

Gradings in Aikido

Gradings are an emotive and contentious subject in *aikido* due to the lack of clear objective guidelines. Travelling to different *dojo* and seminars, it is quickly apparent that there is a large variation in the standards and technical requirements for gradings. Other martial arts such as *karate* and *judo* attempt to introduce consistency through the use of competition. Weight and age categories are used to ensure people compete against well-matched opponents while strict rules outline what competitors are, and are not, allowed to do. The founder of *aikido* did not believe that true *budo* should contain competition. *Aikido* initially followed the older *koryu* martial disciplines, issuing formal certificates to recognise a student's level, culminating in the student eventually receiving *menkyo kaiden* or "full transmission" of the discipline. *Aikido* later transitioned to using the *dan-kyu* system recognised in most dojos today. The absence of competition in *aikido* should be seen as a positive factor. It has, to date, resisted the pressures of becoming a competition based sporting activity. However, it ensures that gradings remain a divisive and often discussed subject.

A good first question would be to ask why we do gradings in *aikido*? It is clear that many people respond better when working towards a goal and for some, the prospect of preparing for a grading can give real focus to their training. While gradings do play an important role in our development and practice, they should not be thought of as the end-goal or as the principle focus in our training. They are an opportunity to gauge our individual progress; they let us appreciate how far we have come and highlight how much we still have to learn.

It is undeniable that many people with the same grade often have very different abilities and this can cause confusion. Determining if someone is ready to grade is a difficult task and technical ability is only one of many factors to consider. The student's personal commitment to training will certainly impact the decision, as will subjective matters such as the student's age and attitude in class. Each student should put their full effort into the preparation of their grading but what this involves will be dependent on the student's personal circumstances. Technical level, in readiness for the grade, may also vary, based on each student's unique situation. Simply put, it is unrealistic to have the same expectation of performance from a 20 year old and a 65 year old. However, if that older student is at class every day, pushing themselves to the limits their ability and age allow, should that effort not be recognized?

I often hear that hardly anyone fails an Edinburgh Aikido Club *kyu* grading. This is true but the reasons are misunderstood. The decision to let someone grade is a result of evaluating that student in class during the preceding months. The student's commitment to training and their technical progression have been observed and the grading is an opportunity for that student to demonstrate the results from their efforts. *Dan* grade (black belt) examinations are carried out by *shihan* (senior level instructors) from France on behalf of the Aikikai Foundation. I have limited input into these decisions and so the best I can do is to control the student's progression through the *kyu* ranks to ensure they are as prepared as possible. If I do not believe someone is ready to grade, I prefer to simply make the student wait, rather than unnecessarily and publicly failing him or her at the grading. This achieves very little except embarrassing the student. However, it would be wrong to consider gradings a foregone conclusion; they should be carried out seriously and with the correct attitude; the student should put their full effort into the grading and it must be representative of the student's ability. If this is not the case, the student will be asked to re-take the grading at a later date.

The subject can become more complicated as the student begins to progress up through the *dan* grades. It is my personal belief that all students have the capability to prepare for their *shodan* (first dan) if they are willing to put the required effort and training time in. This, unfortunately, cannot be the case for the higher *dan* grades. This scenario is true for almost all arts, disciplines and activities that require prolonged practice. I am convinced that many of us, given the necessary time, could learn a classical instrument well enough to play in a community orchestra. However, very few of us will every have the unique mixture of natural ability and commitment to play with the London Chamber Orchestra. Similarly, in *aikido*, we cannot all expect to become 6th dan one day! One way the Aikikai Foundation deals with this is to impose minimum time requirements between *dan* grades. For most students, the actual time required to progress will be much greater than these minimum requirements. Progressing up through the *dan* ranks involves certain responsibilities, one of which is being a technical role model and example for the more junior grades in the dojo. As someone progresses through the *dan* grades,

the requirements for these grades become harder to define. There are no “advanced” or “secret” techniques in *aikido* that we are introduced to once we have reached a certain level. Instead, we re-iterate over the same techniques practiced as a beginner, often with an emphasis on stripping out the unnecessary and making the movements simpler and more efficient. Our progress can be harder to gauge and it is generally better to wait for some indication from a senior level instructor that we are ready to grade.

Aikido is, for most people, a hobby that competes for our time against important factors such as school, work and family commitments. It is my wish that people come to class principally because they enjoy the training and get something positive out of it. Gradings are an important part of our training as they allow us to mark our progression. They are to be celebrated as recognition of the personal improvement our efforts have produced. But then they are best forgotten so that you can focus on getting back to class and regular training.

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