



Black Belt Ranks and Titles

People studying karate at the color-belt level tend to think of a black belt as their ultimate goal. That frame of mind is useful up to a point, but once black belt level is reached an attitude adjustment usually becomes necessary.

To achieve *shodan* level (first-degree black belt) is really just the beginning of one's "professional" training as a serious martial artist. New black belts, who think they are now pretty hot stuff, often get a rude awakening when they attend their first black belt sparring class. It is not uncommon at that time for higher-ranked black belts to administer a sort of informal "initiation" in which the newcomer is thoroughly dominated and defeated in every match. The message is that he has a tremendous amount yet to learn, and some humility would be appropriate.

In all, there are ten *dan* levels of black belt, each promotion requiring somewhat longer to achieve than the last, so that to reach 10th *dan* one must generally be getting a bit elderly (though not necessarily frail, as for example Hanshi George Anderson, who can still knock people around quite easily). Usually a proficiency test is not required after 4th *dan*, the promotion being based more on years of experience and on "contributions" to the advancement of karate. Incidentally, the rank certificates from the official certifying organizations also escalate in price, up to hundreds or even thousands of dollars at higher *dan* levels.

Ranks are one thing but titles are another; titles do not generally come automatically with rank, but must be awarded or bestowed separately by the certifying organizations. Each title is usually restricted to a certain *dan* level or above, but is not necessarily granted at that level, or ever.

Table 1 shows the standard criteria for promotion in most traditional Japanese-Okinawan systems. It should be noted, however, that not every system follows the guidelines shown in Table 1 for number of years required in each rank. Taekwondo, for example, is particularly free with its ranks, often bestowing black belts in just a year or two, giving elevated ranks to young children, and promoting adult black belts to higher *dan* levels at shorter intervals. Even among the traditional Japanese systems, the specifications in Table 1 are not always rigorously adhered to by promotional authorities, but rather represent the *longest* period of time that should separate promotions for an active and involved *yudansha* who can demonstrate the required proficiency. Karate

masters have many reasons and justifications for promoting their black belts at shorter intervals. For example, a master may require the services of a 5th dan on his staff for other reasons, and may therefore promote the most senior 4th dan even if the prescribed interval is not yet completed. Or a dan grade may be purposely skipped when there is sufficient justification.

Table 1. Dan (black belt) ranks as defined by the Federation of All Japan Karatedo Organizations in 1971 (F), Robert Trias for the USKA in 1987 (T), and John Linebarger for the KoSho Shuri-ryu organization (1997).

Dan Level		Required Years*			Minimum Age		Title** Possible
		(F)	(T)	(K)	(F)	(T)	
10	(Jyu-dan)				70	60	Hanshi
9	(Ky-dan)	10	8	10	60	60	Hanshi
8	(Hachi-dan)	10	7	9	50	55	Kyoshi
7	(Shichi-dan)	8	6	8	42	50	Kyoshi
6	(Rku-dan)	7	5	7	35	40	Renshi
5	(Go-dan)	5	4	6	none	35	Renshi
4	(You-dan)	3	3	5	none	30	none
3	(San-dan)	3	2	4	none	26	none
2	(Ni-dan)	2	1	3	none	22	none
1	(Sho-dan)	1	½	2	none	17	none

* Years required in grade before becoming eligible for promotion.

** A *renshi* must be 35 or over, and at least two years as a Go-dan. A *kyoshi* must be over 40, and must have held a *renshi* title for at least 10 years. A *hanshi* must be over 55 and must have held the title of *kyoshi* for over 15 years. Titles may not be granted irrespective of rank. They are awarded for exceptional achievement and outstanding character, and do not automatically come when a particular qualifying dan rank is reached.

There is also the subject of “cross ranks,” that is, black belt ranks in *related* martial arts conferred without any special testing or training in them. For some systems (e.g. kobudo or jujitsu), a cross rank can be awarded simply by demonstrating proficiency to a master authorized to grant rankings.

In some cases the cross rank is awarded at a *higher* dan level than the existing karate rank held by a yudansha. There are no rules governing the waiting periods between ranks given for different martial arts, or for the same martial art given by different underwriting authorities. Shihan Linebarger, for example, was awarded his 6th dan in karate in 1992, his 7th dan in Taekwondo in 1993, and his 8th dan in “Chinese Martial Arts Sciences” in 1992, all through Master Anderson.

