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The Path

I won Jaws at the Portal Elementary carnival, when my ping pong ball landed in a water-filled jar holding the only non-orange goldfish on the table. Unprepared for a new family pet, my parents placed Jaws into a glass chalice that I can't recall ever being used for any other purpose. Two days later, circumstances forced them to explain to me that fish don't swim upside down. Even the non-orange kind with ironic names.

While tradition normally dictates a burial at "sea," followed by a quick flush, we instead placed Jaws' limp body into a tiny Milk Duds box and buried him in the back yard. Ten-year-olds' concepts of time being what they are, I announced that I would dig him back up in ten years. Doing some quick math, I realized I'd be in college by then. Wow! College!

The decade anniversary of Jaws' passing has long since come and gone (we never exhumed my scaly friend), but what remains in my mind is that sense I had as a ten-year-old of what it would be like to be in college. To be grown up. To have a driver's license. To have all the answers. It's a feeling similar to the one I had when I started aikido nine years ago. I looked at the yudansha with whom I trained and thought, "I can't wait until I'm a black belt. This stuff will all be so effortless, and I'll understand all the 'ins' and 'outs' of aikido." I will have arrived.

As with my youthful perceptions of adulthood, my expectations of being a black belt weren't wholly accurate. I remember training as a fourth kyu with a shodan who was trying to refine his iriminage. "I still can't quite get this technique right," he admitted, tossing me again and again with what seemed to be a thoroughly effective throw. It felt disingenuous to me when I was coming up the ranks to hear yudansha say they were struggling with techniques. "You're a *black belt*, for crying out loud!"

And now, as I prepare for my nidan exam this weekend, I find it ironic that iriminage is one of the techniques with which I struggle most. But it is hardly the *only* one. I may be my own worst critic, but even the casual observer can point out that there is considerable room for growth in the quality of my aikido. It is apt that the Japanese term for black belt is “shodan” – beginner level.

At a recent seminar in Fredericksburg, VA, Bill Witt Shihan illuminated the difference between a “do” and a “jutsu,” explaining that a “jutsu” is a skill while a “do” – as in, ai-ki-do – is a path. A journey, rather than a particular destination. This distinction resonates with me a great deal as I continue to refine not just my technique, but my posture, position, center, awareness, and understanding of various other elements of aikido. The iriminage I do this weekend, with the camera rolling and my peers, teachers, friends and brother in attendance, will not be the best iriminage I ever do. It’s simply the best one I do on that day, at that moment.

Another yudansha with whom I train at Sunset Cliffs loaned me a book about aikido several years ago. While the title and author’s name escape me, I distinctly remember reading how training in aikido goes in cycles. There will be explosive periods of growth, but also frustrating plateaus where tae-no-henko suddenly feels foreign, efficient footwork proves impossible, and where kokyu crumbles. In essence, there will be periods where there is no joy in Aikido-ville. But, they are just that: periods. The mojo eventually returns, and with it the joy of training.

So, as I sit here, one week shy of being a nidan, I try to resist the urge to compare myself to my fourth kyu expectations of what I’d be able to do when I got to this level. When it comes down to it, exams – while very good at focusing one’s attention and energy – are somewhat arbitrary points of demarcation. I won’t suddenly be capable of leaping tall buildings in a single bound. My nidan certificate won’t arrive packaged with a cape. I’ll simply have one more day of training under my belt, and when I step back onto the mat following my test, I’ll still be working on my center, my footwork, and that darn iriminage.