

# What is a Black Belt?



What is a Black Belt? Why are people willing to work so hard for years to earn one? Why are others willing to pay thousands of dollars to be guaranteed one? Why do so many quit soon after receiving a Black Belt?

I asked the first question when I started our Black Belt class at the new Centennial School and it is asked frequently in the sphere of martial arts. Literally, it is a piece of black cloth that can be tied around your waste. In the Japanese martial arts tradition, a black belt started out as a white belt and as it got dirty with age it turned black as a testament to the length of time the practitioner had devoted to training and study. A Black Belt, to the non-martial artist has also come to symbolize excellence or expertise in martial arts. Unfortunately, in this time of "McDojos" and "Black Belt Factories" the Black Belt has become a commodity to be purchased and guaranteed by contract. I am dismayed when I see 5 or 6 year old First Dan Black Belts or 8 year old Second Dans that are produced by these strip mall charlatans, I doubt anyone that young can learn and refine the skills associated with a Black Belt, let alone understand and practice the personal characteristics of a Black Belt. This type of commercialization has deluded the meaning of the Black Belt rank.

In economic terms a black belt is what it costs to make it and how much consumers are willing to pay for it, I can get a black belt from any number of wholesalers for \$12 - \$30. Others have put a dollar value on a black belt when they sign multi-year contracts with the local "McDojo" guaranteeing a black belt at the end of the contract term. I have seen those contracts for up to 5 years and \$17, 000. Some black belts get value through the time and effort the student puts in to achieve the rank of First Dan. In the accounting world we call that sweat equity. In the Taekwon-Do world we call it blood, sweat, endless repetitions, sleepless nights and sore muscles equity.

The way things are now, there are a plethora of martial arts styles and as many schools out there that have just as many different philosophies, including their own definition of what a Black Belt is. I guess ultimately, the individual decides what the Black Belt means for them personally and it is the responsibility of the individual to go out there and find a school or club that shares that definition.

I started martial arts when I was about 9 years old, a virtual senior citizen compared to the kids that practice martial arts today. I would tell you how long I have been training in Taekwon-Do but, for those of you who can add, it would give away my age. In all those years, I have been exposed to a wide range of martial arts, martial artists and their philosophies. I have developed my own personal philosophy on what a Black Belt means and as Head Instructor of a Taekwon-Do school, that is also my school's definition. It is my sincerest hope that all of my students share my philosophy. I know for a fact that some of my students that haven't shared my philosophy have left my school to find other Instructors whose definition they were more comfortable with, or they have simply quit (yes, I dare to use the "Q" word) Taekwon-Do.



People begin their training and set their Black Belt goal for a lot of different reasons. I will never forget a parent, who was living her life through her son's accomplishments, so she had this poor 10 year old boy involved in so many different activities he was doing something different every night of the week including Taekwon-Do, soccer, choir, piano and so on. I felt sorry for him! He was a smart and skilled martial artist, but he was only attending class a maximum of once a week. One night after class this parent approached me and asked, "What is the fastest way I can get my son to Black Belt?" I figured she left out the rest of the question that probably would have gone, "so I can move him on to another activity adding one more of my son's accomplishments to MY resume."

Those who know me, wouldn't be surprised at my answer. I told her, "I can order in a black belt for \$12 and we can have it in about a week. For \$25 he can have his name embroidered on it and it should arrive in about 10 days." She was not amused. So I thought I better get serious fast. I explained the training and time requirements. She let me know in no uncertain terms that his schedule was completely full and he could not meet the requirements. That was the last time I saw that student and his mother. The saddest part of the whole thing is that if his mother had let him put in the time and effort he could have been an outstanding Black Belt.

I recently saw a t-shirt, (some of the greatest truths are found on t-shirts and bumper stickers) that said "A Black Belt isn't something you get, it is something you become." AMEN! That sums up my feelings exactly about what a Black Belt is.

I believe a Black Belt represents excellence, our school motto is "Seek Perfection, Accept Excellence." I have known many students who go through the motions of getting to the Black Belt level, they do the minimum necessary, while whining the entire

time about how difficult it is physically or how demanding it is on their schedule or how they are missing out on other activities. These are average martial artists and not Black Belt quality in my school. I would never give them permission to test, it would cheapen the experience for those that go above and beyond the minimum requirements. Anyway this type of student soon quits after receiving their First Dan because they did not really become a Black Belt and they are content with their black piece of cloth. As a side note, it has been my experience, generally speaking, it is the most talented students who are natural martial artists that fall into that category. They rely solely on their talent and natural ability to get by, never really excelling the way they could if they were willing to put forth 100% effort. They tend to be the real whiners! These people are NOT Black Belt quality. On the other hand some of the finest Black Belts I have known started out with no natural ability or talent whatsoever, often they have a hard time putting one foot in front of the other. But they work hard, sweat, go through endless repetitions, put in as many classes as possible never slacking for a minute.



