FEATURE · TESTING & PROMOTIONS

A Deeper Meaning for Promotions in Aikido

by **Julie "Jet" Tollen**

Receiving a promotion should be a meaningful moment—a feeling of true accomplishment, as in: "Welcome to a new level of responsibility, greater technical execution and a higher plane of existence!" I think we all agree it should mean something. By that token, the certificate itself should also evoke significance, accomplishment, and perhaps even pride.

I was told there is always a real-life struggle that accompanies an aikido test—and that struggle is the "real test." The lead-up to testing time reminds me of a snake shedding its skin—if you've seen this process, you know that it takes a good deal of effort for the snake to peel each scale slowly away, and that it uses any kind of friction to get there. If the skin doesn't come off fully in the shedding process, it can cause the snake serious issues. Here are some of the snags we humans can run into in our "shedding process":

1 **You want to test as soon as you're eligible.**
There's nothing inherently wrong with this; however, the shorter the amount of time between tests, the better the test is expected to be. It's better, is it not, to achieve a promotion entirely confident and prepared, even if you need to wait a year (or three) after eligibility to show a solid, stellar test? Although your eligibility may have come up, time is one factor we typically can control.

2 **You know the techniques… just like kata.**
I know you know them. But remember, Aikido is not purely about technical skill. It takes time to develop an "Aiki body," but Saotome Sensei has warned us repeatedly that "Ai-body-do" is not the ultimate point of what we are practicing either. Merging movement with Aiki (akin to balanced movement within the natural universe) takes more than just technique. Bridging the gap between technique and embodied flow takes awareness, connection, and creative vision.

3 **You got a conditional pass.**

Congratulations, you did some things well! Now, there's some real feedback to work from, and no excuse but to iron things out. Much of the time, we work with multiple variables and abstract principles in Aikido. Knowing exactly what you need to work on can be a godsend. Rather than a time for disheartenment, this is the chance to dive in with full intensity to focus on a subset of movement… and show it again like you own it!

4 **You plan to rely on motivation and inspiration to guide you through your test.**

I'd like to put in a word for regular training. If you don't know omote and ura, or have to think about the names of techniques when you hear them, please postpone signing up or accepting your test date. In reality, you'll likely spend more of your lifetime as a black belt than as a white belt, so why rush the process? Be overprepared through routine practice, with confidence oozing out your ears at each level of your progression.

BEFORE AND AFTER TRAINING

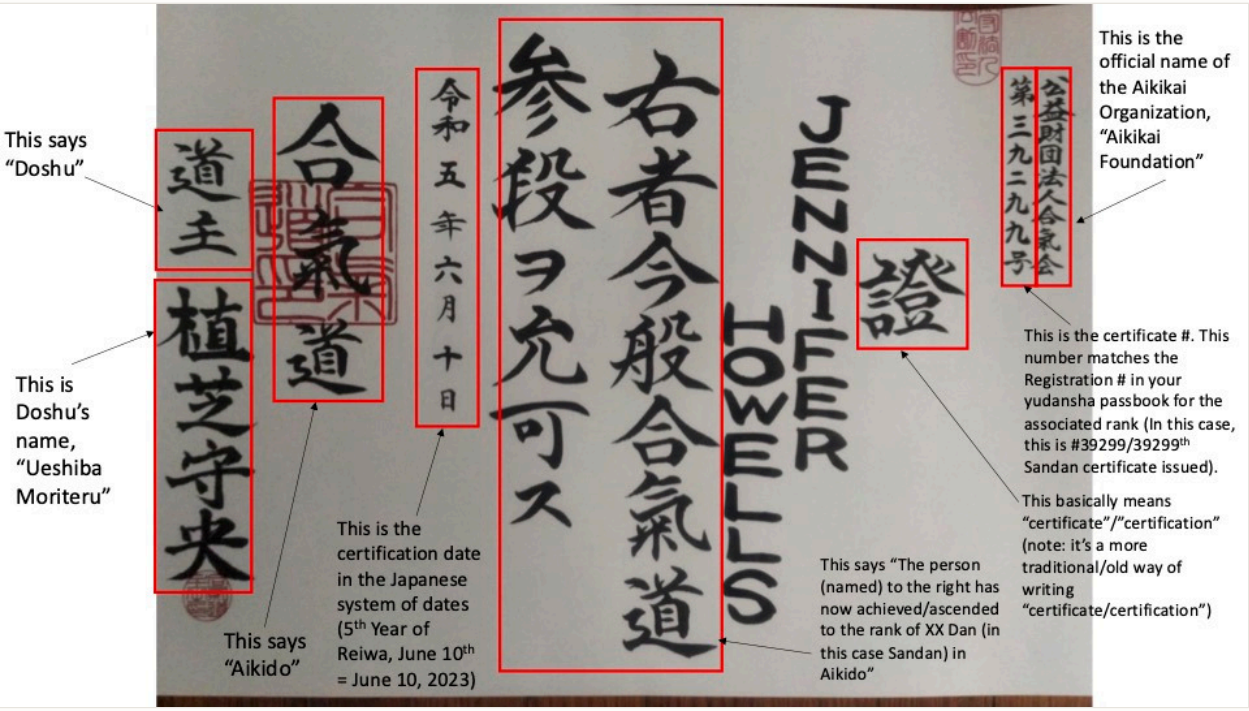
Saotome Sensei has been known to put his palm up to his own face, and say blankly, "Where['s] my hand?" It can be hard to see what's right in front of our face. We humans are notorious for having poor self-assessment. The instructors and the dojo community have some responsibility to keep us straight in that regard. We have to challenge one another to wriggle free from the idea that regular training is just a grind—mae-geiko and ato-geiko are excellent tools to work on things we suck at (forgive my blunt speech) or we're stuck on. They also give us the chance to try new things (i.e., take risks), refine details and deepen trust with partners.

