

A Thought or Two on Grading

What's it good for anyway?



Curated by Amy CharlesChiu

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Paper heroes

OK it's going to be that sort of morning is it? Phone turns itself on and drains its battery overnight, coffee shop closed an extra hour so I have to wait outside, Bluetooth keyboard goes silent and has to be reconnected. Oh and the upper back seems to have reversed its course, getting worse instead of better.

At least there's a little sun out there to look at, which is a lot more interesting than the 7dan iaido certificate on my wall. Behind it is all the other iai certificates I could find floating around the house. I think I'm missing a couple but never mind, each of those lower certifications became meaningless the moment I got the next one.

I constantly think about paper it seems, mostly to rail against the idea that it's a worthy goal for anyone. I don't think it is, you don't need it to practice budo, and you don't make money in our organization so there is no return for the cost of it. The sole use is to sit panels and keep the system ticking over, to give out more paper. That's why my paper is on the wall, you hang the last one, and 7dan is the highest useful rank outside Japan according to the international rules. If that changes, well, ranks above 7dan, and shogo (which currently have no meaning at all in the international guidelines) are the responsibility of the local country, so if we need them we hand them out.

What? No testing? Testing, what is that? We have a couple of 7dan challengers travelling to Europe once or twice a year to test. They are being told "you're close, just this tweak or that little nudge and you'll get it". So they show up for the next round hoping that panel will, what? Appreciate the tweak or the nudge? This is the algebra test at the end of the term isn't it? You need to get 50% of the correct answers and you pass. Like an algebra test that you try several times, the questions change a little each time, sometimes you need to tweak your noto, sometimes you need to change the angle at which you do uke nagashi. You have to guess which aspects of algebra you're going to be tested on every time.

That's called an objective test, it's supposed to be fairer than your teacher simply giving you his opinion on your ability to do algebra. And once you pass the test? You can forget it. Go into biology and never think about quadratics ever again... well once, 20 years later when you are trying to work out a concentration for a solution and you suddenly say "wait that looks familiar!"

Oh yes, did I mention that testing is expensive? I suspect each of these overseas attempts are costing multiple thousands of dollars. They have taken up a couple of years so far and since the questions keep changing, the tweaks, it's hard to see an end to the process. When you face a different panel each time you test, you're going to have a different test. Sure we say the standards are objective but really, how can they be for something that we say is personal, after 5dan other things, mental things, spiritual things come into play. We should rather say that the standards should be consistent from test to test. That means having the same examiners each time, or at least pulling examiners from the same pool. Otherwise it's the luck of the draw, if you get 4 examiners that agree with how you move, that guess favourable about your mental state, you pass.

What do you do? Try once and if you fail go away for five years and try again? That would be my suggestion, if you're not there, a few months aren't going to do it, if you're there but the panel decided you stubbed your toe on the third step of the fifth kata... um practice five years until you just don't care anymore and can relax enough to not stub your toe no matter what. In other words, go for the paper when you really and truly don't care about the paper any more.

So what about the other kind of paper? The old way, the subjective way, paper as opinion rather than as testing. That's where your sensei, who knows you well, who watches you every class, gives you a piece of paper that says.... what? That he thinks you have learned what it says you learned on the paper. Often this was a list of kata you have memorized, so the paper says "you know these kata". Maybe there's multiple sets of kata so you get multiple pieces of paper during your career. Maybe eventually you get a piece of paper that says "you have learned everything I can teach you, go teach if you want".

Again, in this day and age, what does that mean? It's paper on the wall, its wallpaper. If it's an ego boost it's not good for you. If you can make money with it, by taking cash for kata, maybe that's a good thing but what student knows enough to ask to see the paper, and how many can read it? It's probably in Japanese. You can teach without paper, just call it something other than what you learned if that organization is fussy about paper.

Is paper a validation of your skill? Don't you know your skill? Don't your sensei and your students know your skill? If I give you paper that says you can fly a plane will you believe it? You might if you can actually fly a plane. Again, don't try for the paper until you have no use for the paper, until its wallpaper.

Mileposts, markers along the way to work toward? Sure, why not. I'm OK with that for those who find that useful, but there are other things that can substitute for paper, seminars for instance. I tend to practice harder as seminars are approaching, just so I can demonstrate the kata well enough to be taught something other than the dance moves. Teaching, I tended to review kata for the next class so that I could demonstrate them smoothly for the students. I don't worry so much any more about hiccups in my demonstrations, I blame it on old age and failing memory and muddle through anyway. Remembering the names? That's what 4dans are for.

Let's face it, in 40 years of practice I still don't know what these papers mean. Mostly because paper doesn't mean anything consistent at all. A shodan is not a shodan is not a shodan. A certification means exactly whatever the issuing person, panel or profession says it means, no more and no less. If you're chasing a rank that keeps requiring "just a little more of this or that", maybe the requirements are similarly vague. The more meaningless, the vaguer? That's something to think about. If you can't say what a piece of paper means, maybe its meaning is exactly that, unknown.

I know what a 7dan means in the FIK, it means you can sit panels up to 7dan. That's why I've got that piece of paper on my wall. That's what I consider I was being tested on by the panel that gave it to me. Can this guy recognize this level of skill? Looks like he can, so give him the paper.

That's where both systems come together, where the panel test meets the private opinion. We think you can perform whatever duties the paper says you can perform, or what the bylaws say you can do.

You can, at this moment in time, perform algebra at a satisfactory level of skill. No promises about 20 years from now but that's not what we're testing is it? Maybe 20 years from now you're going to be testing kids on an algebra that is super-different than what you're doing right now. Maybe you will help define that new algebra. Maybe we have faith that you can do that. Maybe not, but we do know that we're going to need algebra teachers in 20 years when we're retired so here you go.

Another paper hero.

Have I talked you out of the gradings coming up in a couple of weeks? If so there is still a seminar to attend so feel free to register for that, the club credit card and bank account are both looking a little like my upper back feels. Rather poorly.

Nov 11, 2018

Grading and Quality

A suggestion was made that with gradings, defined as handing out rank for money, comes a drop in quality in a martial art. Is that true? I don't know, are those who learn without gradings more serious than those who do? Do people really confuse rank with knowledge so that they pay for rank instead of work for knowledge?

I'm pretty certain that everyone, those who give ranks and those who don't, worry about quality. In the kendo federation it seems that folks have slowly got the idea that quotas, specific, low percentages passed means that the quality of the grades is high. The question which begs to be asked is whether it's the standards that are getting higher or the students who are less skilled. If pass rates drop it can be a factor of many things.

1. Standards are getting higher. This simply shifts the ranks to the new scale, 5dan is the new 6dan. I have actually been told this, as in "you should be very proud of your new 5dan because it's very difficult to get 5dan in Japan these days, it's a high rank". The problem with shifting the standards downward is that in places that are not Japan, Canada for instance, there is a shortage of rank that can run the system. A 5dan can sit a panel up to 3dan, after that you've got to fly in panellists. If you shift the standards you ought to shift the privileges too, let 5dans sit 5dan panels. This makes sense for everywhere but Japan where the shifting standards will have originated. There the problem is a logjam of rank at the top which, in order to avoid dilution, requires slowing down the pass rates. This means, in the kendo federation, that standards shifted for 8dan, 7dan, 6dan, and now it's reached down as low as 4dan apparently.

With changing standards should the current grades not have to retest? Why is grandfather grandfathered in? Just asking. More than that, should the new standards not be acknowledged, published and taught toward? To raise the standards without notice is to introduce unfairness into the system. "I know you're expecting the grade 12 algebra exam but here's the grade 13 calculus exam instead, gambatte". "Although there has never been a timer put on the exam before, we timed you this time and you went over time so you failed". "This time the judges decided that etiquette is hugely important and that your etiquette is crap, that none of you know the proper etiquette so you all failed".

2. Students are getting worse. If the standards are not getting higher, the student skills must be lower. How else do you explain a lower percentage pass rate? Is this true, are students getting worse at this stuff? If so whose fault is that? The students? This younger generation, so lazy, why in my day.... Or is it that their teachers are getting worse. For the upper ranks to fail more students is for them to admit that their teaching is getting worse. (Provided that the standards haven't changed.) "Your etiquette is awful, you need to work on it, although we never taught the correct stuff to you, you didn't meet the standard this time so you all fail".

