations of fundamental movements and patterns develop alertness and the ability to change movements as well as direction; while sparring develops peripheral vision, timing and concentration.

The organized training procedures foresee techniques of warming up and cooling down to promote flexibility or prevent injuries and stiffness. Also the breathing exercises and the attacking 'Yell' (ki-hab) are examples of the highly developed science of body mechanics and physiology, contained within formal ITF Taekwon-Do training.

The study and training of ITF Taekwon-Do may provide benefits in perceptual-motor organization, vision, body development and control which is valuable in the pursuit of any other sport or physical activity. Nowadays, we know a lot more about healthy exercises to prevent injuries during training in the short or long run. The warming up and cooling down exercises are adapted to the normal physical movements of the body for the same reasons. We learned from the past and try to implement the positive outcome of scientific investigations as much as possible. So generally, it is good for everybody, and may be a positive challenge for people with a disability like autism. The training aids the students in becoming more active and increases their amount of energy and focus. Through each training session they gain increased endurance, muscle toning and stretching, which is something that is not always possible in their daily lifestyles. Adaptation to the individual up to a certain limit is always possible and needs to be taken into account by the instructor.

"During the International Instructor Courses there is laid special pressure on the 'Theory of Power' since its study is essential to ITF Taekwon-do. Already during the teachings of General Choi Hong Hi, he placed particular emphasis on such theory and explained its significance and the need for instructors to be scientifically aware of how advanced this martial art is, as its origin and modernity are linked in this specific feature. Therefore instructors must place emphasis on the understanding of such principles in order to improve the quality of their training and the student's performance effectiveness. The goal is to supply them with concepts that will enable them to guide their students along their evolution and technical performance, as well as being useful for the instructor's own learning." (2013- The Art of Taekwon-Do ITF)

We will see that through the composition cycle of ITF Taekwon-Do, everybody can find his or her 'thing' and can be attracted by fundamental movements, patterns, face-to-face actions (e.g. sparring), accessories (equipment), and personal defence. Power and special techniques are also part of the competition and examination mode. I will explain those previous elements separately underneath.

2.2.2 Patterns (Tul)

Patterns are pre-determined fights against imaginary opponents: there are various fundamental movements, most of which represent either attack or defence techniques, set to a fixed and logical sequence, and performed in a fluid rhythm. Students systematically deal with several imaginary opponents under various assumptions, using attacking and blocking tools from different directions. Therefore it enables them to practice the fundamental movements in series, to develop sparring techniques, improve flexibility and body shifting, build muscles and breath control, develop fluid and smooth motions, and gain rhythmical movements. Competitors must produce maximum power while maintaining a high technical level. Building up tactics (for sparring) and stimulating the memory and concentration are also side-effects of this kind of exercises. One can perform patterns alone or in group.

The accuracy of a practitioner will be fortified by starting and ending at exactly the same spot while a correct posture and facing as well as the sinewave must be maintained at all times. The right and left sides are equally stimulated, trained and coordinated because the techniques are equally distributed among right and left hands and feet. ITF Taekwon-Do is designed to develop both sides equally at the same time, while we know that many people with special needs (like those on the autism spectrum) struggle with their left and/or right hand flanks.

The patterns are regarded as distinctive ITF Taekwon-Do legacy: they are like a genetic code passed down from generation to generation. There are 24 patterns in ITF Taekwon-Do, representing the 24 hours of one day. The life of a human being (perhaps 100 years) can be considered as a day when compared with eternity. Therefore, you can practice ITF Taekwon-Do all your life while evolving through the patterns. In your own time and pace, you can grow old with them without forcing anything, even when you deal with a specific disability such as autism.

The forceful and even the finer techniques depend largely on a correct stance as this is the starting point of every ITF Taekwon-Do movement. Stability, alertness and flexibility are the controlling factors. This is why we learn the basic stances as fundamental exercises before going to the patterns. But we know that learning and teaching ITF Taekwon-Do is a continuous process via the eternal circle (=the composition cycle) of ITF Taekwon-Do: ... fundamental movements → patterns → (step) sparring → self-defence → fundamental movements ...

Our grandmasters of the technical committee tried to standardize the pattern movements to facilitate a more profound understanding and provide in a clear interpretation of each movement. This knowledge is laid down in 2013 in the book 'The Art of Taekwon-Do ITF' by grandmasters Marano, Trajtenberg and Bos and actualized, adapted and communicated to all ITF Taekwon-Do practitioners during the International Instructor Courses. Until today, the technical committee is working very hard to systematize the details so every movement will be fully understood and maximally performed in a natural way and in the same manner all over the world.

2.2.3 Sparring (Matsogi)

Sparring is the physical application of attack and defence techniques gained from pattern and fundamental exercise against actual moving opponents under various conditions and situations. It is indispensable to promote the fighting spirit and courage, to train the eyes, to read the opponent's tactic and manoeuvres, to copy the attacking and blocking tools, to test your own skills and ability, and to learn other movements barely to be picked up from pattern or fundamental exercise.

Sparring is classified into stepsparring, semi-free (with specific limitations), free (includes competition) and pre-arranged free sparring.

Stepsparring is to practice fundamental movements and techniques from the patterns with a partner to learn how to bring realism and precision into the picture such as the right angle and distance for attack and defence. Step sparring is practiced under prearranged modes with various assumptions: the steps to be taken, the target and attacking tool to be used are agreed upon between the players in advance. For the first time there is physical contact between two people while they study to perform their techniques. Different skills can be developed in the same set of exercises: to harden the body, train coordination and speed, gain precision and timing. The physical contact can provide some borders for autistic people, something they are really longing for, as we will see later on.

The (semi-)free sparring, e.g. competition sparring, shows how to deal with real fighting situations and unexpected events. It is only a small part of ITF Taekwon-do. It is essentially an open combat with controlled attacking and prohibition of attacking to certain vital spots and below the belt. Both competitors are completely free (within the rules of the playing game) to attack and defend with all available means and methods; there is no pre-arranged mode between the players. In sparring focused blows, speed, power, balance, blocking, dodging and attitude are taken into thought. True ITF Taekwon-Do style sparring is performing theoretical, powerful movements that are aesthetically pleasing, while avoiding stereotyped movements without any tactics and disregard for the opponents position at all. Those rules can create a safe feeling because they have the intention to protect the players or competitors at all times. Good educated umpires play a key role in this part of ITF Taekwon-Do. Free sparring is important to build courage, experience, sense of victory (and loss), ability of performance and significance of participation. For safety reasons, there are some limitations, such as limited number of attacking areas, methods and tools, use of safety equipment, limited space for fighting, no full contact and prohibition of attacking the vital spots. The main goal in competition is to attain a score advantage over an opponent. The sparring is performed dynamically with semi-contact. Safety and health are the topmost priority during competition, a context which is elemental for people with special needs like autism. Some of them will never reach this phase of the game while others can be good at it.

Pre-arranged free sparring is also practiced under prearranged modes with various assumptions which are agreed upon between the 2 players, who are free to choose their own techniques. This is simulated free sparring. The participants follow a prepared scenario that enables them to skilfully exhibit a wide variety of techniques without fear of injury. Two students (=1 team) agree to perform a number of traditional and sometimes acrobatic elements like attacks, defences and jumping techniques creating a spectacle worth watching. It seems ideal for demonstrations because it shows the possibilities of sparring and some

beautiful (high foot) techniques of ITF Taekwon-Do which are visually impressive. It is therefore also useful for introducing the ITF Taekwon-Do style of fighting to an audience.

2.2.4 Self-defence (Hosinsul)

The ultimate purpose of the martial art is self-defence and defence of the weaker against a stronger aggressor. The techniques of practical self-defence are the most interesting and most advanced. They are a logical application of various motions acquired from patterns, sparring and fundamental movements to be used against a sudden attack by an (armed) opponent or several adversaries. The defender must know how to make use of his or her opponent's momentum, vital spots and force, while using his or her dynamic and reflexive actions. These techniques can only be effective if you take the time to constantly train with them under realistic conditions.

Many practitioners believe that self-defence means adopting ju-jitsu, aikido or judo techniques, when in fact it is all about the application of ITF Taekwon-Do techniques in circumstances which are out of the ordinary and which are rarely practiced in class. E.g. somebody grabs you or when you are confronted with somebody who is holding a stick or a knife. That would be as well the case when you are facing more than a single antagonist or when you are lying on the ground. Why we don't borrow techniques from other martial arts? Because when we should face an expert in another martial art, we better do it with our own techniques and with the style we are best at: basically, using a system for striking at long and medium range. Anyway, the decision of engaging in combat must be taken only when life is at stake, having the tenets of ITF Taekwon-Do always in the back of our heads.

"A most wanted side-effect of hosinsul is perhaps the possibility to increase your assertiveness and boost your self-esteem. Self-defence is good for autistic kids who are often bullied by others. The encouragement of self-confidence and (mental) self-control can lower problematic aggressive behaviour and increase perseverance and mutual respect; together with a stronger self-consciousness and a feeling of competence. These are very wanted characteristics you can acquire by practicing martial arts for a long time. People with a handicap can obtain certain habits or sharpen their skills by doing martial arts. Some do even overcome their initial timidity and become teachers, speakers, scientifics, performers or writers in 'overcompensating' themselves. Others can become good practitioners or even champions of the martial art itself." (Professor Marc Theeboom – VUB Belgium – 2002 / Bloem and Moget – 2002)

2.2.5 Power breaking and special techniques

These are specific parts of ITF Taekwon-Do and more particularly of championships, but some people like them very much. Participants can show their skills of using the speed and power of the techniques to the limits.

The main purpose of Power test is to break as many (plastic) boards as possible (held by specially made stands) with only one hit (a punch or a kick) with their bare hands or feet. The competitor must show appropriate balance and regain the proper technique required before and after executing the procedure. The effectiveness of the punch or kick depends on maximum power with the correct technique.

The main purpose of Special Techniques is to jump as high or as long as possible and hit or break a board, held by specially made stands, whilst maintaining correct balance and regain the proper stance required before and after the technique. The correct attacking tool must be used in the correct manner and knock the board downwards. Jumping ability, flexibility and coordination skills are of vital importance.

These techniques can only be effective if you take the time to constantly train them. The repetitive character of those exercises and the special muscle trainings are interesting for everybody and technical breaks are as well a part of the examinations for grading. Only a small part of the ITF Taekwon-Do practitioners really go for it on championships and have also the talent to break some records in power and/or specials.

2.3 Do: mental and psycho-social aspects

2.3.1 Tenets or principles of ITF Taekwon-Do (“the philosophical way”)

2.3.1.1 Introduction

The ‘Do’ (Korean) or ‘Tao’ (Chinese) refers to the way, the road to what we want to reach in life, to where we want to go, to achieve our goals, to reach our destination, to live healthy and safe with high moral standards and a lot of happiness. We try to follow a certain road, which is not always so straight and easy to walk on, and includes a lot of traps and sideways through dark forests and steep hills. ITF Taekwon-Do is consequently far more than a combat sport: it’s a way of life, especially in the east, and a universal martial art of defence. Even though, the physical techniques of ITF Taekwon-Do are based on some external martial arts like Karate and Taekyon (improved after intense scientific and actualized studies, e.g. using the sinewave), General Choi implemented the skills of the internal martial arts like Aikido and T’ai ch’i (chuan) to make it complete. This includes a broader philosophy about how to conduct within a global sport and a complex world. The philosophy is based on ethical, moral and spiritual standards to which man can live together in harmony. The following guidelines have been set out by General Choi Hong Hi in the Encyclopedia of ITF Taekwon-Do:

- “- Be willing to go where the going may be tough, and do the things that are worth doing, even though they are difficult;*
- Be gentle to the weak and tough to the strong;*
- Be content with what you have in money and position, but never in skills;*
- Always finish what you begin, be it large or small;*
- Be a willing teacher to anyone regardless of religion, race or ideology;*
- Never return to repression or threat in the pursuit of a noble cause;*

- *Teach attitude and skill with action rather than words;*
- *Always be yourself even though your circumstances may change;*
- *Be the eternal teacher who teaches with the body when young, with the word when old, and by moral principle even after death."*

Those guidelines are translatable into the tenets or principles of ITF Taekwon-Do. There's a reason why the tenets of ITF Taekwon-Do are in a specific order, because they are conquered in this order: courtesy, integrity, perseverance, self-control and indomitable spirit. I will explain these principles one by one and why this order is important.

2.3.1.2 Courtesy

According to our founder general Choi Hong Hi: "if we all showed more courtesy, there would be fewer social conflicts since those occur many times for lack of finesse rather than because of profound objective disagreements over an issue."

Courtesy is about how to behave, not only in sports but also in life (outside the dojang). There is an official protocol on paper since 2017. The purpose of these rules is to introduce a uniform protocol for ITF Taekwon-Do people around the world. It describes the basic rules of protocol to be applied in each particular situation like in the dojang, at tournaments, at promotion examination tests ... but also in the social sphere. The underlying principles of the protocol should be applied in all aspects of life for an ITF Taekwon-Do practitioner. Bowing and saluting is a very important part of these rules. The training always starts and ends with the bowing and respect for the teacher, founder and elder students. You are supposed to have an open heart to learn and be humble, polite and real. Respect means also you have to pay your bills in time and don't show up too late for the trainings. *"When you drink the water, don't forget the source"*, according to Confucius. That means you may not forget where you are coming from and who your teachers were/are. Follow your sabum or master when he/she is correct, (and he/she must be truthful, principally) and not when he/she is not right. Disagree in an accurate and polite way.

