

Grandmaster Joon Pyo Choi Biography: The Martial Artist I Became, part 5

Submitted by [melko](#) [1] on Wed, 05/02/2012 - 6:39pm

During the school year, I trained in Taekwondo every minute that I was awake. I'd go to Taekwondo class after school, and then run home for dinner. After dinner I had to do homework, but I only wanted to think about martial arts.

Around midnight, after everyone in the house was asleep, I'd come down, sneak outside, and kick, until 2 AM or 3 AM or 4 AM. Even in winter, I'd go outside to kick. The ground was frozen dirt, but after a couple hours, the dirt was thawed and all mud. The yard was a mud pit from all the training I was doing. I'd clean myself up afterwards, sleep for a couple hours, and then be up by 6 AM to catch the public bus to school.

I was always short on sleep and short on school work! I'd miss the bus because I overslept, or I'd miss my stop because I was sleeping on the bus. So I was always tardy. That became my nickname: King Tardy.

The front doors of the school were locked after the bell rang, so to get in, I had to jump the wall and sneak into the room. But the teacher knew I was always late. The punishment for tardiness was a whack with a bamboo stick. Every day I received a stroke from the bamboo. But that didn't keep me from falling asleep, I was so tired. During our short breaks - five or ten minutes - I would get up and start kicking again.

That was my lifestyle during the school year. Obviously by sticking to that schedule, I became one of the strongest fighters in school, but not one of the strongest students! As one of the strongest fighters, I drew a lot of weaker students to me. The book worms, the small guys, the nerds - who were all pushed around by the bullies - always followed me. I was kind to them and protected them. So I was the friend of the small kids, but enemy of the bullies, and so enemy of the street gangs that were surrounding the school. These gangs were always trying to take advantage of the students, take their money or their books.

But I was not alone. All my Taekwondo students from Boy Scouts were with me and ready to help me if I needed it. Together there were ten or twelve of us, and it wasn't possible for the bullies and gangs to attack me easily. Even so, there were many fights that I was in.

One such fight was during my second year of high school. I was sixteen or seventeen. After Taekwondo class, I and my students came down the mountain from the Boy Scout camp where we trained. We waited for the bus at the bus stop, me, one of my students, and one of my friends. Another guy was there waiting for the bus, and we made eye contact. That was all it took! A fight broke out.

The guy came at us yelling, and my student Joong Wan punched him - hard! Blood was coming out of his mouth. We thought we had busted his lip. He didn't want to fight after that, and when I waded in to help my friend, he ran away.

Unfortunately, I was wearing my school uniform, and it had a distinctive pattern on the sleeve. About a week later, as I was going into my school, I saw the same guy, only now he was with a group of guys; he'd brought his gang. Luckily the school bell had rung, and we all went into the school. Unluckily, he was waiting for me when I left at the end of the day to wait for the bus to take me home.

He and his gang forced me into the alley by the school. He started to take swings at me. I didn't want

him to hit me, so I moved and covered, and then after he hit me once, I struck back at him. I hurt him because I was strong, and we fought some more.

The principal of the school saw that his gang had dragged me into the alley, so he called together a group of teachers and they came for me in the alley. They broke up the fight. But the guy was angry. He claimed I had injured him before, and he showed the principal his tongue where it had been cut nearly in two. It wasn't a busted lip like we thought. It was a serious injury. The principal called the police, and the guy ran off.

I explained to the principal that it was all self-defense. He understood. This wasn't the first time that I had been in a fight defending myself. He knew I protected the weaker students, so I didn't get in trouble.

But that wasn't the end of it. A week later a police officer came to arrest me at the school. One of my teachers had told me that if I was arrested, I would be expelled, and they didn't want that. Before the police officer could arrest me, though, a girl working at the school let me know that the officer was coming for me. She tipped me off, and I ran.

I learned from the warrant that the guy who had been injured was the son of the police station chief. The chief was determined to arrest me and fine me so that I paid all the medical bills of his son.

He wasn't ever going to quit. They wanted revenge. I found out where he lived – about 5 or 10 miles from the school – and decided to visit his house. I also learned that he was a gang member too. I decided to visit him where he lived. My plan was to let him beat me up a little bit. If I had some minor injury, I felt he would be happy and not need to arrest me and send me to jail. It was self-defense of course, but he was the one with the serious injury. It didn't look good for me, especially if his father was the police precinct chief. In hindsight, it wasn't a very good plan.

I went to his house. He didn't live with his father, as his mother was his father's mistress. He lived with a grandmother instead. The police chief had had an affair with a famous, very popular singer, and the bully was the singer's son. Because of this situation, he was a troubled man.

