

# Aikidosphere

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## **The Issue of Competition in Aikido**

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Editor's Note: This article by Yamada Sensei has been reprinted with the permission of Budo International, a major martial arts magazine publisher in Europe, for which he is a regular contributor.

I understand that among the younger generation, there is a lot of interest in creating competition in Aikido. With this in mind, I would like to take the time to discuss this issue further.

I know that there is a country using a system of what you might call competition and I happened to witness it. I don't know whether I was lucky or not, but at least, I could form an opinion based on what I had seen. You may call it a competition but it was more like a contest. You don't compete against your opponent but rather against other couples. For example, it is very similar to watching a pair's figure skating competition. It didn't seem all that different from it. You will be the winner if you have good choreography and acrobatics and if your partner is cooperative and flexible, you're the winner.

There will be no physical suffering as the loser and there is no effectiveness of technique nor velocity or power. I don't even understand how the panel of judges, if there is such a thing, can determine the "winner."

I myself love sports, especially competitive sports; however, it is absolutely impossible to have competition in the world of Budo. Needless to say, of course there is competition in Judo or Karate and I personally like both of them. But, once they have a regulation in order to make it a sport competition, they are no longer in the spirit or category of Budo. You can call it "Judosport" or "Karatesport."

Even though you make certain rules and regulations of what you can or cannot do, sometimes it's not too clear who the winner is. This we already witnessed in the recent Olympic games, especially in the Judo tournament.

I don't have to go into great detail as to why it is impossible to have competition in Budo. After all, the definition of Budo is "a matter of life or death". In order to be a winner, you might end up in jail. Again, I'm not in a position to judge whether there should be competition in Judo or Karate. However, I can say that in Aikido, it's absolutely not appropriate to employ competition, and for that I'm very proud to be an Aikido practitioner, because there should be something that has no competitive aspect in this modern world.

Nowadays, in our society, we are surrounded by competition and power struggles. We are bogged down by competition in so many ways, both subtle and obvious, whether in our professional lives, our



family dynamics, or among our friends. It's our exercise not to be competitive, to not compare ourselves to others.

Unfortunately, even in Aikido, there is certain competitiveness among Aikidoists. It's in the Dan grading or ranking system as a whole. If I weren't part of the Aikikai organization or if I were the great master, who would be in a position to create a new Dan system, this is what I'd do:

First of all, I would completely eliminate the black belt degrees; Once you reach black belt, not by examination but, by recommendation by the master, there would be no such thing as 1st, 2nd or 3rd degree black belt, etc. Once you reach black belt, after that it's obvious to everybody how well he or she is improving. Instead of giving them higher rank, we see them develop without their degree number going up.

Not only would this be freeing for the practitioner, it would eliminate the feeling of competing with others. The bottom line is that within each rank you might have a talented student and a less talented student. Already, there is a discrepancy. It makes the rank seem like an illusion.

Additionally, part of the system I would create would be to have the master give the students, when appropriate, the status of Fukushima (assistant instructor), then Shido (instructor or sensei), and Shihan (master).

As I understand, the Aikido founder, O-Sensei, didn't even care about rank numbers. Nevertheless, they needed a system for commercial reasons, to promote and spread the art of Aikido, as well as create a business to earn money. In my opinion, it doesn't make sense for students to pay more money each time they get promoted and pay even more money as they advance in rank. After graduating college, you don't pay tuition or money for the diploma or paper. You get the piece of paper or diploma based on what you learned and tuition that you already spent. That should be enough, in my opinion.

Unfortunately, I am not too optimistic about the future of the Aikido movement. You never know, people might create several different systems so that they can create a system of competition. I just hope if you really love Aikido, just stick with it and follow an appropriate or good instructor with good principles. If not, it's the end of the spirit of Budo that the founder of Aikido had in mind.