

Two Cranes Aikido

The Black Belt Testing Process

The Aikido Rank Structure

The hierarchical structure of aikido follows substantially the ranking system adopted by all the other major Japanese martial arts. The students of the art are divided into two categories: one including students of kyu rank, and the other those of dan rank.

The category of dan rank embraces those students of aikido who have been awarded their black belts. Collectively they are known as yudansha (black belt holders). Dan tests are scheduled according to the candidate's readiness.

The requirements for preparing for a Dan test:

1. All dan candidates need six months of intensive preparation prior to testing. They should arrange a meeting with Sensei to begin the process. It's up to you to express your interest in testing to her. It's her decision as to when your practice demonstrates your readiness to prepare for the next rank.
2. Students wishing to engage in the exam process are encouraged to train at least 4 times a week in class minimum for at least four months prior to testing.
3. In addition to class, take time before or after classes to work directly on your test techniques with an uke equal to your rank or 1 or 2 ranks above. This will be the uke you will use in your test. Find a black belt instructor willing to help you with any questions you have along the way. They will also be a guide to help you achieve the standards necessary for a successful test process. This should be one black belt who can walk with the whole process with you and will be in attendance during your mock exam with Sensei.
4. Schedule a mock exam with Sensei a month before your test date. Be sure your uke and black belt mentor are able to attend this mock exam. At this point you should be very clear on the techniques and all requirements for your test. From this point forward your focus should be on fine-tuning your efforts.
5. In addition to regular training, Sensei or senior instructors will offer topic-specific training opportunities for the testing candidates.
6. Please fill out a test application and pay your testing fee: \$100 for Shodan, \$200 for Nidan and Sandan prior to testing.
7. Students are required to attend one week-end seminar between ranks and encouraged to attend one training camp. In lieu of a training camp two additional week-end seminars is acceptable. It is understood that this requirement may be waived due to special circumstances with Sensei's approval.
8. The candidates will be asked to write a piece that describes the significance that the preparation process has in their everyday training and personal life. This reflection may include what they have desired to know more about through the training process for the exam. The candidates may identify what their strengths and weaknesses are in training.

Shodan:

The rank of Shodan demonstrates a new beginning commitment in your training. First Degree Black Belt does not mean that the student has attained mastery or is in some sense an expert in the art. In the Japanese martial arts, the first black belt rank simply means that a student has trained hard enough to have a solid knowledge of the basics or "Kihon Waza" and is therefore now to be considered a serious beginner.

Student must meet all requirements of prior testing demands. They need to have 200 class days of training between ranks and over a minimum of one year after receiving 1st Kyu. They are responsible for demonstrating all basic techniques and previous requirements plus:

Tanto dori (knife takeaways): A different technique from each - shomenuchi, yokomenuchi, tsuki, slash and behind the back.

Tachi dori (sword takeaways): A total of five different techniques. Attacks will be shomenuchi, yokomenuchi, and tsuki.

Bo Ikkyo

Randori

Nidan:

The nidan examination tests not only the candidate's understanding of principles and techniques, but also considers her initiative, responsibility and personal expression in training. The demonstration should reflect the kind of leadership and role model position an aikidoist of this level is often asked to be responsible for. He/she needs a minimum of two years and 400 class days of consistent training after receiving shodan.

All basic techniques and previous requirements plus:

Kaeshiwaza (Counter techniques)

Kumi tachi (paired sword): First five basic kata.

Bo Ikkyo and Bo Nikkyo

Randori (multiple attackers): Three people attacking.

Sandan:

3 years and 400 class days of consistent training after receiving nidan and meeting all requirements for Candidate status as outlined above. Sandan hos are responsible for creating a personal demonstration that includes all elements of Aikido techniques. In addition they are responsible to demonstrate leadership in the dojo that includes instruction of students and being a steward to the dojo.

