

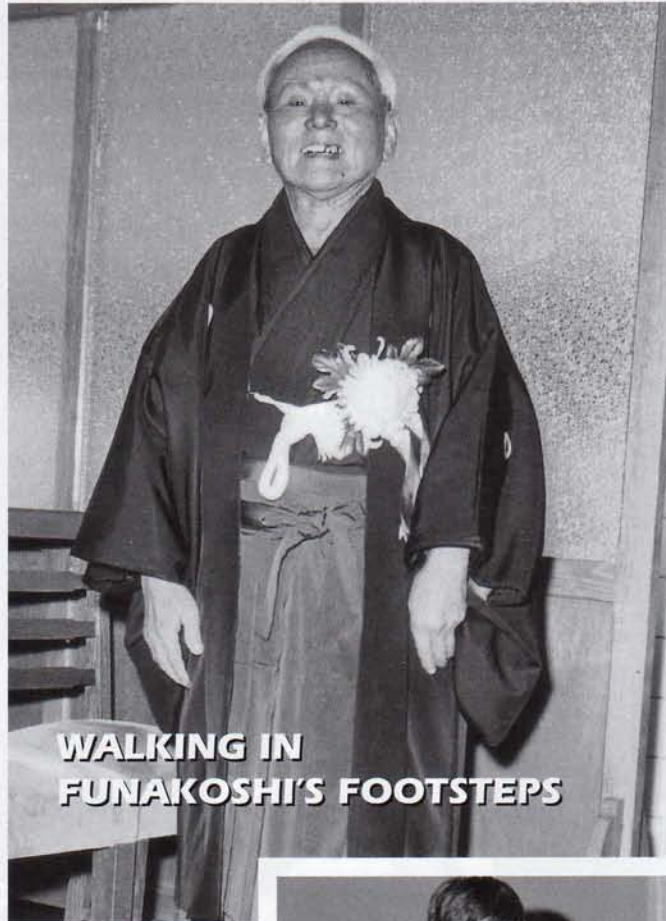
# SHOTOKAN

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**KENJIRO KAWANABE**  
(Interview)



**WALKING IN  
FUNAKOSHI'S FOOTSTEPS**



**THE GRADING EXPERIENCE**



**SANCHIN-DACHI**

**THE MAGAZINE FOR ALL SHOTOKAN KARATEKA**



## 'FUEL THE FIRE'

# THE GRADING EXPERIENCE. By Ty Aponte.

Preparation for an exam is something not to be taken lightly. Do your homework and take your training seriously prior to the test, and give it your all on the actual exam but don't get too discouraged if you don't pass the first time around. Learn from the experience, take the opportunity to improve upon your weak areas, and come back stronger the second time around. Maintaining this positive perspective is important at all levels. My own personal experience illustrates this point well.

My original experience in Karate-do began as a young boy on the east coast in 1970 under Sensei Hector Martinez. Hector earned his reputation as one of New York's toughest senseis. With his unique brand of Shotokan he forged ethnically diverse groups of raw, unruly kids from the inner city into an elite corps of battle-hardened, disciplined young men ... and loyal black belts. After moving to the west coast in 1974, with no Shotokan dojos in sight, I continued my karate training in Shorin Ryu under Sensei Dean Pickard. Aside from becoming my foster dad, he gave me a strong traditional foundation and also exposed me to a broader, more eclectic experience in the martial arts. This experience was invaluable to me in my personal growth and development as a martial artist and as a young man.

In 1994, however, I made the decision to return the foundation of my training from a Shorin based style to a more widely recognized Shotokan style. This change not only brought me back to my roots but also enabled me to offer the internationally diverse student population at the Claremont Colleges (in Claremont California, where I have taught karate since 1980 as an accredited, elective PE class) a style that they could take with them upon graduation. With this foundation my students would be able to find another Shotokan dojo almost anywhere in the world and find relative acceptance. To accomplish this transition, I was determined to seek out and train with the best representatives of traditional Shotokan Karate available. I was fortunate to find several outstanding instructors here in the greater Los Angeles area and I was twice blessed to discover that my new mentors were also associated with the LA Central dojo.

