

Aikidosphere

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Some Points on Promotion and Testing

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Editor's Note: The following thoughts of Yamada Sensei which first appeared in the Spring 1981 Federation News. This article was written shortly after one of Osawa Sensei's memorable visits to the United States. Osawa Sensei, who served for many years as the General Director of Hombu Dojo, was someone whose teaching always inspired all who were fortunate enough to receive it.



Aikido activity in this part of the world recently became very exciting because of the presence of Osawa Sensei, who conducted classes at the annual black belt seminar in New York

For the students, a highlight of this kind of seminar or summer camp, is the black belt testing. To be honest with you, it is not always a highlight for me. Sometimes--because of his or her performance on a test--I have to fail a student. And no instructor likes to do that.

I would like to discuss a few things which I noticed when I conducted tests recently. I am mentioning these points because I think they will be helpful to you in your daily practice.

What surprised me most was that some of the people taking tests were not able to perform clearly even basic techniques such as shomenuchi ikkyo through yonkyo and also shihonage. Some people didn't even know the names of these common techniques. I understand that, because of the very nature of Aikido--its flexibility and creativity--there may be some difficulty in giving a name to every technique. However, there are specific common names for the basic techniques. And I think that familiarity or lack of familiarity with those common names depends on your attitude in daily practice.

Another thing that I noticed, is that many people are interested in doing fancy movements or techniques, having copied them from advanced students. Please remember that an advanced student doing more complicated or fancy movements is quite different from a relative beginner performing these movements. And this difference is obvious to an experienced Aikidoist. The technique of the advanced student reveals a thorough grounding in the fundamentals and basics of Aikido--her or his technique has backbone; a beginner's fancy technique lacks the basics--it is only surface technique with nothing inside.

It is surprising to me that there are some instructors who teach only fancy movements to beginners and who do not teach the basic elements of the techniques. It makes me wonder whether, these instructors realize how important it is for a student to have these basic elements so that later on if he or she wants to, he or she can perform the fancy movements. To give you an example of this failure to perform the basics: I noticed, on the tests,

that a number of people were not able to do suwari waza correctly! Let us all make sure that we practice the basics in our daily classes.

Obviously, the people who take black belt tests are either first or second kyu. A first kyu's ability should be on a level almost equal to that of a shodan. My thinking is that a shodan test is really a formality, one which demonstrates how your first kyu skills have been further polished. So I would like to ask those instructors who give kyu tests to be a little more strict when they give the first kyu examination, so that their students will not embarrass themselves or their instructors when they take shodan tests. That will make testing a highlight of the seminars for me, too.

Looking at another aspect of testing: sometimes I happen to hear people comparing the merits of one test or another or gossiping about other people's promotions. I hear things like "How did he ever pass?" or "I would never have passed her", etc. Before I go into more detail about the determining factors we use in promoting people, let me say this: the attitude expressed in those kinds of remarks is absolutely wrong--no matter what the circumstances are. We, as Aikidoists, must have big hearts, and congratulate each other on our achievements.

Needless to say, in order to pass a test, a student should be able to perform at a certain level at test time. However, an examiner's judgment might also be based on one or more of the following factors:

- 1) length of involvement in Aikido
- 2) practice attitude
- 3) physical handicap
- 4) effort -- we all have different physical abilities but it is really effort that counts the most.

So, please keep in mind the fact that there are many considerations involved in deciding on promotions.