Shodan Exam Requirements

*Includes proficiency of all previous Kyu requirements. 200 days of training from Ikkyu.
Techniques should be demonstrated from ura and omote.*

Suwari Waza

Shomenuchi Ikkyo, Nikyo, Sankyo, Yonkyo
Yokomenuchi Ikkyo, Nikyo, Sankyo, Yonko
Katadori Ikkyo, Nikyo, Sankyo, Yonkyo
Ryotedori Kotegaeshi
Shomenuchi Iriminage
Yokomenuchi Kokyunage

Hamni Handachi:

Katatedori Shihonage
Ryotedori Kokyunage
Ryotedori Tenchinage
Shomenuchi Iriminage
Shomenuchi Kaitennage
Tsuki Iriminage
Tsuki Kaitennage
Ushiro waza – five techniques including attacks from Tekubidori,
Hijidori, Ryokatadori, and Kubishime.

Tachi Waza:

Ikkyo, Nikyo, Sankyo, Yonkyo from any attack
Shomenuchi: Kokyunage, Shihonage, Kaitennage
Tsuki: Iriminage, Kotegaeshi, Kaitennage
Yokomenuchi: Kotegaeshi, Shihonage, Jujinage
Katatedori: Kotegaeshi, Kokyunage, Kaitennage
Ryotedori: Shihonage, Tenchinage, Iriminage
Morotedori: Iriminage, Shihonage, Jujinage
Katatori Menuchi: Shihonage, Kokyunage, Iriminage

Variations: 5 Techniques from any of the following attacks
select 2: Tsuki, Morotedori, Ryotedori, Shomenuchi, Yokomenuchi,
Katatedori, Morotedori, Katatori, Katatori Menuchi, Ushiro
Ryotedori, Ushiro Hijidori, Ushiro Katatori, Kubishime

Koshinage: from all basic attacks

Tantodori:

Tsuki Kotegaeshi, Gokyo
Shomenuchi Iriminage, Kokyunage
Yokomenuchi Gokyo, Shihonage
Slash attack Sankyo, Iriminage, Kotegaeshi
Knife point to the throat or rear

Bo Ikkyo

Sword Takeaways:

2 techniques from any of the following attacks.
Shomenuchi, Yokomenuchi, Tsuki

Jiyuwaza with 3 ukes

Randori with 3 ukes

Nidan Exam Requirements

The nidan examination evaluates the candidate's Aikido technique and understanding of principles, and also the initiative, responsibility and personal expression he or she demonstrates in training. This reflects the kind of leadership and role model position an Aikidoist of this level takes responsibility for.

In a combination examination/demonstration format, the candidate is asked to organize his/her own demonstration of a wide variety of Aikido techniques. The test is in eight sections. In the first half of the presentation, he is asked to show specific techniques. In the second half he is asked to freely demonstrate the type of practice designated until the examiners indicate that they have seen enough. The examiners may request additional techniques at the end of each section. To keep the exam to a reasonable length of time (maximum 30 minutes) each of the eight sections will be no more than a few minutes long.

Like the shodan exam, in the nidan exam a person is responsible for all basic Aikido techniques and their spontaneous application, but with the greater depth, clarity, and confidence etc. that the additional years of practice have developed. In addition the nidan candidate demonstrates kaeshiwaza, tachi-dori and Bo Nikkyo.

In addition, the requirements include a record of one intensive camp camps and three week-end seminars since Shodan.

Finally, the candidate will be asked to write a piece (to be submitted two weeks prior to the exam) that describes the significance that the preparation process has in one's everyday training and personal life. This reflection piece may include what one has desired to know more about through the training process for the exam. The candidate may identify what his/her strengths and weaknesses are in training. In short, the candidate is asked to express what the rank means to him. The exam not only offers the participant in opportunity to stretch one's depth of self-awareness, but is also a most generous gift to the dojo.