When I arrived, he acknowledged who I was, and then he just looked at me. After a moment, he said, "I'm so glad to see you. Please come back to my room."

His room was small and in the middle was a table. He placed a knife on the table and said, "I'm glad you came here. I'm going to hurt you."

I replied, "You are a famous guy in a fight. But you and I had a fair fight. You lost to me. Why are you causing all this trouble? Why don't you act like a man?"

This was part of my horrible plan, to aggravate him. He did get upset, and I expected he would use the knife. I would block with my hand, take a small cut on the hand, so I could control the knife. With a minor knife cut, I could still win the fight.

He picked up the knife off the table, and I prepared to block. Then he put it back down. "I'm not that stupid," he said. "I know what you are trying to do. I'm going to put you in jail. I'm going to make you pay thousands and thousands of dollars." So much for my plan.

"Do whatever you want to do," I said, and I just walked out.

My mother had heard from the teachers and the police. She knew how important my honor was and that I would not negotiate. She offered me the money, but I would not take it from her. Instead, she went to the guy and offered him the money to settle the matter. And that was it. So much for my plan. But it was a bad plan anyway.

I was very sorry to have caused my mother to pay for my mistakes. I was also quite embarrassed, because I had troubled my mother at all. She didn't have much money, but she had used what she had to save me from jail.

I was lucky to have stayed in school after that. If it wasn't for my Mom and the honor roll students that I protected, I would have been suspended from school.

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By the time my third year of high school rolled around, I realized that I had to go to college. In Korea, if you don't go to college, then you are a failure. You will only get a minimum wage job, and you will not marry well with a person of education. Unfortunately, I had not spent so much time studying up until then. My life had been all about Taekwondo. So I decided to study with just three months until graduation.

I shut down my Taekwondo school and I moved in with my uncle, the admiral, who was Master Ho Kim's father. He lived near us in a mansion, so there was a lot of room to study. In our house, things were very crowded, but Admiral Kim had enough space for me to spread out and focus on my books. So I moved in there.

I did not sleep more than four hours a night. I studied all day and most of the night. I memorized books that I was supposed to have read during the past three years. My brain was not fast, but I worked hard to memorize everything. I studied so hard that I got sick from it.

The gangs at school saw that I was sick, and they knew I had closed my Taekwondo school. They thought they could fight me now and win. They thought I was alone. My reputation was big enough at the school that I didn't have to fight every challenge. I could brush it off and not lose respect.

But I was in the school gymnasium, playing basketball, when a big guy bumped into me. I didn't know who he was, but he wouldn't stop harassing me. I couldn't brush him off, and he wouldn't stop. He kept following me around in the gym, trying to get me to attack him. He was persistent.

I didn't know him, but later I learned he transferred from another school because he had gotten in trouble fighting. He'd heard I was the toughest fighter at my school, and the gangs encouraged him to come after me. Still I tried to brush it off. But by then, word had gotten out to the gangs that he was going to fight me, but that I didn't want to fight.

They cornered me. A group of fifteen or twenty gang members caught me in the small alley next to the school. It was a dirty, dark alley, next to the school gym, and in the middle of it was a septic tank.

I could have run, but I realized that if I did, I'd have to start fighting to earn the respect back. I had to fight. I couldn't escape.

The big guy came at me, but he was slow, and I punched him a single time on his jaw. He passed out, landing in the dirty sewer water. He was knocked straight out with just that one punch. He fell down like a piece of wood.

Then the gang came at me. It was a whirlwind. Five or six of the gang members were knocked down, and they ran. It lasted at least five minutes, but then they were all gone, and I was alone with the unconscious guy.

I'd fought a lot of gang members, and I'd knocked a lot of them out. Usually they wake up after fifteen minutes or so, but never longer than an hour. I expected the big guy to awaken quickly, but he didn't. He was laying in the smelly mud, right in the middle of the septic runoff, his body soaked and

covered in muck.

We tried pouring water over his face, but that didn't work. At least his face was clean though. One of the students ran to get a teacher. She came with the school nurse. He was still out cold, like he had been run over by a bus.

We carried him to the nurse's office. They gave him a shot, but still he didn't wake up. We had to call an ambulance, and they took him to the University Hospital, one of the best hospitals around.

Three days later, he woke up. All that time, I was worried. I was scared that I had killed him. I'd never thought about it until then, but I was trained to hit people powerfully, to kill people so they didn't wake up. I trained every day to use kicks and punches and chokes and holds, and the reason I did that was so my body was a weapon. It was a weapon that could seriously hurt someone. I had not realized how dangerous I could be to my opponent.

