

Test Challenge Experiences

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Originally, this article was written in 2017 regarding my SHODAN exam. After testing for NIDAN at this year's Gi Yu Kyo Kai Annual Seminar, I thought there were very similar issues that are pertinent for NIDAN and higher levels. I realized many things, such as, with each level there is a higher level of expectation and responsibility on the student. I felt this article would help others as they seek to overcome whatever obstacles come in the way of humbly and diligently making progress. These ideas really start with SANKYU, green belt. That test often proves to be more demanding than many students expect as the first notch on the focused training showcase.



The SHODAN or 1st degree black belt rank level is one that is coveted by so many. At Gi Yu Dojo, this rank level is earned with significant difficulty for most. No one is entitled to it in any way. It is not earned without the help of those at higher DAN levels; sacrificial time and energy expended in regular classes and extra training that is offered. Training with your uke under guidance of higher DAN level Sempai is indispensable. A foundational discovery is learning to be a good uke.

Learning in this art of ours takes mimicking the standards as portrayed by Sukh Sensei. As taught in the lineages through generations including Manaka Sensei, Hatsumi Sensei and Takematsu Sensei. This occurs with showing up to class, learning by observation, self-discovery and repeated feedback from our teachers and fellow students. The movements of the kata also need to be practiced outside of class over and over to develop the “motor memory” we hear so much about. It is important to take notes on the parts of the kata that come out “choppy” due to typical problems: not understanding transitions, basic taijutsu, distancing, targeting, timing, speed, fluidity etc. Ongoing feedback from our instructors promotes the refinement process.

In the past one of our high-ranking DAN level instructors discussed the process of learning to “show case” the skill sets we are asked to master for our exams. This was described as a “box”. What is inside the box is acceptable for the testing standard. Elements outside of the box are not acceptable, even if it was displayed in any given class. The responsibility is on us to apprehend the kata as benchmarked and entrusted to Sukh Sensei. The best references to gauge your rank standards are Sukh Sensei himself and the DAN level videos. We have also been admonished by Sensei to discuss details with various higher DAN level students that are in the context of our exams but variations of those skill sets, to be precise, to review the techniques for the applicable rank. Variations have many purposes, but presenting variations of the “basics” for rank promotion is not one of them. Remember, not to depend on the videos alone to accurately learn the kata. Actually train on them to learn them.

We all need to consider the Bushido Warrior virtues when training in a KoRyu art. Humility is a great challenge and is integrated into each of the seven virtues. Believing you are better than you actually are, misses the mark. Telling others you are better than them, misses the mark. Feeling undeserving also reveals issues with lack of humility. Meiyō can also be quite challenging. Success, honor, glory; these descriptors require overcoming self-sabotage and blame as well as overly comparing self to others.

This year I did not pass the NIDAN test challenge. By reflecting on what helped me with SHODAN, I am continuing to train so that I will be fully prepared when testing again soon. I am also very proud of those who challenged their exams and passed at this last Annual Seminar. We can all learn from the progress they have made.

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