Nidan Exams Sections:

- 1. Suwari-waza and hanmi-handachi**
- 2. Standing technique: basics and variations**
- 3. Kaeshi-waza**
- 4. Sword Kumatachi and Sword take-aways**
- 5. Bo Ikkyo, Bo Nikkyo**
- 6. Requests From examiners, to cover weak or missed areas**
- 7. Jiyu-waza**
- 8. Randori**

Nidan Exam Requirements

*Includes proficiency of all previous exam requirements
Techniques should be demonstrated from ura and omote*

- 1. Suwari Waza:** Shomen uchi - Ikkyo thru Yonko
Kata-dori - Ikkyo thru Yonkyo

- 2. Hamni Handachi:**
Katate-dori - Shihonage, Kokyunage, Iriminage
Ryote dori - Shihonage, Tenchinage, Kokyunage
Shomenuchi - Iriminage, Kotegaeshi, Kaitennage
Tsuki - Iriminage, Kotegaeshi, Kaitennage
5 techniques from Ushiro attacks include: Tekubidori, Hijidori,
Ryokatadori, Katatedori Kubi-Shime

- 3. Standing, Basics:**
Yokomenuchi - Ikkyo thru Yonkyo
Ushiro katadori- Nikkyo ura
Aidori - Sankyo omote
Morotedori - Yonkyo ura
Shomenuchi - Iriminage, Kotegaeshi, Jujinage
Tsuki - Iriminage, Kotegaeshi, Kaitennage
Yokomenuchi - Kotegaeshi, Kaitennage, Iriminage
Kata Menuchi - Kotegaeshi, Kokyunage, Kaitennage

Koshinage from all basic attacks

- 4. Standing, Variations:**
5 techniques from any of the following attacks:
Tsuki, Morotedori, Idori, Ryotedori, Shomen, Yokomen, Katatedori,
Katadori, Kata Menuchi, Ushiro Waza: Ryote, Hiji, Katadori,
Kubishime

- 5. Kaeshi waza** Demonstrate reversals from a variety of basic techniques

- 6. Bo** Ikkyo and Nikyo

- 7. Tanto dori** Knife taking techniques

- 8. Tachi dori** Kumitachis 1through 5, Sword takeaways

- 9. Jiyuwaza** 3 ukes

- 10. Randori** 3 ukes

Sayings of Morihei Ueshiba O Sensei

O Sensei insisted that Aikido is the study of the spirit. His life was a dedicated spiritual quest to understand the nature of reality, inspired by an intense longing for the divine. He pored over sacred texts, meditated on the mysteries of existence, prayed constantly to the gods, forged his body ceaselessly, and was ultimately transformed by the most profound visions. Aikido was revealed to O Sensei as an all-embracing path, an eclectic system containing elements of esoteric Shinto, tantric Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism and Christianity.

The Aikido I practice has room for each of the world's 8 million gods and I cooperate with each one of them. The Great Spirit of Aiki enjoins all that is divine and enlightened in every land. Unite yourself to the divine, and you will be able to perceive gods wherever you are.

Rise up early to greet the sun. Breathe in and let yourself soar to the ends of the universe; breathe out and bring the cosmos back inside. Next breathe up all the vibrancy of the earth. Finally, blend the Breath of earth with that of your own, becoming the breath of life itself. Your body and mind will be gladdened, depression and heartache will dissipate, and you will be filled with gratitude.”

All the principles of heaven and earth are living inside you. Life itself is truth, and this will never change. Everything in heaven and earth breathes. Breath is the thread that ties creation together.

There are no contests in the Art of Peace. A true warrior is invincible because he or she contests with nothing. Defeat means to defeat the mind of contention that we harbor within.

Your spirit is the true shield.

A good stance and posture reflect a proper state of mind.

All life is a manifestation of the spirit, the manifestation of love.

Always keep your mind as bright and clear as the vast sky, the great ocean, and the highest peak, empty of all thoughts. Always keep your body filled with light and heat. Fill yourself with the power of wisdom and enlightenment.

Create each day anew.

Do not look upon this world with fear and loathing. Bravely face whatever kami offers.

Economy is the basis of society. When the economy is stable, society develops. The ideal economy combines the spiritual and the material, and the best commodities to trade in are sincerity and love.

Everyone has a spirit that can be refined, a body that can be trained in some manner, a suitable path to follow. You are here to realize your inner divinity and manifest your innate enlightenment.

Failure is the key to success; each mistake teaches us something.

If your heart is large enough to envelop your adversaries, you can see right through them and avoid their attacks. And once you envelop them, you will be able to guide them along the path indicated to you by heaven and earth.

