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Sandan Essay
May 26, 2007

The Preservation of Aikido through Basics

In the United States, the rank of sandan in Aikido can take ten years to achieve, often even longer. This accomplishment is a significant milestone and as I stand at this point in my training career I contemplate the real meaning of the rank. At shodan, a candidate is expected to demonstrate understanding and ability in the basic techniques. At this point, you are fully recognized as a practicing aikidoist and a true beginner. For nidan, the practitioner demonstrates a further understanding of these basic techniques in a more dynamic sense. Following this natural progression of depth and understanding, the sandan test further emphasizes the dynamic nature of technique and the ability to adapt within the form. However, the rank of sandan is not limited to the reflection of personal ability. This level also leads to increased opportunities to instruct and guide others. As such, there is an additional responsibility towards preserving the art for further generations, and the art of aikido will be best preserved through transmission of the basics.

One of the best aspects of studying the Iwama style is the emphasis on basic, form-oriented technique. Too frequently students claim to be bored by the constant practice of basic technique and are driven to explore alternative styles of training, but this constant and steady practice of the basic form is precisely what allows the Iwama stylist to become strong. Once a solid foundation has been built upon these basics, it becomes possible to expand into more abstract ideas while maintaining strong technique, and the

decade it can take to obtain the rank of sandan is an appropriate amount of time to fully develop this foundation. As can be seen in many other styles of training, this progression does not usually work in reverse. Loose, open, stylistic practice does always not lend itself to the development of a strong base, but strong, tight, basic form will eventually allow and support the evolution of a more free-flowing expression.

As the opportunity to teach aikido to others develops, one can be tempted to allow too much of their teaching to stem from a personal focus. While teaching others is naturally a personal relationship, it is important to remember how you, as the teacher, arrived at the level you are at. To attain the level of sandan in Iwama style aikido, one must have devoted massive amounts of time to the practice of basic forms before continuing on to more advanced concepts. If your personal foundation comes from such regular practice of basic form, then in order for your students to achieve the same solid base they must follow suit without attempting to skip any steps along the way. In order for further generations to continue to develop into great aikidoists, this proven method of learning must be preserved and passed along.

This is not to say that personal exploration should be discouraged in any way. For individual development and progression, one must continually press the boundaries of technique and explore depth of understanding. But there is a distinct difference between the personal development of an individual and the transmission of the art to the junior student. Instead, it is the responsibility of the instructor to provide this basic foundation in such a way that each student is allowed to become proficient in the style and then find their own path of exploration and interpretation. In this way, it is assured that the art

itself is preserved, not just a conglomerate of interpretations from a multitude of individuals.

Training for a period of time substantial enough to reach the rank of sandan will naturally place one in the position of instructor more and more frequently, whether this be as an instructor of a school or simply as a sempai member. Regardless, the responsibility remains the same as junior students are seeking instruction or guidance. Although the rank of sandan is an important accomplishment on a personal level, there is an aspect of obligation to pass along the gift you were given and to preserve this method of learning. Practitioners gaining in rank should consider this and not be too hasty to create their own interpretive styles of teaching. Through the continued instruction of basic technique and form, we can ensure that future generations of skilled aikidoka are created and the art is preserved.