"I want to refer to loyalty as an important quality in martial arts and one of the most mentioned and appreciated values in our domain. A loyal disciple is open and transparent with his/her thinking in front of the instructor. And even when he/she disagrees, it must happen with respect and he/she will never oppose the thoughts of the instructor/master in public. It is not to say 'yes' to everything or other kinds of flattery. It goes together with courtesy and honesty with the conviction that we are working for the common good. Loyalty is reciprocal between student and master. The master must not per definition accept all the actions of his pupil and protect him/her in any way. When the differences are very large, it is important to allow the student to continue with another master. It can happen that your paths are not meant to be the same. Affection and mutual respect define the relationship between master and student. Therefore, it should be an important principle in ITF Taekwon-Do."
(Grandmaster Pablo Trajtenberg, IX Degree, former President of the ITF, 2016)

2.3.1.3 Integrity

In ITF Taekwon-Do, the word integrity assumes a looser definition than the one usually presented in any dictionary. One must be able to define right and wrong and have the conscience, if wrong, to feel guilt. It is very important to behave properly, to apply what you are telling, to set an example to other people. We cannot be perfect and we all make mistakes. But mostly we have the possibility to correct ourselves, to apologise, to try again, to give it a new chance, and to take the consequences of our mistakes. Sometimes we even have to express regrets for things we are not directly responsible for. Sometimes, we have to think more about the consequences of what we do, before acting or saying something. Be true, know how to separate good from evil at all times, even if it means losses for ourselves, be not corrupt nor betray yourself or bring harm to others, walk the good track at all times and not only when it suits you. Encouragement of integrity is essential in order to raise our self-confidence. By appreciating our individuality we get to respect ourselves and we get to understand that any meaningful achievement requires self-respect.

2.3.1.4 Perseverance

Perseverance is about knowing how to work to be better day by day and sometimes about how to wait. It is about not giving up when the training is difficult and does not bring immediate results. On those moments, you have to keep going even if others do not support you: do not go along with fashions because they will pass. There is no alternative to conquer the qualities that you do not have: train that technique over and over again, overcome some of your weaknesses without taking shortcuts. To achieve something, whether it is a higher degree or the perfection of a technique, one must set his goal and then constantly persevere. There will be moments that things don't go the way you like them to go, or that you miss confidence and belief in the things you are doing at the moment. That can happen and it will pass too. It's about courage, being strong facing the difficulties of life in general, and not being scared about everything, just continue and make the best of it.

Perseverance is the quality that will enable us to reach goals beyond our natural skills. Nature may have given us the best ingredients but if we do not practice often enough, we will be defeated in the long run by that practitioner who possesses the necessary drive and perseverance to train persistently.

2.3.1.5 Self-control

This tenet is extremely important inside and outside the Dojang, whether conducting oneself in free sparring or in one's personal affairs. A loss of self-control in free sparring can prove disastrous to both student and opponent. According to Lao-Tzu "the term of stronger is the person who wins over oneself rather than someone else." It has to do with analysing things about yourself, about what's good and bad, why it is like that, and how to change it (if you want to change it). It's likewise part of the protocol, how to handle by it and with hierarchy and not to misuse it. Try to be balanced at all times: don't excess, don't give less ... and start with the small things in life like eating and talking.

Self-control channels aggression and teaches us how to make that energy flow in a positive way, preventing any unrestricted violence that may be triggered by excessive energy. It is fundamental to keep a balance between reason and emotion, as a way of getting the necessary self-confidence when the moment demands to choose a certain course of action.

2.3.1.6 Indomitable spirit

The last and most difficult tenet to be conquered is indomitable spirit: few practitioners truly reach it, others lost it in time and all (black belt) masters should have it. This does not replace perseverance, these are different things; perseverance is essential to this, that's why this principle comes earlier. It is a higher spiritual, physical and mental level: the person who doesn't care about difficulties, inconveniences or fears. The person who knows what he wants and how he wants it and nothing in the world will stop or defeat him to reach his goals. We become masters of ourselves and other people's opinion does not bother us; whether it comes from a crowd or our group of friends, we respect them but we are not servants of them. We will conquer them and make our own destiny: we can have this ability after many years of training and through life experiences. It's also the central concept in the Korean ideology of 'Juche'.

It means precisely to gather all determination and courage for a wise choice in situations where we must overcome fear; and it is this wild spirit which allows the Taekwondoin to achieve their goals, no matter what inconveniences or obstacles might block the way, especially when peace, freedom and justice are at stake.

2.3.2 Teaching, coaching and umpiring (“the psycho-social way”)

“The Dojang is an area where young and old, men and women, normal and handicapped, regardless of race or creed, come to learn ITF Taekwon-Do for the promotion of their mental, moral, physical and cultural education”, according to the Encyclopedia of ITF Taekwon-Do. “It should be a place where a certain ‘esprit de corps’ between members can be established with a common goal of promoting and cultivating a noble character. The primary consideration for any Dojang is a well-trained – mentally and physically – black belt instructor. The only thing that cannot be compromised is the quality of the instructor and the conduct in the Dojang: this means the bowing for the flag and instructor, reciting the oath and meditation after training.”

ITF Taekwon-Do is a martial art with four distinct facets: it is a sport, a martial art, a tool for social development and a way of life. Competition puts the sport facet of ITF Taekwon-Do in the picture. It is an important facet that allows ITF Taekwon-Do practitioners to show their skills against others from across the world. It allows you to evaluate and increase your abilities, set goals to achieve a higher level of training and accomplishment and to achieve success at local, regional, national and international level. Of course the sport aspect of ITF

Taekwon-Do is not just about competing, moreover, it is an excellent way to increase your social circle and make new connections. Therefore, it is also seen as a tool for social development: it broadens your view on some social aspects of society and stimulates in helping other people by doing social voluntary work. The equal integration of all kinds of people is stimulated by accepting everybody in the dojang under the same conditions.

In the end, it evolves into a way of life and personal philosophy: live like you think, otherwise you begin to think like you live. And when you say something about it: practice what you preach.

Teaching and coaching other people as a recognized international instructor of ITF Taekwon-Do is a huge responsibility and cannot be done if not also the morality is being trained together with all the rest. Supporting and tutoring your students is a continuous process and acquires a lot of perseverance. The role of the instructor at training is to reinforce the aims of the students, especially the ones with special needs, by encouraging them to listen, focus and persevere both inside and outside the dojang. The instructor must be a trustful figure for his/her pupils and treat them equal; he/she must consider the individual differences of his/her students. That means that he/she has to take into account the possibilities and disabilities of them. By the years, confidence will grow while teaching before a class or school.

"I also have a great deal more confidence in myself. An example of this would be the way I threw myself into the kicking exercises we were given in the last class I attended. Where once I might have been worried and afraid, I approached the class with enthusiasm and self-confidence." (Tae Kwon Do and Aspergers: fragment out of an article -Facebook July 2016- from an American writer and autistic, Robert Laing)

ITF Taekwon-Do is a martial art which you can practice individually and in group. The essence here is that it is a rather individual sport, but you cannot train without a group and an instructor. Many people with special needs enjoy the feeling of belonging to a group; it's a sense of being connected to the community that they can think about and participate in. It encourages patience and cooperation with others. Another side is that they have difficulties in contacting others and keeping relationships going. To start, you need a good instructor who will introduce you into the physical and philosophical basics of the martial art; this you cannot do on your own. You have to imitate the schedules of the fundamental movements and patterns in the beginning and get furthermore instructions to continue accurately and in the true spirit; it will not work properly if you try this only with books and DVD's. You need a living example who can correct you for basic things and into the somatic and mental details. When you grow further into the sport, you can do already a lot of things on your own, but it stays difficult to practice all by yourself the whole time when you want to progress for a promotion. For some aspects of ITF Taekwon-Do you need at least one partner to practice with (e.g. stepsparring), for other types you need more trainees. To progress in sparring, you must confront different sparring partners in order to train your own attack and defence skills. And this goes further than only the practical level: you need examples which you can follow or train with. So the group stays a crucial factor in this matter. As a school/instructor you have to go to other schools and trainings in your country to train with other

instructors/schools in order to progress yourself and lift up the level of your school. As a country, you have to go abroad and compete with other countries internationally for the same reasons. In the end, we all progress because we are part of good structured international organizations (ITF and AETF) with international courses held by our (grand) masters and with international (European, world and open) championships.

In ITF Taekwon-Do a heavy emphasis is placed on moral culture, for it not only promotes a healthy body and keen mind, but good sportsmanship and the perfection of moral behaviour. As ancient Greeks first promoted their *'sound mind, sound body, and creative spirit'*-concept, they meant how more disciplined and cultivated the mind is, the more disciplined and cultivated will be the student's training and growth. This moral culture is uniquely tied in with ITF Taekwon-Do, not only for the eventual attainment of the highest goals in ITF Taekwon-Do and the promotion of power, technique and self-confidence, but also for the cultivation of character. Without this, the instructor would be guilty of instructing a devastating force to those who could eventually become so taken with their newly found techniques, they might very easily become bullies or could use this knowledge as a way to achieve personal ambitions. Most ITF Taekwon-Do masters and instructors are more appropriate to put emphasis on this aspect of training, rather than some of the more sensational training aspects.

From the Confucian values the people in the east learned a deep sense of respect for their teachers. This relationship has always been an important one. An old Korean proverb says: *"Father and mother are the parents who bring me up while the teacher is the parent who educates me."* This is the reason why a student was expected to pay as much respect to his teacher as he would to his parents. To provide the correct education there should be no hesitation to force discipline in an objective way. The responsibility of teaching ITF Taekwon-Do lies with the instructors, whose eventual mission will be to teach students to be physically and mentally strong and to help contribute to a more peaceful world. Some (disciplinary) rules are described in the official ITF-protocol. It is a logical consequence of being attached to a true martial art.

Umpiring is a part of ITF Taekwon-Do of which not many people speak about, but it is very important in championships, and without good qualified and well-trained umpires you can't run a smoothly and fair championship. Learning the rules is one thing –and is of course important– but learning how to behave as a righteousness and honest referee is something else. Some people are attracted by this kind of characteristics and want to build 'a career' as umpire in ITF Taekwon-Do. It is by being who you are, a lot of study and many years of practicing that you will grow into this discipline. The competitive pathway or the sport aspect of ITF Taekwon-Do, gives the opportunity to those who wish to become umpires, to refine and sharpen their skills through partaking in IUCs, IICs and actively officiating in tournaments such as world championships.

My engagement as head of the Tournament and Umpire Committee in Belgium and being an international umpire for Belgium for almost 25 years on championships abroad sometimes cost me more energy than I can generate with my autistic condition. On European, world or open ITF championships for example, there are lots of overwhelming visual and auditive stimuli to get irritated by as a person with ASD. But you need to work hard and stay focused on your job a whole day long for several days. So this is quite a challenge for me: my adaption here is maximal and intensive. That is because of the mass of vital and inevitable

social interactions. Afterwards, I need at least a couple of weeks to recuperate from the stress and exhaustion. On the other hand, the content of being an umpire has always been my objective: being the intermediary figure that regulates and mediates in conflicts or competitions, based on (clear) rules and regulations, that's me.

To convince other people that good educated umpires are of the utmost importance on any championships and the education of these 'growing' referees via National Umpire Courses, are my responsibilities as head referee in Belgium. Planning and organizing all this is not easy for me: for years I stood more or less alone to do this and I did my best to manage those things, but since 2010 we have a Tournament and Umpire Committee, and things are running more smoothly because there are other people to fill the gaps in my abilities. I must say that I am always been supported by the board of ITF-Belgium during all this time.

The specific conditions of the martial arts context in which the autistic soul may well blossom are hereby more or less described. In the next chapter I will link the concepts 'autism' and 'ITF Taekwon-Do' firmly together and speak further about the opportunities that lay around the corner.

3

OPPORTUNITIES

IN

ITF TAEKWON-DO

FOR PEOPLE WITH

AUTISM

- Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity -

Seneca

3. OPPORTUNITIES IN ITF TAEKWON-DO FOR PEOPLE WITH AUTISM

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will picture a context in which ITF Taekwon-Do is appreciated for more than a hobby on behalf of people with special needs like autism. In that way, I'll show the physical and psycho-social benefits of martial arts for autistic people. I will explain the importance of the DO for people with autism and be more specific about ITF Taekwon-Do in some detailed parts. I will describe the conditions in which those benefits can flourish by giving my vision on teaching and coaching for instructors.

