



A JOURNEY TOWARD EXCELLENCE:

A Master's Gift to His Students

By Dr./Master Mark Menees

I had the best seat in the house for second time in seven years. As emcee of Master Sang Ho Lee's 7th Dan testing on December 10th, 2006, I could see everything up close and clear. This was an open, public exam, and was so because Master Lee wanted his students to see that he was willing to undergo the same sets of challenges that they face. There would be no hiding behind closed doors on this night. The performance was in a word, stellar. It brought to mind the other time fortune had a perfect seat for me. It was in a dojang in Burlington, North Carolina on a hot August afternoon. I entered that building with feelings of conflict, and I left having encountered a Master who knew how to listen and lead.

I had trained in traditional Tae Kwon Do under one of Grandmaster Nam Sak Lee's senior students, Grandmaster Kim Pyung Soo, and under one of his students, Master David Mitchell. They had instilled in me a sense of discipline, respect for others, and deep loyalty to my teachers. The relationship with them permeated all the training I had received, and now I was a long way from their tutelage looking for a place to continue. How, I wondered, could I train with someone else without being disloyal? The feeling had been so strong I had not trained except on my own for several years, but I also knew I had to have guidance. I had visited other teachers who simply waved off my concerns as trivial. Some of them had broken off from their own Masters and behaved as if they owed nothing for all the gifts they had received. In some cases they even attempted to undercut their teachers not realizing the lessons they were passing on to their own students. Master Lee was completely different. He listened, clearly understood the value of those past relationships, offered to call them and talk about my training, and most importantly told me, "They will always be your first teachers, honor that. I will simply add to your journey, and I hope expand it"

I include this vignette because it symbolizes the deep value of the relationship between those who teach and those who entrust themselves to that teacher. It was this theme that was chosen for the night's testing. People from in and outside the state attended, including masters, instructors, and a multitude of people who had received invitations to be present for the challenge. The 700+ audience, that witnessed Master Lee's exam were awestruck by the physical performance, but the physical was the outward manifestation of an inner quality that was experienced by the crowd as well. In a sense it was like energy radiating out allowing others to see that life is comprised of physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions, and that each need to be balanced within us. And, as the evening progressed it became apparent how his students had received these very traits from him.

Those elements were made visible in a variety of ways. Several of Master Lee's family came to share in the evening, including his mother who lives by herself in Raleigh, NC.

The importance of family cannot be overstated for the Lee's. Master Jung Ho Lee, a younger brother who runs an Academy in Raleigh, with his own family watching, participated in a wonderful Kumdo demonstration, and gave support to his sibling. Several times a month Master Lee and his wife, Hyon Kyong, and son, William go to Raleigh to spend the weekend with his mother. The students in Burlington regularly witness the irreplaceable importance of families who care, and how the human spirit can be nourished in such a setting. Master Lee has been active in the community through the Junior Police Academy, the DARE Anti-Drug Program, the local Chamber of Commerce, and numerous charities. He is a member of the Screen Actor's Guild, and recently was involved in the filming of "Behind Enemy Lines 2", an action film about North Korea. As a martial artist he has competed many times, has been in multiple demonstrations, including with the Korean National Team, and is a Master Instructor. However, he would likely tell you that being a son, husband, brother, and father hold the highest value for him.

The energy and connections went beyond family to an extended set of relationships. Grandmaster Byong Yu, whose academy is inside the CBS Studios in Hollywood, and is a training place for stars like Jennifer Garner and Tom Hanks, came across country to be Chief Examiner. He spent time with students, parents, and instructors from a variety of schools, sharing his wisdom and experience. Along with Master Lee's brothers, Grandmaster Yu is one of his primary mentors. Master Tommy Chang from Toronto, Canada, whose relationship to Master Lee is like a brother, served as Assisting Examiner. Master Chang is well known for his stunt work and choreography for movies and TV. He brought his stunt team with him and they performed two sets during breaks in the exam. There were also three honorary examiners from the broader community. Sheriffs Terry Johnson and Mike Welch from Alamance and Caswell counties, along with Chief Mike Gauldin of the Burlington Police Department spent an evening participating in the event along with people from around the country. Their presence pointed to the impact Master Lee has had not only in Tae Kwon Do, but in charities, educational facilities, community events, and major civic projects.

