

Aikido Black Belt Preparation

10 lessons most people never consider on their way to an Aikido Black Belt

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Do not practice any form of martial art without a qualified instructor.

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Introduction

My name is Michael Farrugia. I have been studying Aikido since March 1993 and instructing since June 1999. I opened my own school Kihon Aikido in December 2002 and have been teaching students from beginner to black belt and beyond ever since. Now a 4th degree black belt awarded by the Aikikai Foundation Japan, I am passionate about teaching the fundamentals of Aikido through technical precision and attention to detail, whilst not losing sight of the importance of health and personal development. Over the years, I have witnessed well over 100 black belt tests and become deeply involved in Aikido examination preparation and assessment, including of course for my own students. As I am proud of this publication and its contribution to Aikido research, I hope you find the information contained here relevant, interesting and motivating.



Michael Farrugia Sensei

Needs Analysis

This is more than just a guide to assist you prepare for your black belt examination. I aim to provide greater insight into why, for example, some students project energy and ki during their black belt test, but not always with control and precision. Examinees sometimes appear to excel when performing their locking and pinning sequences, but are not always rock solid during the throwing techniques. This guide seeks answers to other questions, such as, why does confidence not always manifest through good preparation? Why do so some students, having completed their tests, feel as though they could have done better? What are some of the pitfalls to look out for and what is self sabotage? Furthermore, having seen a number of students fail to make it to the day of their tests, either through injury or some other frustration, I hope to assist you personally through whatever knowledge and experience I have learned along the way, and to provide a means to improve the consistency of efforts presented at black belt examinations.

To do this, I have designed this document in the form of a timeline of sorts, starting at your black belt preparation 6 to 12 months ahead of your test, providing you with a number of tools you can use to ready yourself, physically, mentally and spiritually. It will move on to some of the more specific aspects of your physical training, including an in depth guide to high falling. In addition to

offering a range of positive suggestions you should consider as your test fast approaches, I'll also describe some obstacles to avoid in the sections on injury and sabotage. The last lesson takes you to the day of the test and some final pointers, which precedes some discussion on life after the test.

Assumptions

I suspect you may have been training for 2 to 3 years averaging 2 to 3 classes per week. Perhaps you've trained more frequently or for a longer period of time. Perhaps you've had a break in your training since you began some years ago. Either way, I assume your black belt test is not far away now and you're wise enough to look to those who've done it before to provide you with further guidance. Don't deny yourself any emotions at this stage of your journey. Accept that you may have doubts about your ability. This is normal. Accept that excitement will mix with anxiety and nervousness. That's normal too. As you read through the tips I provide here, pause frequently and relate the information directly to your training and your own experience, and when you next train, try to remember what you'll read here.

Lesson 1 – What it means to be an Aikido Black Belt

It's important early on to define what it means to be a shodan. It is certainly a milestone, worthy of recognition by your peers. You may for the first time begin wearing hakama and enjoy perhaps a greater level of respect from those you train with. Often, we think of achievement as the reward provided at the completion of some task, the treasure obtained at the end of a journey. While it is true that after years of solid training and by passing a difficult test, your shodan certificate, black belt and hakama will absolutely represent a great achievement, you need to know, and I hope you know this already, that this is not the kind of achievement that represents the culmination of events and efforts.

Earning your shodan is another beginning. While in the past you have studied only basic shapes and forms, your shodan is an entry point to discovering more about yourself. Some students choose to train only the physical aspects of Aikido and may even define it by its tangible characteristics, such as the throws and pins, open handed or with weapons. My challenge for you is to consider that even though your upcoming shodan exam predominantly tests your physical abilities, there are much greater things to learn once the test is done. Be clear that the transition from white belt to black belt can also be a change in your energy direction, from purely physical to also spiritual, from purely personal to also social, from purely motion to also emotion. So by all means, focus your energies towards the task at hand, which for the most part, requires you to exhibit the skills and knowledge you have gained so far. But once you have earned your shodan, consider what it means to you from the perspective of self assessment and service to others.

Lesson 2 – Planning

The best way to walk into a black belt test is by having conducted a plan. I suggest that your plan needs to involve three components. These components should be the test techniques themselves, improved fitness and the right mindset. This is in addition to writing your essay if one is required. I'll only give a little advice here about the essay. Speak to your teacher about their expectations and ask them to provide you with a topic. If you have a topic you'd like to write about already, check with your teacher first. Be honest in your writing and let your essay demonstrate your thinking inside and outside the dojo.

Regarding the actual techniques you will need to demonstrate on the day, there will be some techniques you must perform as specified on your grading syllabus, there will be options presented to you, and there will be options presented to your examiner. For example, you will almost certainly be expected to perform tai no henko, morote dori kokyu ho and suwari waza kokyu ho. You can expect to demonstrate irimi nage, but you may have some options regarding the choice of attack. Or perhaps your examiner will choose the attack for you from a group of possible attacks. Know the format of the exam back to front and map out all the possible techniques you will need to perform. If you can list them all, you can begin ticking them off as you recognise you know them well, or at least as well as can be expected for a first degree black belt.

