

Climbing that mountain towards 3rd Degree.

The story of this veteran's assault on the demanding 3rd degree grading.

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Essay for 2nd Degree grading (applying for 3rd degree).

The grading for third degree black belt is an order of magnitude more difficult than any previous Taekwon Do grading. The grading requires planning, preparation and perseverance. Whereas at second degree level, the practitioner is required to perform well on the ground (for self-defence), or dodging techniques for one step sparring, the practitioner at third degree level is expected to excel at flying techniques, with the one step sparring requiring demonstration of flying double, combination and consecutive kicks in the air. The patterns require execution of reverse turning kicks under control, (Eui-Am), flying dodging reverse turning kicks under control, (Juche), and a flying two direction kick, also under control, (Juche). The specialist destruction also requires a similar level of expertise in the air, with the minimum requirement being a flying double, combination or consecutive technique with the feet. The self-defence requires defence against a weapon attack, where the weapon is prescribed as being a staff or short staff. If anyone has watched Kali (or Philippine stick fighting), by skilled practitioners, one realises that the self-defence, where it is approached realistically, is also a formidable task. In short, in the same way that Juche is a mountain of a pattern, third degree is a mountain of a grading. This essay, is about how I planned to climb both of those mountains. Given that at age forty five, I am now classified as 'super veteran', I hope that this essay will be helpful for any other veteran that is contemplating this grading, or worse, contemplating putting the grading off because it appears too hard.

The minimum time period between second degree and third degree is two years, and it is at around two years out from the third degree grading when ideally you should start planning for the grading. I personally started planning during my Christmas break two years out from when I was expecting to sit the grading. At this time I had been a second degree black belt for around fifteen years, which is far too long to be a second degree black belt. I had stopped training not long after grading for second degree, and had just begun training again around six months prior to this Christmas break. So for me, the prospect of grading for third degree was doubly daunting, as it was a big struggle to regain the fitness and skill level that I had previously had as a second degree black belt. Also, at this stage I was now also fifteen years older, and no longer in my prime fitness years. At the two year mark, the key activities you should be working on are physical fitness, laying the foundation to perform the difficult techniques required for third degree, as well as ensuring that technically, you know, or can remember the patterns.

The third degree patterns require reverse turning kicks under control, flying reverse turning kicks under control, and in Juche the side kick, hooking kick consecutive kicks, also under control. These kicks require a high degree of active/passive strength at full stretch. The kicks also require a high degree of dynamic flexibility, combined with balance. The flying two direction kick also requires you to perform the splits (or close to the splits), while flying through the air. At the two year mark, during that Christmas holidays, I got out a book on stretching that I had bought many years prior by Thomas Kurz, called "Stretching Scientifically". After rereading that book I realised that the key to those types of kicks is building strength in your muscles at full stretch, so that you don't injure yourself performing the kicks, and can throw yourself into the kicks without worrying about injuring yourself. It is a fear of this type of injury which is the biggest obstacle to the veteran martial artist. So at the two year mark, the most significant feature of my physical conditioning was that I began performing static active flexibility exercises religiously. Also that Christmas I did not take a break from Taekwon Do, instead I trained through with the Dragon Spirit club at Papateotoe. This also meant that, that was the first Christmas in a long time, where I did not put on weight, but actually came out the other side of Christmas feeling much fitter than I did going into Christmas. The impact on my general fitness level was significant. The active/static stretching improved my flexibility, and

my general fitness level was significantly better. Psychologically this was a win, because it meant, that third degree and Juche were looking less daunting, as now my general fitness level and flexibility level was not hindering me from training. It was around this time I had a personal realisation 'moment'. There is absolutely no reason, why a person cannot continue to attain the best fitness of their lives in their forties and beyond. Personally at that point in my training two years out from my third degree grading, I realised that I was fitter than I had ever been in my thirties, and age alone was not an excuse, or mental crutch that should be used to prevent myself from even attempting to tackle a task as difficult as a third degree grading. At this point I should also point out, that for the grading from second degree to third degree, the veteran has an option; you can choose to take the mountain pass around the side, and bypass the mountain by performing Kodang, or you can dig in, and tackle the mountain head on by going over the top, performing Juche.

So a significant decision up front for the veteran considering a grading to third degree is to Juche or not Juche. I chose to do both, and here are the reasons why.

Firstly, if you look at the pattern meaning of Kodang, Kodang is the pseudonym of the patriot Cho Man Sik, who dedicated his life to the independence movement and education of his people. The 39 movements refer to his time of imprisonment and his birth place on the 39th degrees latitude.