Is it a good test of skill to be tested on that which you weren't taught? Yet this happens every time someone at the top decides that something is lacking in these students, and the rest of the panel goes along with it instead of protesting. "No, you can't require the students to demonstrate something we never taught them, the fault is ours, not theirs so give us what-for but judge the students on what they were taught". Yeah, right, like that happens.

3. "Unwritten rules" are being applied. Did someone forget to tell the students about the stuff that isn't written down, like "you need a powerful sponsor to push you through" or "you need to get the gift to the sensei" or "there are only four people of your rank that pass each year and you're the fifth, you have to wait your turn" or "we've got loads of 6dans in your area, now if you were from somewhere that needs a 6dan" or "you weren't at enough seminars for the past three years to get your face in front of the panel". I'm sure we can all think up unwritten rules of our own. If they are unwritten they can change at a moment's notice and we are back to students not being informed of the actual standards for passing.

Unwritten rules are essentially "cronyism". If you are in the right crowd you will be told the rules and you will pass if you follow those rules. First, you have to know the right folks to be told the rules. What is having a powerful sponsor if not the definition of cronyism, you pass because of who puts you forward. Waiting your turn, being seen at every seminar is also a form of cronyism, of being "in the in-group".

4. Quotas are being imposed. "In Japan they only pass 3% of 5dans so to keep our standards up we will only pass 3% of our students because there's no way our challengers can be better than those in Japan". Really? Is this true? What if our challengers take extra years to manage a 6dan grading, while in Japan the challengers are there in the absolute minimum time between gradings? Would that account for a difference in pass rates given clearly open and fair standards? Time in training alone could account for differences in pass rates.

5. The panel is simply not possible. What could account for a difference in time between panels? Not being able to put a panel together would be one. We had several years gap in the jodo gradings here in Canada as we worked out how to put a panel together. It works now, but we will still have gap years because we don't have the money to fly in panellists each year. Thankfully we don't have as many challengers who need the upper level panels. The kendo section has no such problems, they have the rank in place to provide all our gradings without needing to fly people in. This is economical and provides standardized panels which will result in consistent expectations for challengers. Give us another decade and we may be there as well.

There are many places around the world who are in worse shape than we are, needing to bring in panellists from other countries for shodan gradings. As a result, those challenging shodan may have been practicing for a decade, would it be reasonable to expect that their pass rate would be higher than Japan's? What happens with the unwritten rules that "you have to get your face in front of the panel" and "you have to wait your turn" when you are forced to go to another country to grade because your own country has no gradings? Oh yes, this stuff can get pretty complex.

Does a grading system mean quality goes down? Or up? Or is rank, as I was told 30 years ago by my Aikido sensei, mostly a function of how long you've been hanging around?

One is told that a grading system is based on objective standards, is this true? What about those arts that have no grading system. Is a ranking system automatically a grading system? ALL martial arts have ranking systems, teacher - student is rank, sempai - kohei (the "first through the door" modified by age, social status etc. system) is a ranking system. Paper certification for completion of levels of study is a ranking system.

A grading system so dominated by unwritten rules that it is no longer a measure of objective skill, is still a ranking system. A grading system that is completely based on the purchase of rank is still a ranking system.

Quality isn't necessarily affected by a grading system, that depends on who is doing the grading. Quality is certainly not directly linked to ranking systems since they are ubiquitous. Quality, I would argue, is tightly linked to the abilities of the teachers. Good teachers tend to have good students, regardless of the ranking or grading systems.

The moment a grading system is based on anything but objective standards of quality, it is not dropping quality, it is divorced from quality.

Oct 9, 2018

Making the grade

There is some rumbling in the pipelines that Niten Ichiryu may bring back grading. I have practised the art for 26 years now and have not felt any loss for the lack of a rank or title. I have been quite content to study the art for the sake of studying it, as I do all my koryu. I have never asked about rank in any of them, and never thought to ask my instructors if they had a rank either. They are good, they can teach, I'm content.

But I can see where grading would have a certain use. People like to know where they are and they certainly benefit from something to work toward. My interest in Niten has been aroused by an upcoming seminar and the resulting requests to have a class or seven beforehand. Happy to accommodate, whatever the class figures it needs is what we do, and I like Niten.

I am curious what sort of criteria people will suggest for the various levels. Will it be something technically standardized like we do for Seitei iai and jo? If so I am, as they say, pooched. I'm hopelessly old-time, having learned the style of three or more soke ago. I'm happy practising whatever the style is today while studying with the soke, but I'm not all that anxious to have a seitei and a koryu version of Niten to work on, having seitei and koryu versions of iaido and jo is work enough thanks. Having a standardized version of Niten would make it something other than a koryu simply because it's been standardized.

If we are talking a test of understanding of fundamental principles as outlined by Musashi and taught by the current instructors, I wonder who, other than the soke and a few of his contemporaries would be qualified to judge this. Because grading requires judging and judging requires knowledge of what and how to judge.

One Niten organization published their requirements, you got a rank for each set of practice you learned until you hit the highest level with Niten Bo (yes there is such a thing). I first looked at that and thought "huh, I'm a Menkyo" (I don't know all the Niten Bo so no Menkyo Kaiden for me). About a year later I noticed that the requirements had changed to include some sort of judgment by the seniors, something about "suitable character" if I remember it right.

I have no particular problem with giving a rank for memorizing a set of kata, after all, a paper that says "so and so has successfully learned the following kata" is pretty much what the old menkyo kaiden were yes? The key is "successfully learned" of course. Who judges, who defines. You get a license for knowing a set, who is that for? You obviously, your sensei knows what you know, and what you don't know. This is a license of completion, something to put on your wall that says "I once knew this stuff", like The Calculus, I passed a course or two where I learned it. And forgot it because I never used it. (Do I give back my old transcripts?)

Grades are demonstrably useful in getting and keeping students around. Certification happens in the sort of spontaneous generation that folks once thought happened with life. One minute a rotten piece of meat, the next flies are swarming out of it. Every new aerobics fad generates a certification system very shortly after its invention, sometimes at the same time. Community centres like to see the paper that says "so and so is certified to teach this stuff". They like it for hip-hop hot rhumba and they like it for martial arts. You got paper? Yes. Good, carry on.

You got paper? No but I've been practising this stuff for 30 years. Come on back with some paper. Do you need to see the paper? No, I guess not... You want to know who gave me the paper? Umm.... Does the paper I just told you I have certify that I can teach this stuff, or that I learned this stuff? Errr....

I learned Niten with no certification. One class my instructor said "where are all the other students" and I took that to mean "go teach this", or more accurately, "I figure you're teaching this so go ahead and bring the other students along". My teaching license. I haven't shown that license (story) to anyone in years, they just walk in and start practising, nobody asks for my paper.

Grades or certification often confer... no not the right word, they allow, they permit things like teaching, or sitting in judgment. They don't confer, nobody can be made to teach or sit a panel. The definition of a grade may include "you can put students forward to grade" as our 5dan paper does. It doesn't mean you have to teach, in fact it says put students forth for grading. You can teach any time, before getting a 5dan you need someone else's signature on the grading application, after 5 it's yours.

These are just a few random thoughts on grading, I'm fine with it either way, grade or no grade. I can see benefits to grading and I can see problems. One thing I know, grading systems mean something only to the group that uses it. A grade in one art means nothing in another, a grade in one organization means nothing to the same art in another organization.

You don't have to grade even if gradings are expected in your organization. I've known lots of folks through the years who have dropped out or never started on the grading ladder. What do you want from your paper? If you want to teach without someone breathing down your neck, get to the teaching rank. Anything beyond that is a rank that implies organizational responsibility. In the CKF you can put students forth for grades at 5dan. There is no rank beyond that which lets you give rank, we have panels with a sliding scale. Before you "can teach" you can sit on a panel, 4dan can judge 1dan. 5dan can judge 3dan, 6 can judge 4, and 7 can judge 7. Want to be a judge? Get the rank, we could use some more 7dans for sure in both iai and jo where we only have 5 and zero. We're fine for kendo, with enough rank for panels on both sides of the country, Toronto and Vancouver (get it, both sides... oh never mind it's a Canada thing, as in "there's something east of Toronto???").

Aside from teaching and judging, the higher ranks are expected to do the heavy lifting of promoting and organizing the art as well. If you don't have the time or patience for that, why would you grade? As for me, I keep saying I don't care about the rank and I don't. In the arts where I can get no rank, I teach, I promote and organize the arts, and I gently urge students to go teach when they leave the nest. OK I kick them hard and say "you better not have wasted my time, teach this stuff wherever you are". So without a grading system to tell when I can do those things, I do them when they need doing. Thus, I don't need or desire the paper. On the other hand, some of my arts, jodo and iaido specifically, require rank for certain things and expect grading and rank for others. In this case, I grade to the maximum useful rank and then hang the paper on the wall.

