

# **Vision in Action**

An Interview with Kwan Jang Nim H. C. Hwang

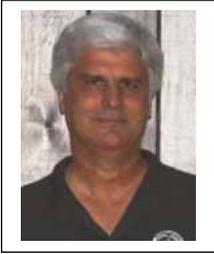
By Stanley W. Odle





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*Stanley Odle is a screenwriter, college writing instructor, and independent producer of Emmy nominated documentary television programming aired on The Discovery Channel, PBS, and National Soviet Television.*

My quiet hotel room was clean and organized. It was early morning and sunshine shown on the desk as I once again checked my tape recorder and made certain of extra tapes and batteries. My notes were there next to my two pens; there was nothing more to do. I sat down and in this calm moment thought of the day before and my first meeting with the small, smiling man in a gray suit.

The late March afternoon of yesterday found me waiting in the entryway of a stylish southern Washington inn. The Grand Master, the Kwan Jang Nim, of my international Korean martial arts organization was due any moment. I had arrived earlier and just received a cell phone call from one of my two master instructors. They were bringing Kwan Jang Nim H. C. Hwang the 150 miles from the Seattle airport to this first clinic in our region. “We’re about there; be ready.” I was ready, and waiting, and wondering why I, holder of a colored belt some 20 months from my Midnight Blue Belt test (the Moo Duk Kwan equivalent of the Black Belt), was here in such exalted company at all.

“Mr. Odle, you’re the writer, I would like you to do a story about the new Kwan Jang Nim during his Vision Tour stay in our region.” Soo Bahk Do/Moo Duk Kwan founder and Grand Master Hwang Kee had recently passed on, and his son had accepted the leadership role and was visiting every studio in the United States as part of his Vision Tour. My master was smiling, but her words were not a request. “Yes Ma’am, always my pleasure.”

The next weeks allowed for planning the intention and scope of the story, and included a protocol question or two. What was the purpose of the Tour, and what part might a story

play in support of this? I have worked in some difficult production situations before, and knew it was wise to have at least an idea of what you were after before an interview. So I thought, discussed issues with my seniors, and prepared for this day. While I awaited the Kwan Jang Nim, my own questions were waiting upstairs in a well-worn notebook.

Still I wondered, “what will he be like, is he the man of vision his father was, and if so, will I be a support to him at this important time in the history of the art?” And then he arrived and stepped from the car, just a man in a gray suit. Yet this was the man I bowed to each time I trained, and whose picture I had followed for years in the instructional books as I attempted (not always so successfully) new and demanding techniques. Wasn’t he more than a man? He returned my respectful bow, and smiled.

This warm memory was interrupted by a knock, and I stood to approach both the sound and a story that proved broader in scope and participation than I could have imagined. My work over the years has afforded me the opportunity to interview presidents and kings, but never a man like the one waiting on the other side of the door.

The Kwan Jang Nim entered my room and, after polite greetings, took a seat. The owner of my own school and Regional Examiner, Sa Bom Nim Curt McCauley, himself a master of the art, sat close by. Kwan Jang Nim softly, but immediately, continued with a matter that had been much on his mind last evening. “People are pursuing economic growth, we need a common goal, not personal agendas. I often hear how our students, when compared with those of other martial arts, have to work too long and too hard to promote.” Without glancing down I knew this was surely not the first item on my list. I asked him if we might begin by first discussing other issues. We would, I promised, return to this most serious of concerns.

“What is the purpose of the Vision Tour; why are you here?” With the tape recorder running I felt free to relax and listen, while taking an occasional note. Kwan Jang Nim wants all students of the art to see his vision for the future. He had decided to take this vision first to the masters, and now personally through this second Tour to every U.S.

Federation member nationwide. Until recently he had not been so concerned with the future, but with the passing of his father, founder and Kwan Jang Nim Hwang Kee, he has now been entrusted with this task. He feels a strong responsibility to maintain the art of Soo Bahk Do and to preserve the art's guiding Moo Duk Kwan philosophy (literally: Martial Virtue School). From my studies I recalled the words of the founder in describing the purpose of the Moo Duk Kwan he founded in 1945: "...a brotherhood and school of stopping inner and outer conflict and developing virtue through Soo Bahk Do training." Soo Bahk Do is the technique for developing this Moo Do philosophy. In my own training I have come to realize how seriously this ideal is incorporated into our studies.

"What is the vision?" Kwan Jang Nim wants "all members to focus and participate in the future of the Moo Duk Kwan; the future belongs to them." At this important time in the Moo Duk Kwan's 59-year history he desires to share responsibility with the members. This is the "strengthening the foundation" we have been hearing of in our training sessions. "I want to see in my time all the Moo Duk Kwan get together. I don't know if I will see this, but I will be happy if I can at least see a strong foundation and the next generation gets it all together...one Moo Duk Kwan someday."

