

Reflections on the Significance of a White Belt

I sat quietly on my knees, watching intently as the instructor demonstrated a technique. Watching the demonstration was the easy part and, even as I tried to concentrate, my thoughts strayed to a contemplation of what I knew would follow. When the instructor finished the demonstration, the students in the class, of which I was one, would break into pairs and attempt to practice the technique that had just been shown. This would seem simple, except that as a new student in this dojo I was having an exceptionally difficult time finding people who would train with me. I was ten years old and had been practicing Aikido since I was eight. I had recently been promoted to a new rank and was allowed to wear a blue belt. I was allowed, at least, until I came to Guam.

As a result of my father's job, my family and I were constantly living in new places. The most recent move had been to the US island territory of Guam, in the Pacific Ocean. After two years of Aikido training, I was not prepared to give it up merely because of a temporary relocation. Therefore, shortly after our arrival in Guam, my mother and I began searching for a dojo where I could practice. As it turned out, there were only two dojos on the island, and I quickly determined which one would suit me better. On the one hand, there was a small, less traditional dojo, where all age groups trained together. Alternatively, I could choose the larger space where classes were separated by age group. As a ten-year-old child, the prospect of training with strange adults was naturally intimidating. After all, my only previous experience had consisted of practice with children my own age – often my friends. If that was not reason enough, the instructor at the latter dojo was more appealing. She was Japanese and, though minute and elderly, seemed excellent at Aikido and taught in a traditional manner similar to what I was accustomed to. Obviously, if not necessarily, I chose the latter.

After I had made the decision, my mother took me to meet the instructor formally. She, of course, was happy for me to join the class; her only apprehension concerned the attitude of the other students. The children's program at the dojo, she explained,

was still fairly new, and none of the students had been promoted past orange belt. As a blue belt, I would outrank all of them, and this, she thought, could affect their tolerance of me as a fellow student. Her proposal was that I wear a white belt and train as a new student in her dojo until I had gained recognition and acceptance from the other students. It seemed like a harmless, if quirky, request, and I happily consented. The consequences of this simple agreement, however, were far more drastic than I could ever have imagined. The effects of wearing a white belt created so humbling and degrading an experience for me that over the course of the next several months I was often tempted to give up Aikido for good.

That was how I came to be in my current predicament. The instructor was still demonstrating, but I could clearly imagine what would happen when she finished. First as always, I would bow to another student – usually the one who was seated closest to me – requesting that he or she train with me. Bowing in this way was what I had been taught to do and had always elicited the desired response of a returned bow and an acceptance to practice. However, in this new setting, I invariably received one of two completely different responses.

Most commonly, I would bow to a student who was wearing a colored belt and the disdain with which I was consequently treated never ceased to amaze, not to mention depress, me. Seemingly without noticing my bow, the student would turn to another person and they would pair up and begin to train. I would then attempt to bow to a second student, who would usually respond in the same manner, and it was not uncommon for me to be the last person standing alone on the mat, searching for a training partner. The other response, I only received occasionally, when I was fortunate enough to be sitting next to a low-ranking student like myself. When I would bow to such students as these, at least I would receive a lethargic acceptance to train, and though the practice was slow, I often enjoyed it more than training with someone who outwardly expressed their contempt of my lowly rank.

The instructor completed the demonstration, and I turned to the student seated beside me. I was, for a change, seated next to a fellow white belt and was able to pair up with a training partner on my very first try! As we took turns moving through the

technique, my mind again wandered to the irony of my situation. I had now been training in Guam for three months, and my original hopes of quickly regaining my true rank had nearly disappeared. The instructor had made it sound as though it would take only a few weeks for the other students to accept me; after that, I thought, I could wear a blue belt again and have my experience recognized. However, there had been no signs of this happening, and I had recently learned that the instructor would be returning to Japan for two months with seemingly no intent of altering my situation first.

It is impossible to describe my irritation upon hearing this and I truly began to wish I had never decided to train at this dojo. I understood the intention of the instructor when she wanted me to wear a white belt at first; what I could not comprehend was her complete lack of recognition of the troubles this request had caused me. If the disdain with which other students treated me was not as obvious as I found it, then at least the way I was ignored should have been noticeable. I am not one to underestimate the skills of others, but I thought it apparent that I was at least one of the more experienced Aikido practitioners in the classes I attended and I just wished I could be treated as such.