Try to map out some sort of grid with the techniques listed. For example, list out the three irimi nage techniques you will perform if you have the option. List the three attacks from which you will perform shiho nage, and kote gaeshi, and koshi nage, and so on. You need to memorise this table so on the day of your test, when your examiner asks you to demonstrate three kote gaeshi techniques, you don't need to think hard to remember what to do. In addition to the three techniques required, have a fourth technique as a backup. Make sure your table doesn't contain any overlaps. For example, if you are required to demonstrate three techniques from ushiro waza, don't map in ushiro kubi shime juuji garami, as you'll probably need to perform that technique in the juuji garami group of throws, required at an earlier stage in the test.

Also make sure that you include techniques that demonstrate a range of technical skill and ability. For example, if you are required to perform irimi nage from three attacks, don't choose shomen uchi, katate dori and kosa dori, all performed at a very basic level. If you complete the entire the test this way, you'll earn no points for difficulty and therefore leave yourself no room for errors. Conversely, don't choose morote dori, ushiro ryote dori and full nelson dori, all performed at a very advanced level, either. You might be able to execute some difficult throws well, but you'll find it nearly impossible to keep a good standard if you choose to only perform the most difficult of techniques throughout your test. Instead, do some easier throws and some more difficult throws. I would recommend carrying out irimi nage to shomen uchi first, because it would show you know which irimi nage throw is the most basic and allow you to execute it with power and stability. Then do perhaps yokomen uchi irimi nage, as the attack comes in on the move making it more

advanced. Include a half turn in this throw to show your level of competence. Lastly, choose something more difficult that you can perform well, such as a flowing morote dori irimi nage or a strong eri dori irimi nage, to show the range of your skill. My endeavour here is not to spell out exactly what attacks you should choose when performing irimi nage. Rather, I am trying to establish the idea that you need to demonstrate a range of skills, and this can be done best by performing some easier throws at a high level of competence and some more difficult throws with an even level of competence.

Be thorough during this stage of your preparation, mapping out your choices of technique, as there is ample time to complete this task. Try to make decisions to lock in your choices early on and focus your training and preparation on the decisions you've made, having made them by considering all options.

Lesson 3 – Fitness

I noticed great improvement in my own physical strength and endurance as I trained rigorously, particularly in the lead up to my black belt test. Good training should provide your body with whatever it needs. If you were not particularly strong when you started training, I am sure you are stronger now. If you were not particularly flexible, I am sure you are more flexible now. However, aerobic fitness seems to be one aspect that sometimes lets students down during their black belt tests. The grading should not be a test of endurance, since if you perform your techniques well, it should last no more than 45 minutes. But for many, 30 to 45 minutes of serious activity can be difficult for the heart and lungs. If this is true for you, put in place a means to remedy this. I'm not suggesting a complete lifestyle change, though this can be an obviously positive thing, just a short to medium term increase to the amount of exercise you undertake as you prepare for your black belt test. My simple remedy was to take up jogging. I was awful at first, unable to pace myself, and unable to jog long distances. But I persisted and very quickly was able to increase the distance I could run and the duration. I admit that I didn't continue with the jogging after my test but I definitely benefited from the extra exercise which helped prepare me, especially for the jiyu waza at the end of the test. If jogging is not your thing, try swimming or something else. Be persistent as improvement will come.

Lesson 4 – Mindset

It's also important to mentally prepare for the test. Consider the environment of the test. Do you know the location of the examination hall and are you comfortable with its layout? Do you have your partners sorted out and are you training with them regularly? Do what you can to avoid surprises. Visualise the day in detail through meditation. Meditation is an important part of the preparation and should take some form during your regular ongoing training. So visualise yourself in the examination hall, with familiar faces all around. Imagine the details as well, such as the colour of the mats, the possible locations you'll be standing, the location of the examiner. Imagine the feeling of someone gripping your sleeve and the grip you take on their sleeve. If you're not sure about anything, don't worry about those things. Instead, imagine yourself completing your techniques with confidence and precision. Visualise yourself extending with ki and feeling like you are full of energy throughout the test. Smile as you meditate and smile in your visualisation. Enjoy the day. Be motivated to perform at your best and create in your mind a picture of yourself, executing techniques on the mats with your partner, with high levels of motivation and positive energy. Focus your thinking on success and how to overcome any mental obstacles you may have. I'll talk more about such obstacles in the section below on self sabotage, but the message here is to prepare a mindset that will help lead you to success and remove doubts and fears.

Hopefully you can see that mental preparation is just as important as the physical preparation. The physical manifestation of your technique will be tested on the day and will be affected by your mental attitude on that day. The right attitude will obviously assist you to demonstrate your best technique. Let me expand on this discussion in the section below providing guidance on the examination day itself.

