

## **What Does your Black Belt Mean, and what is it Really Worth?**

The merit of rank is a question that warrants careful consideration in the modern era of martial arts, and one for which you rarely see thoughtful comment. Rather than leading you down a long and winding path to an answer, I will state it up-front and very succinctly:

***A black belt means whatever YOU think it means, and it has no worth whatsoever if you put nothing into it.***

So there it is, raw and on display for all to see in a single sentence. In the modern era of martial arts where black belts are handed out to whomever is willing to fork over the money, there is no way to sprinkle sugar on the answer. A black belt is worth no more than the sweat, tears, blood, pain, and other sacrifices that you put into your efforts in learning the martial art and achieving the rank. This model is the same for the achievement of proficiency in any sporting endeavor, and you will get a similar answer from an expert in dancing, ballet, gymnastics, or soccer – they all require sacrifice in order to achieve proficiency.

The one difference that separates the martial arts from many other sports and artistic endeavors is a formalized and time-honored ranking system for assessing this proficiency. Many Japanese and Okinawan styles of Karate follow a 10-level system for ranking under-belts and black-belts. These levels are often divided into 10 “kyu” rankings that decrease in number from white belt through brown belt, and 10 senior “dan” rankings that increase in number beginning with promotion from brown to black belt, or Sho-dan (1<sup>st</sup> dan).

So what do these black belt (Yudansha) rankings mean to the martial arts community in general, and how should we apply them?

Most will tell you that Karate or other Martial Arts rankings must be bestowed upon the recipient by a senior ranking black-belt from a “recognized” Karate organization, and this bestowal must be made by a person that is at least one rank/level above the recipient. Some might also tell you that regardless of an instructor’s rank, the instructor must be formally certified by the organization to bestow dan rankings to others.

In answering this question, let us go back in history to understand how the many current Karate styles began, and when ranking of proficiency became a consideration.

### **Quick History on Rank and Organizational Structure**

Today, many traditional arts practiced in Japan come with a highly regimented structure and a progressive ranking system to recognize experience and competency in the art. This is not only the case for modern martial arts, but for many artistic endeavors such as calligraphy or Taiko drumming. However, ranking of proficiency in the martial arts is a relatively new concept, not something rooted in ancient traditions as one might think.

If we turn back to the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were no formalized “styles” or Karate organizations. There was only one Karate in Okinawa (known as “Uchina” in the local dialect), and it was called “te” (or “di”), which means “hand”. Some also referred to it as “Toudi” or “Chinese hand” in recognition of the Chinese influence on the art. *Te* was taught primarily by the aristocratic “peichin” class of scholars and teachers that was maintained under Japan’s now-abolished feudal kingdom, and under this class structure, only *peichin* (or a higher noble class) were allowed to learn the art. This was not necessarily out of any need to hide the fighting art, so it could be used against the fearsome Japanese samurai (as some stories recount), but rather, out of a class-based system that reserved this art for those of a higher social status (*i.e.*, privileged access to knowledge).

During its early time of development, the practice of *te* was very individualized and much like a formal apprenticeship under a knowledgeable master, with “recognition” of proficiency coming solely from the respect and honor your peers may afford you after many years of training. Most *te* masters would teach only 2 or 3 students at any one time in order to maintain high quality and focus. Large class-structure with a formal belting system and ranking of proficiency was not a function of *te* training during the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

As Karate began to spread to Japan in the 1920s, the notable *te* masters on the island decided that they needed to formally define the styles or lineages of *te*, based on the Okinawa prefectures in which they were generally taught. Some would say that the key masters who taught these styles began vying for individual recognition of their regional arts, but regardless of the reason, these styles were categorized broadly as *Suri-te*, *Tamari-te*, and *Naha-te*. There were no formal organizations or head *te* “masters” of the system, nobody wore the formal uniform or “gi” yet, and a “belt” (or sash) was generally an ornamental wardrobe item that adorned the formal Kimono worn by everyone (not only *te* practitioners) on ceremonious occasions.