In extreme situations, the entire universe becomes our foe; at such critical times, unity of mind and technique is essential - do not let your heart waver!

It is necessary to develop a strategy that utilizes all the physical conditions and elements that are directly at hand. The best strategy relies upon an unlimited set of responses.

Opponents confront us continually, but actually there is no opponent there. Enter deeply into an attack and neutralize it as you draw that misdirected force into your own sphere.

Study how water flows in a valley stream, smoothly and freely between the rocks. Also learn from holy books and wise people. Everything even mountains, rivers, plants and trees should be your teacher.

The art of Peace I practice has room for each of the world's eight million gods, and I cooperate with them all. The God of Peace is very great and enjoins all that is divine and enlightened in every land.

The divine is not something high above us. It is in heaven, it is in earth, it is inside us.

Aikido Reading 2010

Encouraged Texts:

Heckler, Richard. *Aikido & The New Warrior*, Berkeley, North Atlantic Press, 1985.

Leonard, George. *The Way of Aikido, Life Lessons from an American Sensei*, New York, Dutton, 1999.

Stevens, John. *The Shambhala Guide to Aikido*, Boston, Shambhala Publications, 1996.

Ueshiba, Kisshomaru. *The Spirit of Aikido*, Tokyo and New York: Kodansha International, 1988.

Additional Recommended Reading:

Dobson, Terry. *It's A Lot Like Dancing.*, Berkeley, North Atlantic Books, 1985.

Fields, Rick. *The Awakened Warrior, Living with Courage, Compassion & Discipline*, New York, G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1994.

Gleason, William. *The Spiritual Foundations of Aikido*, Rochester, Vermont Destiny Books, 1995.

Heckler, Richard. *The Anatomy of Change*, Boulder, Shambhala Publications, Inc., 1993.

Mindell, Arnold. *The Leader as Martial Artist*, San Francisco, Harper Collins Publishers, 1993.

Palmer, Wendy. *The Intuitive Body :Aikido as Clairsentient Practice*, Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1987.

Palmer, Wendy. *The Practice of Freedom: Aikido Principles as a Spiritual Guide*, Berkeley, Rodmell Press, 2002.

Perry, Susan, *Remembering O Sensei*, Boston, Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2002.

Saotome, Mitsugi. *Aikido & the Harmony of Nature*, Boston, Shambhala Publications, 1993.

Steinman, Louise. *The Knowing Body*, Boston, Shambhala Publications, 1986.

Stevens, John. *The Philosophy of Aikido*, Tokyo: Kodansha International, 2001.

Ueshiba, Morihei. *Budo, Teachings of the Founder of Aikido*, Tokyo, Kodansha International, 1996.

Westbrook, A. & O. Ratti. *Aikido and the Dynamic Sphere*, Rutland: 1979.

The Spirit of Aikido

Kisshomaru Ueshiba, Kodansha International, Tokyo, 1984.

Chapter I: The Ki of the Universe and Individual Ki

The Uniqueness of Aikido

Aikido is essentially a modern manifestation of the Japanese martial arts (budo). It is orthodox in that it inherits the spiritual and martial tradition of ancient Japan, first recorded in the eighth century literary and historical works *Kojiki* (Record of Ancient Matters) and *Nihongi* (Chronicle of Japan). This does not mean that aikido blindly carries on the tradition of the ancient fighting arts, merely preserving and maintaining its original form in the modern world.

The ancient fighting arts are a historical and cultural legacy, originating on the battlefield in periods of civil strife and later formalized as budo, the Way of martial arts, in the Tokugawa period (1603-1868). They need to be properly assessed and appreciated. In their original form they are unacceptable to people today and are out of place in the modern world, which in the case of Japan begins with the Meiji Restoration (1868).

The Founder of aikido, Master Ueshiba Morihei, was born on December 14, 1883. Living in the turbulent time of Japan's modernization, he dedicated himself to establishing a martial art that would meet the needs of contemporary people but would not be an anachronism. The following factors were at the core of Master Ueshiba's primary concerns: an abiding love for traditional martial arts, the care that it not be misunderstood and a deep wish to revive the spiritual quality of budo. He sought to achieve his goal through a relentless quest, given substance by constant training in the martial arts, for the truth of budo throughout the vicissitudes of modern Japanese history.