The performance started out with forms. Very often this is the least "favorite" aspect of training for students, and less than entertaining for those watching. This night those concerns were not present. Master Lee's intensity along with his precision made them a thing of beauty. Perhaps of equal importance was the fact that every poomsae from novice belt up through expert was performed with the same liveliness. No student in the hall that evening could have missed the fact that their Master Teacher was going through the exact same challenges they faced. He did not jump over the tasks his students are required to perform, but rather gave everyone a model of what explosive energy matched by control can produce. I found myself out on the floor of the training hall an evening later doing forms with greater intensity than I had in months. One novice student noticed and asked if I was getting ready to test. I could not help but think that the conversation which followed about focus in training occurred because Master Lee had somehow passed on to us his own enthusiasm for the art.

What happened next brought the hall to silence, and had the spectators poised on the edge of their seats. No, it was not breaking techniques which are always a crowd pleaser, although this did come later. Rather it was self-defense techniques. In fact, they were the same ones we teach under black belt students. But tonight they looked very real and conducted with an intensity rarely seen. One of Master Lee's instructors, Misael Rebollar, was chosen as the "opponent". Rather than the usual demonstration being done from standing and static positions, these were performed with constant movement and attacks coming from every imaginable angle. Again and again precision, speed, and prowess brought the attacker to the mat, while joint locks and kicks disarmed any attempt to counter. At one point in this stage of testing, Grandmaster Yu stopped the performance to ask Mr. Rebollar if he was feeling any pain. Yes, he answered, but it is being controlled. The crowd responded with a knowing laugh that meant they understood how real this encounter had become. Then Grandmaster Yu questioned Master Lee in Korean about the importance of control in training. Master Lee's response was well thought out and direct. He spoke of the importance of self-control under the most stressful situations, which if accomplished meant the martial artist could do so under more "normal" conditions. The demonstration continued with the same intensity as before the question. And what did the teacher give to his pupils in this? Not only a model of how to do Hapkido well, but far more importantly the concept of finding the crucial balance between using all one's energy while remaining in control. It was a visual image of the blending of body, mind, and spirit.

Interspersed throughout the evening were demonstrations by a variety of student groups from different academies along with Master Tommy Chang's stunt team. Groups of three to five year olds showed their ability to follow instructions, carry out falls and rolls, and not be intimidated by standing in front of over 700 spectators. Adult students, including some in the fifties, did coordinated forms and more challenging self-defense moves. Two different demo teams from Lee Brother's Academies in Burlington and Mebane entertained everyone with choreographed moves, mirrored weapons performances, and some spectacular aerial stunts. Twice during the evening the stunt team from Toronto amazed the gathering with humor and martial skill, which included break dancing, simulated fights, and amazing airborne twists, flips, and landings. The energy of all these groups kept the crowd involved, between parts of the testing. It also showed Master Lee's willingness to "share the stage" with others, and it gave many of his students an opportunity to shine.

The program was divided into 2 "Acts", and the second one began with a dimly lit stage engulfed in fog. It was the very image of a dream-like landscape with a sole figure in the center meditating. This character, as acted by Master Lee, was soon surrounded by three phantoms each of whom appeared carrying weapons to stalk the lone warrior. The scene acted out for all to see was a representation of the psychological aspects of training. One represented fear, another, anger, and the last the temptation to use martial skills for self-centered and egotistical ends. Three of Master Lee's senior students, Master David Lanning, and Instructors Duncan Germain and Lucas Dunn performed admirably in attacking, countering, and mirroring these traits, which all artists must face. Accompanied by music and narrative, it was a remarkably effective visual presentation

about the struggle to be a just and peaceful warrior. No one watching could have failed to grasp the message, and the energy of the skit was not wasted.

The theme of weapons as both an extension of the martial artist's skills, and as a threat to be faced had already been introduced earlier in the evening. Master Lee demonstrated his abilities with double nunchakus, a six foot staff, and with a live sword used in a form. The speed and precision were clear and showed the power of concentration that is necessary to master these tools. Along with this there had been an episode of defense against an opponent using a knife. This scene left the impression not of a planned out session, but rather of spontaneous and unexpected attacks and counter measures. In essence the use of weaponry within the exam became the opportunity to show both the threat and the potential for learning that comes when one faces these instruments. Seen as a whole this theme provided a wonderful overview of a martial artist's training.