In 1936 a group of recognized *te* masters came together to discuss a variety of monumental changes to the art – changes that were expected to propel *te* into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and more specifically, to broaden its exposure in Japan. Many considerations were assessed, including a formal decision to change the name of the art from *te*, to *Kara-te*, meaning “empty-hand” in Japanese. The addition of the suffix “do” was also approved at this meeting, so that the name conformed to changes in the terminology applied to other Japanese martial arts at the turn of the century. So at this meeting, *Karate-do* (or the “way of empty-hand”) was born. Although terminology, name-changes, and even the creation of new and simpler kata (gasp!) were topics

of discussion at this meeting, there was no mention of organizational structure or formalized rankings for *Karate-do*. If we step away from Okinawa for a moment to examine early development in Japan, the formal rankings first adopted for Karate had a genesis in a much earlier time. The dan ranking structure was originally created in the 1600's during Japan's Edo period to designate a player's proficiency in the board game of "Go", and it was later adopted in 1893 by Jigoro Kano during his development of Judo as a nationally recognized martial art in Japan. This kyu/dan ranking system allowed Judo students to not only be recognized for knowledge and experience, but it also allowed for ranking of proficiency levels for purposes of competition – an important consideration for Kano as his primary goal was to create a national competition sport through his establishment of Judo.

In 1895 the *Dai Nippon Butoku-kai* was established under the authority of the Japanese Ministry of Education, with the goal of organizing, standardizing, and promoting the various martial disciplines that were practiced in Japan at the time. The *Butoku-kai* adopted the colored belting system that Kano created, which at the time, consisted of six *kyu* rankings (three white belt levels, and three brown belt levels), and ten *dan* (black belt) rankings. The organization also issued instructors licenses, based on the samurai titles of *hanshi* and *kyoshi*, and later added the title of *renshi* to recognize the apprentice instructor.

In the interest of conforming to the existing Japanese martial arts, Gichin Funakoshi adopted elements of Kano's ranking system in 1924 by awarding the first ever Karate black-belt "dan" rankings of various levels to seven of his senior Japanese students. It is generally understood that Funakoshi himself had not yet been awarded any rank, so technically, he was not formally recognized by the *Butoku-kai* as an instructor in martial arts when he first accredited his students as Yudansha. To further confuse this historic evolution, when the *Butoku-kai* finally awarded Funakoshi

with the (lowest) instructor title of *renshi* in the late 1930s, one of Funakoshi's Karate students (Koyu Konishi) was actually a member of the board that accredited Funakoshi with this title (Konishi had already been awarded the coveted *kyoshi* title, even though his Karate instructor was not yet recognized as a *renshi*). It was Chojun Myagi, founder of Okinawan Goju-Ryu, who would first be awarded the title of *kyoshi* by the *Butoku-kai* in 1937, but as an Okinawan, he was not awarded a seat on the board as Kinoshi was. Although Funakoshi's Karate was well-known and respected in Japan, he would not be awarded the *kyoshi* title until 1943.

So, we can see at this point in development, the Karate ranking and accreditation system was not exactly uniform in application, despite its unity under Japan's Ministry of Education. Although some of this disconformity related to the prejudicial views of the Japanese towards Okinawans (being Japanese had its privileges), there were no clear rules or formalized criteria for adjudicating credentials and proficiency – politics and favoritism often ruled the day, and Chojun Myagi himself voiced concern that dan rankings would lead to discrimination, where individuals would be judged based on their rank and not their character. The *Butoku-kai* was all but abolished following the close of WWII, but the rankings continued to be highly prized and there was a drive to maintain this structure. Many organizations began to spring up, and fall away, but conformity and integrity continued to be an issue. The All-Japan Karate Federation (AJKF) was one of the more notable organizations that was formed during these post-war years, and the AJKF was presided over by many notable Karate teachers, including Gichin Funakoshi. Rankings did not formally take root in Okinawa until the formation of the Okinawa Karate Federation (OKF) in 1956 with Chosin Chibana as president. The OKF is generally regarded as one of the first Okinawan organization to be formally recognized by the Japanese Ministry of Education and authorized to bestow dan rankings to Karate practitioners.