Ultimately, Master Ueshiba concluded that the true spirit of budo is not to be found in a competitive and combative atmosphere where brute strength dominates and victory at any cost is the paramount objective. He concluded that it is to be realized in the quest for perfection as a human being, both in mind and body, through cumulative training and practice with kindred spirits in the martial arts. For him only such a true manifestation of budo can have a *raison d'être* in the modern world, and when that quality exists, it lies beyond any particular culture or age. His goal, deeply religious in nature, is summarized in a single statement: the unification of the fundamental creative principle, ki, permeating the universe, and the individual ki, inseparable from breath-power, of each person. Through constant training of mind and body, the individual ki harmonizes with the universal ki, and this unity appears in the dynamic flowing movement of ki-power which is free and fluid, indestructible and invincible. This is the essence of Japanese martial arts as embodied in aikido.

Through the genius of master Ueshiba the first principle of budo, as formulated by him-the constant training of mind and body as a basic discipline for human beings walking the spiritual path-was transformed into a contemporary martial art, aikido. Today, it is found in all levels and classes of society and is embraced by countless people all over the world as the martial discipline most suited to our age.

That aikido is a modern budo does not simply mean that a traditional martial art has taken on contemporary features found in other modernized forms of budo such as judo, karate and kendo. While inheriting the spiritual aspects of martial arts and emphasizing the training of mind and body, the others have emphasized competition and tournaments, stressing their athletic nature, placing priority on winning and thus securing a place in the world of sports.

In contrast, aikido refuses to become a competitive sport and rejects all forms of contest or tournaments, including weight divisions, ranking based on the number of wins and the crowning of champions. Such things are seen as fueling only egotism, self-concern and disregard for others. A great temptation lures people into combative sports-everyone wants to be a winner- but there is nothing more detrimental to budo, whose ultimate aim is to become free of self, attain no-self, and thus realize what is truly human.

This is not intended as a criticism of other martial arts for becoming modern sports. Historically, this direction was inevitable for their survival, especially in Japan immediately after World War II, when all martial arts were banned by the Allied Occupation authorities. Even as sports, they have attracted the interest of many people, whether as participants or spectators. This is positive, for there is no denying that the young, especially, are attracted to martial arts because of the contests and tournaments that decide the best in the field. Despite this trend, aikido refused to join their ranks and remains true to the original intention of budo: the training and cultivation of the spirit.

Within the world of aikido voices calling for tournaments have occasionally been heard, the argument being that it is necessary to gather a wider audience for survival in the present age. In fact, some aikido practitioners have started independent schools advocating “competitive aikido. This is a serious matter, since the transformation of aikido into another form of modern sport could lead to its inclusion in the national sports meets and in the future, perhaps the Olympic Games.

Aikido draws a clear and sharp demarcation line from such thinking and the reason is very clear. Aikido seeks to maintain the integrity of budo and to transmit the spirit of traditional martial arts, remaining true to the first principle of budo, as enunciated by Master Ueshiba: the constant training of mind and body as the basic discipline for human beings walking the spiritual path.

In the tradition of budo strict adherence to the Founder's ideals and commitment to the Way take precedence over all other considerations. The very reason for aikido's existence in the present world is because of its identification with the ideals of Master Ueshiba, even though the public may regard it as merely another form of combative martial art.

The unique place claimed by aikido, clearly differentiating it from both classical budo and its modern counterparts cannot be truly appreciated by the stereotypes that people have of the fighting arts. This fact, together with the principles and movements unique to aikido, may present some obstacles to the popularization of this art.

At one time or another all practitioners have been asked the question "What is aikido? Even advanced students have difficulty in providing a straightforward answer. Moreover, people who see aikido movements and technique for the first time are confounded or skeptical and have many doubts and questions. Such people can fall either one of two groups.