I found out he was the son of a high ranking general in the Army. I went and spoke with the father. I explained what had happened, and he believed me that it was self-defense. He realized I had done what I needed to do to defend myself. By then the guy had woken up, and he was okay. I was happy about that because I didn't want to be a murderer.

Still it troubled me that I could do that sort of thing. That was my last street fight for a long time. I was very afraid that I might kill someone. I began to wear big hats to cover my eyes, so that I wouldn't accidentally make eye contact. I acted goofy instead of tough. I made jokes instead of punches and kicks. I had lost my fighting spirit, for a while at least.

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Unfortunately, though I tried to avoid fights, fights would not avoid me. Something as simple as eye contact with the wrong person would start a fight. Graduation was coming, and I was trying to study, but there was no stopping the fights. I was protecting too many people. I was the leader of all the underdogs. I had to fight, even when I didn't want to.

I was on my way to school, past some book stores and small shops that offered cookies and candies to bring customers in. They knew me in the shops, as I was always passing by, and I often bought books. There, standing near the book stores, was a young bald guy smoking cigarettes. At that time, smoking was not common. It was taboo. It caught my attention, and I looked at him. I mumbled something and looked away. But it was too late. He came up to me and wanted to fight.

I walked away. I had no reason to fight. It was just a misunderstanding. So I turn and head to school. He followed me, trying to get me to fight.

This caught the attention of the gangs that were always near the school. The local gangs would collaborate with the school gangs, bullying and taking money and hurting students. They were bolder now that I was no longer fighting. They saw this guy trying to start a fight, and they asked why I was afraid to fight. They hadn't seen that before. I had always been ready to fight up to then.

I got past them, but behind me one of my friends was walking in, and they surrounded him. It was ten guys to one. Not a very fair fight, so I turned around and stepped next to my friend.

They had weapons, knives and pipes. I said, "You are outnumbering him, and that's not fair. But I'm here and even though there're only two of us, at least four or five of you will be crippled before I go down. I will gouge eyeballs, and I will break groins, and I will knock teeth out."

Sometimes, if you explain what will happen in the fight, your opponent will be reluctant to attack. But the tension was building. The bald guy was egging people on. Some of my students came and stood

with us, and now it was more even, but there were still more of them than us.

Then the bald guy swung his knife and the fight started. There was no talking our way out of it. I covered and struck back, catching him on the jaw and almost knocking him out. But he still cut me on the elbow.

When they saw the guy with the knife go down, the rest of them were scared and they ran off. After that, I had to go to the hospital to get stitches.

Later, I saw the bald guy again. He realized how powerful I was and came up to me to shake my hand. Even when I did not want to fight, I was able to defend myself and the people around me.

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Graduation was even closer now. The distraction of these fights made my grades worse. I was barely passing my classes, and sometimes I had to beg my teachers for a passing grade. I had been suspended seven times for fighting, but each time I was exonerated because it was determined that I fought in self-defense. Or I fought to save someone else. If that happened, the person would testify on my behalf. So while I was getting suspension after suspension, I was never actually expelled. But all that suspension made studying even harder!

College was very important in my country. But to get into college, you had to be in the top 20 or 30 percent. I wasn't there. At the time, my teachers and my parents - no one! - really believed I could get into any college. Maybe if there was a college with no entrance exam. My school record was just too poor. I didn't have much knowledge of my school subjects and no grades for the college exams.

So I decided to do something about it. I decided to study. I decided to do nothing but study. The exams were in late January to early February. It was almost November, so I had just three months. I wanted to make my parents proud, so I decided to sit and just study for three months. I wanted them to think of me more than just the kid who fights. I wanted to be more than the kid who almost killed another kid.

I stopped teaching at the Boy Scout YMCA school. I just closed the school, told them, "Now I have to study." They all left the school, and I set to work. Some of my students were offended by this, and it became a touchy subject. It had to be done however.

For three months, I didn't sleep more than four hours in a night. Ten days into my studying, my nose started to bleed I was so focused. I memorized all the books from all my classes, from my freshman year to then.

I was good with languages. It was easy to memorize English and Korean. Also Korean literature and history was easy. Memorization made it easy, and I was very good at memorizing. Also, chemistry was easy to memorize. But there were some subjects that it was impossible to memorize: physics and mathematics. There, you had to apply the formulae.

