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Sandan Essay 5/2004

“Stop reaching,” my sensei told me when I attempted to intercept a falling bokken and turn it into a technique. That was nearly a year ago when I knew that I was starting to train for my sandan.

“It’s something I notice about you a lot,” another senior instructor said to me that same week.

“Hmmm,” I thought, *“this observation probably contains a metaphor about the way that I carry myself, or interact with other people, so if I learn it on the mat, I might have a chance at self-correction. Could be illuminating...”*

I quickly made that the main theme of my sandan training: Not reaching. Letting the attack come without stretching myself off my own center to intercept it. After awhile, being mindful of this practice, I began to notice that there was a great deal more time in the space within an attack, than I had originally thought. Even more interesting, was the feeling that I wasn’t just the technique, I could also be the space *around* the technique. And way bigger than just the attack. I experimented with breathing into people’s attacks to create a vacuum, and extending harmonious energy into attacks, and found that I was able to shift the energy of the attacks before they even reached me. Which also turns out to work pretty well on ill-tempered dogs, I’ve discovered.

Another revelation was that, by not focusing entirely on an attacking hand or an attacking weapon, that I had a much clearer and wider picture of the body that the attack was coming from, which gave me more options and possibilities than before.

“Sandán is about flow, and *zanshin*,” my teacher told me. “Nidan and shodan are about technique, while the sandan test is more of a presentation of how you have interpreted the art, and your connection with your ukes.” When I first began aikido, (and probably *why* I first began aikido although I would not have had the presence of mind to admit it then), I was at age 24, too shy to even look people in the eye when I was talking to them. I thought I was just taking aikido because I didn’t want to carry a lot of fear around like baggage. Being adventurous by nature, I figured a nice, non-violent martial art would be a good thing to have in my life. Little did I know back then, the pleasure I would later experience by looking someone in the eyes during a conversation and not only hearing everything they said without secretly cooking up my answer (or retort, depending on the situation), but also being able to see and appreciate the color of their eyes and the body language that would tell more about them than they would be even cognizant of. Not like I’m a nosey person now or anything. Just by opening the space around you to see more, these things pop up now and then and you can’t help but notice.

During my whole training life I went through a number of changes and enlightenments and bumps and bruises and the occasional broken finger and I still felt as if I were standing just slightly askew of self-esteem. Even the satisfaction of completing shodan and then nidán ranking still found me lacking in that respect. Well, enough so as to be annoying when I thought of myself as a second degree black belt and still a pushover in day to day life, not always having the courage to say, “stop,” or “no thanks.”

With my upcoming sandan presentation I had the opportunity to enter a year of thinking of little else during training, than those two principles: not reaching, and connection with my ukes. Also a year in which I brought my hip back from a debilitating and painful injury (a tilted pelvis with a dysfunctional set of surrounding muscles), which I accomplished by slow, thoughtful practice for more than half of that year. I think that staying on the mat and training around the

injury, some yoga, and the will to not be limping during my exam were all working simultaneously during that year.

At the end of that year, just before my presentation, I was working hard at remembering the sets we had chosen for the presentation. It was like learning a sonata on the piano; the first few months you learn the order of the notes; the exact fingering so as to make the phrases fit together right. Then the cadences and the rhythm. At some point my piano teacher would ask me to memorize the sonata, so I could learn the flow of the entire piece, from beginning to end. It was the chance to finally explore the music by touch and sensation and enjoy its journey, rather than by reading and interpreting it from the written page.

My sandan presentation felt like that. After having a list of techniques stuffed inside my gi for several weeks, changing and refining it every day, I finally had to let go of it the week before the test. Of course, when I drove around town I thought of nothing else. I fell asleep at night running the test through my head over and over again. When the evening of the test came, and I got ready to bow in, I silently invited the aiki-kami to join me. Then it felt as if I had entered a realm which included myself and my ukes. It felt like magic; as if all the preparation of the year before had culminated in my being able to let go of all the details and have fun with the flow and the presentation, and to trust that I had the ability to stay focused the whole time.

Now that the test is over I have this metaphor to add: If my life of aikido training was a boat, I would have started out with a small rowboat. Sometime around shodan I would have been driving a very fast speedboat but after that I took up scuba diving and so I didn't think much about boats other than things that brought you from one dive site to another. So my nidan test would have been a bigger faster cruiser with a lot of new gadgets on it, like fancy depth finders and underwater lights. Now that I've completed my sandan presentation, it feels as if someone has given me a really beautiful cabin cruiser. The kind that still goes fast enough to be exciting although when you step aboard you feel comfort and expanse, and you know you won't be tossed around in the waves created by everyone else's wake.