The first group consists of those who watch aikido with certain assumptions about martial arts, based upon what they have heard or read. On seeing aikido demonstrations their general reaction is one of disappointment, because they expect to see a display of brute force, combat, violence-and even lethal techniques. At first glance aikido, with its beautiful flowing movements, appears to be non-violent, even passive. Frequently over hear are such comments as: "Everything seems to be choreographed and planned." "There's no climax, no high point in the movements." "It a critical situation it would be useless," and so on. These criticisms are understandable and come especially from the young who seek thrill in victory and conquest or from those who have stereotypes of martial arts as consisting of shouting, hissing, kicking and destroying people.

In the second group are those who have become acquainted with modernized martial arts especially their competitive forms, and view aikido from that vantage point. Their criticisms are various: "Why doesn't aikido hold champion tournaments?" "Why is it limited to public demonstrations which become boring once you've seen one?" "Since there are no tournaments, it's impossible to tell who is strong and who is weak, who are beginners and who are advanced students." "Without tournaments, no one practices and trains seriously." Again, the criticism is understandable, since people generally want to see who has the best technique and who it the strongest.

Another naïve but commonly asked question is, "Can one win a fight if he knows aikido?" All of these questions and criticisms are simplistic and superficial, revealing ignorance of the basic principle of aikido and misunderstanding of the chief characteristic of martial arts: the training of the spirit. If a person who has no self-discipline wants to show off his physical prowess and seeks to learn aikido

simply for its fighting technique, he will be asked to leave. Without actually practicing aikido with some patience and experiencing this art firsthand, the question will never be answered to full satisfaction.

Actual training in aikido is the only way to grasp its significance and to gain some benefit through such a process—beginning with doubts and questions, being initiated into practice, then gradually becoming acquainted with the method and form of aikido. Later, they experience its irresistible attraction and finally some measure of realization of its bottomless depth. A person who has gone through this cycle will have learned several things about aikido that make it a unique martial art. First, he will be surprised. Unlike the “soft” appearance seen in public demonstrations, it can actually be “hard”, vigorous and dynamic, with powerful wrist locks and direct strikes (atemi). Contrary to what one might assume, aikido contains several devastating techniques, especially those meant to disarm and subdue the enemy.

Next, he will be shocked to discover even at the beginner’s level, how complicated and difficult it is to execute the basic techniques’ and movements, such as taking a fall (ukemi), proper distancing (ma-ai), entering (entering) and other body movements (tai-sabaki). The fact is that the whole body, not just the arms or legs, must move continuously in a coordinated manner and this must be done with speed, vigor and power. In order to perform smoothly and swiftly, an extraordinary degree of mental concentration and agility, balance and reflex action are necessary.

He will also realize the importance of breath control, which includes normal breathing but something much more that connects with ki-energy. This mastery of breath posers is basic to every move and execution and insures the continuity of flow in the movements. Furthermore, it is intimately connected with the philosophy of budo developed by Master Ueshiba.

Finally as the student advances he will be amazed at the endless number of techniques with their variations and applications, all characterized by rationality and economy. It is only after experiencing the complexity of aikido movements that he will appreciate the centrality of ki, both personal and universal. And then he will begin to sense the depth

In brief only through actual training in aikido does one become fully aware of the crucial dimension of budo—constant training of mind and body as the basic discipline for human begins walking the spiritual path. Only then can one fully appreciate the rejection of contests and tournaments in aikido and the reason for public demonstrations being a display of constant training, not of ego accomplishment.

On Belts and Ranking

-Peter Goldsbury Sensei

"I think you can take the question of belts and ranking in two ways: and this is how it was explained to me by two very senior shihans (i.e., both 9th dan at the time they gave the explanation) in the Aikikai.

One way is in a 'horizontal' way, where the dan rank is the result of a test taken before a jury and where the rank is a condition for doing other things, like instructing. This is the situation in France, where there is a 'college de grades', with the grades being given by the French government. One might argue that this way of testing, before a rather impersonal jury, is a more objective way of testing whatever skill or awareness is being tested.