Lesson 5 – Technical Aspects

Although I don't want this document to centre on technical aspects of Aikido, to understand the information I offer in this section, it is worth considering a simple scoring system used to grade you during your test. While there is no official or formal points system, suppose you start the test with 10 points in hand. If you perform techniques at the level required, you neither earn nor lose points. But you will lose points for executing techniques below standard and you may gain extra points for executing techniques above the standard required. If you still have 10 points in hand at the end of the test, you pass. In other words, the average performance of your test must be at the required standard. For example, it's possible you may pass your first dan test despite executing a number of throws quite poorly, but otherwise consistently pinning and throwing your partner like a second dan. Very high level technique in one area of your test may make up for low level technique somewhere else. Keep this in mind when mapping your techniques as described above by choosing some techniques which will show off your qualities.

Katami Waza

To my mind, katami waza or locking and pinning techniques form the corner stone of physical development in Aikido. Slow training of these techniques as both the nage and the uke are required to build strong Aikido bodies. During your preparation, concentrate on breaking away from strong static grips by moving and extending from your centre. Apply sound Aikido principles to your movements and avoid quick jerking movements. With omote waza techniques, consider the connection to first bokken suburi. As you cut your opponent down in an omote waza front forward movement, bring yourself into hanmi and use your arms as you would while cutting with the sword. With ura waza movements, don't speed up through the turn at the cost of basic principles. That is, keep uke's wrist the same height as his shoulder. Keep his arm at 90 degrees to his spine. Keep your arms in front of your centre but away from your thighs. If your locking and pinning techniques are well rehearsed and look good on the day, it will put your examiner in a happy mood to watch the rest of your test.

Nage Waza

I find most people direct their attention to this section of the grading as there is so much variability in the requirements. There's irimi nage, shiho nage, kote gaeshi, from shomen uchi, yokomen uchi, tsuki, katate dori, etc. Once you have mapped out the techniques you will perform on the day, spend your time practising them, focusing your attention on technical precision and stability. Stability is so important from the perspective of your examiner. It will be clearly obvious if you are unstable. While I'm sure you want your partner to soar through the air as you throw him, it is more important that you be well grounded. The very best Aikido images are those mid action shots where the master is so unmistakably firmly fixed to the ground. Secure yourself to the

Earth by lowering your centre and making yourself feel heavy. If you over extend to increase the appearance of your power, you'll lose connection with the Earth and become unstable.

Buki Dori

Weapons taking techniques always present opportunities to find flaws in students' technique. Invariably, weapons taking exercises are performed at a lower level than their open handed counterparts. Why? Because they're difficult! The simple lesson here is to practise them. You won't be required to do many weapons taking techniques, so practise them. Practise them well enough to be able to perform them with a high level of competence. If there are few flaws in your buki dori section, you should confidently feel you have good control over your partner and yourself during your practice.

Jiyu Waza

Typical 1st degree black belt tests require the examinee to defend himself against multiple attackers, usually two attackers without weapons, with whatever techniques present themselves in a free flowing exercise. This is an area which will also require practice. On the day of your exam, you will want the jiyu waza to start slowly and build up a little in speed as you go along. You'll want to take adequate time with each of your throws to ensure they are effective, not rushed. In your preparation, be sure you understand how to enter towards the next attacker after every throw, by turning on the foot nearest to him. That is, don't back away from each attack. Enter in obliquely towards it. You'll also want to vary the throws you use. After you pivot towards your attacker, you'll either find yourself at arm's length from him or much closer. When at arm's length, choose to execute kote gaeshi if on his back side, or ikkyo based kokyu nage or shiho nage if on his front side. When much closer, try kokyu ho or irimi nage if on his back side, or perhaps kokyu nage on the chin or koshi nage if on his front side.

I often see kote gaeshi over used in jiyu waza. The reason for this is usually due to the entry. If the nage pivots towards the attacker ineffectively, they'll often end up at arm's length from them and so choose to use kote gaeshi. If you find you over use kote gaeshi, consider entering more deeply while you practise. Then, irimi nage should also appear. If you find you use the same techniques regularly in your jiyu waza, determine which techniques you seem to find more difficult to include. For example, if you find you never seem to include kaiten nage throws, practise some jiyu waza looking for every opportunity to use that throw. Then when you return to the usual free form activity, kaiten nage should present itself more often.

As your skills and confidence in this area improve, try to throw each attacker at the other. Rather than throwing irimi nage in whichever direction immediately appears, turn your partner so that you'll throw him at the other attacker. This will slow down the jiyu waza and give you more opportunity to catch your breath, re-assess, and take control. Do this safely of course.

Lesson 6 – Individual Differences

Technical precision in Aikido is dependent upon geometry, physics and timing. With repetition, your body learns to move accurately into the shapes and forms required for each technique. Your instructors and seniors have been practising for longer than you, and so I trust you have been told to copy their movements. As a general first rule, your aim should be to copy precisely the shapes made by your teacher. This is how you should spend the first few years of your training. Ideally, you should try not to compensate for the individual differences in your body shape or in the body shapes of those you train with. This can be difficult if you are significantly taller or shorter than your teacher or your partner. Later down the track, perhaps on your way to nidan, you'll find it absolutely necessary to amend your technique to take into account varied body shapes and other factors, such as the speed and direction of the attack. But that is not basics training. If you spend too much time studying this too early in your development, you'll never learn the basic shapes. So although individual differences may exist due to age, gender, height or weight, my advice as a teacher is to stick to learning just the basic shapes until after you pass your shodan test.

