

## ***Chapter 1 – Presence Over Rank***

I didn't receive an email. That's not how it works in Ki Aikido.

Rick Blanke Sensei, my teacher and guide for years, had prepared my Sandan certificate to be formally presented—quietly, respectfully, and in keeping with the tradition of the art. There was no fanfare. No announcement in advance. Just practice acknowledged in the quiet way it always is.

There was no global announcement. No ceremony shared across dojos around the world. But that didn't make the moment less meaningful. If anything, it made it more so. There was something profoundly personal about it. The absence of spectacle sharpened the presence of substance. Because in that small, silent room, what was being acknowledged wasn't just technique or attendance—it was intention. Years of it. Decades, even.

Each rank along the way has its own meaning. But for me, Sandan marked a shift. Not just a step up in curriculum or responsibility, but a pivot in mindset. It was no longer about proving anything. It was about becoming.

I had tested for Sandan alongside ten other hopefuls under Kashiwaya Sensei—his final formal testing before retiring after fifty years as Chief Instructor. The testing went beyond just demonstrating the required techniques, Taigi, and Katas

expected above Nidan. Kashiwaya Sensei wanted more. He always did. He wanted to see what else we had in us. His Aikido was never just a checklist of forms—it was a mirror. And during that test, he wasn't looking for perfection. He was looking for authenticity. For Ki that was extended not just in motion, but in intention. He wanted to see if the principles had taken root in us. Not just memorized. But lived.

He threw curveballs. Asked questions outside the expected. Surprised us with scenarios that demanded more than rote execution. He watched how we adapted. How we breathed. How we connected. That was the test—and we knew it.

In many ways, it reminded me of life itself. We prepare. We train. We believe we're ready. But then something unfamiliar appears. Something unscripted. And the real question is: do we still extend Ki? Do we still remain centered?

That's what Kashiwaya Sensei wanted to know. Not whether we could pass an exam—but whether we could pass through difficulty with grace. Whether our practice had prepared us not just for the mat, but for the unpredictable terrain of real life.

Even now in his seventies, Kashiwaya Sensei continues to move and teach with a vitality and clarity that defies age. His mind and body coordination remain unparalleled—easily surpassing what most could dream of in their prime. Watching

him is to witness what it means to live the art fully, without pause or pretense.

Though now retired as Chief Instructor of the Midland Ki Federation and no longer serving in his former formal roles within the Ki Society, Kashiwaya Sensei continues to teach and guide others through the sword arts of Ki-Kenpo in both personal and group settings. His lifetime of teaching left a profound impact on students across the globe, who were drawn to his spirited, dynamic approach. Each seminar was a new chance to be inspired, to refine, and to reconnect with the heart of the art. Thousands encountered the legacy of Koichi Tohei Sensei through his guidance.

When the day came for the presentation, Rick Sensei called me forward.

Still seated in seiza, I rose and moved toward him, kneeling again just in front of Sensei. The room was quiet—only the sound of breath, the presence of others, and the weight of the moment filled the space. We bowed—not as formality, but in mutual recognition of the path walked. Then, with care, he reached behind him and retrieved a cylindrical leather-encased certificate holder. It bore the emblem of the Ki Society and was sealed on one end, designed to protect the rolled-up certificate within. These are custom-made, and each is marked with an individual number, corresponding to a specific practitioner.

Sensei opened the holder and withdrew the scroll. With the help of senior instructor Tomoyuki Nishino, who reads Japanese, Rick Sensei read the certificate aloud. He spoke each part of the formal presentation with steady voice and strong Ki. I listened, not to the words alone, but to the meaning. This wasn't just a piece of paper. It was a scroll that represented decades of learning, failing, falling, rising, and teaching.

When the certificate was fully presented, we bowed again, and I returned to my place in line. The room filled with quiet claps—not of applause, but of appreciation. For the journey. For the investment I had made in others. For the unseen work that leads to visible growth.