In 1995, in furtherance of my quest to deepen my knowledge and understanding in Shotokan, I joined the National Karate Institute Central dojo headed by world renowned Sensei

Hidetaka Nishiyama (9th dan and direct student of Shotokan's founder Master Gichin Funakoshi) in Los Angeles, approximately forty miles from where I live and work. The distance alone required a considerable commitment just to attend training sessions on a weekly basis. When I first presented myself seeking permission to train, I was truly humbled as he asked what rank I held. I kept my answer brief and told him that I was a sandan (3rd deg. BB). His response to me was, "*One man's sandan is another man's shodan,*" pointing out that standards vary among schools and his standards are very high. With that he welcomed me to his dojo.

Stepping onto the hallowed floor of Sensei's dojo I was inspired by, and have developed a profound respect, for the outstanding calibre of karate-ka that dedicate themselves day in and day out in the pursuit of mastership of the empty hand Budo way. Both men and women alike in Sensei's dojo are strong spirited and present outstanding examples of what can be achieved with sufficient desire, dedication and commitment. Periodically I was even surprised to share the same training space with some of Sensei's most senior students who would return to Sensei's dojo from time to time to pay their respects and train. Many of these individuals have gone on to form new alliances and make names for themselves in their own right, either on the traditional tournament circuit or

through their tireless efforts in spreading the Shotokan way. And just as their belts have faded from black to white from years of toil, each of these outstanding practitioners of the art have come full circle to once again humbly train with the master, Sensei Nishiyama.

The current group of senior and competitive black belts; Avi Rokah, Ron and Sue Vance, Tati Eugenio, Taichiro Kaijima and Reuven Sharf among many other loyal and talented athletes at the Central dojo may be a generation or two removed from the earlier legends of Traditional American Karate (Senseis: Yabe, Dalke, Smith, and Fields) however, they all share a common bond - they train and sweat in the modest and humble dojo that Nishiyama built and where he continues to teach with passion and vitality to this day at age seventy eight. With these outstanding examples and with much hard work, in 1996 I successfully tested for my Shodan and, three years later, upon sufficiently demonstrating my understanding of the physicality and dynamics of basic movements and techniques, I advanced to Nidan.

Almost every month Sensei will have elite athletes from around the world come to train at his dojo. Whole teams come from abroad to eagerly refresh themselves and integrate Sensei's "New System" into their traditional training routine. Just as Sensei has introduced new events into the traditional competitive arena (Fuku-Go, En-bu, Ko Go, and Bunkai in team kata), he has also been innovative in developing and introducing new training concepts based on original karate and budo principles of the traditional Japanese arts. Sensei avoids stagnancy and is continually looking towards the future. Like medicine, through trial and error, there are always new discoveries to be found. Sometimes during class one can see Sensei tinkering and devising on the spot. He experiments on his students at the L.A. Hombu dojo before introducing his new concepts internationally or at his annual ITKF SUMMER TRAINING CAMP. With the aid of modern sports science, he has proven the technical concepts of his new system effective and has raised the technical level of traditional karate to an even higher standard. With a treasure trove of ideas senior students are pushing to do more to preserve and catalogue Sensei's contributions for future generations of karateka to appreciate.



*Nishiyama sensei corrects a brown-belt student's mae geri at the ITKF hombu dojo.*

To avoid specialization, Sensei Nishiyama consistently emphasizes the three principals of training: kihon, kata and kumite. He encourages his students to be well balanced like the three points of a triangle where each facet is dependent on the other. In the dojo one is constantly under pressure (generally self induced) to produce their best technique, and making a conscientious effort to apply correct principles of body movement and body dynamics that are essential to one's overall performance. I have also found that my training doesn't stop in the dojo. As I'm driving I can't help but sometimes hear Sensei's voice reminding me, "Spine straight, chin up, head pulled back." To this day if the back of my head is not touching the head rest of my seat then I know that I'm slacking in my posture.

Sensei discourages students from bouncing from one kata to the next. So that one can learn the subtle details he encourages a rather long-term study, practice and understanding of one kata over a given period of time. One can look flashy and great on the surface, but without the internal power and connection it will lack cohesiveness. To help achieve this Sensei will often have us perform the same kata many times, though each time he will emphasize a different point, for example; "stance/posture and form", "driving technique", "rotation and snap of technique", "pressure to the floor", "shifting/transition", "tempo", "power/kime/total body contraction", "breathing/kiai". These points mentioned barely touch the surface however, and there are also points within these headings that are stressed as well.