The other way is a 'vertical' way, where the rank, with or without a test, is an indication of the teacher's judgment about a student. In this case, the grade or test (i.e., the indication of skill or awareness) has no value outside the personal relationship between teacher and student, except where the teacher has a certain reputation which will perhaps rub off on to the students. Thus, if my teacher gave me a certain rank, or told me to take a test, to refuse could be taken as something more than an expression of one's own humility.

This 'vertical' way was Morihei Ueshiba's way of regarding dan ranks and it accords more closely with Japanese ideas about education and social structure. He accepted Kano's ideas about the appropriateness of dan to his 'new' budo, as against the rather chaotic situation previously, but still thought of dan ranks in terms of the older levels. Thus he gave K Tomiki 8th dan because this was the equivalent of 'menkyo kaiden'. He also gave out even higher ranks to other students (rather like confetti, as one insider noted), but this was rather more in appreciation of a close relationship than as an indication of proficiency attained.

Of course, one's readiness to take tests and wear white/black/coloured belts depends on one's readiness to accept a teacher-student relationship or membership of an organization. Some people find this quite difficult. On the other hand, I have sometimes noticed that people refuse ranks, testing and grades for reasons other than humility--it sometimes masks a refusal to face up to other, deeper, fears: if you have never tested for a black belt, it is perhaps easier to call such tests a waste of time.

Peter A Goldsbury Ph.D, Professor,
Graduate School of Social Sciences, Hiroshima University

What is Black Belt Anyway?

-Kimberly Richardson Sensei

O'Sensei said over and over again, "build a peaceful and beautiful world inside ourselves."

Shodan is often referred to as a beginning rank in the Japanese martial art of Aikido. After five or six years of intensive training as an undergraduate 'kyu' student, you might be encouraged by your teacher to prepare for black belt. What this really means is that once you pass your test and receive your rank, you get to start over with a true sense of beginner's mind. The day I was asked to get ready for my black belt I remember thinking: "all that effort just to go back to square one?"

The shodan process did not begin very smoothly for me. I remember that frigid Saturday morning in the dead of winter of 1982 riding my bike to class. An unusual tranquility permeated the air and the streets felt strangely deserted. Maybe it was more about how I felt inside my skin as I pedaled up the steep icy hill. I locked up my bike and entered the dojo only to discover that the heater was broken and the mat felt like an ice rink. I never warmed up that day, but I did receive an invitation from my teacher to prepare for my black belt test. I should have been gleeful, but in truth I remember feeling a little numb. That is until I got the next piece of news explaining that she had decided to take a sabbatical for a year, leaving the dojo to pursue other passions. I tried to not make too much of the news, but I wondered what studying for black belt would look like without a teacher.

My preparation began in my mind's eye as I endlessly examined my strengths and my weaknesses on the mat. Over time senior students stepped in and shared their knowledge in their own astute ways. One of them offered a diamond of an insight that I use to this day: "When facing a sword coming at you at light speed, breathe it into your soul. That's how you control the blade." It didn't fix the abandonment feeling I felt facing black belt without a teacher, but it did help me learn to wield a sword effectively. In the long run, my teacher's leaving could be interpreted as: "you can do this, have a little faith." While I wasn't thrilled with the prospect of going at it alone, ultimately it laid the groundwork for my appreciation of independence and self-reliance.

One month before my exam I broke my big toe. To make matters the other black belt candidate was an athletic superstar. No matter what I did, I couldn't escape the daily comparisons of our talent: he having it, me wanting it. Mary returned home about a month before our tests and on that long anticipated day friends and family gathered. The defining moment of my exam came when a guest instructor, Bernie Lau Sensei, was asked if he would like to see me demonstrate something. (That's how a test operated in the 1980s, invite a stranger and ask him what he wants to see.) Quiet for a

moment, he cracked a twisted smile and pulled an eight inch live blade out from under his hakama. "Lets have uke attack her with this," he requested.

My uke came forward to receive the knife. I knew that Lau Sensei was unaware of the warped history my uke and I had shared. He couldn't have discerned that Joe was a former boyfriend who was furious that I'd called it quits just months before. I had exactly one second to embrace my fear and deposit it somewhere else. I had one second to assess that I could get hurt here. Worse, I could hurt him. I had one second to get control of that explosive violent feeling flooding my veins, extend my ki through the four walls and take that tanto away...again and again. In the three minutes that followed I am proud to say no blood flowed.

