

ARE YOU WORTH THAT BELT?

By Russell Boon - Kazoku Karate/International Tang Soo Do - Martial Arts Society

In this article, I will take a look at the crisis in the martial arts grading system and the predicament we face as students and instructors. Bruce Lee once remarked that a belt is only good for keeping your trousers up. Actually to be precise, in karate, they stop your jacket from coming open. Details, but many of us are utterly obsessed with them.

It was Judo founder Jigaro Kano who created the belt system most recognise and follow, more or less, today. In the 1800s, Kano awarded the first black belt to his original students. Later, having only used white and black, he introduced a coloured belt system starting with white for a raw beginner, red for novice, brown for intermediate and black for advanced. Senior grades were awarded white and red block belts and the most advanced solid red, thereby completing the circle.

Why he chose these colours remains a mystery. One popular theory is that the longer a student trained, the dirtier the belt became. Another, more believable theory, is that white was chosen as the colour of both the martial art uniform and novice belt because of the cultural significance of white in Japanese culture: white is used to represent cleanliness and innocence, honour and virtue. The Japanese national flag, the 'Kokki' features a red disc, representing the sun, on a white background. (Incidentally, the white of the Tae'gukki - the South Korean flag - also indicates purity, revealing an East Asian cultural trend, thus allowing the Koreans to adopt the same philosophy). The white of a new

student's belt is therefore a symbol of his innocence and lack of knowledge.

This possibly explains white, but what about black for 1st Dan and above? According to a hypothesis put forward by the American martial arts academic and author, Dr. Don Cunningham, in Japanese high school swimming tournaments, advanced competitors wore black bands around their wrists to separate themselves from the novices. Cunningham writes on his website: "As a distinguished educator and sports enthusiast, Dr. Kano was most certainly aware of this tradition and may have incorporated it into his practices at the Kodokan."

And red and white for the most senior? A simple cultural preference says Cunningham: traditionally the Japanese traditionally divide groups into red and white sides based on the Genpei War in which two rival clans, the Genji and the Heike identified their troops with flags, the Genji using white and the Heike red.

In Tang Soo Do, the Korean form of Karate-Do founded by Grandmaster Hwang Kee, the belt system is slightly different to the Japanese version but based on the same idea. There are ten Gup grades and ten Dan grades, with 4th Dan and above being classed as 'Master'. Most schools feature a red belt instead of a brown belt but can incorporate both. A lot of schools base the belt colours around the seasons of the year, for example white represents winter, yellow and orange spring, etc. etc. In many schools, midnight blue is worn as a substitute for black, the theory being that it isn't as final as black and could always become darker, suggesting knowledge can forever be gained, whereas black is permanent. Master grades, 4th Dan and above, wear midnight blue belts with a red stripe, implying that the holder had both the quality of um (characterised by midnight blue) and yang (the red). Um/Yang is the Koreanised version of the Chinese concept of Yin/Yang, the eternal contradiction ultimately working in harmony.

In many American Karate clubs, the 'Renshi' belt is becoming more and more common and causing a bit of controversy. For those who don't know by now, the Renshi belt is a variation of the red and white block belt favoured by senior judo practitioners, usually worn by a rensai grade (5th Dan and above usually) hence

the title, it is split lengthways, coloured red and white on one side and solid black on the other. Unfortunately no one in Japan recognises the belt. Sensei John R. Spence of Williamsburg Shorin-Ryu says these belts do not, and have never, existed on Okinawa. He writes, "dojos that use these belts are not bad dojos or those who wear them are not bad sensei, however, they have to be used for the right reasons. If you are using it to distinguish the higher-ranking black belts/senior black belts from the other yudansha [Dan grade holders] then I imagine it is acceptable. However, to wear one to recognize your newly acquired 5th dan or 6th dan rank and so that you can feel more important by having people call you 'renshi', then the joke is on you."

It seems that some people are hiding behind their flashy belts and titles, claiming to be something that they are not. Not only do we have stripes, blocks and gold bars, we now also have camouflage belt and even 'patriot' belts designed in the colours of national flags. We have important titles, 'Kwang Jang Nim' (Korean: grandmaster), 'Renshi' (Japanese: refining teacher), 'Hanshi' (Japanese: wise teacher) etc. Some schools operate on an almost Josef Stalin type cult of personality! There is nothing wrong with titles, but I have seen 30-year old 12th Dan (!) grandmasters advertising their superiors systems in magazines.

I think most of us recognise the need for a grading system because we all like something to aim for, something to achieve. But what happens when the belt, rather than improvement itself, becomes the main focus?

In my father's school, we fear the dreaded red belt fever! Red belt fever could be described as 'severe aversion to training, lack or non-existence of spirit and a perpetual feeling of despondency' Let me explain: 1st Gup students - red belts - must wait a minimum of a year between passing their 1st Gup and testing for 1st Dan. Many students lack the patience to enable them to continue training. They set their sights on that coveted black belt so much that one of two things happens, (a) they cannot wait, get bored repeating the same patterns and techniques over and over again and quit, sometimes blaming the instructor for holding them back or some sort of other feeble excuse, or (b)



they finally accomplish their goal, are awarded the black belt... and leave because the novelty quickly wears off. They don't feel any different, they aren't suddenly any better and it is at least another two years wait until they can grade again so they quit and take up something else. This period is a perilous time for students!

And what about instructors? What pressure does the grading system put us under? For one, the pressure to pass students is quite high because no good instructor wants to see students humiliated, especially children because they do not take failure easily (and neither do the parents!). Luckily, our students don't often disappoint and don't often fail but sometimes they do and it is just a fact of life. Some quit, some learn from it. Usually though, they quit.

As an amateur instructor with a 'proper' full time job the pressure on me isn't as great as it would be if I were a professional instructor banking on my students staying so I could pay the mortgage. Some professional instructors - not all - end up running 'McDojangs/McDojos' because they couldn't care less what standard people are as long as the capital keeps following.

As practitioners of martial arts, we must remember to tell ourselves that the belt, whatever colour it may be - yellow, green, brown, black, pink or gold - says something about us, our character, and our clubs, associations and federations. Are we really worth that belt? That grade or title? Are our students at acceptable skill levels for their grade? I have met 'Masters' with only seven years service under their fancy belts! Do the sums! If it takes on average at least three years to get to black belt, two years between 1st and 2nd Dan, three years between 2nd and 3rd and four years between 3rd and 4th??? Me thinks it has more to do with them being franchise managers, bringing a lot of revenue into the head office. The black belt is something that is earned, not given. It shouldn't be bought in the same way any kind of qualification shouldn't be bought. Would you learn how to play classical piano with a teacher who has only been playing a couple of years?

Sensei John Spence says, "with new rank, comes new responsibility and expectations. It does not bring us fame or new metaphysical abilities. Each new step or rank puts us in the crosshairs of our students, our peers and ourselves."

We are expected to deliver in other words. If we do not, it makes the holder and the club/association look bad.

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For more information about *Kazoku Karate and the International Tang Soo Do - Martial Arts Society*, ring 01642 563658

