

Should I grade?

By Daren Sims

With the announcement of next years dates for dan grade weekends once again the question for some students when looking at shodan in particular is “should I grade – am I ready?”.

For others there is a stronger feeling of “I don’t want to grade – I’ll decide when I do – not you”.

Both fairly natural reactions, no one wants to carry a grade that they don’t feel up to. Furthermore no one wants to feel railroaded into grading.

Its certainly not for me to decide – especially in a general article which it written just to make people think.

Aikido is all about choice after all...you learn the bases and choose how and when to use them.

Or is it? Is it wrong of the dojo or the instructors to encourage you to make the right choice? Should they ask for something back. Or should they remain quiet while you exercise your rights of choice and in doing so slight them and the dojo?

Who’s to say? We’ve come a long way from the days where students waited for days to be allowed in the presence of the master – these days such attitude is seen only on films such as ‘fight club’. And quite rightly so. But have we gone too far when students expect the club to function for them and refuse to give something back?

Not for me to say, However if your thinking that you as a student should dictate as and when you grade, heres a couple of pointers which I believe could help you to see this from the instructors side of the tatami;

* I don’t want to grade. Fine – its your choice. Don’t grade. Stay as a beginner for ever. Apply the same philosophy to the rest of your life and achieve nothing. Just a thought from where I’m standing. Fortune favours the bold!

Bear in mind though that within Templegate the process of regular grading has long been proven to focus students and has contributed immensely to the development of students aikido. Take a look around at the achievements of your fellow students – those dan grades didn’t just fall out of trees. Well not all of them.

If your attitude is anti-grading, at least be consistent. Don’t grade all the way up to 1st kyu for instance and then decide not to grade.

We had an example of this last year. A student moving away elected not to grade. His choice of course. But what a waste of all of his instructors great efforts in getting him within a whisker of his dan grade. Be aware that while a dan grade is pretty much universal and will travel and be recognised a kyu grade is less likely to be and you may find yourself starting all over again. For what? I just can’t see a reason not to grade if you are good enough. But of course that is just my opinion.

- what do you do for your instructor?

Most instructors do the following for you.

- Give up time. Week in, week out. They miss time with their families, watching their crap team or even cut out having a good tea. Often while you enjoy the lesson they provide they themselves freeze to death without a whimper.
- They Monitor Evaluate and give feedback on your performance. Every week, sometimes many times. Often taking great pains to do so with sensitivity. Who gains most from this? Them or you?
- They treat all students equally and fairly – how often have you avoided the newbie or difficult student? Who hasn't been that difficult student? Were you a perfect student when you arrived? Your instructor doesn't have this choice of ignoring anyone on the mat – yet he started with the same goals and aspirations as yourself.
- Make every effort to provide lesson plans that balance aikido, learning, exercise and enjoyment. This is not easy. This whole process is geared towards preparing you for shodan – do you want to throw it back in their face? Is that what you want...cos that's what'll happen!
- Most instructors have an instructor who looks at them to develop students. Your grading is a display of what you have been taught. If its good then your instructors performance may have been good, if its bad your instructors performance may have been bad. Who can tell if you don't grade? This is your chance to do something for your instructor. And for the dojo too!

Again – I have examples of students electing not to do nidan last year. Personally I've never had a nidan student and would have liked to produce a nidan myself rather than being part of a team of instructors contributing to the students success. Its not a big deal of course and I accepted their decision, hopefully with grace. With the recent changes in class structure in Templegate I no longer have a nidan class so that opportunity is gone. For the foreseeable future. Who can say if it will come again. Fact is that they could have done something for me and didn't.

So what do you do for your instructor?

Seize the day! Give something back unless you believe aikido is all about taking.

- Its my choice

Absolutely. The student chooses an acceptable instructor. But having done so ...can you not trust that instructor to choose when you are ready. Instructors can choose too. Have you thought about that as you insult them by saying they are not able to tell if you are ready? Because that is effectively what you are doing – you are stating that you disagree with their judgement. This is fine but don't do it inadvertently.

Look at the other side of the coin too. Sometimes instructors have to tell students that they are not ready to grade. Now this is really difficult. Many Instructors have lost long term friends over gradings and I'm included in that category. Take it from me it can be a wee bit galling to have someone saying 'I want to feel at my very best when grading' or 'I just don't feel right' or some other seemingly trivial excuse when

you've just lost a friend and training partner of many years because you've been brave enough to help them avoid unnecessary stress by asking them to wait until the next grading and they've taken it badly. Often your instructor will still be dealing with the fall out from these scenarios long after you've graded, passed and are training as if you were born a shodan.

- Finally – why don't you feel ready?

Everyone has self doubts. Ignore them. By the time I reached shodan I realised it was nothing like I'd expected it to be. All it does is draw a line under your period of apprenticeship. You've studied the tools of aikido. Now its time to study aikido using those tools. Your instructor believes you are ready so lets just grade and be happy! Life is too short to worry about being perfect. Probably the only thing guaranteed in life is that you won't be.

- Are you scared to fail.

No one fails a grading. They just don't pass. Big deal. They carry on as before but usually with strengthened resolve to do better next time and to learn where they went wrong and improve. Then they come back and try again. So this is positive. A useful thing and something to be encouraged.

How did you feel the first time you came on the mat? A little scared? Like a fish out of water? Your still here so it must have been worth a little fear.

So don't stand back dithering– should I grade? Shouldn't I grade? What if I fail?

What if you pass?

A little fear is good sometimes. It can bring out the best in you if you let it.

Just do it. I bet you'll enjoy it. Especially when its over.!