That is the official pattern history of Kodang, however if you dig a little deeper, Wikipedia will tell you that Cho Man Sik was also a nationalist activist in Korea's independence movement, and was actually a contemporary of General Choi Hong Hi. (We do not know if the general knew Cho Man Sik, only that their life periods overlapped and both were patriots or activists against the occupation of Korea by Japan during world-war two.) Cho was also the man who the Japanese handed interim power of Korea over to at the end of world-war two, and was a significant figure in the subsequent interim post war government. Cho was very patriotic, fiercely a nationalist, and did not want to be a puppet to either the USSR or the USA. Subsequently he was arrested by the communists, and Kim Il Sung eventually became the despotic ruler of North Korea. Also, like Germany before her, Korea became a divided country after the war, divided along idealistic axis, with the Communist supported regime in the north, and the USA supported regime in the south. Cho Man Sik is assumed to have died in prison sometime around 1950 during the Korean war.

Kodang therefore is a significant pattern, and one that is quite important to me. Cho Man Sik is a man that history has almost forgotten, and similarly, Kodang is a pattern that is almost forgotten as well. I believe that Kodang the man, should not be forgotten, and similarly Kodang the pattern should not be forgotten. Unfortunately, Kodang the pattern, is not a difficult pattern to learn and execute. So in terms of 'climbing the mountain', demonstrating Kodang itself as a pattern is not as significant achievement as learning to perform Juche. For me performing Kodang, is more a spiritual exercise, as it allows me to reflect on Kodang the man, and how different Korea would have been, had he succeeded in his goals. I perform Kodang at every opportunity, and will teach it to whoever is willing to learn it. In this way I do my part in keeping Kodang alive.

Juche is defined as the following:

Juche is the philosophical idea that man is the master of everything and decides everything, in other words, the idea that man is the master of the world and his own destiny. It is said that this idea is rooted in Baekdu Mountain which symbolises the spirit of the Korean people. The diagram represents Baekdu Mountain.

The above sounds like an admirable ideal, and in fact when I first began learning Juche back in 1998, after having just attained the rank of 2nd degree, I thought the Juche ideal as stated, was an

enlightened philosophical idea, which I very much agreed with. However, if one searches for 'Juche idea' on Wikipedia, or generally search on the internet, one finds that Juche is an idea which was used by Kim Il Sung for a much more sinister purpose. The Juche idea was first mentioned in a speech by Kim Il Sung in 1955, entitled, "On eliminating dogmatism and formalism and establishing Juche in ideological work." It was given to promote a political purge similar to the earlier Yan'an Rectification movement in China. Juche is practically the ideology which underpins the North Korean regime, which begun with Kim Il Sung, and is currently perpetuated by Kim Jong Il. So in the same way that the Swastika has been tainted by the NAZI regime, Juche has come to represent the North Korean regime. Ideology aside, Juche though is a significant pattern. The pattern Juche was created in the 1980's, and as such reflects some of the more modern and difficult movements within Taekwon Do. Personally the start of Juche, with the slow side kick, hooking kick consecutive kicks, represents a challenging exercise, which is similar to the passive/active stretching exercises mentioned above, which were introduced to me by Thomas Kurz. Performing those kicks over and over again, has got to make you a better martial artist, just based on performing the active passive exercise over and over again. What doesn't kill us makes us stronger, so for me the decision is easy. Juche all the way, because of the personal satisfaction I will get from mastering it. Also as it turns out, performing Juche over and over again, actually makes it easier to perform the reverse turning kicks in Eui Am.

The decision thus made, then how does one prepare to perform Juche? As stated above, the slow side kick, hooking kick consecutive kicks require a high degree of active/passive flexibility and strength. Or stated more simply, you train to be good at performing sidekicks slowly, by performing sidekicks slowly. We prepare to be good at performing slow reverse hooking kicks slowly, by performing reverse hooking kicks slowly. Lots of them. The following you tube link is an excerpt from a training video by Bill Wallace, which I remember watching in the 1980's. (The actual recording in the link may be more recent than the 1980's however they are based on VHS video I hired from my local video store in the 1980's.)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zxokaEvKnD8>

The above link shows how to train passive/active flexibility by performing slow 'round house kicks' (American for turning kick), and hooking kicks. The same concept can be used to train sidekicks, and practically any Taekwon Do kick. The key concepts are the same though which are common to practicing all kicks.

- The knee should be raised prior to the kick, or the appropriate intermediate kicking position should be adopted. IE the leg should be moved to the correct loading position, in that position you should pause,
- The leg, or attacking tool should travel slowly along the correct path to the target. The emphasis here is SLOWLY, this is the active passive part of the exercise that is building muscle strength for each position of the movement,
- The correct attacking tool should focused upon at the target, (get out of the habit of using the wrong attacking tool),
- The leg should be moved back to its intermediate or loading position, (it should not flop to the floor),
- If performing a set, the leg should not be lowered in between kicks, however the next kick begins from the intermediate or load position.
- You can lower the foot to the floor between sets.