I believe General Choi Hong Hi revealed the secret to what it takes to become a Black Belt in his Student/Instructor Relationship (Sajeji Do *삿엿이 도*) "#2. *A good student must be willing to sacrifice for his art..*" (The Condensed Encyclopedia of Taekwon-Do, General Choi Hong Hi, page 45.) Unfortunately, most people misunderstand this precept because they misunderstand the meaning of the word 'sacrifice'. I would like to put this into perspective because so many people give the concept of sacrifice a negative connotation. That is to say people think sacrifice is a bad thing. Sacrifice is a good thing! The best definition I have run across of sacrifice is: "*The giving up of something good, for something better.*" (Ezra Taft Benson)

Now let's put General Choi's precept together with this definition of sacrifice; *a student who wants to become a Black Belt must be willing to give up something good, like casual time or other hobbies, for something better, becoming a Black Belt.* This attitude, along with knowledge and skill are how students become Black Belts.

In my martial arts experience I have met people who are so focused on perfecting their technique for Dan testing that they lose sight of developing a true Black Belt character. This type of person may be impressive in demonstrating physical skill, but are lacking in the demeanor required for a Black Belt. As the saying goes "a wrench in the hand of a gorilla is not a tool." So even a student with the greatest skill without the character is not a Black Belt and can be a dangerous combination.

In my school, a student doesn't just earn a Black Belt by becoming proficient in kicks, blocks, strikes, patterns, step sparring, self-defense, breaking and tournament competition. I do not believe in average Black Belts. A student must excel in all of the physical requirements according to their own physical abilities driven by the attitude of sacrifice for the art. They must also develop the characteristics of the tenets of Taekwon-Do, they must exemplify in their actions, attitudes and behaviors *Courtesy, Integrity, Perseverance, Self Control and Indomitable Spirit*. So becoming a Black Belt is a "whole package" deal, developing the physical, mental and spiritual aspects of one's life.

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Again as I look back at the finest Black Belts I have known over the years and they range from First Dan novices to Ninth Dan Grand Masters, they have all had excellent physical skills, but in addition, they were humble, caring and personable people. There is no arrogance or condescension when they dealt with lower ranks. There was no ego or contention when dealing with those of equal ranks.

Unfortunately, these type of Black Belts are not the rule. Far too many have worked to get the Dan ranking for ego purposes, or have had their egos inflate as the gold bars on their belt increase. I have also known "Black Belts" whose attitudes are in direct opposition to General Choi's precepts, they are arrogant, self-centered, abusive with lower ranks both physically and emotionally. They are egotistical and contentious with fellow Black Belts. One of my favorite stories is about several Seventh and Eighth Dans that were attending a seminar put on by General Choi Hong Hi, the creator and Father of Taekwon-Do. What an incredible experience that must have been. But instead of taking full advantage of such a rare opportunity, they got caught up in a contest of egos arguing over which direction the knot of the belt should open. They wasted the General's time and immense knowledge asking him to address this silly and trivial matter. The General gave a wonderful answer to this petty little squabble among the "elite" group of upper Dans. I will share that answer with you on another occasion. Even though their skills may have ranged from passable to extraordinary (most of them could probably beat me soundly in sparring) and they have earned their rank through physical tests, they do not have my respect and they would not be welcome in my school.

Another important aspect to the character of becoming a Black Belt is a depth of interest and knowledge of martial arts, not just the techniques but the philosophy and history. Those who focus only on physical training are superficial practioners. A student must also break a mental sweat to become a Black Belt. As I evaluate First Dan candidates I look for an intellectual curiosity. Does the candidate ask questions?

Does the candidate read and study about the various aspects of Taekwon-Do? I even think a candidate that is a voracious consumer of cinema martial arts demonstrates an intellectual curiosity worthy of becoming a Black Belt.

This type of mental training is difficult because most of it takes place outside of the training hall and independent of an instructor and other students. Regrettably, the vast majority of students restrict their training to the physical activity that takes place in class. The typical, dare I say, the average student doesn't give any thought to Taekwon-Do or martial arts outside the school. This is tragic because Taekwon-Do can benefit the student in their lives outside of the training hall! Someone who has become a Black Belt can effectively translate his or her training and experience into all aspects of their lives.

A First Dan Black Belt is not a destination at the end of trip of only a few years, but a benchmark in a life long journey. The other phenomenon I can't understand is the First Dan that quits just a few months after receiving his Black Belt. Obviously this person has put in the time and effort only to pad their resume with "Black Belt". This type of attitude is not uncommon among martial arts students. I have never been able to get comfortable with the idea of people that work hard for several years to test for their First Dan Black Belt only to quit (there's that "Q" word again) thinking they have made the ultimate accomplishment in Taekwon-Do. That's like a 12 year old quitting school after making it through the sixth grade saying that they have accomplished the ultimate in education.



The ideal that martial arts is a way of life has eluded the First Dan quitter. These students have earned a Black Belt, but they have not become a Black Belt. So their resume will look good, but they will not receive the full benefit that a Black Belt has to offer throughout a life lived as a true martial artist. A life lived as a Black belt is rich and rewarding as the lessons learned in the dojo permeate through all the other aspects of a person's life. No one in Taekwon-Do tests for a Black Belt, they test for a First *Dan*, if they pass the test they are still considered a beginner, there are 8 more degrees to go!

I just want to reiterate that this is my philosophy and definition of a Black Belt. I am not saying that I am right and others are wrong. I am just putting out my ideas in hopes that those who are in agreement can find a home in my school. Those who disagree need to take the time and put in the effort to find a school that more closely mirrors their idea of what a Black Belt is. So what is a Black Belt? What do you think?