I believe it was a certain amount of stubbornness on the part of the students that prevented any change in their feelings. They ignored me so completely that they were unable to catch the rather obvious hints that I was a bit more skilled than the average beginner. I wore a white belt and that was enough reason for them to ignore me. There was also the fact that a majority of the students were friends who consistently trained in their small, cliquish groups. Still, there was something else in their attitude towards me that was different from the way they regarded the few other students that had joined the dojo since I had practiced there.

Perhaps there was a racial component to the way I was treated. I was an outsider – a “white guy from the Mainland” (*Mainland* being the US, since Guam is an island) – whereas most of the rest of the students had grown up on Guam and were either of Japanese or Pacific Islander descent. I was too young at the time to understand how this could have affected their view of me, but now I see that it could have been a contributing factor.

I could go into much more detail about the various hardships I encountered, practicing Aikido in Guam. That, however, is the material for a novel, not an essay, and I believe I have sufficiently described my situation. Besides, what I have written so far is the preface, not the point, of the story.

After the class I have briefly described, my training experience remained much the same for a few months. The instructor left for Japan, entrusting the maintenance of the dojo to some of her high-ranking adult students. At every class I attended, I would have the same bitter thoughts about my unfortunate predicament and the same desire to give up Aikido training. Fortunately, I stuck with it until the main instructor returned, at which time things finally began to change. It was decided that I would continue training as a white belt for a couple of months, learning the test criteria for the next rank above blue belt. When I could do all of the techniques that were required, I would take the test for that rank and thereafter be allowed to wear a colored belt again!

The thought of continuing my training as a white belt was daunting, but the thought of finally being respected because of my rank provided inspiration to persevere. The instructor even invited me to attend some of the adult classes in order to prepare myself for the test (by this time I had become familiar with several of the adults who had been teaching the classes, so I would not be training with strangers). These classes proved to be more to my liking than the children's classes – largely because the adults had no inhibitions about training with me – and for almost two months, I prepared diligently for the big moment.

Finally, the instructor told me I was ready! None of the other students had any forewarning, and I am sure all of them were surprised when the teacher said, "Cody is testing today." When she went on to explain my situation, and that I would be testing for a second degree of blue belt, I could only imagine their shock. Here was this kid, a white belt, who had been training for a while, sure, but to test straight to second-degree blue belt?

The test itself went better than I could have hoped! I completely exhausted my two attackers (a couple of brown belts from the adult classes) and by the end I was pretty worn out as well. The most memorable part of that day was when the other

students commented on my test. In that dojo, after a test, each student in the class was required to make some comment about the performance. Such comments were almost invariably along the lines of “good” or, sometimes, “very good.” After my test was over, there was complete silence in the room. “Well,” the teacher said at last, “what did you think?” After a brief pause, one student said “excellent!” After that, everyone repeated that one word, “excellent!” again, and again, and again! I could not believe it. I had made my point, and my experience was finally recognized! When they were all finished, the teacher asked: “so, do you think he deserves a blue belt?” The response, according to every student, was unquestionably affirmative.

The other students’ attitude towards me, after that day, was almost inconceivably changed. Actually, it was quite ridiculous! From then on, everyone wanted to train with me. The highest-ranking student in the class beside myself, a chubby second-degree orange belt that I had always considered to be the most aggravating of the bunch, was now at the front of the line of hopefuls waiting to practice with me. It disgusted me that a simple change of belt color could have such a drastic effect on people’s view of me, but in the end I happily took advantage of my suddenly broadened range of available training partners.

My Aikido experience in Guam taught me several important lessons. The first was about perceptions, and I think it has been sufficiently, if not specifically, explained in the preceding paragraphs. The second, more important, thing I learned was about feelings. Through an analysis of my own emotions, I gained an understanding of how hurtful it is to be ignored, and that is a lesson I try to remember in my current Aikido training as well as in my life in general. That test in Guam was by far my most memorable so far and it remains to be seen if my shodan test will supplant it. Whatever the impact of future difficulties, not only in Aikido but everywhere, I will always remember a third lesson I learned that day in Guam: every struggle, every test, and every challenge has some lesson or moral. It is always there to be learned from and remembered, if only it can be found.