You only hang up your last paper, then you stop collecting it. My 7dan iai paper is on the wall, all the rest of those certificates, as many as I could find, are behind that one. I don't know where my jodo or aikido certificates are, I've lost them again, and hopefully they will show up if I need them. Should probably hang the aikido paper, I'm never going to be healthy enough to take another rank. I will if I find it again.

Grades, formal or informal, are grades. Teachers and students is a grade, probably the only one that has real meaning, and the rest may just be signposts on the journey.

Hooked In

Seitei Jodo last evening, we'll practice it a lot between now and the grading in a couple of weeks. The registrations for the seminar are trickling in, I hope registrations for grading are being done. As an official of the CKF I would like folks to get into the grading system as soon as possible.

We can argue the merits of Seitei Gata Jo and Iai, we can argue the style, the intent, all sorts of things, but the fact remains at the end of the day that our gradings are done with Seitei jo. The organization needs those Seitei gradings to hook students into the system that brings dues and grading fees which is how the organization can afford to exist.

It's as simple as that, really. It's about investment. The organization needs to provide gradings, it needs to invest in them so that new members get hooked in and current members remain connected. The investment in organizing gradings pays off in income.

On the membership side, the investment is in time and money to get the rank. Once a beginner has taken that first grading there's an expectation that they work toward the next. It's a continuing incentive which can provide a life-long reason to stay hooked into the system.

Is that it? Money for rank? Is there nothing else? Of course there is, an organization provides a framework for instruction. "I'm in the CKF because my sensei is in the CKF" is actually sufficient reason to be a member. Beginners are loyal to their sensei, not necessarily to an organization, so if that sensei leaves the organization a lot of his students will be gone as well. It's happened, it can happen again. It doesn't help the organization when 50 members follow their sensei out the door. The organization may provide other things, in the case of the CKF that's an insurance policy that allows dojo to practice in public spaces. This is a big thing. It's the finance and organization of the Kendo team for the world championships. It's a bit of development money to help pay for seminars in jodo and iaido. It's a community of practice, a community of instructors. It's your sensei.

Sensei bring in the students, sensei keep the students. Beginners aren't loyal to the organization, they are loyal to their sensei for the very simple reason that their sensei is the face of the organization. Students don't really believe that rank is the purpose of budo, not most of them. Rank is "what you do", and once you get into the system you have an investment in the organization, certainly, but the important thing is the practice and you do that with your sensei, not somebody in a head office a thousand miles away.

So where does an organization, those guys in the far away office, put its efforts? For new membership, into the grading system. Provide the grading opportunities so that the sensei can get their students hooked into the system. Make it easy to go to a grading. In practical terms that means getting the gradings to the students, in a country like Canada it's insane to expect that beginning students are going to want to spend a thousand dollars to travel a thousand miles to get their first rank. Why would they do that? They have no investment in the system. There are lots of students who never get hooked into that system, they practice for years without gradings because gradings aren't available anywhere but a thousand miles away.

No country that makes it difficult to get to gradings is doing itself any favours. Lack of grading opportunity does not make for skilled shodans. If you do your shodan test after 20 years of study you will certainly be a good shodan but think about that for a moment.

Get the gradings to the students at the lower ranks. If there's a local seminar happening and you've got enough rank for a panel, put that panel together. Get the students hooked into the system. Remember always that they don't have to get involved in the organization, the system, at all. They have their teacher.

How do you keep the membership in the organization once you have them hooked in? Pretty much the same way, you provide gradings for the sensei. You keep the sensei around because you support them and their practice. You give them reasons to stay around. Senior gradings may need to be a thousand miles away because of a lack of panellists, you need to do gradings at major seminars where you can afford to fly the big guns in. Should the organization do this? Absolutely. Can the organization fly in a bunch of panellists from overseas so that the senior ranks can get even more rank? If it can, it should, if it wants to continue as an organization, remember that if you lose the senior ranks you lose all their students as well. But not every organization can afford to fly senior panellists to all parts of a huge country. Some can't afford it at all, so someone has to organize a seminar that will pay for the panel and that is often thousands of miles away.

Fine, find some other way to get those seniors to the grading. Maybe throw them a bone, slip them a bit of a break on the seminar fee, or a travel bursary. It's an investment in the future, an investment in keeping the organization healthy. What you do not want to do is make it hard to keep grading. What you do not want to do is tell the seniors that they must spend thousands of dollars to organize their own gradings, or get to gradings, without giving them any incentive or use for those gradings. By the time you're a senior rank you aren't usually looking for an ego boost, so you need a reason to take that next rank. If there isn't one, if the organization isn't interested in you or your rank, why would you reach for your wallet?

Organizations are their membership. Make that membership angry by acting like they owe the organization loyalty (and money) and they are likely to walk out the door. Remember, the loyalty is to the sensei and the sensei is in the organization. If the sensei leaves, or even if they simply stop promoting gradings and membership in the organization, the students stop being hooked into the system. Sensei may tolerate being treated badly by the organization for a while, they may stick around "for the students", but if there is nothing happening "for the students" for long enough, even the most loyal members will gradually stop supporting the organization.

Simply because the organization has stopped supporting them.

So we will continue to practice Seitei Jodo for the next few weeks whether or not anyone from the dojo is grading. I will be kicking them in the rear end to go to the seminar and watch the grading even if they are not challenging for the next rank. This will help keep them hooked into the system and I support the system, I have for a very long time, our community shares a common goal, our sensei tend to look out for their students rather than themselves, and the organization provides the framework for all of us to work together.

It's worth staying hooked in.

Oct 31, 2018

The Lost Generation

I found a piece of paper under a pile of junk at the cabin. It has what looks like a note for an essay but like others of its kind, I have no idea what I was thinking at the time. Let's see what it means today since I'm looking for things to do.

It seems to be a comparison of seitei and koryu in relationship with a Lost Generation.

First, it says balance. I'm assuming that we need a balance between the two, or rather, that we want, desire, a balance between the two.

The note goes on to say that if we are denied gradings, we concentrate on koryu. I think I know where this is going. Seitei is for grading, without the gradings that go along with it, what the point of practising seitei. Better by far to practice koryu.

The next statement is that we must stick around for the organization. Must? Yes indeed, without "us" there is no organization. But, it says, if the organization doesn't do what it does, if it doesn't provide gradings for its membership that membership will leave or will concentrate on koryu.

Hence, you end up with a lost generation of members (who do seitei, call them B). You lose the link between the previous generation (A), which didn't provide gradings, and the one that, we presume, will reinstate the gradings (C). In between there, a generation (B) will be teaching without any interest in seitei.

Hmm, do I believe this? What organization in its right mind would break the grading cycle and deny itself the income and membership that goes along with those gradings. And once a generation of instructors wanders off to do koryu, why would their students return to do seitei? Let's face it, arguments over gradings is the most likely reason for people to quit the group.

Why would those at the top of the grading system, generation A, deny gradings to generation B in the first place? I'm really not sure what I was thinking, unless it was worry about my inability to arrange jodo gradings of 4dan and above. That wasn't out of a choice on the organization's part, it was simply that I hadn't figured it out yet. We lost a couple of years, but not a generation by any means. It also helps that of our group of senior ranks, only two of us are over 60 so we ought to have the ranks around for long enough to be able to make more leaders.

Should generation A deny gradings to generation B, why in the world would generation C (or B) reinstate them, assuming of course that they had the rank left to do so. Remember that the rank would have to be in generation A, which said no in the first place. Or am I being too discrete with my generations? They aren't strictly digital are they? They intermix, so maybe, thinking nastily here of those who "want to be in charge", of which there seem to be a few in every organization, maybe generation C arranged things so that generation A couldn't do gradings, and then when generation B is lost, generation C steps up and is suddenly in charge.

One would hope that would be stopped before it started, by keeping the gradings going. And it's not necessary anyway, let's face it, most people would be happy to say "go ahead, be in charge" to anyone who wanted the job. This stuff is voluntary and in most voluntary organizations the guys who want to be in charge end up there. Look at small town mayors who can't retire because nobody runs against them. And those jobs have perks, unlike most budo jobs.

I still don't know what I had in mind when I wrote that note, but pondering it has killed an hour or so.