Rick Blanke Sensei had stepped forward with remarkable humility and strength after the passing of Mark Rubbert Sensei. He never tried to replace him. Instead, he honored him—picking up where his mentor, teacher, and friend left off. His guidance helped bridge a time of grief and uncertainty, and with each class, he upheld the standards and the heart of our lineage.

After the presentation, we trained.

It was the perfect reminder: even in recognition, the practice never stops.

As I moved through techniques that day, I found myself reflecting on the path that led here. I thought back to 1993, when I first met Mark Rubbert Sensei.

He was a steady, intelligent, and detail-oriented teacher. He held the dojo together with quiet integrity and sharp awareness. Mark was the one who first introduced me to the subtlety of movement that lies at the core of Ki Aikido. He was—and remains—a pivotal figure in my journey.

Mark was different than most everyone else. He was a carpenter by trade, someone who truly worked with his hands. And those hands were incredibly strong—years of craftsmanship had shaped them into tools of both precision and power. Standing well over six feet tall—closer to 6'4"—and weighing around 250 pounds, he was an imposing figure physically, but never overbearing. His demeanor was humble, and his presence grounded.

Despite his size, his movement on the mat was never about domination. It was always about clarity. About connection. He moved deliberately, never wasting effort, and always inviting you into a lesson you didn't know you were about to learn.

I had come in confident. Athletic. Capable. I had played soccer at a semi-professional level. My balance was good. My reflexes sharp. But none of that translated easily onto the mat. In Aikido, force and athleticism are almost irrelevant without awareness, softness, and presence. I had tension in my shoulders I couldn't even feel until I tried to roll. My breath was shallow. My movements rushed. I didn't yet know how to let go.

Mark knew. And he saw that in me.

He was patient. Steady. Always explaining more than just what to do—he tried to show me why. But for years, I just couldn't catch it. And in time, I could sense his frustration. I don't blame him. I shared it. I was frustrated with myself. I could feel the disconnect, but I didn't know how to fix it.

I wanted to be good. Too much, maybe. I tried to replicate what I saw. I had seen the Steven Seagal movies, full of flashy wrist throws and dramatic falls. I'd try to mimic the movements, but what looked sharp on screen felt hollow on the mat. Mark never once discouraged me outright. But he didn't indulge that imitation either. Instead, he quietly guided me back to the center. Again and again.

His style was never dramatic—but it was unmistakably rooted. His techniques worked not because they were forceful, but because they were true. There was no hesitation in his movement, and no need to explain everything. He allowed you the space to discover it.

One day, I remember distinctly—we were working on a simple tenkan. I had done it a hundred times by then. I thought I had it. I was trying to move quickly, fluidly, to show I had improved. He stopped me mid-movement.

"You're still trying to move ahead of your partner," he said. "That's not blending. That's avoidance."

It hit me like a bell. I had been trying to win. Even subtly. Even unconsciously. I was trying to stay one step ahead so I wouldn't have to feel vulnerable. So I wouldn't have to respond. So I could stay in control.

That was the first moment I understood how deep the art actually goes.

Mark didn't offer a long lecture. He didn't need to. His corrections were precise, but generous. He didn't want you to feel small. He wanted you to wake up.

Looking back, I can see just how much of his teaching formed the foundation of everything that came later. I owe him more than I ever said out loud. His presence on the mat—and his willingness to keep showing up even when I flailed—gave me the chance to stay with it.

Eventually, something began to shift. I started to relax. My breath grew fuller. My movement softened. And one day, I found myself responding, rather than reacting. Connecting instead of controlling.

That was the doorway. And Mark Rubbert Sensei had handed me the key.

I was deeply saddened to learn of his passing in 2024. The dojo lost a guiding presence. I lost a teacher. A mentor. A steady influence in the storm. But what he gave to me—and to

many others—remains. It lives in our movement, our posture, our breath. Every time I bow in, I carry some of his teaching with me. His legacy is not in the techniques alone. It's in the way he lived the art.

Still, I showed up.

Week after week. Month after month. Year after year.