

What Does a Black Belt Really Mean?

By Reverend Kensho Furuya

Through the popularity of this column, I get correspondence from all over the country. And the most commonly asked question is, "How long does it take to get a black belt?" I don't know how this question is answered in other schools, but my students know that asking such a question in my dojo would set them back several years in their training. It would be a disaster.

Most people would be overjoyed if I would say it takes just a couple of years to get a black belt, but unfortunately it does not. And though I am afraid most people would not be happy with my answer, I think the general misconceptions about "what is a black belt?" should be clarified as much as possible. This is not a popular subject to discuss in the way I am going to. Indeed, I warn my students not to ask the question in the first place. The answer is not what they want to hear.

How do you get a black belt? You find a competent teacher and a good school, begin training and work hard. Someday, who knows when, it will come. It is not easy, but it's worth it. It may take one year; it may take ten years. You may never achieve it. When you come to realize that the black belt is not as important as the practice itself, you are probably approaching black belt level. When you realize that no matter how long or how hard you train, there is a lifetime of study and practice ahead of you until you die, you are probably getting close to a black belt.

At whatever level you achieve, if you think you "deserve" a black belt, or if you think you are now "good enough" to be a black belt, you are way off the mark, and, indeed a very long way from reaching your black belt. Train hard, be humble, don't show off in front of your teacher or other students, don't complain about any task and do your best in everything in your life. This is what it means to be a black belt. To be overconfident, to show off your skill, to be competitive, to look down on others, to show a lack of respect, and to pick and chose what you do and don't do (believing that some jobs are beneath your dignity) characterize the student who will never achieve black belt. What they wear around their waist is simply a piece of merchandise brought for a few dollars in a martial arts supply store. The real black belt, worn by a real black belt holder, is the white belt of a beginner, turned black by the colour of his blood and sweat.

Training Pattern

The first level of black belt in Japanese is called Shodan. It literally means "first level". Sho (first) is an interesting ideograph. It is comprised of two radicals meaning "cloth" and "knife". To make a piece of clothing, one first cuts out the

pattern on the cloth. The pattern determines the style and look of the final product. If the pattern is out of proportion or in error, the clothes will look bad and not fit properly. In the same way, your initial training to reach black belt is very important; it determines how you will eventually turn out as a black belt.

In my many years of teaching, I have noticed that the students who are solely concerned with getting their black belt discourage easily, as soon as they realize it is harder than they expected. Students who come in just for practice, without concern for rank and promotion, always do well. They are not crushed by shallow or unrealistic goals.

There is a famous story about Yagyu Matajuro, who was a son of the famous Yagyu family of swordsmen in 17th century feudal Japan. He was kicked out of the house for lack of talent and potential, and sought out instruction of the swordmaster Tsukahara Bokuden, with the hope of achieving mastery of the sword and regaining his family position. On their initial interview, Matajuro asked Tsukahara Bokuden, "How long will it take me to master the sword?" Bokuden replied, "Oh, about five years if you train very hard." "If I train twice as hard, how long will it take?" inquired Matajuro. "In that case, ten years", retorted Bokuden.

Finding a Focus

What do you focus on if you don't focus on attaining your black belt? It is easier said than done, but you must focus your energy on practice. However, to think, "I will concentrate on my training to get a black belt", is simply playing mind games with yourself and will ultimately lead to your own disappointment.

Can you simply think "I will forget about rank completely"? Can you simply say to yourself that you will never achieve it? Will you always be attached to your black belt, allowing the idea to linger in the back of your mind? In other words, can you simply concentrate on your training without regards for anything else? Can you finally realize that your black belt is nothing more than "something to hold up your pants"?

You should also realize that although you master all the requirements, the correct number of techniques, all the required forms and put in the appropriate amount of hours of training, you may still not qualify for black belt. To achieve black belt is not a quantitative entity which can be measured or weighed like buying string beans in the market. Your black belt has to do with you as a person. How you conduct yourself in and out of the dojo, your attitude to your teacher and fellow students, your goals in life, how you handle the obstacles in your life, and how you persevere in your training are all important conditions of your black belt. At the same time, you become a model to other students and eventually reach the status of teacher or assistant instructor. In the dojo, your responsibilities are greater than

the regular students and you are held accountable to much, much more than those junior to yourself. Your responsibilities are great as a black belt holder.

Achieving Training Focus

How do we focus on our training? Successful training means, to a great degree, that we look at what we do from a reasonable and realistic viewpoint. More often than not, we are not looking at realistic goals but dreams and delusions. Do you want to excel in martial arts as a way to improve yourself and your life, or are you motivated by the latest cops and robbers movie? Is your practice motivated by a strong desire to enlighten yourself, or do you simply want to imitate the latest martial arts movie stars? Although experienced martial artists may snicker, it is amazing how many inquire about martial arts saying they want to be just like Chuck Norris or Steven Seagal. But those people are themselves by their own efforts. You are yourself. We all have our hero, role models, and our dreams, but we have to separate out fantasies from reality if our training is to be meaningful and successful.

Reality

Training has nothing to do with rank or black belts, trophies or badges. Martial arts is not simply playing out our fantasies. It has to do with your own life and death. It is not only how we protect ourselves in a critical, lethal situation, but how we protect the lives of others as well. You cannot be another person, whether he is a movie star, great teacher or multimillionaire. You must become yourself - your true self. As much as John Doe dreams about becoming James Dean, Bruce Lee, or Donald Trump, he can only be John Doe. When John Doe becomes John Doe 100 percent, he has become enlightened to his true self. An average person only lives 50 percent, or maybe 80 percent of his life and never knows who he is. A martial artist lives 100 percent of his life and becomes impeccable. This is what the true black belt holder must come to realize within himself. He is no other than himself, and his practice leads to enlightenment into nature of his true self, his real self. This is the essence of our training in martial arts.

Achieving your Black Belt

Think of losing your black belt, not gaining it. Sawaki Kodo, a Zen Master, often said, "To gain is suffering; loss is enlightenment." If someone were to ask the difference between martial artists of previous generations and martial artists today, I would sum it up like this. Martial artists of previous generations looked upon training as "loss". They gave up everything for their art and their practice. They gave up their families, jobs, security, fame, money, everything, to accomplish themselves. Today, we only think of gain. "I want this, I want that." We want to

practice martial arts but we also want money, a nice car, fame, portable telephones and everything that everyone else has.

Shakyamuni Buddha gave up his kingdom, his palaces, a beautiful wife, and everything else to finally seek out enlightenment. The first student of Bodhidharma, considered the founder of Shaolin Kung Fu, cut off his left arm to study with his teacher. Now we don't have to take such drastic measures to learn martial arts today, but we should not forget the spirit and determination of the great masters of the past. We must realize that we have to make sacrifices in our own lives in order to pursue our training.

When the student looks at his training from the standpoint of loss instead of gain, he comes close to the spirit of mastery, and truly becomes worthy of a black belt. Only when you finally give up all thought of rank, belts, trophies, fame, money and mastery itself, will you achieve what is really important in your training. Be humble, be gentle. Care for others and put everyone before yourself. To study martial arts is to study yourself - your true self. It has nothing to do with rank.

A great Zen master once said: "To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to understand all things."