No examination at this level of expertise would complete without the inclusion of speed and power breaking. To prepare for this Master Lee included a time of meditation and focusing of Ki. To show how focus and concentration can impact performance a stack of 3 oversized, 2 inch thick, concrete pavers was placed on his chest as he spanned two chairs horizontally, and they were broken with a sledge hammer. Then in a standing position four students approached him with standard pieces of lumber used in construction. Each was broken as it struck his body at various sites. From my vantage point on the stage, I can say this was no illusion or visual trickery, but solid martial arts skill.

Master Lee followed this section with power breaking. The first break was done as he was suspended in full lateral split on two chairs. In front of him were two separate stacks of concrete pavers with three 1 5/8 inch thick slabs. His break was a simultaneous right and left hand break. This was followed by a forearm strike to a stack of 7 concrete pavers.

For most people an evening of this physical and mental challenge would be enough, but there was more to come. A speed breaking presentation occurred next. Master Lee decided to forgo the standard fare in breaking and moved immediately to a series of high speed spinning and aerial breaks. Spinning tornado kicks were followed by jump spinning hook kicks linked to 540 degree high tornado kicks. In the later kicks he landed on the same leg he used for the break without touching with his other foot. We witnessed triple breaks all done while in the air and many well over the heads of board holders. Perhaps the most stunning break of the evening happened last. With spectators buzzing and wondering why two large ladders were being brought out, Master Lee had two of his instructors position themselves on rungs and hold boards eleven feet above the stage level. From a brief running start he jumped onto a mat and performed a reverse somersault kicking and breaking both boards while his feet were toward the ceiling. In the process he completed the flip and landed safely on both feet. The audience went from stunned silence to overwhelming roar.

The completion of the exam was a demonstration of the Korean art of Kumdo, or the Sword. Partnering with Master Lee was his brother, Master Jung Ho Lee of Raleigh, North Carolina. Donning full protective gear including helmet, hogu, and gloves the two sparred at full speed using bamboo swords. The challenge for the crowd was to be able to count the number of strikes per pass as the sparring proceeded. In one encounter four cuts were executed in a single pass. While a relatively new experience for most of the spectators, this turned out to be a very pleasing demonstration for everyone present.

At the conclusion of the exam the stage was overrun by black belt students who trained or had trained with Master Lee. Grandmaster Yu took center stage and reported on his grading of the performance and included the comments from Master Chang. He also presented a beautiful plaque from the World Martial Arts Master Association inducting him into the Hall of Fame, along with a certificate of rank and a new belt. This was followed by a moving set of comments from the three honorary examiners reflecting on Master Lee's importance and contributions to the community. The two sheriffs then presented him with an honorary membership into the NC Sheriff's Association.

I began this article by saying I had the best seat in the house. And this is true, but not simply because I was standing on stage and could see each aspect of the evening "up close and personal". My seat was best because I witnessed the meaning of martial arts. I saw a master perform incredible physical feats, but far beyond those I saw the influence one person can have on the day to day lives of others. This man has been involved in many astounding demonstrations, including working with Korean National Teams while they traveled in the U.S. But he does not believe that good teaching comes from just having outstanding physical skills. "High Color" credentials do not always mean a person is a good teacher. Just because a person has a larger academy or fancy home is no guarantee excellence. Rather the inner qualities of humility, honor, respect for others and genuine caring are the real measure of a person. Community leaders, masters from across the country, former students who had moved away, and present students came to stand with someone who had given them more than they could say. We were rewarded with an evening of instruction. We were taught about honesty, the value of strenuous work, overcoming obstacles and the unexpected, and about how real excellence can only be achieved through perseverance and discipline. We watched a person with whom we have trained for years, put his body and soul where his teaching has been, and we came to realize what he has given to the thousands that have trained with and under his tutelage. The lesson is that it is not enough to simply exhibit amazing physical, verbal, or management skills in life. What matters is rather who and what kind of person you are. And, when the inner soul of a person is matched by the actions he takes with even the smallest or most insecure student, then he has moved from being just a very good martial artist to being a true Master. This was his gift to us on that night.