

Aikidosphere

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Promotions: Whose Business are They?

By Yoshimitsu Yamada, 8th dan

Editor's note: This article was originally published several years ago in Aikido USA, a previous publication of the United States Aikido Federation. However, we think the issues Yamada Sensei discusses are as relevant today as they were then.



I remember that a few years ago I discussed my views and feelings about dan test promotions, and promotion recommendations in what was then The Federation News.

I think that in the face of recent incidents that I've experienced, this subject needs to be clarified, especially in the area of dan recommendations.

First of all, when it comes to dan testing, I understand that there will always be people who disagree with my judgement. Everyone is entitled to his own opinion about the person being tested. But keep in mind that these opinions are highly subjective and don't take into consideration the factors that I, as a teacher and impartial observer, look for when evaluating a student.

Of course, my judgement is decidedly influenced by the way in which the student performs on the day of the test. However, there are other factors I consider as well and I am usually open to discussing these factors with the person who has tested. One point I feel very strongly about is, that, contrary to what some people think, my decisions about dan tests are not politically motivated, in whatever sense one wants to interpret that. I accept sole responsibility for my decisions on dan tests and I suggest that my years of study and teaching Aikido give me a distinctly different perspective in judging dan tests than that of most casual observers.

Now, when it comes to New Year's recommendations for dan promotions, the procedure is quite simple. The recommendations are based solely on the decisions of the individual Shihan. Each of us has his own reason or reasons for the promotions of certain individuals. Yet, even in this unique situation, where there are no observers and no consultations between Shihans, some people act as if this process were conducted like a bill in Congress, where individuals have an interest in the outcome and feel obligated to try to influence the decisions of their representatives.

To get down to cases, last year I received a few letters from students who suggested that their senseis be recommended for promotion to 5th dan. As I stated before, the recommendation process is strictly the business of the Shihan involved; it is not a vote-type situation.

I appreciate the fact that many students admire their teacher and I certainly don't mind hearing about it. My reaction to their suggestion of promotion to 5th dan is that you should show your appreciation by

practicing sincerely and taking an active part in dojo life; not by acting as promotion advocate for your instructor. I can tell you that if my students wrote to Hombu dojo asking for my promotion, I would feel angry, not to mention embarrassed. Quite simply, it is none of their business; and that's true for any dojo.

Another feature of these letters that I received which needs to be addressed is the often-repeated statement that "he is the best instructor in the nation."

Once again, I can understand your feelings for your instructor, but let's not lose sight of the fact that the Aikido community in this country is quite large and there are a sizeable number of instructors around, as well. Statements like the ones I received are small-minded in the face of these facts and are similar to those made by small children who believe their mothers and fathers to be "the best in the world." Thoughts like these show a lack of maturity as well as a lack of respect for any person who is in the position of teaching Aikido in the United States.

I always encourage my own students to respect not only me but also the other Shihan. I want them to study or glean from these other Shihan the skills or techniques which I might not have. After all, each of us has something that is uniquely ours to offer. You must discover what that is and then fill in the gaps in your own training.

Before I leave the subject of recommendation promotions, I have one more subject to cover. Since Aikido in the United States is almost 30 years old, we are already seeing an older and younger generation of practitioners. As everybody becomes more proficient and experienced at teaching, we can expect that the progress of the younger generation will be faster than that of the previous generation. Now, what does that mean in terms of promotion? It means that since there are only 10 dan levels in Aikido, it is inevitable that the younger generation will catch up with the older generation in terms of achieving dan grades. There is simply no way to keep a relative distance of dan levels between the older and younger groups. Eventually, there will come a time when some members of the younger generation will attain equal dan grades with their seniors and even surpass them.

For instance, since I came to this country, I have been promoted three times to a higher dan grade level. During that time, some of my own students have been promoted up to five dan levels. As their teacher, I'm very proud of their progress. That is my prize as it is theirs. I would not be a very good teacher if my main concern was to keep my students at a certain dan level just so that they could never catch up to me.

It should also be obvious that despite the fact that some people have been practicing for the same length of time, there will be qualitative differences between them as a result of the intensity of their training. A student who practices twice a day, seven days a week will naturally progress at a faster pace than someone who practices only twice a week, even if they both have been studying for the same number of years. Please keep that in mind before you pass judgments on how others are recognized for their progress.

Before I finish, I'd like to touch on a topic related to what can be perceived as an "Aikido generation gap." Some members of our older generation of Aikidoists have complained to me that certain younger generation Aikidoists are not practicing to their liking; specifically, they object to what they call "hard" practice.

First of all, let's remember that Aikido is a budo and there's nothing wrong with infusing that spirit into One's practice. But it is also true that Aikido is very adaptable so there are many different ways that one can practice. Part of the training in Aikido is to learn how to accommodate these different ways of practicing. Some are more suited to older students; some are the province of the young.

There is nothing wrong with practicing "hard" while one is able to. That is a natural inclination on the part of youth in most endeavors. Yet, I do want to stress that there is a difference between practicing "hard" and being brutal. I don't approve of being unreasonably rough. For example, there is no justification for putting extra pressure on a technique after uke has signaled that he or she has had enough.

I must say that in my travels I have yet to hear any complaints from younger practitioners about having to practice "soft." If people do object to this, they must also be tolerant of the needs and abilities of others. Let's all appreciate the flexibility of Aikido to be practiced by each of us in his or her own way.

But no matter which way you choose to practice, it is essential that you stick with the basics, concentrating on making your technique clear and positive in its execution. Just practicing "soft" doesn't mean you can be sloppy on the mat any more than those who engage in wild roughhousing. After all, we must keep the spirit of budo no matter how we practice.