Having said that, I understand you may not have any control over who your ukes will be during your test. While in some schools, it is expected that you have a partner ready to assist you during the test, in other schools, the teacher will choose ukes during the day, almost at random. If you don't know who your partner will be on the day, or if you will need to throw a number of people during the test, you'll be better prepared if you have practised throwing people of different shapes and sizes. On the day of your test, should you perform a technique poorly, you should have the right to repeat it. You may be asked to repeat it if your examiner is unhappy with it. In summary, focus on the basics, but train with people of different shapes and sizes. Have a partner already chosen to take ukemi for you during your test if you can, and aim to successfully throw him correctly the first time. Repeat only if necessary.

Lesson 7 – High Falls

The very first thing to know about high falling is that it is more about jumping than about falling. If you can jump well enough to get yourself off the ground, you'll land with greater ease. If your body has been strengthened through your regular training, you'll quickly learn to land without pain or bruising.

Strengthening

It's probably worth putting in a disclaimer here about high falls before I offer advice on how to do them. When doing a normal forward roll, does your arm stay extended? When you roll with your right arm or left arm leading, does it stay extended throughout the roll, or does it collapse under your body weight? If it stays extended, you have built enough ki and kokyu to continue. If not, I urge you to speak with your teacher immediately, as I bargain you are not strong enough to be a shodan. To improve your strength, spend more time doing morote dori kokyu ho, suwari waza kokyu ho, and katate dori ikkyo to rokkyo. The very first move involved in unbalancing your partner during locking and pinning techniques from katate dori is very good for improving the right kind of strength needed in your arms and body.

Forward Rolls

If you're strong enough to support your body weight during normal forward rolls, you should use rolling practice to improve your ability to jump. Under supervision, practice forward rolling by first jumping a little into the air. Initially, you may land a little harder, so learn to maintain your arm extension and your overall shape. To help arch your spine, keep looking at your toes. As you get better, begin leaping into the air. Focus on training your legs, your quadriceps and calf muscles, to propel you. I've seen so many students focus on high falls from shiho nage and kote gaeshi but never actually learn to jump. You cannot high fall properly from these throws without jumping. If you fail to jump, you'll eventually end up with a busted arm because these throws are often quite dangerously executed. Learn to take care and learn to jump. During rolling practice, have a volunteer crouch down. Leap over him with your arm extended to arc into your forward roll.

Another slightly unusual practice is to forward roll in this manner. Stand with the blade of your hand on your extended arm already against the ground, just an inch in front of your toes. Without moving your arm, use your leg muscles to jump as high as possible, before tumbling in the usual forward roll manner. Aim to bring yourself vertical and upside down by launching your feet as high into the air as you can. This is an exercise to build your ability to jump from awkward positions.

High Fall Practice

This is a simulation of the real thing under controlled conditions. Once you learn to high fall well, it's also a good warm up exercise. Ask your partner to stand with his feet shoulder width apart or perhaps a little wider. He offers you his right hand and protects his face with his left. You stand on his right side, which for argument sake, we'll say is to the south of him. Grab his right hand with your right hand and, if it helps, put your left hand on his right shoulder. Have in mind you're going to do a forward roll on your right side, except your right hand isn't going to get to the ground. Use your legs to jump forward and rotate over your partner's right arm. You'll want to tuck your head in and watch your toes to arch your spine. Your hips need to go over your head. Don't spin out backwards and face the south as you jump. Your left arm should be the first thing to hit the mats as you land on the other side, then your legs, followed lastly by your body. If you landed on your knee, you over rotated. If you landed too heavily, you likely didn't jump high enough. Again, don't focus on the landing, focus on jumping. If you landed with your legs pointing east, you didn't rotate enough. As you get better, you'll land with your legs pointing to the north. Practice both sides of the body and remember to jump.

The Easier Category

Next learn to high fall from morote dori kokyu ho and shomen uchi irimi nage. These techniques are easier to high fall from than other techniques because, assuming your nage knows how to throw properly, they'll make good hip contact with you and help launch you into the air. But before you try taking high falls from these techniques, learn how to forward roll from them. I hope you know how to backward roll from them, but to forward roll from them, turn your head and body toward your partner, then extend the appropriate arm as they throw. This may feel a little disconnected from your partner, but it helps you learn which way your body needs to turn during the high falls to come.

To high fall from morote dori kokyu ho, as your nage steps in alongside you, assuming you have your right foot forward, loop your right hand under his left arm and hold onto the top of his left shoulder with your right hand. Don't grab at his elbow as your hand will slide later on. Make sure you have your hand on the top of his shoulder, close to his neck. As he begins to make hip contact with you, pull down hard with your right arm and jump, throwing your legs into the air. This is like pole vaulting. Pull down with your arms and jump up with your legs. The last thing you need to worry about is the falling. Gravity will take care of that. Don't even worry about rotating. If your partner stands still and strong in the position prior to throwing, with his feet together and arms in front of his chest in the kokyu shape, you can perform your pole vault without worrying about timing. You'll fall forward rather than backward, but that's ok. Once you've learned the shape, you can add the timing. As your partner begins his rotating movement, you take off, flying to his rear.