Finally, there is the subject of “honorary” black belts, a respected tradition approved by international organizations including the Federation of All-Japan Karate-do

Organizations (now the Japan Karate Federation, JKF), and the International Traditional Karate Federation (ITKF). The award of rank is in recognition of an individual's direct or indirect service and support of the development of karate. To qualify, the individual must also have the respect of the community by virtue of good character. The full range of 10 dan grades is available, the first four of which recognize people who have supported or contributed indirectly to the development of karate at the local community level (1st dan), who have given direct support locally (2nd dan), who have given indirect support at the national level (3rd dan), and direct support at the national level (4th dan). The higher ranks are reserved for local and national dignitaries, leaders and sovereigns, and for international leaders and internationally respected figures. Rank can also be bestowed on individuals who have applied themselves diligently and have achieved a high level of spiritual development, but who have a physical limitation or handicap, especially those who have contributed to the advancement of karate through research.

A short glossary of titles and their meanings is given below, not all of which apply to every system.

Hanshi

Honorary title sometimes awarded to 9th or 10th dan karateka who are over 55 years old and have held the title of *kyoshi* for at least 15 years. Literally, “exemplary teacher,” and usually *the* master of a system or style. According to George Anderson (himself a Hanshi), the title indicates spiritual and organizational responsibility for an entire discipline. This is the highest position attainable in Japanese/Okinawan martial arts. It was once translated as “grandmaster,” but that term is considered to be too ostentatious by some (though we still use it for Grandmaster Trias).

Kaicho

President of a major recognized national federation (*kai*) or international association.

Kancho

The administrative head of a *kan* or house of business. Sometimes also the highest ranking instructor of a style worldwide, or the owner of a particular dojo.

Kyoshi

Honorary title sometimes awarded to 7th or 8th dan karateka who are 40 years old or older and have held the title of *renshi* for at least 10 years. Literally “expert instructor,” perhaps equivalent to an “assistant professor.”

Master

The English-language title of “Master” is typically associated with 5th dan. In some systems it is adopted automatically at that level, whereas in others it requires a Master's Teaching Certificate from an accrediting organization in order to be considered official.

Meijin

Literally “wise man,” a rarely used title for only the oldest, most dedicated and most skilled of instructors in a system. The title carries with it a sense of genius in the martial arts, and may also imply attainment of a high spiritual level.

Mudansha

Literally “person without dan rank,” a color-belt ranked person.

O'Sensei

“Great teacher,” a term usually reserved for the founding father of a system, or one who has achieved great standing internationally and among all practitioners of the style. It is used only for rare individuals, and carries connotations of reverence and affection from the students. Morihei Ueshiba (1883-1969), for example, was the founder of Aikido and is still referred to affectionately as “O'Sensei.” Among Shuri-ryu practitioners the term is reserved for Grandmaster Robert Trias.

Renshi

Honorary title sometimes awarded to 5th or 6th dan karateka who are 35 years old or older and have held 5th dan rank for at least two years. Literally, a “polished expert,” and usually an assistant to a higher-ranked *kyoshi*. According to George Anderson, a *renschi* is “in spiritual and organizational charge” of one section of a system. (Fifth dan is considered equivalent to a Master's Degree).

Sempai

A term for a senior student, usually brown belt or first-dan black belt, and often used only when the student is assisting the *sensei*, or leading a class in his stead.

Sensei

A *sensei* is simply a “teacher,” literally “one who has gone before,” i.e. is older or has taken the same path as the student but is now farther along. Usually each *dojo* has only one *sensei*, the owner or highest-ranked instructor.

Shihan

A “teacher of teachers” responsible for the structure and standards of style of those *senseis* under his authority. Most *shihans* have a rank of sixth dan or above, and preside over their own style, or at least over a group of schools each under a *sensei*. The title of *shihan* carries with it the privilege of wearing the red and white sectioned belt. (The title of *shihan* is considered equivalent to a Ph.D. or Professorship.)

Sosei

A rarely used term for “the great and unique leader of a major group.”

Tashi

Honorary title uncommonly used but sometimes awarded to 3rd or 4th dan karateka. Literally, “expert.”

Yudansha

Holder of a black belt, at any level.

Other Titles

Many other titles may be encountered from time to time. *Soke* is a term, originating in Buddhist temples, which refers to the “master of a family-household” (in the sense that a martial arts teacher and his students constituted a sort of family). *Osho* translates as “peaceful worshipper” but also refers to a “chief priest” in charge of martial arts training at a Buddhist temple. Other terms used to signify the headmaster of a style include *taiso* (“great master”), *soshi* (“head teacher”), *doshu* (“master of the Way”), *soshu* (“master of the art”), and *kaiso* (“opening ancestor” or founder of a style).

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