In 1964, the Federation of All-Japan Karatedo Organizations (FAJKO) was formed and was the first organization to successfully unify many of the existing Karate styles under one umbrella organization. The FAJKO was not a formal sanctioning body that authorized the accreditation of rank, but rather, served as an umbrella organization under which many styles or schools of martial arts could affiliate as a group and adopt uniform standards for ranking and sport competition. The FAJKO (now the Japan Karate Federation, or JKF) formulated Karate ranking standards in 1971 that became widely accepted by most martial arts schools and continue to be used today. These rankings consist of the kyu/dan rankings and belt colorings generally recognized in most competition settings to designate proficiency for purposes of pairing or judging in competition.

The JKF continues today as a governing body for sport-Karate in Japan and has continued its efforts over many years to promote Karate for Olympic competition. In 2016 the International Olympic Committee (IOC) finally approved Karate as an official sport of the Tokyo Summer Olympics in 2020, where competition in *kata* and *kumite* will finally be presented to a world audience.

## **How Should You Assess the Yudansha Rankings**

Given the foregoing discussion, what gives a person or an organization the right to promote senior Yudansha, and why should these promotions be honored? What does a “recognized” style or organization actually mean, and how do we judge rank – particularly since we now understand that the ranking system was politically charged, had no formal unification during its development, and was only recently (within the last 50 years) widely adopted under the standards of the JKF?

These are questions that always arise, and for which there never seems to be a satisfying answer, but below is a general guideline for consideration.

**Sho-Dan through San-Dan (1-3):** When assessing the merits of the Yudansha (Black Belt) rankings in Karate or similar martial arts, the ranks of 1<sup>st</sup> through 3<sup>rd</sup> Dan generally represent a focus on the physical development of the Karate student and her/his skill with the martial art. This is the most important time of training as it builds the foundations for a lifetime of study (bad foundation means poor study for years to come). So, in judging progression through these ranks, there will be many things upon which to focus, but key will be the development and improvement of a student's physical skills, and the general knowledge of the fundamentals of the art. This may involve precision with *kihon* (basics), perfection of *kata* (technique), development in *kumite* (sparring), or improvement in competition performance. Of course these criteria must be adjusted, based on the capabilities and gifts of each individual student, but improvement in fundamental skill and progression of foundational knowledge is the overall message.

Devotion of the student is also an important criterion of assessment. During this crucial phase of growth, it is important for the student to demonstrate exceptional focus, active participation in training sessions, and a willingness to make certain reasonable sacrifices necessary to advance his/her acumen in the martial arts. To continue advancement from 1<sup>st</sup> dan through 3<sup>rd</sup> dan, the student must also demonstrate a willingness to "step up" to a position of leadership by assuming active teaching duties within the school or organization. Leading by example is a *must have* requirement for new Yudansha.

### **Yon-dan through Rokudan (4-6):**

In further climbing the ladder, 4<sup>th</sup> through 6<sup>th</sup> Dan represents a focus on the development of the Karate-ka as a teacher and future instructor. These levels prepare the student for a lifetime of teaching and "giving back" this knowledge in a variety of forms. The blossoming instructor must learn to appreciate the depth of

knowledge and develop the ability to peel back the many layers of this knowledge to properly articulate the right information at the right level, and at the right time. This ability to distill down information and draw from a wealth of experience while speaking appropriately to a given audience (whether it be a white belt or a black belt) is a critical aspect of teaching, and it is not easy to apply in practice.

To do this effectively, the instructor must quiet the noise of knowledge that wants to project itself outward, and learn the self-control necessary to categorize information appropriately and present it timely, based on the individual student's ability to comprehend. This self-control often means holding certain things back until the student has advanced and is better-positioned to understand. It also takes a certain relational-thinking ability to link disparate pieces of knowledge together, to build a bridge of understanding for the student. This relational teaching ability is the most critical talent for an instructor and takes many years to learn (not all are able to develop it).