I was curious as to the reception and understanding he had received so far. He smiled and said, "Not so much with the children, but the adults understand the importance of the goal I have set for them. I am motivated by this feeling."

Somewhere ahead we would face the issue of the future of the art, and in this would lie both hope, and danger. The path to this question had to first pass through the notion of "value." I asked, "What does the art provide?"

He paused, and slowly responded, "I know what it did for me, for who I am. I hope for this to benefit other individuals."

"What did it do for you?"

“The Moo Do way helped me to balance myself, to understand the invisible aspect of life and the balance of life.”

I asked a difficult question, but one I thought important, “Why should the members support you?”

“It is the art they need to know and support, not me.”

“Is there something larger here than the benefits to the individual?”

“I remember a day, a Sunday, in January of 1989. It was nice and sunny in the studio. The sun was shining on a table and some seniors came together and asked the Grand Master, ‘Sir, how would you like to see the future of this art to go?’ ...so the seniors could support this. He said, ‘Human relations, nationally; human relations internationally; Moo Do organization; active administration; members organization; financial stability.’ We made notes and called it Mission 2000. The Grand Master emphasized human relations in the first points, first locally, then nationally, then internationally, so we would have a ‘better place to live in this world.’ We begin with peace within, and this becomes contagious to others. We look for internal harmony and connection, we keep our discipline, and thought is carried forward. We feel good after we train and do not respond negatively. The art gives us this good feeling first as individuals, then as a world community.”

As the interview progressed I found my questions being guided less by my notebook and more by some unseen logic; we were going someplace I had not foreseen, and new questions were taking us there with a building momentum. We were approaching the future now.

“How do you see your Vision Tour goals being realized?”

“Through the Tours themselves; through meeting the members. The first Vision Tour was for the masters, with this one for the members. I am not stopping here. Other Tours will look to see what changes have worked and what needs to be changed. The Tour may take ten to twenty years and is one of the last things I can do in my career. Today is only the beginning.”

I asked, “What is the single most important measure of success of the Tours?”

“The Moo Do we believe in is about history, tradition, philosophy, discipline, respect, and technique, and is alive and growing. The measure of success?...growth, but never through sacrificing this discipline...the Moo Do way.” Here Kwan Jang Nim became as stern as I would see him. “With growth we have a greater Moo Do impact, but not if we grow only economically. With more Moo Do practitioners we can do greater good as was desired by the Grand Master.”

“Sir, what needs to be in place to support all this, and is everyone supportive?”

“Not all.”

“Does there need to be a national step-by-step plan with strong leadership for the vision to succeed?”

“Yes. In some places there is much activity, a desire in the members, and action has been initiated. As this builds, we will have first regional, then national, networks in order to provide a foundation for building stronger leadership and the communication to support the vision.”

We had been talking now for almost an hour. We had sipped water, and I had changed tapes. The sun was higher and the light more intense. There was no sense of time, or the need to move faster. But there was the sense of what I can only describe as “process.” Kwan Jang Nim was thinking all the time, and incorporating his thought into a plan he

had brought with him to the meeting. With this strong sensation of unseen movement throughout the room I asked, “What obstacles lie ahead?”

“No problems, just hard work. But there will be some difficulties, such as competing martial arts that offer faster paths to the black belt rank. Even some Soo Bahk Do instructors have a tendency to see success as a bigger studio instead of growth through a good Moo Do Base. This is a temptation, a compromise of Moo Do value.”

We had now returned to his first words, but with some new perception, I felt, present. I was especially attentive as I asked, “With our society stressing success as principally financial, how do we return to strengthening the Moo Do base as the measure of success for our studio owners?”

He offered the guiding Moo Do principles again, from history to technique, and said, “The Moo Do values are strong; if people are allowed to see these values, they will come to them. If we neglect any of these, we lose the Moo Do value, and we must not allow this! These are the invisible aspects; none are material things.”

I wondered about this, and how we might find a way to realize economic stability in an undiminished Moo Do environment. I replied to Kwan Jang Nim by offering, “Sir, I don’t think simply exposing people to the values will be enough,” and told him a story.

I was visiting my 27 year-old son in New Mexico and, as there were no Soo Bahk Do studios nearby, had the occasion to train at another local martial arts school. I have often done this while traveling, and find it a worthwhile experience. But this time I was struck by the advertising on the front window of this successful business: “We offer the fastest track to a black belt, guaranteed.” Here, in these few words, we had before us perhaps the most relevant issue concerning the future of the art. This was not an unfamiliar concern for Kwan Jang Nim.