We must not overlook the fact that autism is pervasive which makes it omnipresent and unescapable in every fibre of the human existence. On the other hand, we must not forget that every person (with autism) is an individual with a unique personality, history/age and background, character, intelligence, temperament and gender. All these items have little to do with the ASD-condition itself but have nevertheless a huge influence on the way people behave and react in everyday life and in ITF Taekwon-Do. The manifestation of social motivation of the autistic individual plays a very important role in how things will work out in ITF Taekwon-Do and in the 'jungle' of human society in general.

Autistic people who perform well in martial arts don't succeed *in spite of* their autism neither go to the top *thanks to* their autism. They make it *with* their autism. It is not a 'Rain Man'-story. Autism has its pro's and contra's, strengths and weaknesses. It can break you in the ring, but it can also take the best of you outside. I think it is more interesting to look at autism in this way and to avoid the stereotypes that are spread all around us.

3.2 Physical opportunities

3.2.1 Sensorial aspects

The jumping, running and kicking moves performed in every Taekwon-Do class are designed to get kids up and moving and while they offer improved fitness and coordination, they also deliver important sensory stimulation for kids with autism. Sensory seeking kids and many of their somatic stims (banging into things, jumping or rolling on surfaces) associated with autism respond well to physical activity. Kinesiology researchers say that benefits extend beyond the martial arts classroom too. According to these movement specialists, the discipline and training experienced in martial arts can help reduce some of the physical behaviours and stims that plague kids with autism.

If your child is sensory seeking, the proprioceptive feedback -that is a hallmark of martial arts- makes a visit to the gym a calming and enjoyable experience. This feedback can also advance a more realistic perception of time and space, due to the many exercises which are designed to develop a better awareness of these time and space related skills. Distance, speed and timing are key abilities in sparring. Control and dealing with different directions are central in pattern. Anticipation is utmost important in hosinsul. Momentum and

energy/drive are imperative in power and specials. Teamwork and choreography are essential in pre-arranged free sparring and team pattern. The physical contact in sparring can give them a sense of borders as they feel the contact with the other person and they can experience the difference between soft and hard contact.

On the other hand, some misunderstandings can rise: perhaps they wobble forwards and backwards with their body, to deal with stress or unknown stimuli, on a moment that everybody else is quiet and easy. It's a challenge for the instructor to find out what is going on at that moment and eventually converse it into applicable Taekwon-Do related exercises.

“And I got to punch and kick stuff. I enjoyed the contact aspect so much because it satisfied my sensory-seeking needs and helped me burn off all the extra energy that was coursing through my body (thanks to adolescent hormone surges and my ASD-condition). Martial arts training probably saved me from doing a lot of stupid things with all of the frustration and confusion I was feeling during my adolescence. When I stepped on the mat, no matter what happened that day, everything else disappeared because of the intense concentration and physical exhaustion that led to the peace I felt as we sat down at the end in meditation.” (From: Cynthia Kim: “Nerdy, Shy and Socially Inappropriate”, Jessica Kingsley Publishers Ltd., London UK and Philadelphia USA, 2015: The Autistic Body, p.121-128)

Performing a Taekwon-Do pattern in another direction than normally done in the school can be quite a challenge for autistic people.

To concentrate on the voice of the instructor or coach during a sparring competition or training, can be very difficult when there is a lot of noise or shouting in the hall. External noise can be very disturbing even if they are focused on the lessons.

In terms of hyper- and hyposensitivity, you must be very attentive while training Taekwon-Do with autistic people, especially when there is an injury: they might not feel the pain quite properly.

In an interview with Jo Redman, she talks about some sensory issues and sensitivities during competitions. She is sensitive to bright lights and sounds and doesn't like strong flavours. Then she struggles to pay attention when there is so much on view in the environment. After her diagnose, she tried to experiment with ways to deal with them more consciously: using iPod in competitive environments together with ear defenders over the top, medication to keep calm and reduce the possibility of a meltdown, or dark glasses to shut the light out. She has also a high pain tolerance and difficulty expressing what she feels: so she walked around at school with a broken arm for about a week and fought injured many times, not realizing how severe the injury was. Now she is more cautious if she feels pain, but it is sometimes a tiny balance and it is also very important to thrust other people in that matter. (Martial arts and the autism spectrum – Fightland blog by Sarah Kurchak: An interview with Jo Redman, British women kickboxer and diagnosed with Asperger and ADHD)

I am a labourer in gardens and I sometimes work with dangerous machines. On one occasion, I cut myself in the leg with a chainsaw without feeling any pain during or after the incident. At that moment, you need somebody to take over and make decisions in your place if you don't want to get into trouble afterwards (e.g. infections, mutilations ...). In the same way, I have to be careful when training, whether it is running, work-out or Taekwon-Do. I am also very sensitive for bright lights and sharp sounds because they can be pretty overwhelming in a sports hall. I try to focus on my duties or activities and ignore the sounds/lights as much as possible, but afterwards I must recuperate for a few days or more in a quiet environment (e.g. home alone helps most of the time) and have lots of sleep. Every change is a challenge and I learned with the years that it is possible to triumph over those adjustments but not without paying a price for it. That means these situations consume a lot of energy and it takes time to refill the batteries. At times, I can feel overwhelmed by all the incentives or stimuli in the surroundings, and then a time-out or some rest is really needed.

People with autism can struggle with new motor activities. That could be the consequence of their less integrated view of the world and fragmentation in perception. In other words: their lack of coherence to see the whole picture instead of the details. Compulsive repetitive hand, head or body movements that fluctuate between near and far; difficulty with hopping, jumping, skipping and appearing frightened when being approached, are a few things that can be the result of a distorted perception. All those can occur while training Taekwon-Do. A delayed perception is not uncommon for autistic people; it can be on every sensory channel. It can slow down the time between the given commands and the actual performance of the exercises. It may give the impression that the pupil is not listening, but he/she is just trying to manage with the incentives that come in. Many experiences are perceived as new and unfamiliar, sometimes regardless of the number of times the person has experienced the same thing before. Seeming unaware for risks and heights is also something to be aware of if there are exercises that could be dangerous when not executed properly. Therefore autists sometimes are very poor at sports in general ... with all the consequences e.g. for Taekwon-Do training and evolution in steps, pattern and sparring. They need lots of training and perseverance to overcome some of these difficulties and the help from others whose support is sometimes crucial to do so. The environment needs to be adjusted if possible and vital. Assessment if special needs are required is essential in this matter.

A few guidelines for people with autism may support things:

- It is often difficult to make direct eye contact, sometimes it may help to look the opponent between their eyebrows or even at the nose.
- The dobok fabric may be a bit rough or scratchy: it can help by wearing a soft t-shirt underneath and/or removing the labels.
- The lighting in large halls is usually quite bright or fluorescent: wearing tinted glasses (e.g. during the breaks) can help to block the extreme brightness.
- Noise can be very disturbing for autistic individuals and sport halls tend to be very noisy places. It is difficult to change this. Ear plugs/headphones (in between classes or matches) or focusing on something in the room (even a mark on the wall) can sometimes help to drown out background noise or to forget what is around them. Whistles and bells are occasionally to be avoided if possible.

- Sport halls and changing rooms can also be pretty smelly places: you can change before you come to the venue and wear a jacket over the top to hide your dobok. If there is a particular smell which you are hypersensitive to, for example, your teacher's perfume or aftershave, it is worth mentioning to avoid this uncomfortable experience each time again.
- Some autistic individuals find it hard to judge distance and sometimes get very close to others without realizing. It is useful here to put your arms and stand an arm's distance away from the person next to you to give you both enough space. The same solution if someone else is standing too close to you.
- For sparring, some particular type of safety can be too uncomfortable to wear or provoke allergies. Sometimes alternatives are preferable.

Those tips and tricks can be very important to know in certain circumstances, but I recognize that the practical aspect is not always evident in real life. I identify a lot of the above symptoms in my own experiences. It is important your coaches and instructors know about those things in advance.

3.2.2 Motoric aspects

Taekwon-Do offers plenty of profits for typical kids, but kids with autism benefit from martial arts training in a variety of ways. The National Institute of Health (UK) concludes that there are scientific indications that children who trained Taekwon-Do had more profit in their executive functioning-abilities than children who followed a standard program of physical education. While the social and psychological aspects of autism often get the most attention, kids with an ASD-condition often struggle with physical delays as well, particularly in the areas of balance, gross/fine motor skills and motor planning. While many autistic kids receive physical therapy as part of an overall 'treatment' plan, participating regularly in activities that promote balance, locomotion and coordination can lead to improved skills in these areas.

According to the website of 'Autism Speaks', regular physical training benefits autistic children in more ways than one, since up to 46% of ASD kids are also overweight and have poorly developed muscles, movements and coordination. In that way, Taekwon-Do can take an important place in their lives.

It is generally agreed that regular physical exercise promotes physical and mental health, but what are the benefits for people with autism? A meta-analysis in 2011 in the Netherlands evaluates 16 behavioural studies reporting on a total of 133 children and adults, with numerous variants of the autism syndrome, that were offered structured physical activities either in an individual or a group context. The effects on motor deficiencies, one of the three primary symptom clusters of autism, were normalized and individual activities gave better results than group activities. (Effects of physical exercise on Autism Spectrum Disorders: A meta-analysis; Michelle Sowa, Ruud Meulenbroek; Donders Institute for Brain, Cognition and Behaviour, Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands; September 2011)

Motor planning is something most kids don't even have to think about, but many kids with autism have trouble performing simple actions and processes others take for granted. The

ability to plan, carry out and complete an action, from swinging a bat to going up some stairs, requires a significant amount of motor planning – planning that typical kids do without thinking about. Taekwon-Do puts everyone on the same level as they begin to learn a new skill, allowing kids with autism to work at their own pace and with their peers. As your child learns the basics of Taekwon-Do, he will automatically be practicing valuable motor planning skills and processes that can be used into all other aspects of daily life. It stays however important that there is sufficient guiding and help during those practices, in all cases and for sure in the beginning and for (small) children.

“If I had a question, the senior ranking students were there to help. Everything was much ritualized which made it easy, predictable and safe... The body awareness, self-protection, the ability to calm my mind under pressure, the confidence that comes from being good at something... Most importantly, I discovered that mindful physical activity is a reliable way to manage my mental and emotional states. Like a lot of autistic adults, I’m disposed to bouts of anxiety and depression. If I don’t exercise regularly, my moods get out of whack, I get overloaded, I don’t sleep as well, I find it difficult to focus and even the smallest annoyances feel unbearable. Eventually, I came to realize that hard physical exercise helps my body balance, my moods, burning off the by-products of stress and anxiety while generating a nice steady flow of positive chemicals. It keeps me connected to my body and it’s the feeling of being alive to me.” (From: Cynthia Kim: “Nerdy, Shy and Socially Inappropriate”, Jessica Kingsley Publishers Ltd., London UK and Philadelphia USA, 2015: The Autistic Body, p.121-128)

A lot of exercises in the Kids Program of ITF Taekwon-Do stimulate the (motor) coordination and balance skills; as a result they are very helpful for children with autism. Also for grown-up children and adults with autism, regular Taekwon-Do trainings can restore some of their skills and reveal some great opportunities. Many exercises in Taekwon-Do can be of great help in this case because they stimulate a better balance and coordination of movements. Sometimes individual guidance is preferable before working in group, but practically it will not always be easy to organize this in your class or school. The specific movement disorders of autistic people seem to play a lesser role in certain individual sports as swimming, trampoline jumping, golfing, horse riding and some martial arts like Taekwon-Do. If they are relatively good in one of those sports, they can develop a special interest for it, and by focusing and practicing a lot, they can develop a high level of performing.

“Today, martial arts classes are still highly structured and have lots of repetition built into each lesson, everyone progresses at their own pace and there’s no competition for playing time or positions. Interaction in class is often structured and a good instructor will make sure that students are paired up with practice partners who are similar in skill level and temperament. For those of us with motor skill deficits, the repetition of a limited set of movements is a great way to build up coordination and balance, not to mention general body awareness. I can’t imagine how clumsy I would be if I hadn’t spent all those hours on the mat. And finally, there is the sensory-seeking

aspect of training. While the kids in my class were jumping, rolling, falling, throwing, wrestling, shouting and hitting things, they were learning new skills in the process but they were also getting a well-rounded sensory diet. Parents would marvel at how calm their children were after class.” (From: Cynthia Kim: “Nerdy, Shy and Socially Inappropriate”, Jessica Kingsley Publishers Ltd., London UK and Philadelphia USA, 2015: The Autistic Body, p.121-128)

Regular Taekwon-Do training has improved my motoric system and balance a lot. I can do a kick or punch with a precision of 2 cm from the nose of my opponent. But at home, I tussle into things and walk against my girlfriend because I do not register her presence behind me. This has everything to do with my autism. When I am not attentive enough during daily life, I get into trouble with my motoric coordination. Nothing goes fluently or spontaneously. My balance skills are continuously challenged by my autistic condition. Lots of training helps of course, but it does not take away the initial disability. Improvement, however, lies around the corner after years of training, and I have extra control over a more strengthened body. That’s what ITF Taekwon-Do offered me after all those years.

