

Fear and Loathing in the Dojang *Thoughts on the Maintenance Test*

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It's mid-winter, and the thoughts of Vaughn's Dans and Cho Dan Bos turn to visions of pain and suffering at the hands of the merciless testing panel in the twice a year rite of passage known as the "Maintenance Test." Sweaty palms and even sweatier bodies prepare both mind and spirit to demonstrate competence for their respective level of progress toward "Black Belt Excellence." Endurance is raised, forms finely honed, and Il Soo Sik practiced to perfection before the appointed night or morning. For some percentage of the attendees, there is a special drive emanating from the receipt of a letter indicating eligibility for the upcoming Dan cycle. It's a glorious time to be in the Dojang.

The February 2004 test, spread over the now customary 3-day period, proceeded well with some 45 of Vaughn's senior students traversing the ordeal (most on the final day). There were some truly inspiring moments, as there always are—moments of technical virtuosity, moments of sheer determination, and moments of unbridled spirit. Also some moments of panic or blank stares as one-steps were forgotten, a movement in a form omitted, or a board failed to break. There was just cause for moments of panic at the beginning of each test this time as the first Vaughn's Pop Quiz was distributed. Some members shone brightly on this new wrinkle, most didn't and now realize the value of constant study as well as constant training.

Sitting at the front on the Shim Sa, one can really sense the heart and soul of the studio, the thrill of victory (as the jump kicks end), and the agony of the defeat (knowing you missed a form)—as well as the agony of the feet (after the speed wheel break doesn't go...). But why do we do it? Why do we subject ourselves to this? The bespoke purpose of the maintenance test is to allow the studio leadership to assess the skills, competence, and development of the senior students. Moreover, it's a chance for the students themselves to self-assess their own skills, competence, and development. You know if you missed a move or didn't execute a technique well, even if the panel missed it. You come away from a test really knowing where you as the individual practitioner need to focus your additional training time. But there's another aspect too. It's the same drive that pushes people to climb mountains or explore caves; it's to see if you can do it—where your envelope is and how far past it you can push reaching for physical and mental betterment, the goal of Black Belt. For those of us in the martial arts, there is no other way to show to ourselves how far we've come, and how far we have to go.

For those participants eligible for Dan testing, there is a special poignancy and a special set of self-questions to be asked. The letter is not your assurance of progressing to the Dan test. The letter informs you that you have enough time since your last test to be considered for Dan testing. Lots of elements go into the decision to recommend for Dan testing by the committee and, ultimately, Master Vaughn: physical preparation and technique, attitude, contribution to the studio, and maturity for the rank are among the factors considered. Not all eligible candidates progress to the Dan test, in fact there are always a number that are offered the opportunity to further develop their readiness for new rank. The maintenance test would be meaningless if we didn't use it to discriminate readiness for testing. This is where the special set of self-questions comes in: Am I really ready for the Dan test? Have I focused enough on developing myself for this? Or have my stances gotten soft and my forms sloppy? What's my attitude toward Tang Soo Do? The studio? My instructors? Myself? What have I done to contribute? How will I redouble my efforts if I pass? If I don't?

Many martial arts texts speak of always being ready, and never being ready. That's the way testing used to be at this level—one day it was announced you were testing and you simply performed. Consistent and constant training of body, mind, and spirit keeps you always ready. Consistent and constant reassessment of your attitude and outlook reinforces the humility of never being ready. Don't neglect either aspect as you prepare for the maintenance test.