Both level groupings discussed above are important in the journey of a Karate-ka, and the journey requires close tutelage by a seasoned teacher for a student to properly advance through these levels. Accordingly, these levels have more of a "promotion" or "achievement" aspect to them - they represent achievement of a new level of understanding and abilities under the tutelage of an honored and legitimate senior instructor.

### **Nana-dan through Ku-dan (7-9):**

Senior Yudansha rankings of 7<sup>th</sup> through 9<sup>th</sup> dan are in most respects purely honorary and represent the "recognition" of a person's time, years of experience, and devotion to the development (and expansion) of knowledge in the martial arts. These rankings should not be viewed as promotions, but rather as



a “recognition” of accomplishment and wisdom by other knowledgeable peers.

This recognition comes from the students and other senior black belts within any given organization - an organization that together all of the members must create. 7th Dan also means that it is now time to stop "taking" and is instead a time to "give back" to the spirit of the martial arts. This means that the higher dan recognition also comes with a substantial amount of responsibility and a heavy burden on the part of the promotee to "give back" to the promoting organization and the general martial arts community in a variety of ways. This includes promoting the organization and its values, sharing of individual knowledge and perceptions, and volunteering an ongoing contribution to the development of the students and members of the organization. This responsibility to “give back” and contribute from your wealth of knowledge is an ongoing requirement of the rank (a prospective mandate, rather than a retrospective acknowledgement).

### **Ju-Dan (10):**

Few people can aptly describe what a Ju-dan (10<sup>th</sup> dan) represents, and articulating its worth and meaning is certainly difficult in the modern age of martial arts. Some will tell you that the rank is reserved only for the senior head of a recognized style/system of martial art. However, this has little meaning in the modern era where there are hundreds of individual recognized styles and interpretations. This view of “one Ju-dan to rule them all” also does not hold up in all respects against the historic track record and development of rank in martial arts as discussed above.

So what is a Ju-dan? In turning back to the original explanation of the meaning of a black-belt, it means whatever YOU believe it means, and it is worth no more than the time, effort, and pain that

one puts into it. Is it possible to have more than one Ju-dan within a particular system or style of martial art? If we accept the rank as having merit in the modern age, then the answer would seem to be “yes”. However, this view comes with the caveat that the rank should be preserved for only those very senior students (50 years or more of active experience), and it should be reserved for only those senior students that have made unique and wide-reaching contributions to the martial arts (the use of the term “student” to describe a Ju-dan is purposeful in this statement). The recipient must go above and beyond the norms to contribute to the martial arts community and make recognizable strides in improving our understanding (and preservation) of the martial arts as a whole.

The problem is that rarely will you find a Ju-dan that satisfies these criteria. Often, those who are awarded the rank of Ju-dan have connived their way to the rank through careful maneuvering and political posturing within a given organization. Wearing the honored red belt is their primary goal, and the merit of the rank means little – and their contributions mean even less. They desire the rank solely because of their egotistical yearning to be recognized on a pedestal rising above all others. So, from this perspective, consider whether Ju-dan should not be a rank, but rather a *test* ... a test that you pass if you refuse the rank, when offered.

### **Assessing the Quality of an Organization that Bestows Rank**

To have merit, any rank must be bestowed by a respectable organization with the framework necessary to make qualified assessments. So what are the considerations when assessing the merits of an organization, and honoring its rankings of senior Yudansha within the broader martial arts community? Below is a framework to consider when assessing quality.

