

T.K. Chiba Sensei on Promotion

Promotion is a natural process in the study of Aikido, in which timing as well as content vary on an individual basis. Each student progresses in an individual fashion, and how he or she should be given recognition can't be generalized. However, we can't afford to be completely without form, but need to have an overall guideline: test requirements.

Test requirements are a sensitive issue. They are fundamentally mechanical, and flexibility is required in order to meet the diversity of the human condition and the individual reality. For this reason, I have adopted the test 'guidelines' and not 'requirements' for the USAF Western Region. This system both ensures that promotion is not a matter of luck, and preserves my freedom to give recognition to my members beyond what is written.

Promotion in Aikido can be given through two different procedures: examination and recommendation. The most important rule for a teacher in conducting an examination is that one must never compare the performance and content of one student's examination with another. Each candidate should be examined based on his/her own human condition and as a complete individual, which requires a close understanding between teacher and student. Without having established this, the Aikido test is likely to be false. The overall principle and backbone of any examination is the degree of cultivation of the body – what I call an “Aikido body” – which is the degree of cultivating one's original body- consciousness. Objectively, an Aikido body manifests as centeredness, connectedness, wholeness, awareness, liveliness, flow, sharpness, clarity, orderliness, and spontaneity. Certainly there are important physical and technical principles in Aikido which make the art what it is, and they should never be taken lightly. However, as long as the body consciousness has been progressively activated, individual differences in performing the forms are acceptable. The important thing is to see the aliveness of the body, not the forms. Whenever the body is alive in its original mind, the forms come to life also. Promotion through recommendation is only possible when there exists a close teacher-student relationship, which is the core of the martial disciplines. Individual advancement must and should vary, and must never be treated mechanically. It is always an eye-opening experience to see a student make a major breakthrough – a leap to a higher dimension of physical awareness – in a short period of time. It is the responsibility, or rather, it is a required ability of the teacher, to be able to observe that breakthrough when it happens, and to give recognition of it promptly. When a student fails to receive recognition for progress, either through the teacher's negligence, or for some other reason, such development can fade away or go to sleep. The absence or recognition on the part of a teacher is as much a mistake as the granting of a premature promotion. When the fruit is picked before it is ripe, it has the same bitter taste as fruit that remains on the tree long after it has ripened. The keenness of the teacher's eyes is vital to the progressive advancement of his or her students.

Another element that needs to be taken into consideration when promoting through recommendation is what I call “big” Aikido and “small” Aikido. Big Aikido is how one deals with one's life beyond Aikido training in the dojo. Small Aikido is Aikido practiced inside the dojo.

I know many individuals whose learning inside the dojo has been relatively slow, but who, by conducting their lives in accordance with Aikido principles, I consider exemplary Aikidoists, and appropriate candidates for promotion. What I look for and how I judge when promoting either through examination or through recommendation is whether a student's Aikido carries something substantial, or is it superficial. On the other hand, however clumsy or incompetent a student appears, he/she may still hold something in his/her body that is truly substantial. A student's Aikido is substantial, regardless of the degree of technical advancement, when that student comes in contact with his/her true self, and comes to accept his/her original face, devoid of artificial decoration or judgment.

A student's Aikido is superficial when that student tried to be someone other than who he/she really is. This person has not yet come to experience his/her original face through the training. More broadly, this person's values in life are based on an accumulation of values copied from others. It is certainly important to copy one's teacher in learning the art. But remaining a copy is a different story. Having a teacher and copying from him or her is the correct path for most people and indeed is the core of the martial discipline. But the teacher's job is to prime the pump – to prepare the student to discard imitation and superficiality, so that he/she may come in contact with his/her true self, and accept his/her original face. This original body-consciousness, awakened through training, is in fact the very foundation of human life. It is martial – as is every living being on the earth from their first moment of existence – and at the same time it goes beyond the martial, to encompass mind, that is, spirit, soul, sense and intellect.