

Aikido Nidan Essay

Julia Kay, 2023

When Penny Sensei and I first started discussing my Nidan test in 2022, it had been 17 years, 3 dojos, and 2 or 3 previous Nidan discussions since I tested for Shodan in 2005. It hadn't worked out previously due to injuries, followed by time off the mat, changing dojos, a schedule that only allowed me to train with Sensei once/week, and the pandemic. Now that we were back to training in person, and I could train more frequently, I was eager to demonstrate all that I had learned since 2005: different styles and variations, how the different techniques were connected and flowed into each other, my own take on certain variations.

Initially, training for Nidan was very frustrating. There was increased correction and instruction, and I wasn't able to embody the new advice as quickly as I expected of myself. In addition, there were new bodies of material to learn and master. In particular, I had very little prior experience with jo nage, jo dori, and tachidori. As my frustration level built, I also started to panic. We had set a date. Would I be ready?

One day, I was working with a beginner. I think it was her 5th class. I showed her something she found useful and she thanked me saying "nobody showed me that before". I thought there was a slight edge to her appreciation, a feeling of 'why hadn't anyone shown her that yet?'. In my head, I thought, "Oh, there are a thousand things someone needs to show you." And then I pointed my internal finger at myself and thought "Oh, there are a thousand things someone needs to show you (me)!"

At that point, I set ego aside and remembered that the only reason I'd ever wanted to test before was not to achieve rank, or show what I knew, but because I so enjoyed the intensive training prior, and everything new that I learned during that period. In fact, I had explicitly said when a dohai was going up for Shodan that I wanted to wait rather than test at the same time because there was more I wanted to learn and the only reason to test then would be ego (so we would stay the same rank), and I didn't think that was a good reason.

Remembering what my younger self already knew, I arranged to postpone my test, and opened myself to letting go of everything I thought I knew, so I could integrate new learning with old patterns. It turned out my biggest challenges were not the new techniques but consistently applying principles such as waiting for uke, giving the whole room my attention, getting off the line and working to calm down uke and myself. As I began to be able to embody these principles, I stopped panicking and started to truly enjoy the process of moving my Aikido forward, making Aikido fun again.

As I write this, I have learned of the passing of Yamada Shihan, a direct student of O'Sensei, and my first Aikido Sensei. Although I only trained with him during the summer of 1980, my training at his dojo culminated in my 5th kyu test, and set me on this lifelong Aikido path. Even though I didn't continue in his style/lineage, I dedicate this test to him - I hope he would have been glad to know that at least one of the sea of white belts that came and went that summer did continue in this art to which he was devoted.