

Nidan: Second Step

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Nidan Essay

Aikido has been a central part of my life since I was born. My parents met through Aikido. While my mother was pregnant with me, she taught classes and was dojo cho at North Bay Aikido in Santa Cruz. I've had the privilege of growing up surrounded by the support of the Aikido community. Since before I could think, I have been immersed in the loving philosophy of Aikido. I believe this has benefited me in more ways than I can fathom. You could say I was born of Aikido.

However, I did not have much choice in the matter. I simply arrived into my parents' world. Since I started my own training, I have often asked myself, "What is Aikido for me?"

When I started training in the youth program at age eleven, I did Aikido mainly to spend time with the friends I made through the class. As I grew older and trained with Anno Sensei, who began to visit from Japan, I became more interested in Aikido as a spiritual path.

Aikido began to seem bewilderingly complex to the point that it was impossible to do. How can our muscles remain relaxed while moving ourselves and someone else? How can we extend while maintaining posture? How can we keep an open field of vision while controlling the center line?

When I took my Shodan exam in August 2010, I thought the translation of the Japanese word "Shodan" as "First Step" was spot on. Taking this unattainability as my base, I tried to move despite that. With sincere effort and a core of basic technique, the rest would work itself out. For me, Shodan meant that despite all the challenges and paradoxes, I could mostly do the basics.

What then is the meaning of "Nidan" or "Second Step"?

Conventional wisdom says that once you can do the basics, it is time to move on to the flashy moves – to develop a personal style. I do not feel this is the case in Aikido. Instead of working on new details, for me Nidan has meant the cultivation of consistency and a strong base. I've stretched myself not by

learning fancier techniques that were too advanced for me before, but by developing my base and fluidity through basic movements. In a sense, the personal style that I have been endeavoring to cultivate in my preparation for Nidan has been that of confidence.

For three months before my exam, I taught the beginning classes at Aikido of Santa Cruz. A room of people expecting me to be an expert on Aikido every week was daunting. I constantly saw how much Aikido was beyond my grasp, yet somehow I was supposed to teach. After feeling nervous about this at first, I found it did not much matter what I could or could not do. What mattered was the attitude with which I approached my practice. The most basic of basics is an infinitely deep practice in Aikido, so I could be a beginner like everyone else in class. With an open mind and a willingness to learn I was able to do what seemed impossible – teach a room full of beginners.

The main difference in content between Shodan and Nidan was the addition of weapons practice and kaeshi waza – reversal techniques. I found these two practices developed me in opposite ways. Weapons practice demanded total confidence in entry and immediate control over the situation and the weapon. Alternatively, kaeshi waza required being patient until I felt an opening. There was a supreme confidence both in entering right away, and in waiting for an opening. In weapons practice, I developed the confidence to know I could follow up on my entry. And in kaeshi waza, I developed the confidence to stave off getting antsy before an opening appeared, and fighting over the technique.

Almost everything on my Nidan exam was on my Shodan exam. If on my Shodan exam, the examining board had asked me to “Demonstrate hanmi handachi ikkyo through yonko blindfolded with your hands tied,” I would have been able to demonstrate this with enough proficiency to pass – well, except perhaps for the hands tied part.

But I want my Aikido to be more than “enough.” I have been working to be able to do more than pass. I want my Aikido to enliven the room. I want enter or turn with such decisiveness that I disappear. I want to have a base that is as solid as the Earth. I want to make my partner smile. This is what Aikido is for me.