High falling from shomen uchi irimi nage is much the same. Again, assuming your right foot is forward, once your nage has entered in alongside you, loop your right arm under his right arm, grabbing at the top of his right shoulder with your right hand. You won't need to jump nearly as much as for kokyu ho, but land in just the same way. Enjoy the ride.

The More Difficult Category

Shiho nage and kote gaeshi should be considered more difficult to high fall from as you won't experience hip connection as you are thrown. The connection is on the arm which makes the throws quite dangerous for the wrist and elbow. In your practice, keep this in mind. Only train with people you trust and look after your kohai. Despite the danger and lack of connection, many see the kote gaeshi throw as the easiest to learn from. I agree it is very similar to the high fall practice simulation exercise described above, except it takes more time to learn the correct distance and timing, because uke's wrist is often moving while nage is throwing. There are a number of important things to remember as you are being thrown from kote gaeshi. As pressure is applied to your wrist, take a big step forward to keep close to your nage. If it helps, put your spare hand on his shoulder. Jump high and curl your spine. Like the other high falls already discussed, don't spin yourself to face the direction you've just come from.

Since the shiho nage throw itself is performed from a fairly stationary position, you should find fewer problems aligning your position. But you will need to turn around to face the direction you are going to be thrown, otherwise you'll still be facing the back. If it helps, put your spare hand on your partner's back. Timing is very important, and make sure you jump high. Start with katate dori shiho nage omote waza, as it is easier than the ura waza version.

Ultimate

This is probably too advanced for those preparing for their black belt tests, but in the future, it's worth considering high falls without being thrown. Remember that ukemi is all about protecting yourself while your nage throws you. If you are being thrown by someone without enough experience, it can be quite dangerous. They may not be able to take into account your needs as a student still improving your abilities to high fall. In time, you should try learning to throw yourself into the air without assistance, then flipping into the high fall shape and landing gently. If you can master this, you'll be able to take high falls even when the expected connection disappears. For example, when someone tries to execute a tenchi nage throw but drops their hands and loses their connection to you due to inexperience, your safety won't be put at risk if you can high fall without assistance. This level of mastery is required for many of the very advanced throws, such as the shiho nage throw from jo dori.

Lesson 8 – Avoiding Injury

While it is true that injuries are rare in Aikido compared to other martial arts, when they do occur, it is often linked to grading preparation. This is usually because students are trying to lift themselves to a new level, which is good, but without necessarily taking all due care, which is bad.

Regarding injuries to other people

Often when students like yourself are gearing up for a difficult test, their mind can focus intently only on that goal. You are growing much stronger and want to practise techniques as you will perform them during your examination. Due to increased strength, proficiency, confidence and focus, some students become forgetful of how damaging our techniques can be when performed harder or faster than the uke can accommodate. If you forget that your first priority, ahead of your own practice, must be the safety of the person you are training with, you may very well be the one who does them serious harm. There's no point achieving a milestone like your black belt having left a wake of destruction behind you. Protect your uke and know when to back off.

Regarding injury to yourself

In much the same way, you could be on the receiving end of a hard or fast technique. Chances are you'll be training with other students also preparing for their black belt tests. So they will be growing in strength, confidence, proficiency and focus too. They, just as you, can become powerful and dangerous. Don't be afraid to say to others that they need to back off. Every year I seem to see another student have their black belt test delayed due to minor injury. Major injuries more often than not lead to students quitting altogether. Since you don't want to have your test postponed by injury, take responsibility for your training environment. Determine your limits and train with people you trust.

Consider also that your body will not grow and strengthen in a uniform fashion. For example, you might find your wrists can withstand a very strong niko, but you may have weakness in your knees. Whole body development will continue, but some joints will strengthen more quickly than others. Some joints will become more flexible more quickly than others. As you amplify the power you generate and apply during a throw, remember that your joints must be able to cope with that power too. Don't overload your joints and don't perform techniques you're not sure about.

Lesson 9 – Self Sabotage

The topic of injury leads to the lesson on self sabotage, because injury can sometimes be the result of self sabotage. Self sabotage is where you ruin your chances of performing well, if at all, during your black belt test due to having either the wrong mindset or poor physical conditioning. I have already discussed the physical conditioning aspect of your preparation in the sections above when describing fitness and avoiding injury, so now I will extend the earlier dialogue on mindset.

Over Doing It

Self sabotage often comes from placing such incredible importance on your goal, that you lose sight of other important considerations, such as safety. I just mentioned the consequence of overloading joints. This can occur when the mind is so strongly set on achieving a result, that physical constraints are forgotten. I have seen black belt examinees consider themselves so good at Aikido, they believe they will present a test better than anyone ever before. Sometimes this over confidence leads to catastrophic injury to joints, as the examinee tries to impress by mustering all muscle power into every physical exertion. Other times, the over confidence turns to complete disorientation when the most mild of errors occurs. The dream of staging the perfect black belt test falls away when a mistake is made, or an uke falls unpredictably, and the student is unable to continue, preferring instead to keep his mind in the past, focused on the mistake which cannot be undone.