During kumite practice Sensei will have us train in combinations with special emphasis on effective footwork to close in on or move in harmony with the opponent's intentions and to enhance our understanding, Sensei will often tie in Budo application and psychology. Coming from a family line of Samurai, this ideology is fitting. As in kata, Sensei will place emphasis on a certain concept or technique and we will then apply it. In kumite, classmates push each other to be on their best game. Most players have the best intentions and control. There are no pads and generally no mouthpiece so if you are not alert or your reflexes, distance, timing or posture are off or if one becomes a bit over zealous, it could mean the difference between walking away unscathed.... or not. Often after each class Sensei's senior kumite champion (Avi Rokah) will invite an eager player to engage in an exchange of skill, strategy, distance and timing and put to test some of Sensei's kumite concepts. Like two seasoned gladiators each



*The author, Ty Aponte performs kata, Jitte under the watchful eye of Nishiyama sensei.*

attempt to expose and capitalize with mutual control, on the other's weaknesses and like true champions both end with a sincere bow, handshake and a smile.

Fast forward to June 2006. I was scheduled for my next exam at Sensei Nishiyama's dojo. I felt fairly confident going in. My sandan exam was not as challenging in the area of basics as the previous two. Emphasis was more on a technical level where I had to demonstrate that I had internalized my understanding of the basics. I performed my favorite kata (Nijushiho) and was then required to explain the practical application (Bunkai) of some of the movements of the kata. Next, I performed a kata of Sensei's choice: Tekki Sandan. Sensei then asked me to give a critique of a brown belt student who performed a few Kihon Ido (moving basics). Admittedly, I am not fond of speaking in front of an audience but I did manage to awkwardly get through it, condensing what would take a student months of training to understand into a five-minute critique. Lastly, I engaged in kumite (free sparring) with three other black belts. When it was over I was very relieved.

Unlike some dojos where exam results are announced the same day, at Sensei's dojo we were not informed until about three months later. Some of the students suggest that this is his way of teaching us patience. Others say he may just be behind on his paperwork. On the day the results were finally posted I went down the list of examinees. I found my name and saw that it stated, "re-exam." After waiting and wondering for three months to find out the results it was not really such a huge shock to me. I guess time had cushioned the blow and I optimistically set my sights on a December re-examination. Still, the question arose, how did I feel about not

passing? Like anyone I was a little disappointed. I thought that I had done well. In thirty-six years of training this was the first exam that I had not passed. Some suggested that he is tougher on black belts who come from other dojos because he wants to be sure that they understand the details of his new system. He might also have been testing my commitment. Regardless, Sandan is a difficult passage point. Well this was exactly what I needed – a good shaking up – to free me of my ego and pride and to direct my attention back to the process of training and to the true purpose of my endeavor, which is to improve myself, because ultimately who am I to second-guess Sensei's decision.

Upon returning to Sensei's class I decided to hang up my old tattered and worn black belt and wear a new one. As I think about it now, I guess this was my way of "emptying my cup" and starting fresh. I knew in my heart that I needed to pay more attention to various aspects of my training and Sensei confirmed this for me in class by occasionally yelling at me, "Back straight, hikite," etc, honoring me with the whack of the shinai or simply adjusting my technique. (Sensei's commitment to quality is constantly instilled. He encourages students, through practice and self-study, to have a sense of pride and integrity that reflects in their technique.) I also stepped up my dojo training from a twice per week drive into Los Angeles to three times per week and increased my efforts in my personal training, attempting to refine my kihon waza, kata and kumite drills until I felt some sense of satisfaction. Sensei speaks with a heavy Japanese accent and is sometimes difficult to understand. After class, I would often consult one of Sensei's technically gifted and senior black belts, (Ron Vance) who would graciously stay and work with me and review some of the details and concepts covered in class. A month or two passed and I was encouraged on a few occasions when Sensei would say to me with a smile, "Your doing better and starting to get it", – "it" being that idea of perfection he was trying to mold me into.

All too soon December came. The examination the second time around was much the same as the first, yet this time I had a renewed sense of purpose about my training and an increased sense of confidence that, pass or fail, I had made significant progress even in just the short six months since my earlier, unsuccessful attempt to gain the next level of recognition and honor from Sensei Nishiyama.

