

## **AIKIDO TEACHING AND GRADING**

The Aikido practiced at the London Aikido Club is Iwama style. This is the style of Aikido taught by the founder, O'Sensei in his home dojo in Iwama from approximately 1945 for fifteen years. It is the true original Aikido of the founder in its last evolution and it is very different from other styles of what is generally called 'aikido' although there are superficial resemblances.

The late Morihiro Saito sensei made it his mission to promote this Aikido and asked those who studied with him to help him preserve O sensei's original techniques. This we try to do. In association with like-minded members of an international group called Takemusu Aiki Kyokai, we are custodians of a precious jewel, the marvellous Aikido of O sensei passed on by Saito sensei.

We do not deviate from this path, although we cannot claim to know it perfectly, and our understanding is developmental.

### **Iwama style is characterized by**

1. **the unification of jo, ken and taijutsu** in an interdependent system.  
"When you practice tai jutsu, think buki waza, when you practice buki waza, think tai jutsu"
2. **Basics.** Strong, solid basics are the ongoing keynote. Moving Aikido (ki no nagare) is not practiced until the basics are sound, and those basics must always be practiced. Just like a musician, however accomplished, will continue to practice his scales. "When we are lost we should return to the base"
3. "O sensei's techniques are very detailed and very rational"  
"It's all in the hips and angles"
4. **The pillars of Aikido** are HANMI, AWASE, KOKYU AND ZAN SHIN. With experience, and rising through the ranks, an Aikidoka's appreciation of these fundamentals will increase. This is the criterion on which assessment is made at gradings

PLEASE DO NOT ALLOW A CONCENTRATION ON TECHNIQUE TO DISTRACT YOU FROM THIS ESSENCE.

In keeping with the traditions of Japanese budo, the system is hierarchical, based primarily on the sempai/kohai system. A sempai is one who is there first, and who has the responsibility to kindly help those coming later, the kohai.

This means that we are all simultaneously both sempai and kohai. The kyu and dan ranks are overlaid on this system.

In Aikido as in most traditional Japanese arts, we use a grading or ranking system. This comprises 6 kyu ranks (before “black belt”) ie 6<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> followed by a number of dan ranks – shodan, nidan, sandan, yondan, godan, rokudan etc.

Gradings are given mainly on the basis of tests, subject to pre-requisites having prior approval.

The head instructor reserves the right to give promotions without testing in special cases. Any instructor might make a recommendation to the Head Instructor.

Nobody has to grade. It is fine just to train, and after a long period of time the hakama may be worn and duties of a sempai assumed. I would strongly recommend that everybody does participate in the grading process because it assists with learning, but since the club is concerned with personal development through Aikido, all points of view must be taken into account.

## **PURPOSE OF GRADING AND ATTITUDE TO GRADING**

***The sole purpose of grading is to define and maintain standards.***

We have been left by O’Sensei through Saito Sensei, this marvellous system we know as Aikido. It is all too easy to modify the original system and develop personal styles which are less effective than the original. Even during his lifetime, O’Sensei was unhappy at the way some of his techniques were changed. Thanks to Saito Sensei we have a very good contact with the source of Aikido, and it is a major responsibility to maintain the integrity of the art. *By taking a grading, students are participating in this process by having their Aikido checked against this benchmark.*

With training, ability grows. In the early kyu ranks, only the basic correctness of the hands and feet can be expected. As time goes on, the use of the hips, the centre and an appreciation of angles and blending increases the quality of the movement. Thus, the same movement would be expected to a higher standard at every rank.

There is no “pass” or “failure”. The concept is “ready now” or “ready in the future”. No triumph, no disaster! Although this system establishes a hierarchy, and this hierarchy is used within the running of the dojo, it is not a hierarchy of heavy-handed authority. A “sempai” or senior is “one who was there first” and should therefore be able to show the way. **It is about responsibility, not power.**

There should be no sense of “pecking order”. The sempai lead by example.

We come from a culture where the passing and failing of exams is paramount. We also usually learn that exam technique can often be more important than ability or knowledge. Getting through is the point, and passing signifies triumph. Even if you “passed, but didn’t know anything”, you probably wouldn’t send back your certificate. **That system is not about maintaining standards, and we should try to learn to carry none of it into a grading, which is very hard after a lifetime’s conditioning.** Excessive preparation by rehearsing the grading techniques does not guarantee a pass. This can lead to a choreography which is superficially correct but lacks essence.

*Ideally go in with an open mind, and expect “yes” or “no”. If “yes”, you just keep training at the same problem. If “no” you will be told where the problems were and this should help with your personal progress.*

It is only of relevance to compare yourself with the standard. Occasionally, students compare themselves with each other – “he passed, so I should as well”. “If he’s a fifth dan, I should be a fifth dan”. *Only comparison with the standard matters.*

Only when you become an examiner can you actually understand what is looked for.

## **CRITERIA**

There are three aspects to every grading.

- (a) **TECHNICAL CORRECTNESS**    Precise, accurate, authoritative execution of the movements
- (b) **ATTITUDE**                      Preparation, discipline, etiquette, spirit, alertness, posture, respect for uke
- (c) **DOJO CONDUCT**                A dojo is a community as well as a place of learning, and everyone should participate from day one. We can all make individual contributions to the overall well being of the dojo.  
  
Commitment, loyalty and endeavour are vital qualities for the dojo to thrive and for the members to fully benefit from their Aikido practice.