

Ten Years Between Tests

Yondan Essay by

Alex Vanderburgh

Aikido West, Division 2

I began my Aikido training with Kanai Sensei in Cambridge Ma, in 1979. Ten years and several dojo's later (including a relocation across the country) I passed my Shodan exam in San Francisco with Robert Nadeau

Shihan, in 1989. Ten years and a Nidan exam later, I took my Sandan exam in Redwood City under Frank Doran Shihan, in 1999.

At that time, I assumed that I needed 1000 training days before I could be considered for my next exam, and since only the classes with my teacher at the Dojo counted, I realized that at 2 classes a week, 52 weeks a year, my next possibility for testing was ten years away. That would be 2009. This posed an interesting challenge for me, as I had always in my years of martial arts training, been focused on the "next test". I started Karate in 1970, then again in 1988, Okinawan Kobudo in 1990, and had been encouraged to prepare and test to keep focused on developing my skills. Preparing to test had always been a useful tool for seeing what I needed to improve on. But now it was different. At least, I thought it was different. Over the years I realized that it turned out to be the same and different at the same time. After all, in Aikido, on the 5th Kyu exam, we have the techniques of Ikkyo, Irimi Nage, and Shiho Nage. These techniques are on every test. The techniques are the same, they do not change- but we do. As we change, our expression of each technique changes. In 2009 I will have practiced Irimi Nage for 30 years- yet each time I train there is some little change, small nuance that is different. I have spent many years in food service, making pizza, espresso drinks, tea, and managing people who do these tasks. I tell the people I manage- remember- you may have made thousands of these- but not this one for this customer- each one is a unique expression of the suchness of the materials- no two are identical. The same is true of training. In 1999 I asked myself what I needed to work on for the next ten years. While the techniques were part of the answer, the depth and understanding of each technique was also part of it. Ukeme as well took on new levels and flavors, and as I age it continues to challenge and develop. Since my Sandan I have had many opportunities to find a deeper understanding of Aikido. I have had the chance to train in Japan, studied the sword style of Kashima Shin Ryu, taught an Aikido class in Bali, trained in dojos in Brooklyn and Manhattan in NYC, New Jersey, Portland Or, Columbus OH, Los Angeles, San Diego and Sacramento CA, Rhode Island, Watertown and Amherst MA, and of

course, all over the bay area. Since 2005 I have had the joy of teaching Aikido to my son, now 15, who has taken an interest in the art, at least on Fridays!

I have also created the opportunity to introduce martial arts to after school students who might otherwise never be able to train. I realize that the future of the martial arts is our children- the children in all the communities around us. The aspects of all the martial arts I have trained in that I particularly love about Aikido, developing balance, confidence, compassion, understanding and power are useful for all children in everyday life. Having the opportunity to affect the lives of 200 young people each year, most of whom do not have the funds to study in a dojo, gives me the chance to show the next generation a better way to deal with the stress they face in everyday life. While my time with them is limited, I get the sense that even one moment, if I truly connect, makes all the difference. I realize now that I already know what I need to work on for the next test- which by my calculations I should be eligible for consideration for in about 12 years- that would be 2020.

I think I have plenty to work on.