

Persistence
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I have been practicing Aikido for nearly 15 years (a month and a half from this writing) and have finally earned my shodan. This practice has taken place in different styles, different dojos, and with different teachers, all of whom have informed my understanding of why practicing Aikido is something I will not willingly cease. However, being committed does not mean making Aikido the one and only meaningful aspect of my life.

Aikido has played second fiddle to some extent—to college, to grad school, to professional opportunities, to travel, to my daughter—but has been a persistent presence; that which I kept up despite everything. Sometimes I had to take a break (bedrest before my daughter was born, or the last push for my dissertation, or an injury). I find that I can't rest for long. When I can come back, I do.

This is a practice I can and will be doing for all my life. It isn't something I question or think about much; I simply accept it as how I am and how much I gain from doing Aikido.

These gains, when spelled out, seem mundane: I make friends. I learn, I teach, and I learn how to teach without saying a word. It is a regularly scheduled physical outlet. I like the philosophy. It's a little bit unusual and I get to explain to coworkers what it is I do in the evenings. I like becoming more body-aware, more able to learn movement and replicate what I see. My flexibility and strength are better than they would otherwise be. Mundane, yet these gains make for satisfaction and comfort. I'm happy with what I'm doing, I have a sense of accomplishment, and I am left with a feeling of responsibility to the whole continuance of Aikido. My sensei have spoken of pushing those ahead of you and pulling up those behind, and I take a great deal of satisfaction from being a responsible part of this chain.

Even with enjoyment and satisfaction I have sometimes experienced a touch of discord associated with hubris. Years ago I read an essay written by an older Aikidoka who noted how it can sometimes be frustrating watching newer, younger students seem to progress faster in the art, despite her years of experience. She asked if this meant she was no longer learning; no longer engaged. I found her conclusion comforting: I'm still learning—maybe not as obviously progressing but I'm seeing subtleties that I wouldn't have been able to understand or contextualize years ago. Sometimes I can even execute them in movement.

I still grow, better and deeper than I did when I was learning to do the flashy initial movements like rolling or doing a big, satisfying throw. And it is OK to see less experienced students grow too, seeming to whiz from milestone to milestone. They are working on part of the spectrum of Aikido experience and I'm working on another part, and over time we will all explore as many parts of the spectrum as possible. We will work to achieve levels of finesse and delicate balance that will keep us fascinated by the art year after year. The knowledge is a continuum, from rough grains to fine.

Because I've been practicing for so long I've seen over and over again friends in various dojos start practicing, progress, and earn their shodans all during the time it took me to earn two or three kyu ranks. When I had been practicing 10 years a friend in another dojo took his shodan exam and said to me afterwards, "It was such a long haul.

I've been working for this for *six years*." At the time I was still a second kyu student and had been for about three years. His comment took me aback. At first I was a bit upset that I was learning so slowly. Then I realized that my particular priorities had set me up for my time scale, that I was still learning and would continue to do so, and because (I knew even then) I would be doing Aikido for decades to come my learning overall was essentially unlimited. I just had to keep practicing, and I would keep learning and progressing. As my parents used to say about school, "You get out of it what you put into it."

Thus I see the shodan achievement as an important step—but really only one step among thousands. Each practice day is a step, each seminar, each thoughtful discussion about the principles and esoteric aspects of the art. All the steps together make up a person's individual Aikido journey. So while I'm pleased to have reached the shodan level, I see it not as a pinnacle ("mission accomplished") but as another step up the slope. I've only finished part of the journey. I'll keep progressing, keep learning. There's no end in sight.