Up to that point in my training history I was addicted to rolling and falling, but I wasn't very clear about why. My shodan test gave me the gift of courage, but it didn't resolve the issue of what to do with my life. The jobs I had taken in the first four years of my practice: advertizing manager for a local news rag, barista girl and counselor for troubled kids were shaped around my training schedule. I knew I was pushing my luck at being an effective real estate agent when I would tell prospective homebuyers that I couldn't show them a house until after class. But sweating my tail off nightly on the mat, I could ignore some of the ways my life wasn't working efficiently, like how and when was I going to select a meaningful career path and what to do with a my constant low-grade anxiety?

About that time a firecracker of a women-bright energy and bright eyed moved to Seattle and joined our dojo. Like me she trained most everyday and we began to train after class, investigating our movement methods and our philosophies of practice. It was her words that helped to jump me to the next level. "Aikido study goes as deep as we want to take it, don't you think?" she offered. She felt that some students enjoyed the training for technical efficiency and aerobic satisfaction and oh, add martial valor. "Seems like for us, it's a path of personal growth." She pointed out that every time we stepped on the mat, no matter what, we are looking at ourselves from the inside out. The question is always there: When are we violent and when are we compassionate? As the conversation deepened over the next few months we saw how we could use our training to look at our depression and our anxiety. She reminded me that one of black belt training friends wrote a piece: *I am Not Suicidal When I sit in Seiza*.

A year later at my nidan exam there were no live blades present, but something quite profound did show up. No one said 'now's the time to immerse yourself in your stuff', but in that six-month period of intensive preparation, the senior students reversed my techniques repeatedly. Nothing worked on or off the mat. I tried to drive my training partners through the floor with my elbows and hips and out of nowhere, memories of the abandoning parent or a taunting fair-weather friend filled my head. When

I tried to blame a partner for not understanding my intentions, I was overwhelmed with anger then shame. Sometimes I found solace in naming the discordant feelings: “Those clanging bells! What a tale their terror tells” says Edgar Allan Poe. Ultimately I discovered that facing all the unfinished business looming like a floating ghost forced me to just stop, look and surrender. My willingness to acknowledge the truth of things turned out to be the only way I could tolerate living in my skin. Through practice maybe I could learn to appreciate how I let myself be in the world. The shodan test celebrated my courage to stand in the face of a live blade. The nidan exam(and every rank beyond) has invited me to study my authentic self –experience how the repetitive daily practice coaxes the inner work to happen on it’s own.

I have this golden-eyed, black panther cat Zoe. His name means ‘spiritual integrity’ in Greek; I named him hoping to set a template on him. He came to me uncomfortable with everything. With a defining elegance, he struts his ebony coat around the living room as though traveling down the finest catwalk. But everything freaks him out. And forget about picking him up. The vet said, “Some cats are just like that.” But I just keep trying to enfold him in my arms. Most of the time he’s not very enthusiastic about this. Regardless, I’ve tried to be with how he is and not try and morph him into a lovey-dovey creature. It’s been almost two years. Just this past month he found his way onto my bed late at night and nuzzled his nose on my cheek. That lasted for about five seconds before he turned his back, galloped across the room and curled up behind the couch. So yes, he’s a changed cat that gets to hang out in a safe place surrounded by loving people. But he’s still scared of his shadow. I still pick him up.

We never know what’s going to happen on the mat and in our lives, but we do sense that when we move to the right spot or simply find the ‘zone’ state of mind, miraculous moments arise. Some days when we bow to the aikido calligraphy and sit in seiza, we sense that radiant connection to everything in the room and intuit the perfect throw in our mind’s eye even before we begin to train. Of course there are days when it all goes to hell: our Aikido sucks and we can’t get ourselves out of a paper bag. But we learn to work with the miserable failure of it and we know how to get up, dust ourselves off and extend our hearts one more time. The Dan process invites us to see ourselves for who we are.