

POOMSAE AND KWAES: THE MEANING OF THE FIRST TAEGEUK PATTERNS

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In my article on the Korean flag, I mentioned the taegeuk, the eum-yang symbol at the heart of the Korean flag and the kwaes, Korean divination signs, of which 4 appear on the Korean flag.

Well when reading up on the the 8 coloured belt patterns, I discovered that not only are they called the **Taegeuk patterns** (i.e. at the heart of learning Taekwondo), but also they represent 8 kwaes, or divination signs.

These divination signs are drawn from the I-ching, an ancient Chinese text that is a method for determining answers to spiritual questions and fortune telling.

What, when I was learning, were just a sequence of moves, have taken on three dimensions and a life all their own in discovering more about what they represent in Korean philosophy, history and tradition.

Il jang, pattern number 1 (jang literally means chapter – so it's a chapter in the Taegeuk), is represented by the kwe, or divination sign, Geon.

This kwe refers to heaven and is about the **beginning of creation** of all things. Its also the top left trigram on the Korean flag.

Pal jang, pattern number 8, by comparison, is represented by the kwe Gon, which **represents earth** and is opposite Geon on the Korean flag.

The kwe relates to roots and settlement, beginning and end. It's the end of the beginner journey in Taekwondo, and the beginning of the next part of the journey, with the next pattern being the first black belt pattern that is Koryo, the learned person, a beginning in itself as we'll consider in yet another article.

So what's between patterns 1 and 8, what journey does the Taekwondo learner embark on?

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Ee jang, pattern number 2, represents Tae, the **lake**, which refers to **inner firmness and outer softness**. This pattern reminds me of the surface of a lake, calm and still, with no understanding of what may yet lie beneath. The beginner who has only just begun to scratch that surface and find what's within them.

Sam jang, pattern number 3, represents **fire or the sun**, its hot and bright, reminding me of a beginner starting to develop more confidence in their capabilities, starting to learn more and build on what drew them to the martial art in the first place.



Sa jang, pattern 4, represents the kwae, Jin, **thunder!** I personally love pattern 4 – its where suddenly everything changes, the moves and the rhythm of patterns 1-3 are challenged and whole new abilities emerge. Its fast and strong, starting with a block and knife hand thrust.

The Jin kawe represents great power and dignity, which is hardly surprising when you watch the moves and newfound abilities of a coloured belt.

Oh jang, pattern 5, represents Son, the **wind**. Its represents **mighty force and calmness**, just like the strength of the wind, blowing without stop. The second move is a massive hammer blow to the head. It flows just like the wind, and stops for nothing, blowing inexorably and without mercy.

Yuk jang, pattern 6, represents Kam/Gam – water or the moon. It represents **incessant flow and softness**. Like water, you can imagine the pattern just washing over an opponent, and like 5, the wind, stopping for no-one.

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And **pattern 7, Chil jang**, it represents **mountain**, which stands for ponderosity and firmness. The wonderful cat/tiger stance and firm blocks illustrate **strength and standing against whatever comes without moving**.

Reading these descriptions of each kwae brings a whole new level of emphasis on each pattern and move within it for me – you can imagine yourself as the sun or thunder or water or the mountain.

Imagine what that natural force means and how it impacts on what is happening around it.

I plan to read the I-ching again one day soon, and will perhaps write about the treasures I find within.

Meanwhile, focus on those patterns and learning them to the best of your ability, and know that **they represent stages on a journey** that never ends and provide answers perhaps to spiritual questions that participation in a martial art can help you to uncover for yourself.