To have any chance at performing the side kick, hooking kick consecutive kicks in Juche, the above routines should be used with side kick and reverse hooking kick. This builds the muscle strength at full stretch, and also increases the balance while on one leg to the point where the practitioner is not stumbling in the middle of the kick. The kicks can then be performed confidently and the pattern looks significantly better. Only when you can perform the kicks without falling over, or stumbling, can you begin to focus on the other aspects such as sign wave at the end of the combination which turns a pattern that is barely OK, into a pattern that looks quite good.

The above exercises will also assist in producing a better Eui Am pattern, as reverse turning kicks are easily performed under control in a pattern after they have been performed many times slowly using the above slow passive/active method of training.

Another difficult kick to learn in Juche is the split kick, consisting of twisting kick on the left leg, and side kick on the right leg. This is a difficult kick to train, because when training with pads, you need two pad holders. At club normally we work in pairs, not in groups of three, so it is very rare that you will get the opportunity to practice a split kick. My solution to this issue is I purchased a second bag for my home training area. Properly positioned, two bags are ideal for training for the split kick. If you are also religiously practicing the active/passive stretching from Mr Kurz book, at this stage flexibility won't be a problem, so the key is practice. Position the two bags, and practice the split kick over and over again. The split kick should be a two foot take off, and a two foot landing. (Otherwise you risk breaking your leg on landing.)

The last difficult kick in Juche is the dodging reverse turning kick, this also needs to be practiced over and over again, until it is perfected. This kick requires a high degree of strength gained by active/passive stretching, because at the end of the kick you need stop with your leg extended, and land with your leg extended. This takes a high degree of control and active/passive strength in the muscle at full stretch. The key to developing this sort of ability is again, Mr Kurz and Mr Wallaces active passive routines. When you break this kick down, it is very similar to the reverse turning kicks in Eui Am, however you deliver them with a jumping and dodging motion. The control aspects are still the same, though, you rotate the top half of your body slightly before the bottom half. You need to stop the reverse turning kick on the target in the same manner as Eui Am. The difference is, in Juche, this is done in the air.

Patterns aside, the next challenge in climbing the mountain for third degree for the veteran is the one step sparring, consisting of multiple kicks (double, triple kicks), consecutive kicks and combination kicks, all in the air. At the time of writing this essay, three months out from the grading, these kicks are still a challenge personally. For the veteran, your best jumping days will most likely be in the past, and fear of injury from repeated jumping training is a significant concern. I addressed the issue of risk of injury from repeated jumping by purchasing a four by five metre set of tatami mats for my home training area. The extra padding absorbs the impact from repeated jumping kicks and makes the idea of training jumping kicks less stressful. I addressed the concern of having my best jumping days in my past, by incorporating an aggressive plyometric regime into my fitness regime. I also wear knee braces whenever I perform one step sparring or plyometrics. I also make sure that I regularly perform consecutive and multiple kicks on the ground as part of my regular training sessions. Did I also mention earlier in this essay that performing kicks slowly using active/passive routines are great for training difficult kicks? The same goes for multiple and consecutive kicks. There is no substitute for hard repetitive training, which includes performing the kicks slowly before you perform them quickly.

To practice plyometrics there are really two types of jumps. The first is a vertical jump which you perform by leaping with a two foot take off onto a box which is between knee height and hip height depending on where you are with your plyometric training. When you have jumped onto the box, you then jump off the box onto the ground, and sink right down into a squat position. The other type of plyometric jump is a horizontal jump where squat, then jump as far horizontally as you can.

My weekly fitness/plyometric regime which I perform every Sunday afternoon consists of the following:

- Perform all of my Black Belt patterns consisting of Kwang Gae, Po Eun, Ge Baek, Eui-Am, Choong Jang, Kodang and Juche. This consists of seven patterns or exercise sets.
- For each set.
 - o Perform the pattern at least twice, repeating its pattern meaning at the start and end of the pattern. (This is how you learn your pattern history.)
 - o drop to the floor and perform twenty press-ups, (as you get fitter you can increase this, adjust the number to represent your current fitness level),
 - o roll over and perform twenty sit ups,
 - o drag the plyometric box into the middle of the training area,
 - o perform 10 vertical plyometric jumps, and
 - o perform 10 horizontal plyometric jumps.

On the last set at the end of Juche, this is the end of the work out, so don't stop at twenty press-ups. Keep going until you can't do any more.

After this go for a run, and try to run hard. This is what it is going to be like at the end of the first days training when you perform your fitness test as part of the black belt test.