Nov 18, 2018

The Divine Origins of Seitei Gata

Or Zen Ken Ren jo/iai, or zkri or zkrj or Zen Nihon Kendo Renmei jo/iai. Lots of names for a couple of sets of kata, one for jodo and one for iaido.

What are they? They are the sets that the various Kendo federations around the world use to grade students. They "belong" to the kendo federations. Plural? Yes, there are lots of countries, including Japan, in the FIK, the International Kendo Federation. Each country does its own gradings, so there are many Federations that use Seitei Gata jo and iai for gradings.

Just to be clear about this, because people are not clear about this, each country gives rank. That rank is recognized by other members of the FIK. Your rank comes from the country that issued it. There is one, single, organization that is between individual countries and the FIK and that is the European Kendo Federation (EKF). You must be a member of the EKF to join the FIK if you are in the European Zone. There is no such organization in the Americas Zone (North and South America) or the Asia Zone. There are three Zones worldwide. There are standard guidelines for gradings but, contrary to persistent belief, you do not get your grade from Japan unless you physically go and grade in Japan. There are no Japanese gradings outside Japan, if Japanese sensei are sitting on your panel, they are sitting on your country's panel by invitation. They are not "in charge", your country is.

Honestly, this causes no end of trouble, and it should not. Read the rules for your country and you are done. Rumour is always just that, the latest rumour I have heard is that an "unauthorized shinsa" was held recently in my country. There is no such thing possible. Our rules say the President authorizes gradings, if he hasn't authorized a grading there is no grading. It's that simple. In order to take a grading in Canada you must register through our online system. If you have not done that you are not participating in a grading. If someone is charging you money directly for a "grading" you'd better ask some questions, maybe it's a club grading, maybe it's a koryu grading but it's not a CKF grading. You will note that it's the President that authorizes gradings, not the Chief Examiner. I get to ask the President. I don't dictate, I ask. I don't forbid, I advise. I've said all this before but every grading season it seems to come up again.

There is a book for jodo and one for iaido that, as Mansfield sensei said recently, is NOT the bible. It is a book that provides some check points that you can reference. This defines the kata, it does not contain all the wisdom of jodo or iaido, that wisdom is imparted by your sensei. I have called the book "the bible" in the past, and I will continue to do so but I hope it is obvious that my tongue is firmly in my cheek when I do.

Read the book and follow what your sensei says if it's not in the book. That's what you're supposed to do. Your sensei reads the book, you should too.

You should know what's in the book so that you know what to ignore when being told "what's what" by someone other than your sensei. Does that sound strange? I suppose it might if you believe that the book is the bible and that all wisdom is contained in the literal interpretation of the bible. Or if you're less fundamentalist, that wisdom is imparted by a hierarchy of interpreters stretching up to the chair of the section in Japan. The higher up the chain the more accurate the interpretation of the bible?

I dunno, the way it goes around our place is "So and so said we should do this part like this" and my response is usually "go ahead" but sometimes it's "I'm not going to do it that way and I'd prefer you didn't either". That's if the so and so in question is someone I respect. If it's some 3dan from another dojo who just came back from a seminar and is spreading the wisdom, I'm likely to laugh and walk away. It's not so much that I'm a jerk (I am) but the "change" is usually a correction for that 3dan. Corrections for you are not changes for the rest of the world, sorry about that.

There are personal preferences out there, there are flavours of practice. Yes I know Seitei Gata translates as representative forms or some such, I know they are supposed to be "standard" but I've listened to enough complaining by "top guys" that other "top guys" aren't doing it right, to know that you're better to pick one of them and do that until you understand stuff, than to chase multiple rabbits. One sensei folks, let him worry about the personal preferences of the higher ups. Let him worry, you just do what he tells you to do.

If you only do seitei kata you can really get hung up on the details of the kata without knowing what parts are important. A while ago this came up with respect to when one puts one's hands on the sword. Does one do it on the first or the second part of the second step as you move three steps toward the opponent?

Try it.

Your opponent is allowed to grab your bokuto (don't use a shinken to try this) and take it away from you. When do you put your hands on the hilt? That's when you put your hands on the hilt.

Unless it's written in the book... Is it written in the book?

I should check.

Dec 7, 2018

Angry again, time to rant and calm down.

Sometimes I wish I was the guy I am accused of being. The guy who "tells his students to do stuff". It would be so easy to get things done if I was that guy, do the math folks, who taught who.

Nope, sometimes it's just that you or your ideas are not very well liked, it's not some puppet master (me) in the shadows pulling strings. Did it ever occur to anyone that maybe my students are adults who can think for themselves and who might just agree with me? Did it occur to anyone that not even the Pamurai does what I tell her, and I can smack her on the head for disobedience every single class. Hell she doesn't even keep me informed, let alone do what I tell her. "Don't tell and he won't ask"?

As you may have guessed, another poor decision has been made, someone who is full of integrity has been accused of exactly the opposite. It's the way of the world these days, it's how those in power obtain and remain in power. Lie and accuse the other guys of doing what you, yourself are doing. Why not, nobody is paying attention, nobody cares enough to check on what is actually happening.

The squeaky wheel gets the grease, the guy who whines and harangues loudest and longest wins, and as long as the general public doesn't care, it will continue to happen. Anything to shut those guys up for ten minutes!

Big breath. Repeat mantra, "not my monkeys, not my circus". There, didn't help a bit... well actually it did.

The Pamurai and I had a beer last evening and we got onto the philosophy of gradings once more. She mentioned that our brand new 6dan had expressed glee that he didn't have to deal with thinking about grading again for another six years.

That's an interesting reaction isn't it? Grading isn't something that is required, it's not something that is necessary, and it's not even something that is suggested.

Required: Nowhere in the CKF bylaws does it say that any member of the federation must grade. What it says is "pay your dues and you're a member, don't pay your dues and you're not a member". Just like every other organization of its type in the world. This is a hobby, it's not high school. You don't HAVE to write exams.

Necessary: It is a rare happening that says you have to be a certain grade to be part of this seminar or that demonstration. Now it did happen not so long ago when we had a visiting instructor and participation was "4dan and over". Not my event but I have said that before, in fact I've even kicked those of lesser rank out the door, but I've also always got a weasel-statement in there that usually says "and dojo leaders" so that I can allow those who don't have the grade but should be there, to be there. These days I usually don't announce any such thing and make it "by invitation" if I'm doing such a thing.

Now, it also happens that some events require rank. Many years ago at a big seminar one of our non-ranking members was told "the 6dans are over there" and his reply was "I have no rank". This was in Japan so of course they had no way to deal with the situation and lots of embarrassment happened, followed by lots of trouble trying to get the fellow jump-graded. Another situation happens at the Kyoto Taikai where older kendo 7dans would very much like to be kyoshi to avoid having to fight the youngsters. Entirely legitimate from my point of view.

In other words, rank is a way of sorting, of seeding in tournament terms, but it's not necessary, one can sort intelligently on several criteria. The usefulness of rank is to be able to bounce those of lower ranks back out the door with the explanation "sorry, rules" instead of "look, dude, you may think you're qualified to be here but you really are not".

Suggested: Nobody I know of, or in "my puppet empire" suggests that students go for a grading. Grades are expensive, and unnecessary to learning. If people want to grade they should grade, if not, why tell them they should? Except perhaps to mention the points just made above.

So why would someone who obviously doesn't enjoy grading, go for a grading?

"To perpetuate gradings" said the Pamurai, and she's right. Those who are currently trying to get higher rank around here are doing it so that there will be rank enough to do gradings once the current crop of seniors has moved on. It's a matter, for most of those I know, of sacrifice for the group. Yes there are those few who want rank because they need some sort of validation, or they want the power they imagine comes with the number, but they are few and obvious. Easily ignored. The ones I, personally, can't ignore are the ones who put up with the expense and aggravation so that they can help those coming along behind. Without them the system doesn't work, or rather, doesn't work for much longer.

Should the system exist at all? That's a very good question and one I deal with daily, being the guy whose job it is to figure out how to provide those gradings. By definition I'm "in favour". But should it exist?

Think of the kendo federation as a business. What does it sell? Rank. Too harsh? OK how about "education", it sells training like other schools.

But it doesn't. It has independent contractors who teach (sensei in dojo), what the federation does is certify those instructors. Its function is to certify. The sensei are not paid, they volunteer. If they make money it's from below, not above. The model is fitness classes in the University, not the degree-granting, education side of it.

