

Along the journey of Aikido, which in my case I hope to be life-long, we are challenged with tests at various intervals along the way. As the natural progression ensues and a deeper understanding develops, the gap in time between these tests becomes greater. These tests are in place to give you a clear idea of where you should progress to and what level of knowledge should be attained by a given rank. Tests are in place to show which points of any given technique should be tightened and show you have learned the new information presented and can demonstrate it at will. As we learn more, our training goes through distinct cycles, one week it may feel as though great progress is made and another week it may feel as though you make no advancement at all. A few months ago Iriminage was your best technique, one in which you feel you have “whipped”. Now it’s the technique you struggle with the most, you feel like you haven’t a clue how to execute it properly. Aikido is always a work in progress; we can always strive to be better at any given area of the vast art. With this in mind, as I have prepared for the nidan test, I have come to realize the true nature of tests is to expose your weaknesses, so you can work to remedy the flaws for the next test and in the years to come.

In the beginning, as you progress through the kyu ranks, it sometimes is only a few months in between tests. Concerned with the mechanics of the technique, like where your foot goes, what your hand does, etc., you have little time to worry about much else, as there is constantly a new technique to absorb. When you get into the more advanced levels of the kyu ranks and more time exists between tests, it is no longer merely about the mechanics of the technique but the more subtle essences, which open to you more and more as you progress. With the new level of understanding of any given technique or an

important aiki principle, the more your weaknesses are revealed to you. The more you learn, the more you realize how much left there still is to learn.

After you achieve shodan, the time between tests expands further as you settle into your new role as black belt and the symbol it truly represents of becoming a true beginner. This can be easily forgotten, however, as the years pass, we settle into what is comfortable and work to perfect the strengths we already possess. Some techniques that you may not execute to your liking may be written off in your own mind as stupid or irrelevant for ego's sake and lead you to forgo the training required to execute these techniques with true expertise. It is most fun to train what we are most good at, and practicing a technique that you may not carry out to your liking can be extremely frustrating.

When the nidan test presents itself, complete with a vast array of techniques, all of which need to be executed with diligence and authority, it is your weaknesses that become exposed. Therefore, the techniques that most easily expose these weaknesses are the ones that should be practiced most. When you work to perfect a weakness, this is the learning that is most gratifying. A test will force you to work on your shortcomings. As the test date draws closer, the more the training intensifies and it is in this period you make the greatest refinements. As everything in our universe has an opposite, the greater the refinement, the greater your exposure to a weakness in that technique. So you practice to get to as high a level as possible in your given time frame and accept Aikido as a life-long process with no end. So the push to nidan for me has been about opening up further understanding, which has exposed how much I still don't know so I can strive to remedy these weaknesses in the years to come.