Without our fellow practitioners, Aikido exists only in concept form. Sticks and stones… the snake uses whatever it can to achieve its goal. Musubi, that great interwoven net, holds us all together. After all, do we not bow to all the training partners after the test is done?

> *What obstacles prevent you from experiencing fulfillment and gratitude at promotion time? I hope you look for ways to navigate toward spaciousness, peel off what bothers you and reconcile the rest!*

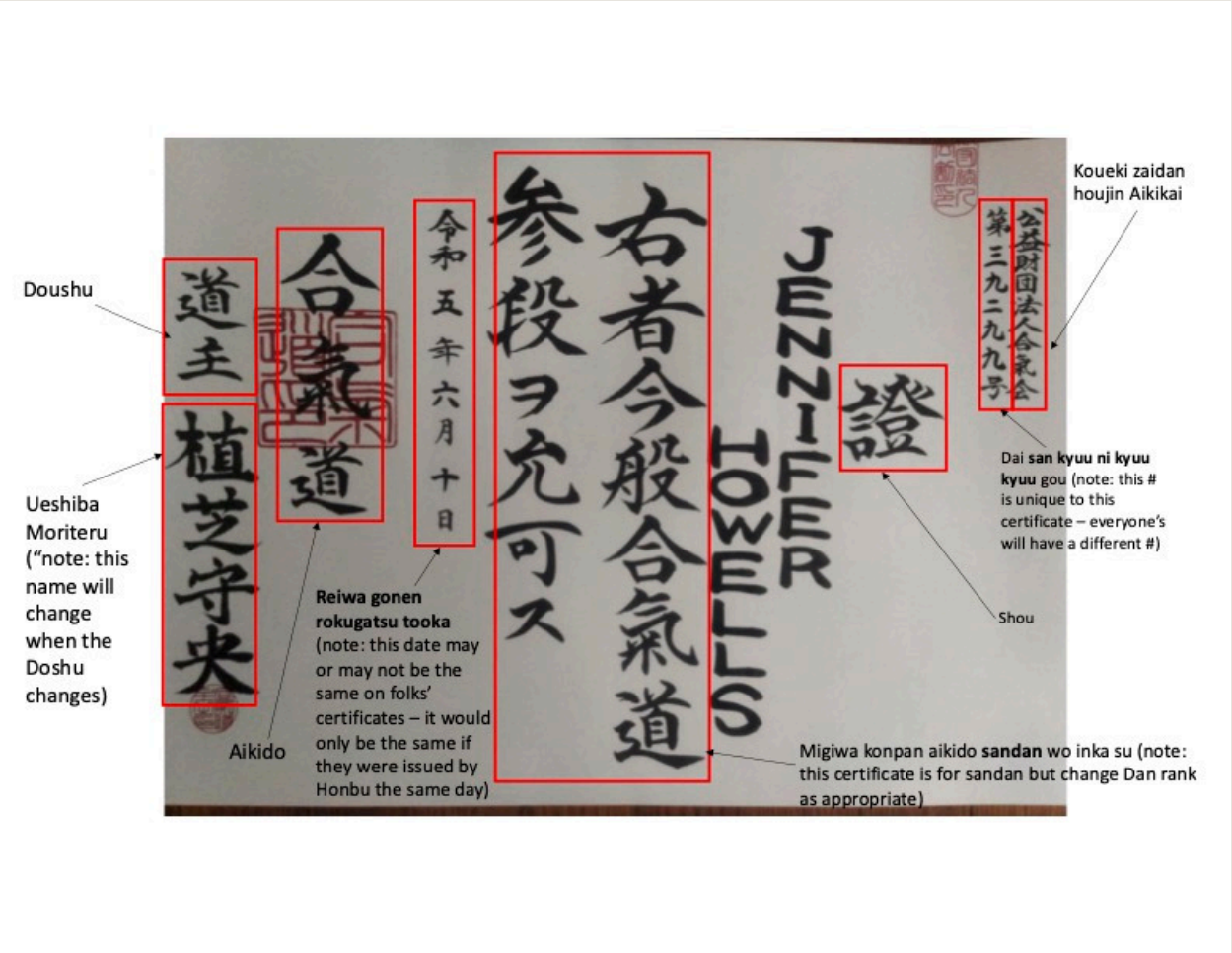
THE CERTIFICATE IN DEPTH

No more preparations, no more practice—the day of the test has come. You did it, you passed! It sure would be nice to know what that certificate says, wouldn't it? Whether yours was a skill test for a kyu rank, or a demonstration at the dan level, certainly an understanding of what the certificate actually says is a good start to give a boost of meaning to the event. Yes, it's just a piece of paper… but it can be more than that.



CERTIFICATE TRANSLATION — WHAT EACH PART OF THE CERTIFICATE MEANS

The Aikido Schools of Ueshiba (ASU) is an organization whose lineage is directly tied to the teachings of O-Sensei under his direct student Mitsugi Saotome (Saotome Sensei's seal and signature appear on all kyu certificates). We are fortunate to be connected to a heart lineage recognized all over the world, and that's an important part of what the certificate shows.



PHONETIC TRANSLITERATION — HOW THE CERTIFICATE SOUNDS, IN ROMAJI

*Certificate translation and transliteration by **Jen Howells**, with a native-speaker accuracy check by **Mamiko Tiefel** · Aikido Shobukan Dojo. Reproduced from Jen Howells' third dan certificate.*

I once asked Saotome Sensei about the difference between a nidan and a sandan rank. He said most people think about promotions and ranking in terms of rungs on a ladder. In fact, he said, it's more like the expansion of a sphere. The idea of comparing my rank to yours equates to nonsense. How would you compare your sphere of progress with mine? Good luck!

> *"Most people think about promotions and ranking in terms of rungs on a ladder. In fact, it's more like the expansion of a sphere."*
>
> — SAOTOME SENSEI, AS RECALLED BY THE AUTHOR

RECEIVING A CERTIFICATE

Receiving a certificate is an elegant practice of dignity and awareness. In Japan, I witnessed numerous sho (certificate) presentation ceremonies. Here's the way it would go:

1. **BEING CALLED UP**
   A name is called; the recipient swiftly proceeds to the front.

2. **PRESENTATION**
