

Ikkyo and the Way: My Personal Journey in Aikido

An essay submitted to Doran Shihan in fulfillment of partial requirements for the rank of yondan

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Do; michi: path, way – theme of the 2008 Aikido Summer Camp in the Rockies

This is an eventful year in my Aikido career in many ways – it has been 20 years since I moved from California to Idaho, and left behind easy access to many of the finest teachers in the Aikido community. I was informed by Hayashi Sensei early in the year that Doran Shihan wanted me to prepare for my yondan exam, and attended my first summer camp in over 10 years. I found it stimulating and refreshing to learn new things and be a student again, beyond the brief opportunities I've had with various workshops through those years. That experience also taught me a lot about the wisdom of my senseis and the barriers to growth in Aikido that I've allowed my personal and professional life to impose, and a fear that I, too, might be guilty of practicing 'sport Aikido!'

To demonstrate that I might be deserving of the rank of professional teacher in Aikido is both an honor and a stark view in the mirror at my own abilities and commitment to the martial path I chose 27 years ago while a graduate student at UC Riverside. It was fitting that the summer camp theme this year in Glenwood Springs was *DO*. Throughout my training and teaching, I have felt that I understood my path in the Aikido world. It was a path that seemed more like a leaf floating on a river, occasionally moving in the main current with speed, but often caught in the eddies, where there was less turbulence, but also little progress downstream. Even in the eddies, there has been opportunity to share my skills and talents with others, who might also be caught in the slower currents of the Aikido world – first in Davis in the mid-1980s, and then in southeast Idaho, where I've lived and worked since 1988. I have always felt a sort of kinship to the many students I've encountered over the years who remark how they have been looking for a dojo in their moves from place to place, or for the time to finally train in a martial art they have only read about but felt was right for them. I've welcomed such students to my dojo, and encouraged them as they have grown. And often felt a sense of personal loss that those same students moved away to some place more remote, or lost interest, or health. That too seemed part of the Way...

What is clear after having a chance to revitalize my personal training this year, and the challenge to refine and polish my own skills enough to demonstrate my Aikido to others in the context of my yondan test, is that my path can actually be much more than I've let it be. Yes, my professional life has been very demanding, with lots of travel and little time. This has had an impact not only on my Aikido, and my family, but also my students. While Aikido has been a

regular part of my life for 27 years, the many and varied dojos and senseis I've had the opportunity to train with, and the luxury I enjoyed as I began my study of Aikido to train virtually as much as I was wanted to, are not something that my students can share in our community here in Idaho. It takes much more commitment of time, personal resources, and travel to find those opportunities away from Idaho Falls. So my responsibility as their teacher becomes much larger, since it is largely through me that they get a glimpse of the value to be gained from training with other students and teachers.

So this leads to the second thread of my essay-



Ikkyo: first teaching

Saotome Shihan devoted an entire chapter (in his book *The Principles of Aikido*) to a discussion of the relationship between the sword and *ikkyo*, and more importantly, to how the 'simple' first technique is central to the philosophy and aims of our Art. He speaks of *kurai dori*, controlling an enemy's spirit. This is the high-level Aikido, the step above incremental physical skill refinement that I'm sure we all strive for, but often don't see directly, in our (my) training. This is the evolution in our training that must be achieved if we seek to do more than 'sport Aikido.' O-Sensei is quoted by Saotome Shihan to have answered the question "what is the true secret of Aikido" by stating "*Ikkyo* – that's it." So while I have sometimes commented to new students that Aikido terminology is not very inventive, now I have to revise that and suggest that O-Sensei called it the first teaching to stress its importance to our development in Aikido.

The one consolation I have in reflecting on my training and teaching in Idaho these past 20 years, is that I have always felt that even if I can only train with and teach beginning students, that I will learn something to improve my own skills. So perhaps this brings me back to connecting the ideas of *Ikkyo* and *Do* in my Aikido career – I am on the path, and enjoy the support and concern of my sensei and sempai who know much more than I do about the Way. By focusing on the first teaching, I can foster the evolution of my art to the next level, and at the same time, provide an example that will make the path more clear for my students. In doing so, I share the responsibility that O-Sensei entrusted to his direct students at his death, "Train not for selfish reasons, but for all people everywhere."

The good news for my personal path is that I have the shining example of Doran Shihan, so hope that I still have several decades ahead to continue training, refining, and sharing my knowledge (I also recall Warren Little Sensei telling me he was going to continue training until he was at least 87, so he could say there was something he did that O-Sensei didn't!) *Ikkyo* is a good place to start at this juncture on my Way...