

Khoa Hoang's Black Belt Journey

Growing up in a small village in Hue, Vietnam, I yearned to study martial arts. Shaolin Kung Fu was immensely popular, and I wished I could be like my peers in their black uniforms riding bikes to practice. However, my father dismissed the idea, arguing that martial arts only led to fighting and potential injury. Financial and time constraints further hindered my aspirations.

Fast forward to my move to the United States. I had grown up believing the phrase “practicing martial arts” simply didn’t exist in my dictionary. It wasn’t until Master Hien visited our Nguyen Thieu Youth Buddhist group and expressed his plan to open a Taekwondo “Dojo” that my interest rekindled.

I eagerly followed along as Master Hien taught us the basics, from bending our knees to keeping our hands up and holding our fists tight. I absorbed every technique he showed. However, the practice was challenging for me. My body sometimes struggled to keep up with my mind’s demands, leaving me dizzy and out of breath, especially after I had missed a few classes.

Martial arts became an enriching experience. Master Hien took us to various tournaments, where I eagerly performed Katas in front of strangers and never hesitated to spar with others. At these events, I had the opportunity to see many other martial arts schools and styles.

As college became demanding, I had to take some time off. After graduation, I returned to the mats, unaware of how much time had passed. Most of my peers at the Buddhist Youth group had already achieved different levels of black belt, leaving me wondering when I would finally reach their level.

Rejoining the practice, I gradually regained my footing. I faced challenges with memorizing the forms, but I persevered. I was grateful for the low fees, and the journey continued until the pandemic brought everything to a halt. When I finally returned to class after the pandemic, I had to pay close attention and learn the techniques all over again. I hadn’t realized just how much I still had to learn.

There was a time when I thought I could pass the black belt test in just four months. However, the reality was that I wasn’t ready. I remained in the brown and high-brown belt ranks for a few years. During this time, I learned that martial arts isn’t just about kicking and punching; it’s also about listening, leading, and building character. I suspect that was something my father hadn’t considered; if he had, he might have let me practice when I was little.

After I passed my black belt test, it hit me that now is the ideal moment to dive back into learning. With the test's weight lifted, I can focus on perfecting my techniques without the usual ego or stress holding me back. I'm so thankful to have Master Hien as my guide. Our martial arts school is a non-profit, which makes learning and practicing Taekwondo even more rewarding. As they say, black belt is not the end, it is just the start of an exciting new adventure.