

The Sho Dan Test Challenge Experience

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The Sho Dan or “1st degree black belt” rank level is one that is coveted by so many. I thought I would share my thoughts around this very difficult test, possibly one of the most difficult in our adult lives outside of martial arts. I have now learned, if I can do this ShoDan exam, I can face and overcome any challenge in my day to day to life. At The Gi Yu Dojo, this rank level is earned with significant difficulty for most. No one is entitled to it in any way. It is not earned without the help of those at higher Dan levels; sacrificial time and energy expended in regular classes and the extra training that is offered. Training with your uke under guidance of higher Dan level Sempai is indispensable. A foundational discovery is learning to be a good uke.

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

Recently one of our high ranking Dan level instructors discussed the process of learning to “show case” the skill sets we are asked to master. This was described as a “box”. What is inside the box is acceptable for the testing standard. Elements outside of the box are not acceptable, even if it is displayed in a given class. The responsibility is on us to apprehend the kata as benchmarked and entrusted to Sukh Sensei. The best references are Sukh Sensei himself and the Sho Dan video. We have also been encouraged by Sukh Sensei to discuss details with various higher Dan level students. Variations have many purposes; rank promotion is not one of them.

After failing the test in 2016, my deficits were clearly explained to me. These needed to be whittled down for the 2017 challenge. I know for a fact that I did much better than last year, but all the while being painfully aware of more deficits. A big road block was “physical test anxiety”, in actuality being the mental, emotional and spiritual pressure. It is hard to fully describe the overcoming process. It included stopping the mental chatter of overthinking, and overcoming the panic at its root. Focusing on being a good uke also helped. This is a much needed skill in daily life.

We all need to consider the Bushido Warrior virtues. Humility is a great challenge and is integrated into each of the seven virtues. Believing you are better than you actually are misses the mark. Feeling undeserving also reveals issues with humility. Meiyo is the most challenging for me. Success, honor, glory; these descriptors require overcoming self-sabotage and blame as well as overly comparing self to others. Finally, If not for the selfless instruction, encouragement and admonishment from all the Dan levels, I would not have met the mark. So it really is not about me. It is about us. Now holding Sho Dan ranking, the burden is greater to focus on helping others and continuing to grow as well.