Without rank (certification) the federation ceases to exist due to lack of funding. Is this true? Perhaps, if all that exists is the instruction below the federation level. Sensei in dojo don't really need the federation, they obtain and train students who pay for the instruction and/or the rental of the instructional space. No real need for the federation. The exception is "senior instructors", you have to be in the federation to access senior instruction, otherwise known as "Japanese sensei".

Do you? That's a grey area. There are kendo federation instructors who have created "overseas empires" of koryu students. This has happened and continues to happen. It tends to be frowned upon by the federation for the very simple reason that it reduces the power and authority of the federation. In the end it's usually about power isn't it?

So the simplest solution all around is to join the kendo federation if your sensei is in the federation and/or if you want to access sensei from overseas who are in the federation. You MUST do this if you want to grade, but even if you don't bother to grade you probably should to do it anyway. If only to reduce the complaining about "overseas empires".

Empires? Wow, we wish don't we? Empires of ten or twelve people? It becomes silly as soon as it is examined closely.

What we come down to again, is that grading, ranking, is something that isn't necessary except for ego or altruism. If either of these are motivation, grading happens.

There, I've once again justified gradings. If they are justified, they ought to be provided. And why not? As long as nobody is forced to participate, there is a constant, continuing referendum on the system. Enough challengers to pay for the gradings? The vote is yes. gradings cost more than is made because not enough challengers? The vote is no.

As long as someone is paying attention to the money the vote will be clear.

Oh my, I just had another thought. Who is paying for the seminar that pays for the grading?

Oh hell, my argument is garbage.

Dec 14, 2018

These gradings are rank!

Once again the winds are blowing toward the "what if we had gradings outside the organization" direction. It happens often, people get annoyed with the system, they wonder why they grade, they wonder why they pay the money, and they wonder why they have to jump through so many hoops. Maybe the gradings become silly, or too much of a loyalty test instead of an examination of skill. Maybe they become corrupt. Whatever the reasons, people start thinking about other ways.

First, there's nothing stopping anyone from grading outside their organization. I have grades in the Kendo federation and in an Aikido federation. No problem with either, they are different arts. I could also have ranks for the same art in a koryu organization and the kendo federation, again, no problem. The koryu rank might be something from my sensei in the menkyo system. The kendo rank would be in the dan-kyu system from a panel. Both are ranks, both are gradings. The koryu assessment might be over several months or years and be a declaration that I have "arrived". The dan rank would be a one-time snapshot of my abilities on the day, at the moment. There are different ways to assess, some more suitable to large numbers, some fine with smaller numbers. It would be difficult to assess a hundred people by panel over a long term. That's why there are usually time requirements and sensei recommendations in the "one-shot" system.

The only problem with multiple gradings comes when one organization or the other, or your sensei, gets a bit stropy with gradings that can be confused, one for the other. If one were in the kendo federation and the iaido federation or perhaps even the Butokukai, and had ranks for "iaido" that were different from one another, maybe a 5dan, a 6dan and a 7dan but all "dan" rank, it could get somewhat confusing. But again, legally, technically, this really should not be a problem. It is a matter of your sensei or one of the organizations saying "pick one" perhaps because it is irritating to see you with multiple loyalties, multiple calls on your time.

What would be a greater problem would be to set up a parallel grading system with the same people, one inside and one outside the organization. This becomes a financial concern, the examiners are, at minimum, creating a system where the organization may be losing grading revenue. While this sort of thing does happen, as for instance when you have a koryu ranking system from people who also sit on the kendo ranking panels, it can cause irritation. The two systems would need to be kept separate, different things being assessed, and maybe it should be kept quiet as well. Why kept quiet? Because one's advancement in one system is always at risk when one annoys those higher up.

In all this, the one thing not to do would be to, for instance, test seitei both inside and outside the kendo federation. First, why would one do this and second, it would certainly be a reason to be booted out of the federation or at least sidelined. This has, by the way, happened, with the offending person being sidelined for the rest of his career. What has also happened is that gradings "inside" the federation have been offered but without being approved. This ends up with results being thrown out, and in the case I'm thinking of, a bunch of folks leaving the organization. You know, even if nobody cared, if the organization said "go ahead and have gradings inside and outside our control if you want", why would you want that? Redundant grades are redundant, and if they get out of synchronization, which is the "real" grade?

Perhaps we are getting the idea that gradings belong to an organization. In a very real sense, gradings ARE the organization, they are certification from a certifying body. You can get certified by the Red Cross or by St. John's Ambulance or by the Royal Lifesaving Society in similar things, but they aren't the same thing, nor should you set up your own system using their standards and materials. For one thing it would not be recognized as legitimate should you be trying to get a job as a lifeguard.

Grading systems may be loosely organized (as in my Aikido system where anyone of sufficient rank could do a grading any time) or very tightly controlled (as in the CKF where gradings simply cannot happen without approval because the registration, payment and certification is all done through the website).

So we accept that if we wish to grade "outside the organization" we leave that organization. Maybe we join another and we're done... until that system starts to show its cracks.

If we want to organize our own gradings using the same material (who says we can't?) we have some things to think about. Who says we can't? Who says our internal recognition of our new system isn't sufficient to our purposes, martial art rank is not usually transferable between organizations... well, unless we're raiding students of course, as in "sure, join us and we'll recognize your rank, in fact we'll give you one higher". It happens, but usually a rank in an organization is only relevant to that organization. I don't go with my Aikikai rank to a Yoshinkan dojo and say "gimme a shodan". It doesn't work that way, I put on my white belt.

Thought experiment: Let's say we wish to grade in Seitei but outside the CKF. What should we think about?

1. Why?

Seriously, why are we setting up a grading system? Because we're pissed off at the CKF? That's a lot of work for spite, mind you if we're trying to raid all the students as well, maybe we have to do gradings. Students like gradings, they say they don't but they show up and grade. They don't ask the questions below, even if they should.

Why do gradings? Because students like them and we need students of course, but from our point of view?

Skills assessment perhaps. How are we doing? How is our teaching system? Are we getting the material across?

Sorting criteria. Let's assume our new organization is going to get big, we need to sort the students into levels of skill so we can separate groups at seminars. "4dans and up down here" is an easy way to do that, faster than "who knows chudan?"... "No, I mean who has done it before, who knows the steps"... "OK I know damned well you've gone through it with me several times, get over there". Sooo much easier to say "4dan and above? Over there".

Teaching certification: If you pass a certain grade you get to teach. Now some organizations are strict about that, some are not, we need to decide how to handle it. The CKF says you have to have a 5dan or above sign off on gradings, but it's not a problem for lower grades to have a dojo and teach. And they do, as long as there's someone to catch what-for if that teaching isn't any good.

Administration structure: Do we say the top ranks run the system? This leads us to pay, should we be fortunate enough to have that many paying students, who gets paid what at what rank. Who gets paid what, at which rank, for seminars?

2. Who does the grading?

Assuming we have decided gradings are a thing, who sits the panels? Do you sit there if you've got sufficient rank? That rank system might be created when we create our organization. Yes we just did create an organization, you can't do gradings if you don't have an organization to keep track of them. Well you can, but it will go wonky fast if you're trying to use it for anything. Do we bring our ranks in from the old organization? Do we set up a challenge grade at the first meeting? (Who judges that?) Do the founders get together over beers and award each other ranks?

Ah, I set it up, so I'm the top dog and I'll tell the rest of you what's what. Yes, that's the most usual system.

Now, do we want to assume a certain rank means the ability to judge? If not, we need to train judges. Do we create a separate ranking system for judges? Two grading systems?

Tournament referees? Oh dear, how many grading systems do we need, how many intersecting rank bubbles in our Venn diagram of an organization?

3. How is it done?

The two basic systems have always been "sensei hands you a rank" and "grading day". Rank can show up because sensei decides you're "there", or sensei may set up a day where you demonstrate specific skills and he decides if you demonstrated them well enough.

Do you have a system where there's a single judge or do you call in others to opine as well. Single or panel. Once you decide on a panel how do you define it? Is it local so that everyone knows the criteria being tested or do you make it as wide as possible so that standards are standardized? How many on the panel? Secret vote or does the big guy get to override the panel if he figures his student should pass even if the rest of you don't?

Yes you have to define all this and you have to be clear, transparent about it, or the students will decide it's unfair and start this whole process over again when they get ticked off. Fun isn't it?

What do you call your grades, are they menkyo, are they maki, are they kyu and dan? It doesn't really matter, pick the one that seems right.