   The instructor reads the certificate aloud and then turns the certificate facing the recipient and attendees to witness.

3. **RECEIVING THE CERTIFICATE**
   Bowing and with straight arms, the instructor offers the certificate, facing out, slightly above their head as a show of respect. With the same feeling, the recipient mirrors the gesture by bowing and taking the certificate above head with both hands.

4. **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**
   The recipient receives the certificate and any feedback or accolades, bows to the instructor, then optionally turns (at an angle so the back is not fully to the instructor) to bow to the seiza line in silent thanks for their role in the promotion.

5. **RETURNING TO THE LINE**
   Afterward, the recipient once again turns to face the shomen and returns to the seiza line either by backwards shikko walking or walking backwards. (The conduit to the lineage as well as the spirit of the Founder remain open while facing the shomen during this time.)

COMMUNITY & RESPONSIBILITY

Similarly to how paper money itself isn't "worth" anything, obviously, a paper certificate itself doesn't have any inherent value (I actually did the math on it once; they are worth about $2 per sheet). In other words, it's up to you to "inject" it with its value. Kyu-ranked practitioners, whether they know it or not, are already becoming examples for newer people. Dan-ranked practitioners can mentor kohai students, assist in teaching, facilitate ato-geiko, and work to uphold the dojo's standards and traditions. They might aspire to become the most skilled Aikidoka they know, or even (and hopefully!) offer service to the greater world community. What is done with the new rank, rather than simply "getting" it, is of the most value. Learning does not stop because an outward benchmark has passed.

Appreciating the framework of recognition can be more than a shrug of the shoulders. Your test can serve a greater purpose than as a new video for an online post, for example. Whether you display it or not, the deeper significance of forging oneself through hardship within the martial traditions keeps the meaning of promotion time fresh and alive and, in the end (in my humble opinion), worth spending one's precious life energy on! In doing so, we not only show respect for the tradition and honor the teachings of our instructor, but uphold the truth in the lineage of our beloved art and provide a positive example for those who follow.

Julie Tollen *works as an administrator for the ASU and has penned thousands of names on kyu certificates for ASU since 2015.*