By the end of the above routine you would have performed at least 140 press ups, at least 140 sit ups, 70 vertical plyometric jumps and 70 horizontal plyometric jumps.

The warm up for the above is to perform all the coloured belt patterns up to and including Choong Moo.

With plyometrics incorporated into the fitness work out, the theory is that over time jumping becomes easier, and the multiple kicks are easier to perform. At the two month mark of performing plyometric routines, I am beginning to notice some improvements in my one step sparring, my advice for anyone else considering the grading from second degree to third degree, is to start the fitness and plyometric training earlier at the twelve month mark, or two year mark.

Surprisingly, I have noticed that plyometric training also trains the abdominal muscles quite well, which has led to less back issues during my training, which is the opposite to what I had expected when I planned my plyometric routine.

Another challenging aspect of the third degree grading is the pre-arranged sparring. This component must not be left too late. It takes at least six months to put together three routines and practice them sufficiently to the point of being able to confidently execute those routines. The key to this is finding a reliable partner with whom you can get a six month commitment from. Once you have found a pre-arranged partner you must also make sure that you are prepared for each pre-arranged training session with that partner. I have found that it is almost always a waste of time to attempt to start from a blank piece of paper in a pre-arranged training session with your partner. You need to write down some ideas beforehand, spending the time imagining your partner performing techniques in front of you responding to your attacks and defences. By all means you need to discuss

with your partner beforehand what techniques he/she feels comfortable performing in the pre-arranged routine. You need to work with your partner's strengths and weaknesses, and give them techniques to perform that they feel confident performing. I have also found that when I try to put together a sequence of techniques, in my mind I am continually asking myself, if I do this technique, realistically what is going to be the response? Is the technique likely to be effective if it is not blocked? I try to avoid contrived techniques which would not realistically be performed as they would not be effective. The wow factor comes from an audience observing awesome Taekwon Do techniques delivered effectively and powerfully.

The last aspect of the third degree grading which I want to discuss in this essay is the stick defence. Stick defence is not something that you can learn in a couple of weeks, and as such is also something that you should tackle earlier and not later. I personally decided that the best way to learn to defend against a stick is to learn to effectively fight with a stick, so I signed up to Master Pellow's Balintawak (Filipino stick fighting) lessons. See if you can persuade your stick defence partner to attend Balintawak sessions as well. This will teach them to wield a stick safely, in such a way that they will not accidentally cave in your temple when they accidentally swing too far with their stick during one of your practice sessions. The key to stick defence is also learning how to avoid the stick for basic attack vectors and leverage a number of opening insertion moves to get yourself inside the stick radius in a position to effectively apply the responses from the recently reworked ITKD self-defence syllabus. The main exception is that being attacked with a stick is deadly serious, so all the responses are B responses. In Balintawak there are 12 basic attacks or attack vectors. If you can learn to avoid or counter all of these you will effectively be able to defend against any stick like weapon including a knife or sword. There are also some fairly cool stick disarm moves that you learn along the way as well. Having a number of these up your sleeve for the stick defence component of the third degree grading will come in fairly handy. The key, is though, to learn to avoid, and defend against the stick, IE effective blocks that stop the arm wielding the stick, and learn to perform these without thinking. Then don't focus on the stick, but the person wielding the stick. According to Master Pellow, a common mistake is focusing too much on the stick, and so completely missing the hand that the stick is not in, when it smashes you in the face. (Then you get hit by the stick). Confidence comes with a large amount of practice (, a large amount is more than a couple of months). You eventually learn to relax when faced with a person with a stick, and you instinctively avoid the stick and attack/remove the person holding the stick using the reworked ITKD self-defence syllabus moves. You must be relaxed, otherwise you cannot move freely, and you get tunnel vision, focussing just on the stick. So my final note on stick defence, is that it is not about the stick. It is about dealing with the person holding the stick.

In summary, the common theme of this essay, and a crucial aspect of sitting for third degree is preparation. This aspect cannot be understated, and is absolutely the key to the third degree grading. This is even more so for the veteran practitioner. When you are a veteran, in addition to preparation you must analyse those aspects of your being a veteran that you are using as excuses to not prepare fully for third degree, and remove them.

- My veteran voice said I was too old and unfit. I got fit, and found that I wasn't too old.
- My veteran voice was concerned about not being able to jump, I forced myself to do plyometrics and found that although I can't jump like a young guy, I can jump fairly well for a veteran and that is not an excuse to not do a grading.
- My veteran voice was concerned about injury from jumping. I bought mats to train on and started training in knee supports to avoid injury.

- My veteran voice was concerned with defending against a stick. I started Balintawak with Master Pellow. My veteran voice quite enjoys this.

My veteran voice has given up complaining and is now enthusiastically looking forwards to our third degree grading in December.