“Martial arts train its students in motor coordination and body movements which is exactly what helps autistic children, teens and adults. Martial arts can connect the mind and body together more strongly. Persons with autism are in need of physical therapy and exercise to improve their range of motion and control over their movements. Martial arts are used often with the mentally and physically challenged for those very reasons. Martial arts use stretching to improve range of motion and flexibility, and repetitive drills to teach the student to control their body as well as to strengthen them. Martial arts teach discipline to its students, where people with autism in particular, benefit from. They become much more self-confident because of it.” (Opinion from an American instructor: Mr. Chuck Lovelace - Head Instructor - 2013 - Warriors Academy of Martial Arts, Mount Horeb Wisconsin USA)

Research conducted by the Physical Therapy Department at the University of Wisconsin in 2010 showed how the potential in kids on the autism spectrum comes alive during training and common outcomes are improved balance and better coordination skills. Students with autism gain more strength in their bodies and the confidence to be able to defend themselves. They are also more willing to engage socially with each other and show cooperation. The effort required in martial arts consumes anxious or excess energy of kids with autism, releasing a sense of calm and enjoyment.

“For a child with Asperger’s, who often experiences ‘sloppy joints, immature grasp, slowed speed of movements and problems with clumsiness’ (Kirby 2002, cited in Groft and Black 2003), a martial art such as karate or taekwondo can be very beneficial. The kicking skills of these arts are an excellent way to develop balance, coordination and flexibility in all children. Groups of movements known as ‘kata’ or ‘tuls’ or ‘forms’, and the various stances needed, develop strength and the ability to move the

body in diverse ways. It can also help with the left versus right issue many children struggle with.” (Dr. Sandra Beale-Ellis, 2008, UK, The Autistic Voice, author of “Autism and Martial Arts, A Guide for Children, Parents and Teachers”)

Next to proprioception, another internal sense has been studied: balance. A study of the California State University shows us the positive effects of Taekwon-Do on balance for autistic children. TKD training can help children with ASD improve their balance. Children with ASD also showed a high rate of loyalty (92%) to the TKD training. Their findings suggest that TKD can be a fun, feasible, and effective therapeutic option for balance improvement of children with ASD. (Effects of Taekwondo intervention on balance in children with autism spectrum disorder; Kim, Todd, Fujii, Lim, Vrongistinos, Jung; Department of Kinesiology, California State University, Northridge, CA, USA, August 2016)

3.3 Psycho-social opportunities

3.3.1 Stress-reduction

Autism sometimes changes daily life into an everyday survival struggle. To help people with autism in this matter, a form of basic rest is needed. An autism-friendly approach is looking for adaptations in the surroundings as well as offering strategies to learn to cope with stress. That doesn't mean a lack of challenges is the solution in this case, on the contrary. All new situations will bring a sort of stress and an instructor who creates basic rest in his or her club will create space for people to engage in new challenges. Especially for autistic people, basic rest is a *conditio sine qua non* for all other opportunities to grow further. E.g. imagine that you have been sitting in a very crowded train with lots of noise for a couple of hours, you need to go to the toilet and you are hungry. At that moment, you will not be very receptive for a nice chat with a stranger. In the same way, all people need some basic rest before engaging in an activity. Without it, they still can function but it will be on a lower level. For autistic people, that level will decrease exponentially if there is an absence of basic rest. Stress-reduction is very essential as a basic condition for the growth of all other benefits. A special interest (like ITF Taekwon-Do) can have huge opportunities in the life of somebody with ASD if that condition is fulfilled.

In that context, I want to say some things about the function of a specific interest in my life, and later on by clarifying roughly what the effect is of routines and the purpose of rituals in daily life. Specific interests in general and physical activities in particular can have a very destressing effect in my life. I perform ITF Taekwon-Do now for many years and the warming up, moving choreographies of the patterns or different parts of sparring and *hosinsul*, still do not bore me for one minute. The repetition of the movements sometimes brings me in a kind of trance or rest *modus*. For me, that hobby grew out into a passion in which I evolved in a mental way. It became a special interest that I would explore and deepen in different levels: physically, mentally, socially and spiritually. ITF Taekwon-Do is perfectly integrated into my autistic way of being; it feels good, calms me down and is energetic.

In Belgium, everybody can join the lessons for his or her own good reasons without feeling pressure to catch a certain level; it must be pleasure and fun is the first issue in our schools. On the other hand, the trainings are clear, structured and disciplined. Trainings for kids and beginners are separately to give some extra attention to the safety and the background of the practitioners. Of course it stays important to inform the instructor before the lessons if there are points of attention to be taken care of, or if there is a handicap (e.g. ASD) in the picture. In every situation, the way in which instructors teach and approach their pupils is essential in this matter.

With or without any help, there will be advantages and shortcomings in the course of training a martial art. Those go together with some benefits and disabilities of the autism spectrum. In the context of this thesis I prefer to focus on the opportunities without masking the incapacities. Autistic people can go for the details of a Taekwon-Do pattern and miss the great lines of it, when performing it or look at somebody else's pattern. On the other hand, for some (autistic) people who practice Taekwon-Do, analysing the patterns and movements in a physical or scientific way, will be a positive experiment for their systemizing brain. They can spend hours in analysing and practicing with some exercises or movements. It fulfils an important need and improves their skills both in a physical and intellectual way. Routine can help to control fears by focusing on rituals, repeated actions and the logic of going from one technique to another.

“There are plenty of challenges that come with autism spectrum disorders in martial arts (and in life), but there are also some unique benefits. A neurological penchant for patterns and repetition comes in fairly handy when you're trying to learn complex combinations, for example.” (Martial arts and the autism spectrum – Fightland blog by Sarah Kurchak: An interview with Jo Redman, British women kickboxer and diagnosed with Asperger and ADHD)

Martial arts are usually quite disciplined and students should not be talking during classes. You may find other pupils chatter too much at times, however, and if it becomes annoying have a quiet word with the teacher. When you are known as an autistic person you will be used to others trying to tolerate you for your differences. But there are some other children or adults who have ADHD or autism for example, who find it difficult to keep quiet all the time. It's a question of reciprocity and mutual respect.

Being clear in advance how the Taekwon-Do training is going to be and sticking to the program is an important tip for instructors who work with autistic people in their gym. When you have to change things during the training, try to explain why and how you are doing so. Somebody (a coach, a buddy) who plans and organizes everything instead of the autistic person itself can take a lot of pressure of the shoulders; this can be temporary or permanent.

Instructors can fulfil an important function in the school, because autists can be very chaotic and inefficient (=difficulty with priorities and organizing daily life). Another item is their perfectionism that can work very paralyzing during training or championships. Sometimes they do not know what to do or how to begin or continue the exercise, which gives a strange view for outsiders. They need some help with it at that moment. On the other hand, autists

can show others firmly when they make a mistake, not always in a discrete or appropriate way. They have to learn how to do so in a more suitable way. It is very important to have some confidants in the group in which they train, to guide them through some difficult moments. People who know them very well can 'translate' social situations into an 'understandable language'. In that context, a predictable and clear Taekwon-Do training can be very relaxing, in particular when they have to do repetitive movements which are not too complex. Of course not every training can be like that, but once in a while ... it can be a relief. Once again, an intimate person in the neighbourhood (=a buddy) is very helpful to push the 'context-button' and can lower the stress significantly.

Sometimes Taekwon-Do can help channel the feelings of people with autism like anger, distress or anxiety. They may forget their sorrows for a while during training. Studies have shown that young people can overcome their impulses and aggression after training for a long time and can learn to unleash their energy in a much more constructive way. Of course this can be a problem during Taekwon-Do training in the beginning, but often the instructor can let them work in small groups to practice easier. Sometimes he/she can give them separate instructions or tasks to do on their own when they need to have some time 'alone'. Normally the training has a clear beginning and end, which is very good for them. They can become more assertive after a while doing all those exercises, especially the ones involving self-defence (hosinsul).

"Martial art training is very consistent and regular classes are likely to be similar in content, satisfying the child with Asperger's need for routine and predictability. There is a ranking system of belts a child can achieve and techniques become more difficult with each belt. Basic training is always practiced however, even when the student achieves the highest grades. This can be repetitive and can be a bore to many children, but to the child with Asperger's, this repetition can be comforting. Luke Jackson (author of Freaks, Geeks and Asperger's Syndrome, 2002) agrees 'the fact that it is so structured and predictable makes it the perfect form of exercise for anyone on the autistic spectrum'. The structure of a lesson is usually similar in that way there is always a warm up of about 10-15 minutes, the basics, maybe some group work, possibly some sparring, and a short cool down or discussion session. There are variations to this, but for instructors experienced in teaching students with ASD's, if a major change is planned, students are told in advance. For example, if a different hall is to be used, students on the spectrum are invited to visit the hall and become familiar in advance of the class." (Dr. Sandra Beale-Ellis, 2008, UK, the Autistic Voice, author of "Autism and Martial Arts, A Guide for Children, Parents and Teachers")

In sparring, their lack of ego will push them further than some others because it does not stand in their way to realize a good performance. They can experience with different kinds of contact in a safe environment.

“So, to go back to the question as to whether martial arts and autism go together...it's a definite yes....for many reasons. And although it may sound strange... an autistic person can make a really good fighter... Why? ... Because they have no ego. When an autistic martial arts student is in a match.....they are just trying to remember what the teacher told them to do in any given situation that they happen to be dealing with at the time, while a fighter without autism may be thinking: Yo...I'm faster, I'm better....or worse...I, QUIT!!” (Mr. Chuck Lovelace - Head Instructor - 2013 - Warriors Academy of Martial Arts, Mount Horeb Wisconsin USA)

For pre-arranged free sparring, I similarly emphasize on the safety component of this kind of sparring, where it can sometimes be impossible or very difficult for autistic people to perform regular free sparring. It depends on the individual. Some autistic people can develop a specific interest for power or specials, especially when they are tough and/or fast enough for breaking or skilled to make high jumps while performing impressive foot techniques. The safety-elements will occasionally decrease the stress-level to acceptable proportions.

“It's no secret that a traditional martial arts program is one of the best extracurricular activities a child can participate in. For children with special needs (e.g. autism) the benefits are invaluable because of the inherent structure and discipline the art brings to a child's daily life. All children need structure, some more than others. Some might need to be reminded more often or a different approach might be necessary, but in the end it's all the same. Let's talk about some benefits right now. Consistency and repetition create familiarity and, therefore, children on the autism spectrum do well with classes. Repetition of the same location, same faces, same curriculum, and knowing what to expect are all part of the recipe. With continuous structure, discipline and fun exercises, even the child with multisensory issues almost immediately rises to the occasion.

(Paul Del Sordo, Chief Instructor, Paediatric Martial Arts, Hwang Martial Arts & Wellness and Del Martial Arts LLC, Springfield, New Jersey, USA, 2016)

A study in 2012 by Fatimah Bahrami and colleagues at the University of Isfahan in Iran showed some amazing results. There was a 42% reduction in repetitive behaviours from the original recorded baseline among those students who trained in kata. Kata form the backbone for technical learning in traditional Japanese martial arts, this aspect is similar with pattern (tul) in ITF Taekwon-Do. The kata (tul) training lead to a large and significant reduction in stereotypy that was still there one month after the training had stopped. This was a very clear result and is the best scientific evidence that martial arts training could be an effective method for positively affecting motor activity in the autism spectrum. This study corroborates some other similar but smaller and informal studies that have appeared. (Study: Patterning in martial arts may help reduce stereotypic activity in autism; Fatimah Bahrami and colleagues; University of Isfahan, Iran; 2012)

Professor Zehr made some interpretations about this study, based on his own experience:

“Here’s what I think based on my experiences as a martial arts practitioner and teacher and as a neuroscientist. I think it has to do with the activity being repetitive activities that are externally-cued. A huge part of the teaching methodology in traditional martial arts involves visual training. In the example above, trainees watched the teacher or “model” perform the movements in the kata. They then either repeat the movements themselves or follow along supplemented by verbal and physical feedback to correct and improve the movements learned. This is a very typical training methodology and is what I meant by externally-cued. This contrasts with repetitive stereotyped movements that are often seen in the autism spectrum. These are more often internally triggered by the person himself. They can occur independently of obviously related cues in the environment. So why does this matter? My suggestion is that the use of an external movement pattern becomes the context that is now used to frame the subconscious brain activity of the person doing the training. In this way externally cued movement triggered by visual motor learning winds up changing motor related brain activity. In this way changes in overall brain function can then be seen externally. It would be great to see more scientific research into this area. Currently, it seems that safe and effective traditional martial arts training (note: not just fighting practice) delivered by highly trained instructors can be another form of effective and useful physical activity for everyone. Including those in the autism spectrum.” (Published by E. Paul Zehr Ph.D. on Nov 15, 2012 in Black Belt Brain; link in Psychology Today. Paul Zehr is a professor, a neuroscientist, an author, and a martial artist at the University of Victoria, USA)

3.3.2 Communication, emotions and interaction

The effects of fighting sports and martial arts on the behaviour of vulnerable youngsters have been investigated many times. The following report will explain that it is very complicated material; it situates very well the general position of martial arts in this matter for people with autism. That is why I want to show here a summary of the report from the Netherlands, and not only the conclusion:

“Youngsters with autism experience a number of obstacles which complicate taking part in sports in a successful way, such as lacks in motor development, cognitive deficits and problems in social context. Sports can be of great meaning for this group. Divers studies showed that not only the physical fitness progresses in this group but also the attitude of children with an autism spectrum disorder can improve.