Now decide how many levels you need. One? You've got everything I know, here's a list of the kata, get out of my dojo. Two? Here's your level that says you can teach students, later you might get a level that says you can give out ranks that say you can teach and give out ranks. Many? "OK guys, it's the first of the month, time to pay up and test for your 3rd black stripe on your brown belts!"

What about time? Do we put time limits in or do we simply allow challenges at any time? If we decide we don't want to test the idiot that figures he's "there" every other week, we put in some minimum practice times. Years? But what if they never show up in class? Classes? But what if some classes are three hours and others are half an hour? Hours? Who is keeping track of this stuff? And why can't I do my next grade this month, I've got the hours in, I practised here and at the dojo across the street too! Hours plus years? How about Hours plus years plus 4 seminars per year? Oh and you're still not good enough dude, come back next month at the grading in the next province and see if you can pass there.

4. What is tested?

This, this is tricky. You will test what you know. You will of course test "do you know the shape of the kata or the physical shape of the techniques". That's the first step to learning and the first thing to test. Next maybe "how well can you demonstrate the skills" which is really the same thing only later, as in "have you got two years' worth of practice in?"

Is there anything else to this? What's this Shu Ha Ri stuff? Can we judge that? Do we know what that looks like? "Hey sensei, how do I do Kigurai? I know it's on my 6dan test so I should learn how to do it, right?"

Still want to set up gradings outside the organization? It's a lot simpler to stay home if you're unhappy with the grading system, nobody HAS to grade, not in any organization I've ever been in.

If gradings are rank, stay away or hold your nose. Your choice entirely.

Dec 18, 2018

Beard too big

I've dropped ten pounds since starting the diabetes meds, mostly I think because my stomach is upset constantly, add in the back (MRI and bone scans coming up) and I just don't enjoy my food any more. Got a pint of beer down last evening but that was it, gave the rest away.

And the numbers, the bloody numbers are really getting me down. I'm 8.8 this morning after three or four days around 8.0. Normal is apparently around 5. My mood floats or sinks on these damned numbers.

In all of this I looked a few times into the mirror and saw a scrawny old man looking back. Am I losing muscle mass instead of liver fat? Today I'm doing more bloodwork and the doctor called for a test for muscle damage so even he's looking at that. I'm hoping not, and I'm hoping the back is nothing more than the arthritis on the spine they found on the x-ray.

But that gaunt visage in the mirror? I trimmed the beard.

Without a big scraggly goat-beard (couldn't call it a goatee, too messy) to make my head look big, my shoulders and arms now look a lot more normal.

A hell of a lot of our perception relies on comparison. How big that guy is, depends sometimes on how little the guy next to him is. This is part of what you need to know in iaido. If you want part of a kata to look fast without looking tiny as you crunch up and "swing short", you need to stop looking at the fast bit, look at the bits on either side, slow them down. If you want to strike like a snake with your jo, stand still before you swing. Moving from zero looks a lot more sudden, a lot faster, than moving from half speed.

Want to "catch him" as Ohmi sensei says, want to get your invisible opponent before he can escape? Jo Ha Kyu, accelerate, change the speed of your cut so that you would have caught him before he could get away. You can use this on walking kata, don't just trudge across the floor, start slow and "catch him" with that draw and cut, use the comparison of speed from the first step to the third. The other reason for jo ha kyu is to disguise the fact that you're using a featherweight sword. Using a really light sword as if it's really light isn't very impressive. We know how things accelerate. Make that light sword look heavy, accelerate it to speed rather than twitch it from grading point to grading point, and your scary factor goes up.

A jo has to move "inside" a sword, it has to get there first so it MOVES. A jo is lighter than a sword and we move our hands over it, we slide, so of course it moves quickly, we expect it to snap from place to place. Can we snap a bokuto from hasso to someone's face really, really quickly? Sure we can, faster than the jo can move, but a bokuto is not a sword and we can see that, when we're watching a kata. The bokuto must move like a sword in order for the jo to move like a jo, the comparison must be done correctly or the whole looks wrong.

This sort of comparison works in real life too. Want to look like a good guy? Arrange a comparison between you and a jerk. Now you look great. A conservative friend tried this one on me last evening, the other way around. He said "they're all the same" when talking about governments. If "they're all the same" we're supposed to ignore what the current government is doing right? It doesn't matter which one is in there, so ignore what's happening, it would be happening anyway. The problem with that argument is that some people pay attention and know how to make a comparison. More people should.

Gradings are supposed to be comparisons, how were you last year compared to this year. If it's the same person doing the comparing, or if it's you, the judgment should be accurate. Are you above a certain level of skill or knowledge? Good, assign a grade. Since this is a physical art, maybe we ought to re-test downward as well, sort of like driving tests for old farts. Take those grades away if the skill is no longer there. Mandatory retirement age for judges in the Kendo federation (75) sort of implies this. So does the 8dan age range, too young or too old and you may as well stop challenging if you are looking to pass.

But wait, you say, we don't take rank away, we shouldn't take it away. Why not? Tell me why not. The skill goes away, what's left? Power in the organization? The ability to refuse grades to those coming up? The ability to influence the other judges to pass those who are favoured? Well yes, I suppose that's all true but is that it? A matter of office politics? A competition to find the right sponsor so you can pass, thus keeping the old farts in power?

Or does the comparison criteria change at some point. Can we put an old hachidan up beside a young godan and see a difference? Can we talk to both of them and detect a difference?

Maybe it's just the size and greyness of the beard.

Dec 20, 2018

Swanning in

This early morning I opened my little notebook toward the front and got into a seminar sort of area, must have been in South America around then. This note was about "swanning in" as a seminar instructor and taking over. Two quotes seem appropriate, the first was to me from our Jodo Grading secretary. He made this comment a few years ago when I started to make some remarks about changing the grading so we could get through it faster. His response was "Shut up Kim". I blinked, and he said "you told me to say that if you started interfering, so go stand over there and we'll tell you when we're ready to start".

I got out of his way. It's not my job to run the gradings, not when I'm sitting the panel, especially if I'm sitting as head judge. This was my seminar, my panel, but not my job, and it's even truer if you're somewhere else. The next comment was from a judge to a judge at an iaido grading in Brazil. One of the judges (not me) started to tell the local organizers how to put down tape and how to set up the chairs and... One of the other visiting judges called him over quite sharply and said "judges don't do that".

They don't. Not in their own gradings and certainly not when they are visiting another country. The appropriate response for a judge in another country is "how do you do it here?" Never "this is how you do it". Kendo gradings are from the country in which they are held, not from anywhere else, and that includes Japan. If you are a visiting sensei you are not in charge, you are just another judge on the panel. If you are senior you may be asked to be head judge. Your job at that point is to make sure you know how the gradings are run, in other words, you need to ask for the rules you are in charge of enforcing. It's not your job to "fix" things.

Does this happen, do visitors change things? Yes, of course they do, visiting judges who are not experienced internationally, or who are not familiar with the FIK rules on gradings will assume, quite naturally, that how gradings are done in their country is how they are done. This is rather an extension of the instruction they are probably giving at the seminar. "Here's how you do the techniques, and oh yes, here's how you run the grading". No.

You doubt me? The May seminar has had many senior Japanese instructors through the years, many of them have been chair of the iaido or jodo sections, many of them have sat the panel as head judge and it is a rare grading where they are not at least watching the event. In every case these internationally experienced judges have asked us ahead of time about our rules. They are slightly different than Japan and of course the gradings are set up slightly differently as well. They are inevitably different in each seminar and venue. All these senior judges deferred to our rules, which are not so different, really. Acceptably different shall we say. The point is, these very senior people do not swan in and take over, and they understand that local folks must run their own organizations.

This is the difference between a visitor on his 50th international visit and his first. The experienced fellow will let the seminar happen. He will let the organizers tell him where to go and when, never complaining, always willing. Those teachers who come in and start telling the seminar organizers how to run the seminar are creating problems, forcing last minute changes that will cause problems for months afterward as the helpers, the volunteers, complain to the organizers about these last minute changes that stressed everyone out.

Do you want to be that guy, the guy who swans in and tells people how to run things? You know, some of these locals are high-powered professionals, doctors, lawyers, people who run companies with hundreds of employees, and you're going to tell them how to arrange a seminar? Are you going to walk into another country and undermine the authority of the fellow who is in charge of gradings? The chair of the section, chief referee, bucho, whatever he is called. When you come in and change things you tell everyone in his section, HIS section, that he doesn't know what he's doing.

