

# BLACK BELT POOMSAE: THE MEANING OF BLACK BELT PATTERNS

*Written by Kay Millican, 4th Dan Black Belt*

As with the first 8 Taegeuk patterns a beginner in Taekwondo learns, so too the black belt patterns have layer upon layer of meaning. Focusing on these helps bring about a transformation not only of technique, but of the spirit of the martial artist.

Through developing from beginner to black belt and then beyond through the various Dans, **a martial artist learns not only technique, but they learn about themselves**, what it means to be human, what it means to be of good character and how best to live in the world.

Perhaps I take liberty there, but to the martial spirit, **life is about who we are, as much as what our bodies can do**. Exercising self-restraint or self-discipline comes from knowing ourselves through and through.

I've previously described how the coloured belt Taegeuk poomsae patterns represent kwaes, or divination signs that were used in the I-ching to answer spiritual questions.

Having grown through beginner levels of Taekwondo, a black belt slowly emerges.

**Koryo**, the first black belt pattern, in fact represents the learned person (the Seon Bae). It refers to someone with a strong martial spirit, righteous (in my mind, standing up for what is right and virtuous) and learned (internally, as well as externally).

The path to black belt requires a person to **learn their failings, as much as their strengths**, and how to overcome their own weaknesses, far more so than how to defeat an opponent.

But Koryo, and first dan black belt status, is just the start of the next journey. A lot of students set a goal of achieving black belt status, and then leave. There's nothing wrong with this, but it leaves so much of their development unfinished, or their inner questions unanswered.

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The second black belt pattern is **Keum-gang**, the diamond. It refers to Mt Keumgang, a centre of Korean national spirit. This mountain and the diamond stand for a mighty warrior, who is hard and ponderous, unmoving as only a mountain and diamond can be.

**Mountains** are forged by geographic processes like volcanoes and tectonic plates colliding, diamonds are forged from immense pressure for long periods of time. Keumgang represents a lot of years of training and learning and the hardness and strength that results in. But still, it is near the start of the black belt's journey



**Tae-baek** is the third black belt pattern, and it represents the bright mountain – the ponderosity and seriousness of Keumgang is taken over by brightness and lightness. In my mind and experience, getting to third dan and beyond, I started feeling like moves were my own, they flowed better and felt lighter and easier to execute.

Taebaek is also about sacredness of the soul and a Korean concept “hongik ingan” (the humanitarian ideal). I think this is where martial arts starts to feel like being for defence or deflection, rather than attack. Its about preservation of soul and being there for others, not standing against them.

The fourth pattern is **Pyong-won**. This stands for the plain, a vast stretched land which is the source of life. It also stands for peace and struggle. I really like this pattern with its stretched out two-dimensionality, where most other patterns are in three dimensions. It truly does reflect a plain, stretching away into the distance, a place of seeming peace, but also makes me think of those nature documentaries where the hidden and night cameras reveal a wealth of life and the struggle of existence under the seemingly calm surface.

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While I'm currently a fourth dan, having read up on remaining patterns, I seek to understand them, even though I haven't experienced the lessons those years of training teach yet.

The fifth dan pattern is **Sipjin** (pronounced ship-jin). It stands for **longevity**. This doesn't surprise me in some ways - the wait time between each successive black belt dan is in fact progressively longer. I suspect the wait to 5th dan will indeed feel long to me.

But its important that this occur, because the more you know, the longer it takes to learn and experience more that develops you to similar degrees. **Improvements come in smaller increments over longer periods of time.** Sipjin relates to 10 creatures of long life – 3 natural, 2 plant and 3 animal, or also represent faith, hope and love.

**Ji-tae**, the sixth black belt pattern, refers to the man standing on the ground with two feet looking over the sky.



To be honest, for me, that almost brings to mind a god! A person looking over the sky – it feels like they'd have to be standing at the top of the world, or somewhere like Mt Olympus (the home of the greek gods) or Valhalla (home of the Norse gods).

Yet, **Jitae represents the human struggle for existence and spring to heaven.** So while not a god, it seems to reflect the one that aspires to god-likeness. Has, by this stage, the learned person started to break the bounds of what it is to be human, having learned so much along the way about themselves and others?

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Which brings us to **Chong-kwon**. Heaven's great mighty! – the seventh dan black belt pattern. Its about the origin and creation of everything, including the cosmos – it truly does seem to bring us even closer to godliness.

In fact, it represents change and completion as well as man's oneness with heaven. It is true, that **the Taekwondo journey, gradually brings greater self-confidence and assurance**, but it needs hubris as well, or practitioners are unlikely to align with godliness.

**Han-su**, the eighth black belt pattern, represents water, the source of life and growth. It represents strength and weakness, harmony and adaptability, its unbreakable yet flexible (reminds me of a Bong (the long sticks we practice Bongsul with), it bends and seems fragile yet smashes through whatever opposes it.



I think this black belt level speaks even more about the hubris I mentioned in relation to Chong-kwon. The joy of becoming one with heaven is starting to accept everything about ourselves, to learn to flow with what is happening, and to be a source for others around us of peace and growth.

Lastly, comes **Il-yeo**, the final ninth black belt pattern. It represents the philosophy of oneness of mind (the spirit) and body (the material). By this stage of the martial arts journey, **spirit and body have been harmonized and become one.**

**This is the essence of the martial art.** Alignment of the whole person, body and soul, and oneness with all that is around us. I'm almost tired writing about the coloured belt and black belt patterns – its like an epic multi-part movie that pulls at all the heart strings and shows epic battles between good and evil forces, until the hero finally wins the day and comes out knowing all they've have faced and overcome to get there.

**Taekwondo: its lets you become the hero of your own story, and lasts forever if you let it.**