The contents of the sports activity are important for the effectivity of the sport. One sport suits better for a person than the other. Some research about fighting sports has been done. The results are divided. The personal meanings, psychosocial influences and social values connected with fighting sports are not very clear for everybody because of the great variety of them. Western fighting sports such as wrestling, boxing and fencing are focused on the result in the end. Eastern fighting sports know their origin in some traditional martial arts and are more focused on self-control, perseverance, sustainability and mutual respect. They want to learn some motor

abilities and the process of 'reaching enlightenment' is being central. Some elder studies have shown the positive influence of martial arts lessons on the self-esteem and social abilities of youth male delinquents, and more recent studies confirm this. These kinds of studies name the influence of the martial arts itself, but also other contextual factors like the quality of the teacher, the social environment and the length and inclusion of a program. Longer studies show that especially the way of teaching and the social climate within a certain group or school (e.g. macho or not) is of great importance regarding the eventual positive or negative effects. This climate can be very persuasive in any way for autistic people.

Conclusion is that the effects of fighting sports are not clear or harmonious. It seems that the quality of the teacher, the social context of the sport school and the social backgrounds and motives of the youth itself, are crucial for the potential socializing and integrative work of fighting sports and martial arts."

(Report 'Sports as a Care Project' / Behaviouristic problems and Sports. Institute for the Youth, Netherlands: Breedveld, 2010; Boonstra & Hermens, 2011; Buysse and Duijvestijn, 2011; Elling & Wisse, 2010)

Some other studies demonstrate that the social skills of people with ASD do actually improve by practicing martial arts such as ITF Taekwon-Do, for some even after a couple of months. A study on the effects of physical exercise on autism from the Netherlands in 2011 by the University of Nijmegen, says that the effects on social deficiencies were normalized. The individual programs bring significantly more improvement in the social domain than the group programs.

One more study from the University of Isfahan in Iran shows considerable development in social dysfunction of children with ASD. Social interaction dysfunction is been considered as a core deficit of autism. They investigated the effects of long term kata (pattern) techniques training on social interaction of children with autism. Results of their study showed that long term techniques training significantly improved social dysfunction in children with autism spectrum disorders. (Scientific Study by: Ahmadreza Movahedi, Fatimah Bahrami, Sayed Mohammad Marandi, Ahmad Abedi; College of Sport Sciences and College of Educational Psychology, University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran; April 2013)

For me, too much time for chitchat is a killer. I am not good at filling my time socially between moments of activity. It depends on others if I feel comfortable to spend that time; e.g. if 'charming' neurotypicals can make it easier for me to fill up the time by telling facts or stories, and I am the listener, it helps a lot. When I am very nervous, I learned to simulate eye contact by staring at the nose or looking at another part of the face. Starting a serious conversation when I do not have enough time is also very difficult for me; then I lose my concentration and I cannot filter the essential things out of what I want to say, so it ends in a disastrous feeling for me. I then notice some confusion with the other person who is talking to me at that moment. So in the end, the conversation dies in itself most of the time, but people tend knowing me like that and no bad things occur.

“In one pilot control study of 30 children with autism, children involved in martial arts experienced significant improvements in language, social communication and cognition as well as less hyperactivity, temper outbursts, longer attention periods, better sleeping patterns and much more independence.” (Mr. Chuck Lovelace - Head Instructor - 2013 - Warriors Academy of Martial Arts, Mount Horeb Wisconsin USA)

Communication is a very sensitive and difficult issue for people with autism. Nevertheless, it is an important and unavoidable item in all places where people come together. Also in sports, whether it is to learn the basics or to progress further on, you will always have to communicate with other people. The benefit of martial arts – in this area – is its hierarchical structure and direct commands from the instructor towards his students and the fact that there are few verbal exchanges between the pupils during lessons. This can be a great advantage for autistic people because they don't like to chitchat or do small talk during their activities. Instead, they can talk afterwards about their specific interest –in this case ITF Taekwon-Do– without boring others with their endless explanations or reproductions. Imitation is a very important quality in martial arts, because it all starts with copying the instructor in doing (and later in saying by teaching to others) the things he or she does or says. E.g. many (Korean) terms in Taekwon-Do sound obvious and familiar once people have learned the basics of this 'new language'. It can be an advantage in this context that Korean language is difficult and new for everybody who starts with Taekwon-Do.

For autistic people, adaption to society is not based on an unconscious and instinctive grown habit, but due to permanent mindful, intellectual training and years of demanding efforts and struggle. They have to build up a mental library of social experiences and rules, like learning a strange language, with all the exceptions that go along with it. These are immense processes that will evolve a little bit more smoothly with age and lots of (social and intellectual) training inside and outside the dojang. For me, it was a long way to go and lots of hard work is still needed to adapt myself to different situations in Belgium and abroad. But through training and perseverance I am where I am now.

“I didn't have to make small talk or find someone who would be my friend. There was a clear social hierarchy in the dojang, an explicitly defined set of rules for getting help, and an ethical code that was strictly enforced. Respect was expected and hard work rewarded, and there was no room for teasing, bullying or showing off. For a kid, who had spent years getting bullied, which lacked self-esteem and longed for recognition, these rules created a cocoon of safety and a path to discovering a deep well of internal strength” (From: Cynthia Kim: “Nerdy, Shy and Socially Inappropriate”, Jessica Kingsley Publishers Ltd., London UK and Philadelphia USA, 2015: The Autistic Body, p.121-128)

Martial arts in general and ITF Taekwon-Do in particular can be helpful to stimulate and help with certain behavioristic issues that come along with autism. Parents of children with autism spectrum disorders sometimes look to activities such as martial arts to help their kids. They often find that attention, motor control and behaviour improve with martial arts. The research project conducted by the University of Wisconsin (Physical Therapy

Department- La Crosse, USA, December 2010) confirmed what parents were already reporting: in the course of learning martial arts, children with autism essentially came out of their shells and grew more socially assertive and cooperative. They exhibited better balance and motor coordination, eye contact improved and play skills were further developed. Greater self-esteem was also reported, with the added bonus of these kids being able to defend themselves, if need be. Martial arts assist kids on the autism spectrum with the ability to concentrate and focus their attention in a consistent and highly structured environment. Additionally, parents find that new skills are used at home and at school. The release of energy in a safe and ritualized environment can bring a child to a new sense of calm. Friendships are formed around a shared activity and that sense of belonging can be the greatest reward of all.

“Kids with autism may have been excluded from participating in rigorous and intense sports, but martial art is not one of these sports. Studies have proven and parents have reported the developmental progress of their autistic children due to martial arts training. Not only do motor skills and coordination improve, but also communication skills and self-esteem increase. Kids with autism respond well to martial arts training and experience an encouraging range of progress in their ability to focus, make eye contact, and interact socially with their instructors and peers. Because of the rigidly structured environment of martial arts training, and the intensity involved, students on the autism spectrum increase their ability to concentrate. This ability to focus has proven to translate into other areas of the student’s life, including activities at school and at home.” (Autism Daily Newscast, Ashley Isaacson, September 28, 2013)

3.4 Importance of DO for people with autism

“Martial arts are not about teaching your pupils how to kick or punch. Martial arts are not about defeating your opponent. Martial arts are not about winning a belt or a medal.

Martial arts are about respecting your seniors and training mates, it is about learning that hard work brings fruits and there are no short cuts to a goal. It is about enjoying a journey instead of the destination. Martial arts are about disarming your own weaknesses. It is about appreciating your opponent for giving you a great lesson regardless of the result. It is about confidence, discipline, honour, honesty, dignity and tolerance.” (Facebook, shared page, no author mentioned, July 2018)

From the beginning I was interested in the philosophy and history behind this in origin Korean martial art named ‘(ITF) Taekwon-Do’. My mind was triggered in the striving for noble, traditional values in the context of a philosophy, next to the scientific practice of the body. The way in which I try to integrate these values into my life, determines my attempt for authenticity.

"In the East, it is a way of life, and many of those moral wisdoms are also applicable in our Western society. The mutual changes between body and mind seem to be a century old issue, inherent to human life, but we seem to be forgotten many of those initial gifts as we became adults in our Western society." (From my own thesis for IVth Degree: 'Moral Aspects of ITF Taekwon-Do in our Western Society' - 2003)

ITF Taekwon-Do as a martial art in its traditional form has maintained its specific characteristics of eastern philosophy, despite being adapted to western conditions. This is a significant difference between ITF Taekwon-Do and some other disciplines known in the western culture. This moral culture is uniquely tied in with ITF Taekwon-Do, also for the cultivation of character. Most ITF Taekwon-Do masters and instructors are correct, to put also emphasis on this aspect of training, rather than some of the more sensational teaching features. The history of the past is very interesting to explore for those who want to learn about the present and the future. Gathering facts, information and knowledge is common for people with autism and can even be one of their specific interests. The moral aspects trigger the imagination of autistic people in general and will motivate them even more to get into the martial art more deeply; it similarly activates their feeling for fair play.

Dealing with moral issues like justice and injustice is one aspect why autistic people can be so attracted to martial arts. They are extensively involved with uprightness on different levels in life: individually, morally, ecologically, environmentally, physically ... Of course this is not the case for every person with ASD, but it seems to be very characteristic for a lot of them. They seem to look for guidelines, codes and values that relate to the desires they experience in these hectic times and in their largely disordered lives.

"Why is a martial art better than another sport or activity? Let me start off by saying the words 'art' and 'sport' are quite different. An art is "any activity regarded as a medium of imaginative or creative self-expression". A sport is "an activity involving physical exertion and skill in which an individual or team competes against another or others".

The unique component of martial arts for children with special needs is the competition within themselves, not with others. Children with special needs must work on life skills, not competing with others for a trophy. That's not to say they shouldn't compete and receive those same rewards, because they should. However, the criteria must be carefully considered and achievable. I am not a proponent of "everyone wins" because failure is a part of life. Life skills are why you should consider martial arts, and if that's all you receive you are a winner." (Written by: Paul Del Sordo, Chief Instructor, Paediatric Martial Arts, Hwang Martial Arts & Wellness and Del Martial Arts LLC, Springfield, New Jersey, USA, 2016)

My engagement as head of the Disciplinary Committee in Belgium is of the same order and also based on similar motives. I always try to be as rightful, fair and correct as possible. I explore every insight and all kinds of perspectives before I talk with my fellow members of the committee about a case. This is where my autistic soul pops up and functions on its best. Because of my many doubts in making decisions, it is an advantage to let other people think

together with me. My focusing on the details of things and explore everything very profound, are an improvement in this context. Luckily, there are the other members to set limitations or help me cut through difficult knots.

I am also a member of the Examination Committee in Belgium for degree-promotions, led by Grandmaster Vanberghen. Judging new black belts in their ITF Taekwon-Do career is every single time an exciting and challenging thing to do and I am glad whenever I can help to develop the level of ITF Taekwon-Do in Belgium. People have the right to be judged in a fair and rightful way, so it asks a lot of concentration and dedication.

“I have learned many things since I have taken these martial art classes. Both about life and about autism. Finally, I have learned something that the majority of people spend their entire lives searching to learn. I have learned the meaning of life. The purpose of life is self-improvement. I have come to truly believe this. The recent birth of my sister’s daughter has shown me that if you are not being born, you are dying. While we are improving ourselves, we are living while we are dying. If we are not improving ourselves, we are dying without purpose. Improvement can come in many ways: through martial arts, through nutrition and exercise, through a college education, through raising a family, through reading a good book or even a simple article. By reading this article, you have improved. The extent to which you have improved is not important. What is important is that you have gained knowledge (or knowledge of an opinion) you did not possess before. The other purpose of life is to help others improve. This especially applies to the more spiritual among you. All parents of children with disabilities such as autism do this on a daily basis. Some more than others. They are doing what they were put on this earth to do. By helping each other improve, we ultimately improve ourselves.” (Martial Arts as a “Treatment” for Autism - Thomas A. McKean, author and autist)

Fairness and honesty are practically written in the genes of most people with ASD, and the specific history and philosophy of ITF Taekwon-Do is an extra cause for them to be charmed by and attracted to. It is almost part of their identity that they want to act and decide impartial and objective. That is why the umpiring part of ITF Taekwon-Do can be popular for autistic people.

“To form character / to bring (self-) discipline, philosophy, morality: it’s not a question of a beginning practitioner of ITF Taekwon-Do, but it might become the part that will decide the most about anyone’s future (in ITF Taekwon-Do); the fact that people train for years with a certain regularity, forces them into a self-discipline that improves the character, and that makes them accept difficulties and the power to compete them.” (From my own thesis for IVth Degree: ‘Moral Aspects of ITF Taekwon-Do in our Western Society’ - 2003)

In Belgium, we try to teach ITF Taekwon-Do as a martial art in which you can develop in your own time and rhythm, with self-confidence and self-control, through exercises which are build up progressively and professionally guided by the higher degrees. Our federation tries

to watch over the quality of the lessons and the ethical level of the instructors via a good structure and administration. We are also international allied with a European and world organization, and the level of ITF Taekwon-Do in Belgium is appealing good.