So curb your inexperience, curb your arrogance, and offer your assistance instead. Do what you are asked, and wait to be asked. Correct things that must be corrected in private. It's not your job to cut the legs out from under the local folks who are in charge. It is your job to teach, and to judge correctly and fairly, according to the rules. Those rules that are international and those that are local. Have you asked what the local rules are? No? Well do so, do your job.

Don't be the guy swanning in and causing problems.

Dec 28, 2018

Two steps forward

Skip down to "Start here" unless you want to listen to me complain.

And sometimes three steps back. My shoulders were feeling better yesterday, right up until I slipped on the ice and wrenched everything. Fine. So a small slip coming out of the sauna knocked it back again, but this morning I thought "it's calming down". Right up until I tried to plug in the sump pump to drain the basement and then slammed my head into the overhang coming back up the stairs.

As much tylenol as I'm allowed before liver damage, and voltaran on the shoulder (which I'm not supposed to use because now I'm going to bleed out due to the blood thinners that are supposed to be preventing strokes).

So I sit in the cafe hoping that as often happens the caffeine, good posture and wiggling fingers helps things calm down again.

I managed to work a bit in the shop yesterday, which helped (anything I can move around and do helps) and I cranked up the heat again today so maybe, if I can move the left arm. My plan is to use some of the Honduras Rosewood stacked up in a corner. Yes you heard right, 60 or 70 year old Honduras Rosewood.

Chronic pain like this, with no idea if it will ever do anything but get worse, is difficult to ignore. In fact, it's pretty easy to slip into suicidal thoughts. So far they include Rube Goldberg machines of weights and pulleys to drag my wrist through the band saw so I'm not too worried that my brain is serious about this. Nor should you be worried.

Not to complain about my lot, but it's absolutely demoralizing to me, to have to spend large amounts of the day lying on the couch. Sitting at the computer makes things worse. Sleeping on my crappy 40 year old mattress makes things worse.

Massage every day, two hot showers every day, sauna every day... Like I said, the idea of toughing this crap out and NOT recovering at the end is getting depressing.

Well they said there would be mood swings but so far those seem to come with the pain, not the androgen blockers. How is it that this much muscle pain is coming out of bone damage? Seriously, I can't move my neck without gasping.

Sorry, just a bad day. Family don't worry and DON'T call or visit, I've wrenched my back and it hurts. I've maxed out the pain meds I'm allowed and am doing all the other pain relief stuff. I just need to stop slipping on ice like an old fart.

[Note from the future, turns out my bones were so riddled with cancer that I had a compression fracture in two neck vertebrae, so no wonder it hurt and my left arm was crippled up for a while.]

"Start here"

We have been talking about tournaments, judging and grading a bit. One of our jodo folk just proposed a practice that I might call a "half tournament". Two pairs in front of a judge, the ones who lose get told why they lose, and move on. An interesting proposal in that it might provide the benefits of a tournament (see the last couple of essays) without the drawbacks (getting involved in the bragging rights, the ceremonies and all the other time wasting that happens in tournaments). It could still provoke the ego, since there would be a winner and a loser.

I think I understand the reasoning, it's a way of asking "how do I pass the next grading"? It's a way of getting some answers to "what am I doing wrong"? The thing is, all that ought to be included in regular practice, or should I say, none of it ought to be included in any way.

Gradings aren't something that you pass or fail. They are an opinion by your instructors (ideally), your seniors, as to whether you are at a certain level of skill or not. You might be just short of that level, you might be way beyond that level, you won't know, you'll only know if those judges think you are over the line or not.

Gradings also include automatic fail points, like being improperly dressed, or doing the wrong kata. Yes the head judge has the authority to allow you a "do over" but that doesn't happen very often, especially when gradings are easy to get to. Just come back in a month and try it again is the usual thought. So did you fail because you're not at the right skill level or because your uniform was a mess?

What's the answer to both of those questions? "Ask your sensei". Everyone wants the judges to tell them why they failed and what they need to work on next, if they passed. Don't you like your sensei? Don't you trust him to tell you what you need to know? Why are you asking the judges who just said "over or under the level"?

Side by side comparisons (tournaments) only tell you whether you are better than the guy beside you, at that specific moment. Your answers are going to be "why you weren't as good as the guy next to you".

If gradings and tournaments bother you, just don't enter tournaments and don't grade. Seriously, neither of those things are necessary to learning budo or acquiring the actual benefits of practice. They are fun for some (tournaments) and a way for your organization to acquire the money it needs to run (gradings). But necessary? Not really. You learn nothing about yourself by being told you're better than the guy next to you "at that specific moment in time", and you learn the same thing (nothing) by being told "you're over the line for 3dan, you've learned the stuff we want to see".

So why do it? Why grade? I've got written down in my notebook that you ought to do what you don't want to do. Grading as training? If you don't like grading, you should grade. This could be the "stress test" idea of trying your iai with the extra of nerves or embarrassment of being in front of an audience. It could simply be an exercise in doing stuff you don't want to do.

There's another side to this, and that's to NOT grade if you want that next rank. If you really want to win the trophy or get the paper, you should deny yourself. Whaaa??? Look, it's the zen thing of getting a letter and placing it on the hall table to be opened and read later. OK that makes no sense to anyone today does it?

It's getting a ring on your smartphone and not grabbing it to see who just "messed" you. It's NOT checking your email 35 times a day, or cruising faceplant 24/7. If you're being paid to do these things, carry on, but if you're just "staying in touch with your peeps", delay that gratification for a few minutes or hours.

Self-discipline, self-denial. These are good things, honest, trust me I'm a sensei. Do stuff you don't want to do with the knowledge that someday you will be able to endure things you don't want to endure.

Because you've had practice.

Jan 24, 2019

Losing Sleep

Woke up last night and thought I'd better not think about the state of this and that. Two hours and a couple chapters of a Terry Pratchett novel later I managed to get back to sleep for a couple of hours.

No you don't want to know. I'm tired of hearing people say "but that doesn't make any sense at all" and "they just can't do that". If it made sense it wouldn't be a problem and of course people can do things they "can't do". As they say, if I had a dollar for every time someone said "that isn't the way it works" over the last five years...

There is no solution to some problems. There is only waiting for the situation to change and sometimes that takes somebody's lifetime. I have in fact, outlived many problems but eventually one of them is going to outlive me. I guess that's sort of the definition of living.

"It does no good to complain" is not a saying that applies to many problems. It often does quite a lot of good to complain. Sometimes people don't realize that they have the same complaints as everyone else, and then the solution is quite simple. Ignore the problem and carry on with the solution. Is that too obscure? OK let's say someone says "you have to store the wrenches over here with the saws" and that makes it inconvenient for everyone in the shop. So you complain at lunch to your fellow workers and realize everyone thinks that's a stupid idea. Nobody makes an effort to put the wrenches over by the saws but leaves them where they were. No arguments, no quitting work, just ignore the "order". 90 percent of the time, Mr. new suggestion will forget all about it in a week or so. Such orders rarely come from those who actually understand shops or who are actually paying the wages (in either case it's probably not a problem on account of it would make sense or it would result in firing so do it to keep your job).

Institutional inertia is a good thing in some cases, it's only from business reporters or internet entrepreneurs that we hear companies have to be lean and mean, nimble and quick to react to the market forces. That's often code for "I have no idea what our product is so we'll just chase whatever looks good". If you're coding websites that might work, you hear about the companies where it did work, but you don't hear about the hundreds of failures.

If your company makes widgets it might not be such an easy thing to switch to a different widget to follow a trend. 400 year old teaching methods? Maybe just go with what's been working so far, after all over 400 years and thousands of student/teacher combinations, someone might have thought of your fancy new idea already. If your idea isn't one that is already there, maybe have a second thought about why.

Change for the sake of change is rarely productive because no thought has gone into it. The default should be "don't fix what isn't broken", at least when dealing with systems that have been around for centuries, or even decades.

How would one check to see if a new idea is working? First, make sure you know what the change is supposed to do. This is more difficult than you might think, the stated reasons for a change are quite often different from the initial reasons. Joe doesn't like having to spend thousands of dollars to go shopping for art at his favourite store way down south in the Big City. He wants to buy something for his wall and so he says "I think the store ought to move to my town". Now Joe can't really say he wants to move it for selfish reasons, nobody would listen, so he will say something like "if the art store moves to my remote village they will pick up lots of new customers". Maybe, but what about the customers the store is leaving behind, the hundreds of picture-buyers back in the big city? Will the six new customers replace those? Will Joe buy enough extra wall-covering to justify the move? I dunno, but I suspect not. Joe is happy for a few years until the store disappears completely.