Aim to do a good test, but be very careful about believing your test will be the best anyone has ever seen. If you think this way, you're setting yourself up for sabotage. Instead of believing that this test will be the most important thing you've ever done in your whole life, understand that it is a significant test which you will only pass with good preparation.

Under Doing It

Only very occasionally do I witness students who do not commit the required effort, but they do exist, and they are just as at risk of injury and failure as those who over do it. Moderation in your thinking and physical preparation is required. For those who may be under doing it, I can only repeat, that this is a significant test which you will only pass with good preparation.

Lesson 10 – Examination Day

Get a good night's sleep the night before you grade. Few people I've spoken to went to training the evening before their black belt exam. The chance to prepare physically is over, so now you conclude your mental preparation. Relax by finding stillness in a cup of tea or talking with your family. It'll probably be impossible to take your mind off tomorrow's event completely, but be peaceful in your heart and go to bed at a reasonable hour. Then continue to remain calm after you wake. When you arrive at the examination hall, do some things which are quite routine for you, such as wiping the mats or doing a warm up.

I spoke earlier about the need to have the right mindset during your examination so as to bring out your best technique. Consider that your entire grading, from bow in to bow out, is not a test so much as it is a demonstration. Have the confidence to believe that all those watching you are there to see you show them how Aikido basics should be done, and build this confidence into every technique. Don't be arrogant and think yourself an Aikido superstar, as this leads to self sabotage, but allow your self belief to come to the surface. Your grading is an opportunity to show others what you've learned, so don't be afraid to deliver. It's a little bit like a job interview. No one likes to see a fellow employee advertise and promote themselves and their work every day, but you're absolutely permitted to sell yourself to a potential new employer in a job interview situation.

Life after the test and preparing for Nidan

I'll always remember my very first Aikido test. Only six weeks after I began training in March 1993, I was required to sit my 5th kyu blue belt test, where I needed to perform eight techniques, which I did quite well. In the weeks that followed, I also remember feeling some pressure to not forget those techniques, otherwise I thought I might have my rank stripped from me.

Years later, when I finally passed my shodan test, I felt a great sense of accomplishment and pride. At the next class I attended, I wrapped around myself the black belt my Sensei had given me, and was provided assistance to dress myself in my new hakama by one of the seniors I looked up to and had helped me prepare. Then I remember experiencing other emotions as I continued with my training. A week before, I was a brown belt and sometimes found it difficult to execute a technique. Even though I was now a black belt, to no surprise, it was still occasionally difficult to throw and pin. I realised that just because I'd received a certificate and some extra clothing, I wasn't so far different to the individual I was a week ago. I still had so much to learn. So my thinking was directed to the responsibility I felt to perform at a higher level than previously. I knew that my peers were looking to me to see that I was a capable new black belt, rather than someone who perhaps did not deserve the rank. I needed to continue to show I was worthy, in much the same way as after my blue belt test.

I think it was this pressure which assisted me to learn and grow rapidly. Time and time again, I am witness to incredible personal growth in individuals immediately following their successful shodan examinations. It's always as inspiring and motivating as seeing the test itself. In the six month period after your test, you are likely to experience significant improvement in your abilities and confidence. So having achieved a great milestone, don't slack off. Keep training hard and watch you instructor just as closely as before to learn and develop.

In the two years between your taijutsu shodan and nidan tests, you may have a bukiwaza test to complete, which may be another small goal to keep you focused. If you need another goal, take some time to concentrate on the training of others. Not only can you support others just as others have supported you, but you'll also find you can learn so much by teaching other students, so everyone wins. Find how else you may be of assistance around the dojo.

You may find that the requirements of your nidan test are not so different to those of the shodan test you have just passed. The expectations will be different of course, in that the quality of your technique must be so much better. But the examination syllabus may be largely unchanged. If that's the case, take advantage of the fact you'll need to do less planning this time round and focus you attention on training rigorously. Determine the areas of your shodan test which needed the most work, perhaps by asking your instructor, and be sure to find improvement in those areas before your nidan test. Enjoy your success and enjoy training purely for training's sake.

Frequently Asked Questions

How do I know if I am ready to test for my black belt?

It's important to be physically ready and mentally fit for your shodan grading. Some say that we all have an internal Sensei, akin to our ego and our conscience. If your ego is telling you that you are not ready, either physically or mentally or both, you should determine whether you are simply feeling nervous. If not, speak to your Sensei immediately. Trust in what your Sensei tells you. Speak to your seniors as well, if you feel you need too. If your seniors tell you that you are ready, then they are probably right. So have confidence in yourself.

What if my Sensei says I am not ready yet?

If you want to grade but your Sensei says you need to wait, trust him. If your Sensei is open to questions about gradings, find a quiet time to talk to him and politely ask about what you should work on in order to get ready. But be prepared for his response. He may say you need to learn to ask fewer questions! He may say your technical skill is not strong enough yet, or he may say that your character needs polishing before you may earn a promotion. Whatever advice you are given, act upon it to find further improvement in your skills and your self.