We furthermore use the ITF-kids program in Belgium, which is also a good example of moral education, in this case more especially for kids with autism because they are so vulnerable and receptive. A lot of values are given to the children through certain exercises and via the awarding system. The way instructors communicate with the children on their own level about the tenets is exemplary and rewarding's are given not only for good behaviour inside the dojang but also for good comportment and attitude at home or in school. The ITF Kids Development Program is specifically designed to benefit young children: physically, mentally and behaviourally. Centred on the "DO", the kids learn essential life skills in a playful way.

"There are some who may express concern about a child with an ASD practicing martial arts. The outbursts which can occur during times of tiredness, frustration or anger could mean that the child will strike out with trained moves. While it is true many techniques can be dangerous, these would take many years to perfect with specific knowledge, and more dangerous techniques are never taught to children. All children who are taught martial arts are constantly reminded that if the art is misused or abused, the child will be withdrawn from training and there may be serious legal consequences. In my experience, students with Asperger's love their classes, and would try hard not to put their training in danger. I teach my students, more so for those on the spectrum, simple breathing exercises which they can use wherever they happen to be, if they feel tension or anger coming on.

Another important part of martial arts training is that students follow strict rules within the class. The students with Asperger's like this, but can get upset if they think someone else is not following the rules, and I have known students to loudly object to another's behaviour if they think he is breaking a rule. Sometimes I find I have to explain certain exceptions to some rules, in case an incident causes a 'tantrum' or fit of anger. An example of this could be sparring, which for children should be no contact, although occasionally someone blocking a kick for instance, may cause slight contact." (Dr. Sandra Beale-Ellis, 2008, UK, the Autistic Voice, author of "Autism and Martial Arts, A Guide for Children, Parents and Teachers")

The kids-program of ITF Taekwon-Do includes elements where little children are stimulated to behave in a certain way that motivates them to react socially appropriate. Children with autism can now learn positive things which they can take with them far over adulthood and beyond the training hall into broader society. The context of the group is firmly structured by the rational program and leaves enough space for emotions and individuality.

Physical and mental training can activate or stimulate some triggers for social interactions in the context of a martial art: the whole culture and climate around ITF Taekwon-Do is impregnated with a moral philosophy that inspires people to get socially involved in one way or another. There is a certain way to behave within the dojang but also outside in society: a whole range of guidelines forms the ITF-protocol. When doing a martial art like ITF Taekwon-

Do, it has its implications in many ways and it includes the way you act and function in the social world. People with autism will be influenced by this culture and will respond in their own typical way, especially because they are triggered by these moral guidelines. The fact that those rules and procedures are so explicit is a very supportive routine for people with autism. It motivates them socially, mostly in an unexpected manner.

3.5 Vision on teaching and coaching

Kids with autism are often excluded from traditional school and extracurricular activities, making existing psychological and social difficulties even tougher to overcome. Regular Taekwon-Do classes should be designed to serve the needs of kids of all ability levels without the pressure of a competitive or team sport. Simply being included in an enjoyable, accepting and low pressure social environment can help a child with autism relate to and enjoy a group setting. While every child is different, autistic children can benefit from the improved confidence, discipline and social interaction offered in a Taekwon-Do class. In such an environment the abilities and social awareness can progress in a more or less natural way. A martial arts-class can offer more support than a schoolyard most of the time. Of course, a lot of things depend on the way the instructor will approach his or her (autistic) pupils, the way he/she teaches, the way in which the lessons are structured.

It is my belief that all styles of martial arts are good; the question is which style is the right one for your child and your family. If the instructor is compassionate, patient, understanding, experienced and willing to dedicate his or her life to your child then that's the place to be. Regardless of the child's needs, learned behaviour can only be achieved through behavioural momentum.” (Paul Del Sordo, Chief Instructor, Paediatric Martial Arts, Hwang Martial Arts & Wellness and Del Martial Arts LLC, Springfield, New Jersey, USA, 2016)

When we say something about teaching and coaching pupils with special needs, we have to think and talk about the method. Do we need an inclusive or exclusive approach?

Are special trainings or special groups more worth than an inclusive attitude? Is it better to have special trainings with people who suffer from the same disability; or is it better to train in a 'normal' school and strive for inclusion? In Belgium there are some unique, small projects for handicapped martial artists – the so-called 'G-sport' (G = first letter of 'handicap' in Dutch) – which try to train pupils and athletes with a disability in a special way. Techniques must be performed a lot of times before some people can start copying them; it takes much patience to deal with it. The change of a hand- or foot-position can ask lots of time and goes step by step. The level is in general lower than with common athletes, but the enthusiasm is not. It can be a solution if people get frustrated or demotivated in the common gyms. By practicing 'G-sport', some make a better progress in a mental or physical way. They can even get motivated to reach a higher level of competition and join the Special Olympics or Paralympics in their disciplines. Of course, there are a lot of circumstances who will determine whether someone is going to achieve this kind of level. The context is very important. In America there are many schools like this and the possibilities are larger. Also in

the Netherlands and the UK there are some good initiatives and martial art schools for people with special needs. But one pupil or athlete is not the same as the other and there are many differences between individuals, each with his or her separate approach. So for one kid a 'G-team' is better than a regular club, but for someone else it can be the other way around. Some know the difference between sports and aggression on the age of 4; others don't understand it at the age of 14. The level of intelligence and practicing the 'Do' is hereby of great importance, but this problem you have with all other kids and adults too.

Talking about autism in this context, I must say that it is a very difficult disability to describe: it's no mental disability and not a physical visible handicap. There are motor- and balance-aspects, sensorial aspects, problems in social and communicative area, etc. How to put it in an understandable perspective for outsiders and to place it in a correct approach into the sports? For some sports like athletics, there are motor, visual, auditive, mental and psychological categories, but no specifications on social aspects.

But what about martial arts? For 'G-Taekwondo' in Belgium, autism is a psychological handicap (according to the Flemish Taekwondo Association). The purpose of the integration project is to extend the sport facilities so that every sportsman can choose how to sport: in a handicap-specific club or in a regular club with a 'G-integration'. There is a difference between fully inclusive sport, where people with and without a handicap sport against each other, and clubs with a 'G-team' (exclusive sport). In some of the latter, the approach is fully adapted to the possibilities and needs of the individuals. Having pleasure in movement and to experience success is central here. Striving towards rest and structure within the sport situation is of great essence to create a safe environment as the base for development. Should not all sport clubs be like this and strive for the pleasure of its participants? Unfortunately, that is not the reality in our modern society. Very often, it is all about money and triumphs.

In a regular, common and thus inclusive club, like most of the clubs in Belgium, there must be enough space for individuality as well. I trained for many years in regular ITF Taekwon-Do clubs and I had to adapt myself to different situations, but there was always space for my own way of being within those schools. That's why I could continue and enjoy successfully, although there were many moments of stress and anxiety. I think it depends on the instructor and the individual whether it is better in a regular or in a handicap-specific school. On the other hand, there aren't many handicap-specific training possibilities because of the lack of such specific schools in Belgium, so it will largely depend on the capability of the instructor.

I personally tend to the inclusive approach out of my own experience, being who I am and having had the opportunity to grow within a neighbourhood that was tolerant enough to accept me for who I am. For people with multiple disabilities it can be a different story, of course. Before my official diagnosis I was already convinced that I was not as neurotypical as everyone else. Briefly, I was a strange boy that did not fit in the social order. I had a lonely time growing up with few real friends and connections, a lot of social anxiety and general fears. Sometimes strange reactions appeared to my used forms of communication and language. When I grew older, my social disabilities were sometimes (over)compensated and camouflaged by a lot of motivation and energy that I put into my surroundings. Let us say I was socially very motivated, which is part of my character and not specific for ASD.

When I started with ITF Taekwon-Do through theatre lessons – in which I also learned a lot about social interactions and communication skills – at the age of 24, I never suspected that it would keep me tracked and busy for the rest of my life. I never thought that it would play such an important role in my existence. The sports aspect and the act and pleasure to be occupied with my total body and mind were my most important motivations. And they still are...

In my youth, I had little contacts outside school or youth movement. During my education and civil service I got to know a lot of people. The social character of many people in the health sector (where I did my studies and worked later on) was facilitating this process. I am known not to take any initiative to maintain or develop the contact with friends. Reciprocity is not a spontaneous issue in my behaviour and I am very naive in my contacts. In my adulthood, I was lucky to be surrounded most of the time by ‘good’ people who did not misuse these characteristics. Most people accept me as I am and know me as fair, integer and peaceful. Not being able to show feelings or point out emotions of other people is a problem in engaging in social contacts. On the one hand, I am very sensitive for any tension and I easily take over the mood of other people. That sometimes causes a lot of pressure and stress on me. On the other hand, I am a good listener without judging and I am always prepared to go along with others. With a little help from my surroundings, I maintained myself -socially spoken- until now and revealing my diagnosis helped a lot with that.

I began my ITF Taekwon-Do career in Ghent with Grandmaster Vanberghen Frank who taught me his skills for many years, and he still is my mentor and motivator. In the school where I train and help teaching in Lokeren with Master Vandriessche Annick – who motivates and inspires me and learns me a lot – I try to assist whenever I am needed to help, to teach, to umpire ... as I have always done in Belgium in the last 25 years. The main reason I do not have a Taekwon-Do school of my own is basically my autism. The organizational, social and psychological pressure of conducting a school would be too much for my brain. I am very meticulous for myself and for others when I teach.

“As with any teacher, I try to always set a good example to my students and I find this is especially important for students with Asperger’s. I try to speak calmly, clearly and rarely shout. Much of my chat is predictable – I use the same old jokes, comparisons and rhymes to illustrate moves and Japanese or Korean names. Many students moan about them but children with Asperger’s appreciate it as it helps them remember. I am polite and courteous to my students and expect the same to me and to each other and any other adults or parents. I wear the correct clothes; have short nails and my hair off my face. Respect is vital in the classes. This is an essential social skill and I feel it is my duty to teach it. If anyone is being bullied either in the class or outside of it, they know they can tell me and I will deal with it immediately.” (Dr. Sandra Beale-Ellis, 2008, UK, the Autistic Voice, author of “Autism and Martial Arts, A Guide for Children, Parents and Teachers”)

For autistic instructors, teaching is a big challenge. Maybe some of them will not be able to conduct a school of their own, but maybe assisting another instructor when needed. I myself am in that position. Organizing a school administratively and socially can ask a lot of someone with fewer abilities in these areas. They may need some extra support from their

federation and other schools or instructors in the country and abroad. The group aspect might sometimes be a bridge too far, depending on the number of people, age and commotion. However, autistic individuals can be good teachers because they generally pay lots of attention to detail and are able to give decent and complete explanations. If Taekwon-Do is their special interest, they are likely to have a lot of knowledge and skills in that area. As they get more experienced at the martial art, there is a big opportunity for them to build their confidence and leadership skills which will be useful in the training hall and outside at other activities. Some clubs give their (junior) students the chance to do special training for this kind of teaching.

For autistic coaches, coaching could be a bit too difficult because they may lack the social talents to give the subtle approach some pupils need. For others, it could go rather well doing so. Therefore you have to be realistic and consider your own weaknesses as an instructor/coach and take them into account. This is a reality and a truth for all instructors of course, but when you are autistic you most certainly need some external help to cope with coaching and other issues. As an autistic instructor, you need some people you can trust and go to when you have questions about how you should do things. You also have to learn to know your own physical, mental and social limits and respect these in order not to get into too many troubles. Reduced social skills can be a complication in that matter and communication lies in the centre of this. But with some help from other instructors and masters in your country and abroad, it must be possible to find your own way to deal with the challenges that ITF Taekwon-Do offers you, and to grow out to become a good instructor and coach in your own personal way and limits, when the time and experience is there to knock on your door.

For coaching pupils with autism, a different approach will be necessary, depending on individual needs. Some suffer from sensory sensitivity (e.g.: can they hear the coach well enough?); others need extra stimulation or some extra support to organize their things and time. Sometimes you have to take them by the hand to lead them. You have to be aware that every student is an individual with his or her own needs, differences and experiences. As a good teacher it is your role to nurture these and to provide a safe, beneficial and enjoyable learning experience. Every child can benefit from the discipline and confidence that comes with regular Taekwon-Do training. It is important to deliver a nurturing and inclusive environment designed to help every child succeed, regardless of sensory or developmental abilities. In this context, performing a martial art such as ITF Taekwon-Do can be a big challenge for people with autism, regarding the fact that distortions and misperceptions may occur in all of the senses, internal and external. E.g. giving commands during a Taekwon-Do session to autistic people can lead to some confusing situations in the midst of a training or while coaching a pupil, especially when they don't understand what to do or interpret it differently than expected. Being clear, honest, open and direct is a must to be interpreted in a non-ambiguous way. Autistic students thrive on reliability, punctuality and consistency. If you say you are going to do something, they will expect you to do it. Being 'let down' in their eyes can affect them dramatically. Be aware that conflicting instructions (perhaps because of more than one teacher in the hall) will confuse and irritate the students and may lead to frustration, anxiety or anger. They can sometimes be easily distracted, so enthusiasm for the subject and a sense of humour are useful characteristics to have as a teacher.