Exam schedules were divided into three groups, so if you don't do well in the first school exams, you can still try again on the second and third exams. The first school exams were for specialty schools, and I picked a school of oriental medicine. The subjects for that test were chemistry, Korean literature, geography, and mathematics. I barely passed, but I made it. I had the option of going to the college of oriental medicine.

This intrigued me because of the guy I had knocked into a coma for three days. I had spent years learning how to hurt people. I felt I should learn how to heal people. The problem was that if I did that, I would stay in the Seoul area. This was a problem because of the gangs.

I had defended myself well against the school gangs, but the bigger gangs were interested in me too. Not to beat me up, but to recruit me. If you are good fighter, the gangs want you. You rise to the top and gain a huge base of followers. At that time, leadership was determined by fighting well and winning. If you win, the losers follow you. The gangs didn't use knives, Uzis, or machine guns. Gang fights at that time were a clean fight, because they were ways to recruit new members. And being in a strong gang had many benefits.

I do not deny that I was considering that. Some gangs did not do violent things. Some gangs just collected taxes and protection money. There was a clear difference between criminal acts and acts of violence. I could join them, or I would have to fight against them constantly. In order to fight against them, you had to organize your own group, or else your life was in jeopardy.

I realized that I could not stay in Seoul and avoid becoming a gang member. I would have to fight all the time or join them, and I did not want to do either. I had one more exam coming, for the University in Pusan, which was a harbor city in the south part of Korea. It was my last chance for school, and if I did not pass the exam, I decided I would leave home and live as a monk. I was leaning closer and closer to deep philosophy, especially after the coma of that bully. The mental side of fighting had come to dominate my life. The responsibility to being a martial artist had pushed me toward the study of Zen, Buddhism, and other oriental philosophies.

As the second and final exams approached, I was certain I would fail it. So I packed my room, ready to leave for some monastery somewhere in the mountains. Even my family and friends didn't believe I could pass the exam. The University of Pusan was in the southern part of Korea, where I grew up during my time as a refugee. It was a navy college, nationally funded, and when you graduated you became a reserve officer in the navy. From there, one became a manager of fisheries or of an ocean vessel. It was a big thing for our country to develop those skills. Korea is a peninsula, surrounded on all sides by ocean.

Because it was such a prestigious school, for every one spot, four people applied. Because it was a national college, tuition was cheap. The competition was severe. I applied for business administration only because they had no philosophy degree.

The first day of the exam arrived. The topic on the first day was English, and I was certain I would do well. I expected a 70% or 80%, an easy pass in that subject. But the topic was Lyndon Johnson's inauguration speech. I had not expected that! I knew nothing about it and I had studied something else.

I did miserably! I was certain I had gotten no more than 50% or 60%. To help my grade, I'd have to do well in mathematics on the second day. But I was sure it was going to be a 10% in math.

So I was certain I had failed. For the first time, I screamed at the universe. The disappointment was crushing, and the sky turned yellow at my sadness.

I went home and told my mother that I had failed. I was horrible at Mathematics. There was no chance for me on the second day. I decided not to even go the second day. It was a waste of time. But I had paid \$350 to take the test, so Mom said I had better go.

For the sake of doing it, for the sake of finishing what I had started, I went. I could leave for the monastery the next day. I was all packed and ready to go.

So I picked up the mathematics book. For four hours, I stared at certain pages at random and memorized them. Maybe ten pages I got through that night. Ten pages out of one thousand.

But the next day, one of the pages I had memorized was the exact problem on the test. It was a miracle. But I was still certain that I had failed horribly. My first day of testing had been too bad.

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About a week later, they announced in the newspaper who had been accepted. I had delayed my trip to the monastery, perhaps because I didn't really wish to go. That day, I was sleeping late. The family has eaten breakfast, and my father picked up the newspaper.

"Son, Joon Pyo! Your name is here!" he said.

"Dad, I'm tired, don't tease me!" I said. "My name cannot be there. I didn't do very well at all."

He pulled me into his room and made me look at the newspaper. I blinked at it. My name was there.

"No, it can't be the same person," I said. "Same name, maybe."

So I call the newspaper company. They verified that my testing number was correct. I had passed!

The whole house celebrated, because we had all been certain I had failed.

So my path was set. I might have been a thug and a gang member, but no. I might have been a monk, but no. I might have been drafted into the army as a private, but no. I might have taken part in the demonstrations and revolution that was happening in Seoul at the time, but no. In all those cases, I would have remained a martial artist, but a different kind of martial artist. Instead, I went to college in Pusan, where there was no Grand Master of Taekwondo, and I became a leader of my own school at the college. That is the kind of martial artist I became.

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