Wait you say, why not open a branch store? Why not indeed, but is that going to work any better or is the original store now bleeding money down the hole of the new outlet? I dunno, maybe someone should have thought about this before packing up the truck and heading on down the road.

Hmm, maybe Joe's original agenda was to wreck the business in the big city so he can open his own store in the village? If Joe hasn't got any experience he might just think that would work. You know, it might. Joe gets the store to move to the village, store goes bankrupt, Joe picks up a lot of artwork cheap in the bankruptcy sale.

Let's not assume the worst from Joe. But let's look at his situation. Is it really fair to ask Joe and his buddies to travel to the big city all the time? Maybe it is. Maybe we ought to go with statistics rather than abstract notions of fairness. In other words, open the store where most of the customers live. But, art isn't something you need every day, and maybe Joe says "how about if I organize a fair once a year and you bring some artwork to a temporary space.

OK I seem to be talking about gradings and seminars because these are the exact arguments we go through when organizing the jodo gradings for the CKF. The federation is a little bit "the big store" for the lower grades and a little bit Joe when trying to organize higher grades where we need to get "the even bigger store" to send along some panellists. We're really not trying to wreck the entire art market and we'd like to think that we're not selfish fellows unwilling to go to the big city to buy art. We're sort of Joe if he opened a small paint and wallpaper store so the village folk could decorate their walls with simple stuff, but once every five years or so, we fill the store with more "highbrow" wall decoration and experts from the big city to explain the art to the locals. Now our fellow villagers don't have to go to the big city to buy a gallon of paint (the whole idea of having a local paint store in the first place). In other words, the beginners don't have to go to another country to get a shodan.

Does it work? Sometimes. Mom and Pop paint stores in the village do sometimes work. And now I feel a bit better about fighting to keep ours open.

Speaking of buying paintings.... er grading, we have a jodo seminar this weekend, Sunday, from 11am to 4pm at the University of Guelph athletics department. 3dan and up from 11-12 and everyone from 1-4pm. It's College Royal weekend, bring the family to tour the open house events while you come practice.

March 16, 2017

There's always grading

We look for grading and ranks from largish modern organizations, but there's always sorting in an art. The most basic and most important from a traditional point of view is time through the door. The mysterious sempai/kohei system.

It works this way, everyone first through the door of the dojo, regardless of rank, is senior to you. Except for some considerations.

First, that's through your dojo door, not first into the art in general. Well sort of. The formal-ish part of this is within your own dojo, informally, someone in the art, not in your dojo, but with more experience (time in) than you, ought to be considered your senior. Next is age, if you got there just before an older guy, defer to him. Then there's social status, university professors in the door just after you arrived ought to be deferred to...

In other words, it's the same sorting that happens out in the world. You should respect learning. OK it's the same sorting that ought to happen out in the world. I know that there are places and people who consider the less learning you have the better you are. If only the supporters of that belief would consider who is promoting it, and why.

Never mind, I just read the newspaper and am grumpy at the state of the world, as I have been since I learned to read.

The training-time system doesn't really change due to absolute time in training. That's picked up in groups that have ranking systems. If you have 300 hours training in one year, and your buddy who started the year before you, has 100 in the same time, he's still up the line according to calendar time, and you might be ranked higher due to training time.

Is that all clear as mud? The sempai system is informal and so subject to a lot of social dancing between those in the system. How you treat your seniors (by calendar time) is largely up to you due to that informality, and it will say a lot about your reasons for grading if you try to move your carcass up the line with your new 5dan past the older guys.

Modesty in all things folks, especially in the budo. Don't advertise your skill levels, just deck the guy when you need to. Monologue-ing is for cartoon villains, as we all know.

On the other hand, don't fight for the low spot in the dojo either, I got sick of watching that dance in my dojo, so now the rule is, first through the door, furthest from it, at each class. In other words, get out of the way of everyone else coming in, move down the line. I don't care where you sit, it's a small class and a small room and I know who you are.

Which brings us to small arts. When there's a single dojo of ten people within a thousand mile radius there's really not much need for a grading system is there? Do you know all the kata of the school and the guy next to you has just started? You outrank him, your rank is "know all the kata" and his is, "just started". If you were in a giant, multiple country organization (say, ZNKR jodo) your rank might be godan and his ikkyu and those words might mean the very same thing.

You know where everyone in the family sits around the dinner table don't you? When was the last time you put out name tags for the four of you?

Certification might be somewhat different than sorting in a small group. There might indeed be paper involved. What does that mysterious "menkyo" license look like? Well I've been told it's usually a list of kata names signed by the teacher and addressed to the student. Musashi didn't give those, his kata names were 1, 2, 3... or middle, lower, upper... but he did give lists of advice on how to fight, to named students with his signature.

These menkyo are generally assumed to be teaching licenses today but I can see a time in the past when they were written out and given to students who needed something to remind them what the kata names were. You learn all the kata in five or ten years, your teacher gives you a list of the names and then boots you out the door to go try it on with the rest of the country (musha shugyo with your shinai). You come back with some practical learning and you get told you can teach. Or you don't come back and ask, you just go home and teach. Two hundred years later and we are all fascinated with the paper and know nothing of the process.

Smaller groups (can we say more exclusive? eh, smaller) might not even have a list of kata to hand out. Sensei might teach for a while and student might say "I'm moving away, can I teach" and sensei might look at him and say "sure, why not?". I've heard that one. I've also heard "I'm teaching you guys so that the art will survive, so go teach" I've also heard "where are all the other students?".

Certification to teach isn't quite the same as sorting, but from a historical point of view we sometimes lay a sorting scheme over a lineage chart. "That line is more legit than that other line". Sure, why not? But it only matters in the dojo if we can demonstrate that instructors from "more legitimate" lines are better instructors than the other guys. Then of course, you have to start defining "better" and I've never been good at that.

Sorting of students is sorting of students, it can be done lots of ways. Certification to teach is something else, often linked to a rank system but not always. Same with permission to give out rank or teaching certification. Often linked to rank but not always.

Big organizations get more formal as they get bigger, more stuff written down, more rules and regulations. Smaller organizations might be, might need, nothing more than a teacher and students. You sort according to when you come through the door and you teach when sensei says you can teach. In that case, you might look at your own students and say "sure, go teach, why not?"

Regardless of formal structures, there is always grading. It may be continuous in a small dojo as sensei teaches and watches you learn, or it may be sporadic as in a yearly grading in a big group. I suppose the small dojo is analogue and the big organization is digital. Both assess the student and various things happen as a result of learning. You may get to sit in a different place in the dojo, you may get to go to a different group in a big seminar, and you might get to teach at your own dojo.

None of which should concern anyone overly much. The great writers of the past are unwavering in their advice that it's the training that's the thing. Titles without training are just paper in the "file folder of honour" as my buddy says.

Mar 31, 2015

I Told You:

That I could tell your rank by the way you swing the sword.

In the middle of a weekend's practice but here's something to think about.

We're going to buy the software and create an unbiased grading panel. No more complaining about whether you deserved to pass or not.

武道学研究 45- (1) : 35-45, 2012 <原著> — —35 身体動作の特徴パラメータを用いた居合道の熟練度に関する定量化崔 雄 1) 高 橋健太郎 2) Quantitative analysis of iaido proficiency using characteristic parameters of body movement Woong CHOI1), Kentaro TAKAHASHI2)

Abstract

The purpose of this research is to make a quantitative analysis of iaido (the martial art of using the Japanese sword) proficiency using body movement data captured with a motion capture system. We carried out motion capture experiments on kirioroshi (a straight overhead slash) movement of roppon-me (a two-handed sword thrust) in iaido. It proved possible to analyze the proficiency of an iaido practitioner by conducting a principal components analysis (PCA) and a cluster analysis using the characteristic parameters of body movement. As a result, we verified that a skilled practitioner has more velocity with respect to center of gravity and right-hand movement, and has a more stabilized body than a beginner when performing kirioroshi. Therefore, it was found that the feature values extracted from a PCA can be used to classify the proficiency of an iaido practitioner by using cluster analysis.

Key words : Iaido, Motion capture, Multivariate data analysis

Age of the Machine!

PS did you notice that there is only one iaido, and it contains roppon-me and it is Seitei. Hehe.

March 1, 2015

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