Most autistic people experience sensory differences of some kind. Those are not necessarily unpleasant but some may affect how they learn, and it will be useful for the teacher to know about those changes. It is likely to be either more hypersensitive or hyposensitive to certain things (e.g. sounds, lights, heat and pain) than non-autistic individuals. It may be difficult to explain these uncomfortable feelings and if there are lots of things going on at once, they can become 'overloaded' and this can often give the feeling they are going to 'explode' in anger or anxiety and panic. That vulnerability to sensory overload must be taken care of. E.g. in Taekwon-Do, it might be a good idea to give those pupils a break in a separate and quiet place or some time alone (time-out) to recover from the stress, before joining the group again for further training. Predictability and certainty are essential for people with autism if you cannot change the environment.

Similarly for myself: predictability, repetition and focus are my mantras. Changes provoke tension. I have rituals and routines in the morning and the evening, who sometimes take quite some time. Once a routine is initialized, it can be developed or extended (e.g. washing, going asleep). Everything has a fixed place in the house (e.g. clothes) and choices increase stress. I can persevere in a long-lasting activity until it is finished and I can watch the same DVD or listen to the same CD time and time again. The same idea matches for unexpected changes during Taekwon-Do activities.

Autistic students tend to enjoy constructive and detailed teaching with a lot of structure during the classes. Many like to impress with some confidence but internally may feel very vulnerable and uncomfortable. They like recognition even more than other students and encouragement can be crucial to their learning experience. Sometimes they have (too) high expectations and standards that can lead to frustration, anxiety and rage. The instructor plays a key role in controlling and handling the situation. Autistic pupils will not per definition get on better with other autistic pupils. It depends on the individual and it sometimes matches better with a neurotypical. Accurate and careful instructions are necessary, with the addition of reasons for and behind them. If the student understands, he is more likely to remember. Sometimes they need more time to learn new skills and activities. Once the memory is formed, however, you will find the student will never forget, so make sure you don't make mistakes too often. Students also need time to process instructions before they are interrupted or given more instructions, especially before carrying out a task. The relationship between student and teacher is vital to the learning experience. Also the help of peer 'buddies' can help to function better in class. A buddy is a confidential figure with more experience who can help with any questions, show you where to stand, where to find things, and generally is just there in case of need or difficulty. He/she does not replace the teacher but is an additional person who can be trusted and is a 'comfort' for the autistic student.

Some courses may be at a different time or venue and there may be students or teachers present from other clubs, so coming early to become familiar with the hall and any other things which may be different, is a preference. The same for grading sessions or examinations (e.g. with a guest examiner): it is good to sit down in advance with the teacher and ask him or her to explain what will happen. Competitions may be local to the club or a long distance away in unfamiliar venues and it may take a while for the student to feel comfortable. Coming early together with the teacher and some personal supporters, to make the transition easier, may be an option. In the same way, I try to prepare myself for

(big) events by arriving early, studying plans and schedules beforehand, imagine what will happen next and ask a lot of questions in advance. Predictability is a keyword.

“Divers studies show that not only the physical fitness progresses in this group of youngsters, but also the attitude of children with an autism spectrum disorder can improve. There are however a few conditions that must be fulfilled to reach that goal. Guidance is very important: patience, understanding, carefulness and support play a key role in these matters. Activities must be individualized. Stressful and complex situations must be avoided. Activities must be offered long, intensive and structured (longer than a year and several times a week) and parents or important persons should be involved. These children need social contacts but also moments on their own. Individual sports can lead to more self-confidence in individual tasks while team sports can bring in more feeling of control on relationships. Of great importance is the guiding of the youth during the process and to adapt to the specific difficulties. Acceptance, working on social abilities and self-esteem or how to cope with stressful situations ... to name a few things that must be evaluated whether we talk about youth with ASD, ADHD or depressions. Coaches must be a vast beacon for their pupils, especially when they have some issues. They must be competent, suited, qualified and have affinity with their group.”

(Report ‘Sports as a Care Project’ / Behaviouristic problems and Sports. Institute for the Youth, Netherlands: Breedveld, 2010; Boonstra & Hermens, 2011; Buysse and Duijvestijn, 2011; Elling & Wisse, 2010)

Being socially clumsy and not sticking to the same rules of friendship like sharing, cooperation and reciprocity can deliver some problems in the beginning. The instructor can be of great help in that mutual process by facilitating the social contact between the school members. In the same move it stimulates their communication and social contact with others; that is an important benefit for people who get easily isolated. Improving their skills in social interaction can sometimes be more successful while performing their special interest. Sometimes it is better not to talk about disabilities. But to friends it will probably be an advantage to tell about it, especially when they already know you for a while. A brief, clear explanation about some of the characteristics of the disorder can install more understanding. Neurotypical instructors and friends can be facilitating this process.

“I found that over the years of teaching children with Asperger’s, when the class is due to learn new concepts or moves, it is most effective to pair them up with empathetic higher graded peers so that the student can be taught on a one-to-one basis, and then join the main class when he or she feels more confident. Watching other children execute the moves may also be an effective way to learn. This is relatively easy in martial arts as most of the work is taught in sections, e.g. blocks or kicks, and then repeated over and over again until the students are competent. With these basic moves, the child with autism feels comfortable because there is little need for any physical contact or interaction.” (Dr. Sandra Beale-Ellis, 2008, UK, the Autistic Voice, author of “Autism and Martial Arts, A Guide for Children, Parents and Teachers”)

Communicating with special needs students in Taekwon-Do asks for special attention. That is really beneficial for the students, together with encouragement and showing interest in who they really are. Humour and respect will do the rest. There can submerge some misunderstandings in the communication towards autistic people in a training session of Taekwon-Do. Being clear and speak in recognizable language and short sentences may help them to understand things better:

- Make eye contact
- Use a gentle and firm voice
- Have confidence in your own authority
- Use clear and simple visual instructions
- Perform demonstration of movements in a slow and fluid motion
- Say less and say it slowly
- Use visual supports and gestures
- Be explicit and complete
- Avoid complex and figurative language
- Foresee a quiet environment to train in

Of course, there is more communication needed when you grow further into the martial art, for example in coaching others or being coached. A lot of (non-verbal) misunderstandings can pop-up in the process of learning a new pattern or new sparring techniques. Being straight, open, direct and honest in your communication as an instructor can prevent much confusions and misinterpretations. Giving feedback can help your students to progress in their own time and speed. Some autists need to practice on their own from time to time without any social interference or physical contact. But above all, they need someone they can trust and rely on, somebody who guides them through difficult periods.

Of course, the instructor must stay professional at all times. If after a few weeks or months, he/she is sure the pupil is not coping or settling, whether the student is autistic or not, he/she must not be afraid to speak to the student/parents and be honest. Not all individuals are suited to martial arts, or can function within a particular class or with you as instructor. I should suggest never making assumptions based on (autism) theory alone.

When there are courses, competitions or lessons in Belgium, I take part (as instructor, practitioner or co-organizer) and engage for 100%. My social skills grew during the years as I got more involved and experienced into those courses and competitions. In Belgium we organize national instructor courses (= to educate our school instructors), national umpire courses (= to educate good referees), days of Taekwon-Do (= fun for everybody), a national Belgian championship and several smaller '(open) challenge cups' every year. We go abroad to open, European or world championships/cups or follow (international) seminars in the neighbouring countries or even further away.

We also invite grandmasters, masters and former champions or skilled coaches from abroad to teach us how to become better Taekwondo; or we go abroad ourselves to get educated in IIC's, IUC's or other courses. Although it is always a challenge for me to mix with a greater group of people, I try to participate in my own particular way by joining the group and sometimes rely on people I trust, while focusing on the activities I have to do. Preparing and starting the activities causes each time anxious feelings, but I learned that it passes by persisting in the action. I have to take some recuperation time and extra sleep into

consideration afterwards. I experienced the need for social guidance during the years as an international umpire abroad in different companies and circumstances, and I still do. Due to my adaptation and lots of energy, I am able to get through these situations without long-lasting harm. But a lot of stress goes along with it every time I have to go to big events such as world championships or international seminars, and I am exhausted afterwards. In this case, for example, having a single room from the organization would be a great help already. I really need to make choices where I will go to or not, it is a question of dividing my energy and time and make a good balance between them. Luckily there are people around me who I trust and can rely on.

My situation in ITF Taekwon-Do has always been unusual as a result of my autism and due to my 'strange' social contacts with people. Nevertheless, I have the feeling that I have always been fully accepted as a (peculiar) member of the group. This has something to do with my way of being of course, but also with the extraordinary amount of energy I have always put in my (external) relationships. 'Pretending to be normal' has been my second skin for the past 50 years, not that I want to be someone else, but the longing for being accepted by others/by the group has always been so strong, that I simply cannot do it otherwise. It has become my personal choice. My social motivation has always been enormous. The position in which I evolved during my Taekwon-Do career, especially in Belgium, was pretty clear from the beginning. I was an intermediary figure who could come across discussions without being very present in the front. In the background, I was standing-up as a stakeholder of the Do without putting myself on the front row. In all that time, I tried to practice what I preached, and I still try to live the way I think, according to my principles and values.

CONCLUSIONS

- Start with what is RIGHT rather than what is ACCEPTABLE -

Franz Kafka

CONCLUSIONS

I want to accentuate the fact that every individual has its own unique development and position in life and in ITF Taekwon-Do. Each one with his or her abilities and limitations. Life itself is a big experiment. That wisdom is applicable on every item of natural existence. According to the encyclopedia of ITF Taekwon-Do written by our founder and grandmaster general Choi Hong Hi, and related to the soul of my thesis, it sounds like this:

“Even if ITF Taekwon-Do is practiced for the sake of exercise alone, the enjoyment derived will justify the time invested and spent. As an exercise, it is equally suitable for the old and young, male and female, skilled and disabled. A word of encouragement for those who are physically or mentally underdeveloped or even handicapped: the majority of ITF Taekwon-Do masters today were not initially gifted with physical strength or natural coordination. In fact, an instructor usually prefers an underdeveloped student not only because of the personal challenge, but also because this type of student will usually work much harder and become the most dedicated student ...”

Of course, as we have seen, there are some extra challenges for people with special needs like autism. It is important to stay yourself not wanting to become somebody else. For that, you have to accept yourself as you are. This has been a struggle for me since I can remember. Everyone around me knows that, now I only have to assure myself about it. I still am who I am and even if I could, I wouldn't change a little bit about it, even though life sometimes tastes quite bitter.

I think I have illustrated with my thesis that there are a lot of positive effects in ITF Taekwon-Do for people with autism. The way in which instructors teach and approach their pupils is essential in this matter. In ITF Taekwon-Do, this is strongly influenced by the philosophy of the martial art and the scientific use of the techniques. That makes it so different from other martial arts.

It is my sincere hope by making this thesis to create a small contribution in the vision of ITF Taekwon-Do about inclusion for people with special needs. I hope that it will be of any help for instructors who already work with autistic people or are planning to do so in the future. I similarly hope that people with autism get more inspired to start with our wonderful martial art and that Taekwondo in general grow more open towards people with special needs.

Don't underestimate the efforts that people with autism have to deliver to deal with their challenges. I know this by own experience. But I am convinced that ITF Taekwon-Do has big opportunities for autistic people if they can follow their own path. Autistic people who achieve well in ITF Taekwon-Do don't make it *in spite of* their autism neither flourishes *thanks to* their autism. They pull through *with* their autism.

I will continue to set an example in that matter in the years to follow. And this is how my influence works: slowly and carefully. And that will be the way to carry out my mastership too, because I am determined to do so, being who I am.

When I said 17 years ago in my thesis for IVth Degree that the way to become a master was still far away for me, I meant every word of it. After 30 intense years of ITF Taekwon-Do and 54 years of profound struggling with myself, I now gathered enough knowledge, self-confidence and experience to give it a try. I am really curious to peek into a new world, to see what is behind the curtain of mastership. For me, it is a way to encourage other people – with or without issues– and to inspire others to become integrity-warriors in their own personal way.

I just want to keep growing in the right direction without losing my authenticity, facing the challenges of autism with the strengths of ITF Taekwon-Do ...

Eddy Van Damme.

