

Testing for Aikido rank

Going through the testing process is, indeed, a demanding yet rewarding experience. It provides a focus not normally required in your regular on-going aikido training. It makes you really know the techniques required for that rank and be responsible for internalizing and executing them properly. It gives you a benchmark—and a passage—where you can acknowledge how far you have come.

Here is what you need to do if you are considering testing for rank:

First of all, long before you look at a testing date, begin asking your fellow seniors (who have achieved the rank you will test for) to help you with the specifics of that particular rank's test requirements. Ask a wide variety for their assistance so you get a wide range of different perspectives and then ask for honest evaluations.

Next. Begin sharing the information you are gathering with others who are seeking the same rank—and who should also be gathering information. Don't get into any big debates with each other on how a technique should be done ("Well, so and so told me this". "Oh, yeah? Well, that senior told me...") because there are many ways of looking at any technique. Before it gets to the name calling stage ask one of the senior instructors to help clarify.

Then—Practice! Practice! Practice! When you feel you are comfortable with the requirements ask a senior to evaluate you—then practice some more.

Before considering testing make sure you are proficient in the techniques and ukemi required for that rank, have given on-going support and attendance at ACNJ seminars, and have done your part regularly in keeping the dojo clean and helping in other ways.

The last few weeks before the test should be spent polishing and fine-tuning the techniques—not learning them at that point. "Testing" begins, actually, long before the actual test date. Your performance on the day of testing is merely a public demonstration showing that you have achieved that level of proficiency.)

Passing is not guaranteed. You may not pass on your first, second or third attempt. If we feel you will have a better grasp of that rank's requirements if you wait then we will suggest it so that you, and we do mean YOU, specifically, will have a test that is worthy of you.

If we suggest you wait then don't be discouraged or overly disappointed. We want you to take pride in acknowledging your true progress and the efforts that have brought you to where you are in your training. If you are overly disappointed it shows us that what you really want is some rank—regardless. After all, what is more important—the "rank" or the moment-to-moment recognition of yourself and your on-going accomplishments? If you answered "the rank" then we need to have a long talk.

When you ask permission to be considered for testing it is at that moment that you have actually begun the test. At that moment we evaluate your present skill level, your attitude and aptitude, and most importantly, your reasons for wanting the rank.

If we feel you may be at an appropriate level of understanding for that, rank then you will be encouraged to begin training specifically for it—with the goal of testing in mind. Paradoxically, though, a healthy unattachment to the desire for rank should be part of your character.

We take pride in you. Our intention is not to hold you back or to be mean but to get you to a place in your practice or your character where you can really shine. As far as testing is concerned, we want you to have a memory of that test that both you and I and everyone can be proud of.

It is not easy to suggest to a student that it may be best to wait and to keep practicing. But if that is our suggestion and we sense an unreasonable disappointment in you then, in our opinion, you have already failed the test—right then and there. Again, a single-minded focus of rank is absolutely the wrong focus in Aikido.

Also, if you react this way I am personally hurt because you fail to really see me, my position, the multi-level responsibilities that I have accepted, my dedication to the standards we are known for and those who have gone before you, and my own dedication to you. Officially, I have a responsibility as the Chief Instructor of Aikido Centers of New Jersey and as a Certified Instructor with Aikido Hombu Dojo. But, personally, and probably more importantly, I'm your teacher. I teach in order to build you up. I want you to know that what you achieve has real and respected value. I care about you and all my students—whether you have been with me for twenty years or twenty minutes. I want you to do well, to progress and to be better person because of your Aikido.

We usually don't see it for the gift it is, but sometimes the ones who care most about us are the ones that have the strength of character, the fortitude, and the love to accept the difficult job of telling us what others won't—and then backing us up as we work to better ourselves.

It may not be easy for any of us but I will be honest in my evaluations. And if you want—I will definitely back you up.

Please, keep all I have said in your mind and heart as you continue the journey we all share. And as for testing, I've been there, done it and I highly recommend it.

Greg O'Connor

(5th kyu, 4th kyu, 3rd kyu, 2nd kyu, 1st kyu,
1st dan, 2nd dan, 3rd dan, 4th dan, 5th dan, 6th dan)