What if I fail my black belt test?

In life, great disappointment can result from great challenges. If you've never failed at anything, you're just not trying hard enough! But instead of being philosophical, let's be realistic. You know you'll have another opportunity to attempt the test. So hold your head up high when you next attend training and keep training hard. Ask your instructor about the specific ways you can improve your abilities then get to work on addressing your weaknesses. Don't give any thought to what others think of you. Those who matter will consider you an excellent student if you can come back from failure, find improvement, reach your goal, then help others to do the same.

Interviews

Kim Davies

Kim holds an Aikido 2nd dan and offers her thoughts.

What memories do you have of your shodan test?

“I remember feeling a mixture of excited anticipation on the morning of my test. I made sure I had a good breakfast with plenty of protein.

“Each student doing their test that day was allocated a number of ukes. Of the 6 students doing their shodan test that day at the same time as me, I seemed to have attracted the 4 tallest and largest black belts in our school to be my ukes. I am 5’5” and quite small. One of the guys was well over 6’6” and at least triple my weight! Many of family, who had come to watch me, were alarmed to say the least. This was not a problem for me, particularly when I had to demonstrate my high falls. I remember flying through the air, almost in slow motion, as that rather large black belt was able to throw me very high and I had so much time in the air. I did catch sight of my sister-in-law’s face as I was getting up after one of these falls and noticed she looked really grumpy. When I asked her about it afterwards she said she was ready to explode at this very large black belt if he hurt me.

“The feeling afterwards was one of relief, tiredness and some anxiety as I waited to see if I had passed. Looking back, I knew immediately there were many areas that I could do better and improve upon. I am proud of my achievement and loved turning up to my next class in my black belt.”

In your observation of others, what pitfalls do you sometimes see?

“One of the areas that some students do not consider adequately in their preparation is the high level of aerobic and mental fitness required to perform an entire test. Most students are able to adequately perform any of their required techniques when directed with lots of precision and ki. However, a test requires students to demonstrate many techniques one after the other, sometimes using a number of ukes, at this high level of precision and with ki. This requires not only aerobic fitness but also concentration and mental agility.

“One experience from my own black belt test was mishearing my Sensei say the name of a technique. Having to be told to show the correct technique snapped me out of my zone mentally and took me some time to recover. Take time out to visualise how you would like your test to go, running through each technique and how well you would perform it. Shadow practice in your mind helps to work out all the details of the technique before you actually

move. If you get good at this, it can also be done during your test to eliminate any need to repeat a technique, if you realise half way through how it should be done.”

What general positive advice do you have for students in their Aikido training?

“The best advice I have is something a senior student told me when I was a junior rank. At that stage of my life, I was travelling overseas regularly and working long hours in my job, which made it difficult for me to attend Aikido classes regularly. The dojo was on my way home, but it was fairly easy for me to just continue on driving by, especially when I was tired and hungry. Once I was in my gi and training though, I felt great. But I often avoided just getting to that stage. One of the nights when I did turn up to train I remember walking up the stairs to our dojo with a senior student. He asked me how I was enjoying my Aikido training. I went on a little about work and also how I felt I was on a plateau with my training, probably because I wasn't turning up regularly, and sounded a bit sorry for myself. I also explained how great I felt after a class, but that I just seemed to have trouble getting there. He listened politely and then just said to me to just keep turning up. How simple! I used that advice from then on. I took all the excuses out and simply turned up to train. My Aikido gradually improved which then made me want to train even more. This is not to say there were not some times when it was difficult to continue with my training routine, but during these times I just reflected on the advice from my senior peer and arrived at my classes and left feeling tired but happy. My Sensei always said our job as students was to turn up and his job was to teach us Aikido. This is the best advice I can offer anyone. Just turn up to training and the rest will happen.”

James Sowerby Sensei

James holds an Aikido 4th dan and offers his thoughts.

What memories do you have of your shodan test?

“What I most remember of my test was being very conscious of the mistakes I was making. I think everyone does this, and how you deal with it during your test will determine the result.

“I had general feelings of happiness and relief at the end of test. A big part of the test for me was the physical aspect. The black belt was something to be revered and I was happy that I had achieved a boyhood dream, which is rare these days.”

In your observation of others, what pitfalls do you sometimes see?

“Students preparing for their black belt tests together often rely on each other's knowledge. Don't practise mistakes! Always seek advice from seniors ranked 2nd dan or above. Students should always do a couple of full dress rehearsals in front of some senior students.

“Running out of puff in a test will ruin good technique and concentration, so be sure to include aerobic training in your preparation.”

What general positive advice do you have for students in their Aikido training?

“My positive advice for students is the same as everyone else’s. Regularly attend training. The students in my dojo who manage to do their 10 classes per month to stick with the grading and progression program, perform better tests and have higher levels of skill and confidence than students who are irregular in their training habits.”

Michael Shaw Sensei

Michael holds an Aikido 4th dan and offers his thoughts.

What memories do you have of your shodan test?

“I don't have many memories of the test itself. It went by so quickly and was some time ago now. All I can really remember is being short of breath.