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Websites:

<http://www.autismecentraal.com> (“*Autisme Centraal*” is a Belgian training and expertise centre that provides specialized and customized training courses, lectures and workshops on autism. What makes them unique is the way they bridge the academic/scientific world and the practical world of everyone working in the field of autism. “*Autisme Centraal*” inspires, informs and helps you to become more knowledgeable about autism, more skilled and – especially – more autism friendly)

<http://www.autismevlaanderen.be/pages/vva> (*The Flemish Autism Association – VVA = Vlaamse Vereniging Autisme – from Belgium: brings people with autism, their parents, family and social network together. In 2020 the VVA exists 45 years. The VVA wants to motivate and activate our society so that people with ASD and their surroundings can be themselves, starting with their qualities and coping with their specific challenges*)

<http://www.researchautism.net> (*This site has been designed to provide you with information about the work of Research Autism and about interventions used to help people on the autism spectrum. It has also been designed to act as a gateway to some of the other resources on autism, both in the UK and overseas*)

<http://www.autism.org.uk> (*National Autistic Society UK*)

<http://www.participate-autisme.be> (*The Belgian Association ‘Participate’ helps people to understand more about autism, answers questions and gives clear answers on Autism-issues*)

<http://www.autism-site.com/autism-site> (*Dutch Autism Site, comparable with ‘Participate’ from Belgium*)

<http://www.autisme.nl> (*Dutch Association for Autism – NVA = Nederlandse Vereniging voor Autisme*)

<http://www.autisme.startpagina.nl> (*Starting page on Autism in the Netherlands*)

<https://www.autismspeaks.org> (*Autism Speaks (USA) is dedicated to promoting solutions, across the spectrum and throughout the lifespan, for the needs of individuals with autism and their families through advocacy and support; increasing understanding and acceptance of autism spectrum disorder; and advancing research into causes and better interventions for autism spectrum disorder and related conditions. There is cooperation with the American Taekwondo Association*)

<http://www.autismkey.com> (*Autism Key (USA) is operated by parents of children with autism spectrum disorders. They offer multi-media, autism information, news, articles, and support for those affected by autism and their families*)

<http://thomasamckean.com> (*McKean, Thomas A., author and autist. See article on his website: Martial Arts as a ‘Treatment’ for Autism (2007). Illinois, USA*)

<http://www.specialneeds.com> (*See article: Why Martial Arts programs are the best for children with special needs*)

<http://www.specialneedstaekwondo.org> (*they are including those with disabilities in society into an art extremely life changing with a vast level of health and wellbeing benefits. Their goal is to see more instructors globally becoming involved to provide great opportunities for the special needs community*)

<https://www.psychologytoday.com> (*See article: Patterning in martial arts may help reduce stereotypic activity in autism*)

<https://www.scholar.google.be> (*Different Scientific Studies about Specific Effects of Martial Arts on some Aspects of Autism*)

<http://www.theautisticvoice.co.uk> (*“I am advocate of autism, running a website which offers support, advice and an outlet for anyone with or affected by autism to celebrate who they are without fear or judgement. I give talks to local and national groups, and work with the National Autistic Society and the Sheffield Hallam University on courses. I also teach karate to students on the autism spectrum,” says Dr. Sandra Beale-Ellis, educator, speaker, author, martial artist and researcher in the UK*)

<http://www.eppersonbroskenpo.com> (*A study on the effects of martial arts training & autism*)

<http://www.taekwondoitf.org> (*website International Taekwon-Do Federation*)

<http://www.itfeurope.org> (*website European ITF Taekwon-Do Federation*)

<http://www.itfbelgium.be> (*website Belgian ITF Taekwon-Do Federation*)

<http://www.worldautismorganization.org> (*website World Autism Organization*)

<http://www.autismeurope.org> (*website European Autism Organization*)

<http://www.hoosiertaeqwondo.com/tae-kwon-do-for-kids-with-autism> (*Hoosier Taekwondo (Indiana, USA) believes in helping everyone achieve their greatest potential through the diligent practice of martial arts*)

<http://www.harenerweekblad.nl/sport/33196/auti-taekwon-do-voor-kinderen-met-autismeass> (*'Auti-Taekwon-Do for children with Autism' in Groningen, Netherlands, 2016, article in Newspaper*)

<http://taekwondolimburg.be/g-sport.html> (*Taekwondo especially for people with a handicap – an example - Belgium*)

<http://www.sportschooldekkers.nl> (*Individual Teaching of Taekwondo for people with special needs, e.g. Autism - The Netherlands*)

<http://fightland.vice.com/blog/martial-arts-and-the-autism-spectrum> (*Martial Arts and the Autism Spectrum / Fightland Blog: By Sarah Kurchak / An interview with Jo Redman, British women kickboxer and diagnosed with Asperger and ADHD*)

<https://www.allesoversport.nl/artikel/werkzame-elementen-voor-sporttrainers-die-werken-met-kinderen-met-autisme> (*Final report research: Sport for social-emotional development of children with autism*)

Article via Facebook, July 2016, Laing Robert (*American author and autist*): *Taekwondo and Aspergers*

ANNEX

Curriculum vitae ITF Taekwon-Do

1. Personal details

- Name: Van Damme
- First name: Eddy
- Sex: Male
- Nationality: Belgian
- Address: Vijverstraat 4, 9160 Lokeren, Belgium, Europe
eddyvandamme53@gmail.com - tel.nr. 0032/487526533
- Education: - College: Mathematic sciences 1978-1984
- High school: General and Psychiatric Nursery 1984-1988
- Work: 20 years as psychiatric nurse in hospitals; 15 years as laborer in gardens
- Date of birth: 29/06/1966
- Age: 54

2. Training + instructor

- School "Juche" Ghent, led by GM Vanberghen Frank: 1991-1999: 3/week: training and parttime assistant instructor since 1994; conducting (national) courses and demonstrations
- School "Ge-Baek" Lokeren, led by Master Vandriessche Annick: 2000-now: 2à3/week: training and parttime instructor since 2003; conducting (national) courses
- Instructor since 2013 during Days of Taekwon-Do (2/year), National Instructor Courses (=NIC 2/year), national pattern seminars and National Umpire Courses (=NUC 2/year)
- Co-examiner for new Dan-candidates 2x/year
- Co-organizer for all internal (national) championships since 2000

3. National qualifications

- National assistant instructor 1994-2003
- National instructor 2003-now
- National umpire since 1994 in Belgium during BC's and internal (open) championships
- President Umpire Committee since 2000 and President Tournament and Umpire Committee (=TUC) since 2010
- Head umpire for all internal (national) championships since 2000: BC (= Belgian Championships); Challenge Cups; Open Ghent cups
- Member Disciplinary Committee since 1999
- President Disciplinary Committee since 2010
- Examiner in Belgian Dan-Committee since 2005

4. International qualifications

- International Instructor (no. 1171) since 2003 and plaque certificate holder (no. 15006)
- International Umpire: Certificate Umpire B since 2000 (B-566) and Certificate Umpire A since 2003 (A-901)
- International umpire experience in EC (= European Championships), WC (= World Championships) and open championships (abroad) as center referee, corner referee and JM
- 2001: during the EC in Villajoyosa (Spain), I got an award for umpiring

5. Promotion details

- **B – 1 – 17** on 12/12/1993 in GHENT by GM VANBERGHEN FRANK
- **B – 2 – 8** on 06/08/1995 in GHENT by GM VANBERGHEN FRANK
- **B – 3 – 4** on 20/12/1997 in GHENT by GM VANBERGHEN FRANK,
Commissioned by GM WEILER PAUL (Germany)
- **B – 4 – 5** on 29/06/2003 in LOKEREN by GM O'TOOLE BRENDAN (Ireland)
- **B – 5 – 4** on 25/10/2009 in LOKEREN by GM WEILER PAUL (Germany)
- **B – 6 – 5** on 21/09/2014 in LOKEREN by GM VANBERGHEN FRANK

6. National courses and seminars

- 1992-2003: different courses first aid given by GM Vanberghen
- 1993-2000: different national hosinsul- and umpire-courses given by GM Vanberghen
- 1993 + 1994: course given by Sabum Tapilatu (The Netherlands)
- 1994: matsogi and pattern national course
- 1995: all-round course given by Master Hutton (Scotland)
- 1998 + 1999: seminar special techniques and sparring given by Master Rombaut (The Netherlands)
- 2000-2004: different courses hosinsul given by boosabum Borms
- 2002: all-round course given by Master Barada (Slovenia)
- 2003: all-round course given by Master Vandemortel (The Netherlands)
- 2007: 5x pattern + 3x hosinsul + 3x power/specials + 4x sparring courses
- 2008: 7x pattern courses + 2x hosinsul courses + 3x sparring courses + 2x power/specials + teambuilding weekend (national team)
- 2009: 6x pattern courses + 3x sparring courses Lokeren + 3x hosinsul courses
- 2010: 2x hosinsul + 7x pattern + 1x sparring courses
- 2011: 5x pattern + 1x power/specials + 1x sparring + 3x hosinsul courses + teambuilding weekend (national team)
- 2012: 3x pattern + 1x sparring courses
- 2015: 1x seminar first aid (Red Cross)
- 2016: 1x hosinsul seminar + ITF Protocol seminar given by GM Dacak (Paraguay) + seminar sparring given by Master Barada (Slovenia)
- 2017: Technical seminar GM Weiler (Germany) (2 days) + seminar sparring Master Hutton (Scotland) (2 days)
- 2018: Injury Prevention Course for Martial Arts given by boosabum Torrealba + pattern seminar given by GM Vanberghen
- 2019: seminar Sabum Doulay (France) + electronical seminar Master Vones (Germany)

7. International courses and seminars

- 1995: IIC no. 96-27 Cologne (Germany) given by General Choi Hong Hi
- 1997: IIC no. CJH-4-97-45 Cologne (Germany) given by GM Choi Jung Hwa
- 1999: International Taekwon-Do Training in Pyongyang (North-Korea) given by Ryang H. C. (6th Degree), Chon Ch. L. (5th Degree) and Li E. I. (5th Degree) during 3 weeks
- 2000: AETF Umpire Course Prague (Czech Rep.) given by GM Bos
- 2001: IIC no. 177-37 Budapest (Hungary) given by General Choi Hong Hi/GM Choi Jung Hwa
- 2002: IIC no. 188-49 Cologne (Germany) given by General Choi Hong Hi + AETF Umpire Course Cologne (Germany) given by GM Bos
- 2004: IIC no. 195-70 given by GM Trần Triều Quân
- 2005: IIC Brussels (Belgium) given by 4 masters VIIIe Degree
- 2006: IIC no. 19-83 given by GM Trần Triều Quân
- 2007: IIC no. B-28-13 Steenokkerzeel (Belgium) given by GM Trần Triều Quân
- 2009: IIC no. 44-064 Miesbach (Germany) + pattern seminar Master Vones Luxembourg
- 2010: IIC no. 57-027 Utrecht (The Netherlands) + IUC no. 7-1 Villorba (Italy)
- 2012: IUC no. 9-31 Limerik (Ireland)
- 2013: IIC no 88-46 Ostend (Belgium)
- 2015: IUC no. 21-121 Budapest (Hungary) + seminar GM Lan (Luxembourg)
- 2016: IIC no. 114-8 Paris (France)
- 2018: IIC no. 128-163 Dublin (Ireland) + IUC no. 31-88 Miesbach (Germany)

8. National and International Umpiring

- 1994: Open Scottish Championships Bathgate
- 1996: EC Riccione (Italy)
- 2000: EC Edinburgh (Scotland)
- 2001: WC Rimini (Italy) + EC Villajoyosa (Spain)
- 2005: EC Terracina (Italy) + WC Dortmund (Germany)
- 2007: Open Brabantse (The Netherlands) + BC

- 2008: Open Zeeuwse (The Netherlands) + BC + EC Wroclaw (Poland) + Battle of Utrecht (The Netherlands)
- 2009: BC + Open championships Dublin (Ireland)
- 2010: BC + EC Skövde (Sweden) + 2x Challenge Cup
- 2011: BC + Challenge Cup + EC Bratislava (Slovakia)
- 2012: Open Dutch Championships + BC + Open Zeeuwse (The Netherlands) + Challenge Cup
- 2013: Open Dutch + BC + Open Zeeuwse + Challenge Cup + EC Skövde (Sweden)
- 2014: Open Dutch + BC + EC Riccione (Italy) + Challenge Cup
- 2015: Open Dutch + BC + EC Motherwell (Scotland) + Challenge Cup
- 2016: Open Dutch + Open Irish + BC + Open Middelburg (The Netherlands) + Challenge Cup + EC Tampere (Finland)
- 2017: Open Irish + BC + Open Ghent Cup + WC Dublin (Ireland) + Challenge Cup
- 2018: BC + Open Irish + EC Maribor (Slovenia) + Open Ghent Cup + Challenge Cup
- 2019: BC Andenne + Open Ghent Cup + EC Sarajevo (Bosnia) + Challenge Cup
- 2020: 30th BC Lokeren

9. Theses

- 2003: Thesis for IVth Degree: “Moral Aspects of ITF Taekwon-Do in our Western Society”: this thesis was spread internationally in 2007 by our former president GM Trần Triều Quân, in the context of promoting the DO-philosophy in ITF worldwide, a tradition that is actually continued through international DO-courses (e.g. by his daughter Master Joliette Trần)
- 2020: Thesis for VIIth Degree: “Opportunities in ITF Taekwon-Do for people with Autism”: written to promote the positive effects in ITF Taekwon-Do for people with special needs like Autism Spectrum Disorder