- **Knowledge and Experience:** Is the organization founded (and presided over) by long-standing and knowledgeable Yudansha with decades of experience training and teaching others?
- An organization is only as good as its members, and the bedrock cornerstone of this membership is the founding body of the organization. In assessing the organization, look first to the founding members – what is their experience with the martial arts, and what is their teaching track-record? Generally, you should see a *minimum* of 100 - 150 years of combined experience by the founding members, with notable accomplishments by each individual member.
- The quality of the students that the organization produces must also be respectable as the organization is only as good as its output, so the students should hold up to the generally accepted standards within the martial arts community. The organization should also be active and participate in the broader martial arts community through competition or training. The organization should not be silent and sit in the background under its own self-created umbrella (this is key to assessing whether the members conform to commonly-held standards). The founding members as individuals must also actively participate and contribute to the martial arts community, and they should have long-standing ties with other honorable martial artists.
- ***Legitimacy of the Board:*** *Did the founders earn their rank and achievements under strict guidance of a legitimate instructor who possesses lineage and teaches with integrity?*
- In building on the first point above, who are the founders of the organization and where did they come from?

- The founders should be able to point to their “originating” instructors, and these originating instructors should be generally honored and recognized within the martial arts community. The founders must be able to demonstrate that they legitimately advance through their earned rankings under these originating instructors, and that they as individuals have made recognizable accomplishments in their art. Assuming their originating instructors were legitimate, the founders (as individuals) should also generally be honored and respected within the long-established martial arts community.
- ***Unified Agreement on Recognition:*** *Do the founders as a team decide together and agree with the senior-level Yudansha promotions and recognitions bestowed by the organization?*
- Key to any organization is unity in following procedure and protocol, including a unified assessment (as a group) on the recognition of senior Yudansha. This minimizes politics and avoids individual favoritism when handing out honors to individuals.
- All senior Yudansha recognitions and promotions awarded by the organization should be approved and witnessed by the entire board of founders (*i.e.*, they must be in agreement on the qualifications of the recipient). Any dissension on a decision should be addressed and resolved by the board as a team. The board members also should actively discuss upcoming recognitions to allow proper time for assessment by the team (decisions on senior ranks should not be made in a vacuum).
- **Guidelines for Recognition:** Does the organization have strict guidelines and specified criteria for promotion, or are

they simply handing out rank to whomever will pay them a fee?

- Many organizations accept exorbitant fees in exchange for a promotion or recognition. The term “accept” may be too light, and the terms “require” or “demand” may be more appropriate. It is important for an organization to receive fair compensation in exchange for value, but too many organizations hand out meaningless certificates to whomever is willing to pay the fee while requiring no standards for advancement.
- In examining the integrity of any organization, first ask about their criteria for advancement - is it based solely on money, or is it based primarily on established standards of quality in the student? The organization should establish firm guidelines for advancement that are based on time, experience, and knowledge-proficiency (not monetary gain). These criteria should be adopted unanimously by the acting board of the organization and applied consistently. The organization should also maintain an established curriculum that serves as a basic parameter for content and format of training. If fees are charged for promotion/recognition, these fees should be reasonable and serve primarily to maintain the organization (not fatten the pockets of the individuals within the organization).
- From this perspective, consider whether fees charged for senior Yudansha rankings (7<sup>th</sup> dan and above) are even warranted - particularly in light of the emphasis on participation and “giving back” as a requirement for achievement.

- ***Rules of Integrity:*** Does the organization require basic codes of conduct and expectations of integrity when teaching the martial art and running a school?
- The members make the organization, so paramount to the qualifications of any organization is the integrity to which it requires all members to adhere. This includes actions within the organization, actions within the practitioner's individual school, and actions within the community at large. Any organization should require adherence to specific guidelines on integrity, and these guidelines should be strictly enforced through sanctions or expulsion. These rules should also be designed to advance the integrity of the martial arts as a whole (not just the individual desires of the organization). Accordingly, these rules should be generally universal and understood as acceptable to any rational person within or outside of the martial arts (*i.e.*, they should be common, rather than archaic in nature).
- ***Recognition vs. Rank:*** Does the organization view advancement to a senior Yudansha rank as a "promotion" to a new level, or rather as "recognition" of knowledge/teaching ability that the promotee already possesses?
- As mentioned, senior Yudansha is about recognition of a person's qualifications as an instructor, and contributions to the martial arts and organization over the years – not about physical abilities or the number of *kata* that the practitioner knows. Does the organization view its senior ranks (7<sup>th</sup> dan and above) in this manner? The organization should require a respectable number of years of experience with the martial arts (generally measured in decades), before considering the practitioner for recognition at these most senior ranks. As a requirement for ongoing recognition, these senior

Yudansha should also be challenged to contribute to the instruction and quality of the organization's martial arts program (see immediately below).