On December 17th 2006, I came into the exam feeling pretty confident about myself, though I knew there was still room for improvement. When my turn

came up to test in front of the panel, I performed my favorite kata – Jitte, and demonstrated bunkai (application). I was then asked to perform Gankaku. This was one out of five advanced kata that Sensei will choose and that candidates are expected to know. Through my nervousness I was a little shaky on a one legged manoeuvre. Aside from that I felt it was a strong performance.

When it came time to critique a brown belt, I gave Sensei a detailed explanation of why the student was not performing efficiently; I then made suggestions on how to fix the problems. Sensei, in his questioning, would probe a little deeper looking for a more satisfying answer. I felt a bit more confident with my answers this time around. I also realized, unlike my first attempt, that my sandan exam was also based on my ability to demonstrate and convey succinctly that I had a firm understanding of the basics, that would include the importance of posture (tailbone in, back straight, chin up) and body connection. As well as the initiation of any body movement (shifting, rotating, vibrating, rising, dropping) starts from the floor and proceeds from one's center-Tanden. When punching or blocking, apply the combination of hip dynamics, strong pullback-hand and pressure to the floor. The reaction of pressure back from the floor is directed to the technique and at the time of Kime, creates shocking (crunch) power. Finally, use proper kiai, keeping kamae, with Zanshin (mental alertness) after conclusion of the

technique. After my critique of the brown belt, I then finished my exam with three strong rounds of kumite. When it was over, my comrades and I praised each other on an exam we all felt relatively good about.

This time around, I am happy and honored to say I was awarded the rank of sandan and, as proud as I was of this accomplishment; my most profound emotion was a sense of relief. I could relax, take a deep breath and simply enjoy the process of training. I could take a moment to enjoy the view along the way and revel in the satisfaction of having worked up a good sweat. I could also allow my performance and effort to be evaluated (at this point in time) by the judge that really matters the most – myself.

Rank testing and exams play an important role in our growth and development as students of karate-do and of life. Examinations can be a positive experience validating the hard work we have put in and motivating us to even greater achievement, or they can be stumbling blocks that hinder further growth and development if we do not accept the process and approach it with a healthy attitude. If the effort you apply in preparation for your exam becomes a chore, then rethink the reasons you have for training and/or testing. Having the right attitude is critical for one to move forward successfully. One should remain positive, humble and passionate in their pursuit for personal excellence. In

Perceval's quest for the Holy Grail, the moral of the story was not the finding of the grail but in the journey itself. One should not be consumed by the outcome or the belt. Instead focus on the never-ending quest for personal excellence. Regardless of the outcome, be proud and look upon the exam as an honor to have been considered for testing.

Preparation for an exam, therefore, is extremely important. You must diligently apply yourself by training in your prescribed classes as consistently as you possibly can, including making time to train on your own (self study). Though coming to class regularly is important, that alone does not guarantee a successful exam. One must demonstrate their skill, knowledge and confidence in the requirements prescribed for the rank. Stay mindful to correct any deficiencies.

On the actual exam give it your all and don't allow your fears to get the best of you. Everything asked of you during the test you have most likely already done before. Again, don't get too discouraged if you don't pass the first time around. Take note of the positive feedback you may receive from the examination process and use this information to focus your training so you can come back even stronger the next time around. No matter what accomplishments you may achieve throughout your participation in Karate training, there is always room for improvement. There is no time limit for mastery. As one struggles to improve one constantly evolves towards perfection. You will never be too old or too good or too experienced to have setbacks that can truly challenge your sense of self-esteem.

My story is tame in comparison to some who may have met with disappointment two or even three times before finally advancing to the next level. However, if these otherwise seemingly negative experiences are viewed in a constructive light, they can provide profound opportunities for significant growth and development as a karate-ka, and as a person.

Even after more than thirty years of training I was faced with just such an opportunity. I did my best to take it in stride and to use the experience to re-focus my energy and add much needed fuel to the fire that burns in my heart and soul and keeps me striving to improve myself. I still have a lifetime to go and I remain committed to taking myself as far as I can for my own benefit and the benefit of fellow travellers on this journey.

*About the Author: Ty Aponte has also broadened his scope of training and is holder of Dan rankings in multiple Budo arts including: Shorin Ryu, Okinawan Goju Ryu and Kobudo.*

*(Photo's By Lisa Silver).*



*Ty Aponte (left, back to camera) demonstrates kata bunkai from kata Jitte as part of his sandan grading examination at the ITKF central dojo in Los Angeles, California.*