Moo Do values are not to be sacrificed, yet we must compete to realize financial stability. Might we not rethink competition? Should we not advertise Soo Bahk Do/Moo Duk Kwan as promising the *longest* road to the black belt, guaranteed? Should we not boldly sell the Cadillac for what it is worth? Through offering realization of the Moo Do values by way of learning Soo Bahk Do technique, we bring people to what they truly need: not less and faster, but more and slower. We honor the values, and present them for what they are worth. Kwan Jang Nim calls this the value of the “brand” and speaks to the unique identity of our history and lineage that so strongly establishes our credibility. He says we can, and must, “create a visible, material, aspect to include the financial and membership concerns studio owners are facing, without losing the invisible aspect of the art: the Moo Do way.” We cannot simply present the values, we must create the opportunity for people to appreciate them, to make them their own.

“What tools do we use to reach the national public with this message?”

“At this time I have no clear answer. But in determining this, there is no rank. It doesn’t matter if it’s a Ko dan Ja master or a beginning white belt, it is member initiative I am seeking now. That is the message of the Vision Tour. It is not my *personal* goal, but our *common* goal. I want our identity to live for a thousand years, and our members are the hope.”

In response to this I had a personal question: “Kwan Jang Nim, did your father charge you with anything?”

“I am only one son in a large family, but it is now my responsibility to continue what he began, how much he did with his life, through his actions. He could have been more comfortable, but he chose the hard road. A student once asked why the Grand Master faced so many problems over the years, and one of our masters replied, ‘He is a very moral person living in an immoral society.’ His ways were not readily accepted by society. That’s what his life was, that is what is left for us, to live a moral life. It is my responsibility now to preserve this.” He was silent for a time, and then added, “But the

spirit can lag, so we are going to need a method for sustaining the vision, to place the vision into action.”

In working at my computer to finish this story by the deadline, I was interrupted by a suspicious telephone ring. I glared at the phone expecting little from anyone who would interrupt my efforts.

“Hello?”

And, of course, I heard an unfamiliar voice, surely a Tele-marketer’s, “Yes, Mr. Odley?” This earned my curt reply, “It’s Odle, yes.”

A pause, then, “This is H. C. Hwang...hello...hello, Mr. Od-ley?”

More than a month had passed, but Kwan Jang Nim simply continued, “It is no good to have spirit without a way to achieve it; courage without technique is not enough. I think we should create committees, first locally at each studio, then regionally and nationally. These will be President’s Vision Tour Committees, and their mission will be to keep the Vision alive. They will welcome members with initiative, regardless of rank.” As Soo Bahk Do is to the Moo Duk Kwan, so the committees shall be to the Vision.

Presenting the Moo Do way for what it is will be a more difficult road to growth than offering the fastest way to the black belt. But the committees are the answer, and they will discover and implement new ways to bring the Moo Do to the public...ways to *teach* the public the value of the brand. They will discover ways to make the Moo Do visible. In doing so we also realize greater spirit within the studios and move closer to our Mission 2000 goals.

Kwan Jang Nim could not see my approving nods. This made good sense, but why the phone call? He said, “We need studio committees within each region to begin the

process, to make their efforts available to other schools. We need to share plans, and help each other grow.”

Our school has such a committee, the “Channel Town Karate Club.” It is a member’s organization and promotes major yearly fundraisers and at least monthly social events. We are involved with our community and have more and larger projects planned. We have also initiated an introductory martial arts course at the local college, with enrollment growing each quarter. Many of the students from the college class have promoted into the art. Kwan Jang Nim wants this to be made available to other schools, and so the phone call: “Mr. Od-ley, you can help.”

In writing the conclusion to this story I am wondering at the true meaning of “Vision in Action.” Can one person make a difference? What can I, alone, do? In looking over these words I suddenly realize *this* is vision in action. This story itself is initiative, sharing, and planning for a greater future of the art. It is one person’s small part of what the new Grand Master has asked from us all: Action.

Before I turn out the lights, however, there is this postscript. I recall the final Vision Tour clinic here in Region 10, and the Regional Tournament that was held the following day. Kwan Jang Nim attended this and at the conclusion of events said goodbye to us all. That evening many of us gathered at the local Applebee’s for dinner and our usual, and sometimes infamous, socializing. There were perhaps 25 people from our school alone, and one of us discovered Kwan Jang Nim sitting off to the side with other instructors. He did not see us. I was watching him leave the crowded restaurant when he noticed our group across the room. He stopped, turned, and began to make his way slowly back against the flow of departing families. I nudged one of my fellow students and said, “Look at this.” My friend’s eyes went from almost closed to about as open as they could get. What he said, I shall leave for you to guess.

Kwan Jang Nim approached the startled table of scooting chairs and suddenly upright then bowing people (much to the wonder of the rest of the customers) and, smiling, shook

everyone's hand. He had said his farewells earlier; he did not have to come back. This act alone, oddly enough, endeared him to me more than any other. He did not have to come back, but he did, and in doing so touched many of us. As I watched him walk away my thoughts returned to a sunny hotel room and a final interview question: "Sir, when your time with this is through, what would you leave behind?"

"If I see the foundation we are looking for established, I will be more than happy."

He had laughed softly then, and smiled, much as he was smiling now, perhaps a few steps closer to his dream.