- ***Active Participation:*** *Does the organization require ongoing active participation to continue forward in rank?*
- Receiving recognition or an award of advanced rank is one thing, but living up to it is another (see prior discussion regarding “giving back” by the senior Yudansha). Rank is only as good as the work put into the achievement, and for advanced Yudansha (7<sup>th</sup> dan and above), this means continuing to actively participate in the actions of the organization and contributing to the martial arts community as a whole. Receiving rank, and then walking away with a “thank you” does not count.
- So, does the organization impose active participation as a requirement for bestowing rank? Does the organization require on-going contributory efforts in order to live up to the rank? Is the recipient required to continue teaching and also giving back to the students within the organization to some meaningful degree?
- Again, senior rank should be a “recognition”, not a “certification” by any organization, so it is just as easy to *cease* ongoing recognition, as it is to *award* recognition at the onset. If the recipient ceases active participation without warrant, then recognition should also cease – the rank/certificate means nothing to the organization at this point, and the recipient (if honorable) should likewise cease to claim the recognition within the broader martial arts community.

When assessing an organization, if the answer to all of the above questions is “yes”, then there is no rational reason why the

organization and its Yudansha should not be recognized by other martial artists and organizations with like-minded principles. There is also little difference in recognizing the creation of a new organization, versus acknowledging the prior establishment of older organizations in bygone years – new groups spring up every year and the list of organizations will grow as the 21<sup>st</sup> century advances, so we must adjust our time-honored views accordingly.

### **Why the Harsh Scrutiny of Higher Rankings (7<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> dan)?**

Generally within most schools, a promotion to 1<sup>st</sup> dan (Sho-dan) black-belt is rarely questioned by the martial arts community. It is bestowed to the practitioner by the head instructor of an individual school (not necessarily a broader organization), and rarely does anybody bat an eye or question the rank, provided the school has reasonable standards of integrity. If the student attends tournament competition or a broader seminar as a newly-appointed black belt, few will scrutinize the ranking. The same generally applies even for promotions to 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> dan – nobody really cares or raises a concern.

So if there is generally no challenge to the lower-level Yudansha promotion, why the focus and scrutiny on higher rankings (7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 9<sup>th</sup>)? If nobody questions your promotion to a 2<sup>nd</sup> dan, why should they suddenly become worried that your recognition as 7<sup>th</sup> dan represents “heresy” within the martial arts community? Perhaps ego is part of the answer – an ego that drives people to adopt the view that as reigning *hanshi* and *kyoshi*, they comprise an elite group that you cannot join or access (at least, not without permission and approval from the reigning royalty). Like any pristine and untouchable club, they prefer an approved “opening of the books” to allow admission. Your unwelcomed admittance as a new member to the rank-and-file dilutes their pristine relevance and tarnishes their (perceived) place of honor. The more common the title, the less relevant the title becomes, so this



ultimately translates into an “injury to ego” that likely drives much of the scrutiny and disapproval of rank as heresy.

So the final answer is ... why worry! It is certainly important to question the merits of rank and the quality of the bestowing organization when assessing the recognition, but it is difficult to say that one organization has more merit than another (or that one organization has the right and privilege to judge another as inadequate). First assess that your organization and its founders are respectable and conform generally to the guidelines suggested above. Second, assess the time, pain, sacrifices, and effort YOU have put into achieving your rank amongst peers.

Finally – if you are satisfied with the quality of these assessments, then stand tall with honor, enjoy your recognition, and rest assured that your rank DOES have merit and relevance to you, and to all of the peers that really matter.