“The preparation is a different story. When I graded for my shodan, we spent a minimum of one year as a 1st kyu brown belt, so you knew six months out that you should be getting ready. I remember training very hard for six months, training before and after most classes, with as many black belts as I could. The black belt classes were the most challenging for me. My techniques rarely seemed to work and that would erode some of my confidence. Learning ukemi was challenging and I remember being quite sore learning on the old Fitzroy mats.

“After the test, I remember a feeling of relief more than anything else. I felt like I had made it, I had completed something. But in hindsight, I believe now that achieving shodan really only allowed me to begin training and become a student of Aikido.”

What do you look for during a shodan grading?

“Shodan is the first level. Once attained, it means that you can seriously begin your Aikido training. At shodan level, you must have an understanding of the basics. So I like to see an ability to execute the core kihon techniques with kokyu.

“When participating in Aikido training [at black belt level] it is important to execute technique strongly and this requires your training partners to take ukemi at that level. You must also be able to effectively execute ukemi and look after yourself so you can train safely at that level.”

What do you see as the biggest problem in most shodan gradings?

“The biggest issue each grading is the mental preparation. Those who do the best gradings are those who have confidence and trust in their Aikido. I have seen many people who are seemingly confident in their life, yet are unable to translate it into their Aikido and struggle through their shodan grading. Similarly, on the rare occasion I have seen people seemingly lacking in confidence in life, yet on the mat, they project a confident energy and produce a solid shodan grading. I recommend undertaking some mental preparation to ensure you are intimate with all the names and variations of the techniques to be demonstrated. Prepare your mind for dealing with errors and have a process for self correction and calming the nerves. The bonus is that these skills can also help in other areas of your life.

“Also keep in mind that your preparation for your grading is all the training you have done from your first class to now. Grading preparation is not limited to the month or two months before the grading day.”

In your observation of others, what pitfalls do you sometimes see?

“I think it's important to systematically work through the grading list and diligently prepare each technique. Often, I observe students either randomly working through the list or rushing through and not completing each technique. As a result, it is easy to detect errors and weaknesses in their Aikido.”

What general positive advice do you have for students in their Aikido training?

“Use Aikido as your mirror. Trust in yourself and your training. No matter how good or bad your day has been, just keep turning up to training and doing the best you can each class.”

Glossary

Japanese

hai
 onegai shimasu
 shitsurei shimasu
 sumimasen
 doomo arigato gozaimashita

hanmi
 kamaede
 hajime
 mawatte
 kotai
 yame
 tsugi
 rei

gi or dogi
 obi
 hakama

ken or bokken
 jo
 tanken

tai sabaki
 suri ashi
 ma'ai
 awaze
 kokyu
 hara
 ki
 ki'ai
 zanshin
 kihon

taijutsu
 nage waza
 katami waza

English

yes
 please or accept
 sorry
 excuse me (to attract attention)
 thank you very much

aikido stance
 take your stance
 begin
 turn around
 change roles
 stop
 next
 bow

uniform
 belt
 wide legged pants

sword
 staff
 knife

foot manoeuvring
 sliding feet
 distance in space and time
 blending or timing
 breath or extension
 centre of body
 spirit energy
 shout (to focus energy)
 state of awareness
 fundamental

open handed self defence
 throwing techniques
 locking and pinning technique

JapaneseEnglish

tachi waza	standing techniques
suwari waza	seated techniques
hanmi handachi	half and half
ushiro waza	rear attack
kaeshi waza	reversing techniques
jiyu waza	continuous techniques
buki waza	weapons training
ko tai	hard technique
ju tai	soft or flexible technique
ryu tai	flowing technique
ki tai	powerful technique
shomen uchi	head strike
yokomen uchi	neck strike
tsuki	chest punch
katate dori	wrist hold
hiji dori	elbow hold
ude dori	arm hold
sode guchi	cuff hold
sode dori	sleeve hold
kata dori	shoulder hold
gyaku katate or kosa dori	opposite wrist hold
morote dori	forearm double hold
ryote dori	two wrists hold
ryohiji dori	two elbows hold
ryokata dori	two shoulders hold
ushiro eri dori	neck hold from the rear
ushiro kubi shime	strangle hold from the rear
hidari and migi	left and right
omote and ura	front and back
uchi and soto	inside and outside
gedan chudan and jodan	low level middle level and high level

Japanese

ikkyo and nikyo
sankyo and yonkyo
gokyo and rokkyo

kokyu ho
irimi nage
shiho nage
kote gaeshi
koshi nage
kaiten nage
tenchi nage
juuji garami
kokyu nage

kohai
senpai
udansha
shidoin
sensei
shihan
soke
doshu

budo
bushin
bujutsu
aikido

English

first and second pinning techniques
third and fourth pinning techniques
fifth and sixth pinning techniques

breath method
entering throw
four direction throw
wrist turn
hip throw
rotary throw
heaven and earth throw
figure ten twine
extension throw

junior
senior
black belt
instructor
teacher
master
headmaster of a style
headmaster of a martial art

the code of the samurai
the spirit of the samurai
the techniques of the samurai
the way of peace and harmony