

Busting the Myths about

sensei master kyoshi hanshi kwangjangnim sempai shodan soke judan renshi professor

by Charles Bouton & Keith D. Yates

Karate Ranks, Belts, & Titles

Perhaps you know that the first karate school opened in America in 1946. But did you know that was only a brief 22 years after the first-ever black belt in karate had been awarded?

Ever since, legions of myths have grown up around the revered “black belt.” Unfortunately it was often Westerners, usually out of confusion—but sometimes out of deliberate attempts to elevate themselves—who created many of them. So we are here to set the record straight.

True or False? • The “fathers” of karate (and kung fu and Taekwondo as well) were all 10th dan. • If you create your own style, then you are automatically a 10th degree black belt. • Titles such as Soke, Hanshi, Kyoshi, Grandmaster, and Senior Grandmaster are only awarded based on “time-in-grade” and the rank one holds. • Everyone who is awarded a 8th dan is automatically considered a “professor.” Read on to find out the answers to these and other myths.

The truth is that most Karate ranking post dates 1940. The Okinawan masters, revered as the ones who took karate from Okinawa to Japan (where it later spread to Korea), simply had no rank at all. In fact the very idea of belt ranking was largely unknown in Okinawa until after World War II.

Martial arts belt ranking began with Jigoro Kano (1860–1938) the founder of Judo. He had studied several ju-jitsu systems and developed a way to safely practice them. He called his approach ju (gentle)–do (way), or, the gentle way to practice. In 1883, Kano borrowed the kyu/

dan system of classifying his students from the game of “Go” where the kyu/dan classifications had been devised by Honindo Dosaku (1645–1702).

There were only three colors of “obi,” or sashes, white, brown, and black. Incidentally, while it is not known

why Kano used the color black, it was NOT because the oldest practitioners had continued wearing and thereby “dirtied” their belts until they were a darker color. Japanese would never continue to wear dirty and soiled clothing. Another myth busted!

Kano’s intention was that the dan classification would not be a terminal or completion grade but

actually a change in phase or type of training (in fact the character for dan (段) actually means “step” or “phase”). The kyu level (級) students learned the basics, you might say the *alphabet* of Judo. The more advanced dan grade students began to make words and complete sentences. In 1907, he developed the first Judo uniform (a yellowish jacket and pants) and with it came the cloth belts we have

The black belt did NOT come about because the practitioner's belt became dirty with age.

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come to recognize today. He used that black sash for dan grade holders.

Again, the Chinese character “dan” literally means “step” in Japanese. It refers to one’s level of expertise or to one’s “degree” of skill. Thus Westerners began to call themselves a “third degree black belt” or whatever rank they held. Now many schools even call the ranks below black belt “degrees” as in “fifth degree blue belt” but this would be incorrect in Japanese. Lower ranks are called kyu level, or mudansha (無段者) those “without” dan rank. The Korean martial arts, by the way, adopted the the dan (단) system for black belts but their lower ranks are refered to as “gup” (급).

In 1895 the Japanese government had created an organization known as the Dai Nippon Butoku-kai, or the All-Japan Martial Arts Association. It was tasked with collecting the knowledge of the various ju-jitsu schools as well as the sword schools. In 1899 they built the Butokuden, an institution to house and collect different martial weapons and hold demonstrations and tournaments in various martial styles.

The Dai Nippon Butoku-kai developed a ranking system of “licenses” to encourage one’s personal perfection and advancement. There were initially two such classifications: 1) Hanshi, intended to designate a model or expert teacher of long tenure; and 2) Kyoshi for an expert teacher of a lower level. These were created in 1902. These licenses were handed out initially only to a few Japanese instructors. The title of Renshi, which wasn’t added until 1934, meant a skilled expert below the rankings of Hanshi and Kyoshi.

An interesting note; beside Ju-jitsu, the two predominant arts to become involved in the Dai Nippon Butoku-kai were Judo and Kendo. **Karate didn’t make its way into the scope of the Butoku-kai until 1933** when the commission voted to consider it. Its acceptance was dependent on four criteria:

1. The word karate had to be written in Japanese characters and not Chinese characters. Until that time in Japan it was known as “Chinese fist (or hand)” and it is pronounced almost the same as “karate.” In Okinawa it was still called “tode.” Gichin Funakoshi (the “father” of modern karate) took the character for “Chinese” and realized it was similar to another character for “empty” or “kara.” Thus he called it, and wrote it, in Japanese characters as kara-te or *empty hand*. Some say a fellow student of the martial arts in Okinawa, Hanshiro Chomo, had previously used the term in a 1905 text. At any rate, kara-te, Chinese fist, became kara-te, empty hand.

2. Karate groups had to adopt a standard uniform to practice in. Funakoshi had already adopted a lighter version of the Judo gi for his school so others began to use it as well.

3. Karate groups had to set up tournaments. This became a huge stumbling block. Although some of the instructors tried to develop rules and even crude protective gear many of them simply didn’t like the idea of “sport” karate. Actual tournament karate didn’t begin in Japan until after Funakoshi’s death in 1957 (and many Okinawan karate groups still refuse to hold competitions).

4. Finally, a kyu/dan black belt system had to be established and strict requirements set up to grant rank.

The last of these proved a large stumbling block as well, largely because of one Okinawan teacher, Chojun Miyagi (1888–1953). He was

from a wealthy, aristocratic family and was a successful and prominent business owner. Miyagi personally sponsored the creation of a research center in Okinawa in 1926, to bring together several of the best-known Okinawan sensei to share their knowledge and promote the development of tode as a national, cultural-treasure.

Until that time tode was largely practiced under a veil of secrecy and individual teachers did not often share information. Along with Kenwa Mabuni, Choki Motubu, and Gichin Funakoshi, Miyagi introduced tode to the Japanese mainland. In 1928, Jigoro Kano invited Miyagi to Japan to teach at the Butokuden.

When the Butoku-kai presented its criteria for the recognition of karate, the various Okinawan sensei could not reach agreement. There were a little over 50 known kata practiced in Okinawa, and most sensei only knew from two to five of them. Which ones would be required and taught? Many Okinawans saw the Japanese as aggressive occupiers of their homeland. Japan was nearing the height of its nationalistic pride and the Japanese looked on Okinawans as hillbillies, and this prejudice kept most of the Okinawan sensei at odds with the Butoku-kai. Funakoshi was one of the few who acquiesced to the Japanese demands.

As stated, Funakoshi had adopted a black belt dan grading system. He awarded the **first karate black belts ever given to four individuals on April, 10, 1924**. And while he accepted the title of kyoshi in 1943, Funakoshi never promoted anyone to any grade above 5th dan. He also only claimed the rank of 5th degree for himself. One of his successor organizations, the Japan Student Karate Association, still only awards 5 dan grades.

Also, Funakoshi didn’t have “stripes” on the black belt (many Shotokan schools today still follow that tradition). But in the West we often see white stripes, red stripes, gold stripes (we’ve even seen gold stars indicating his number of degrees on one guy’s black belt at a tournament—guess he remembered the gold stars he used to get in elementary school). And did you know that in some Okinawan systems one stripe actually means 3rd dan so that if a belt has three stripes on it, the wearer is a 9th degree black belt!

The martial arts in Korea did not have a grading system until the Japanese occupation (1910–1945) when the Japanese arts of Judo and Kendo were introduced into Korea. After WW II and the liberation of Korea from Japan, Taekwondo was created (1955) in an attempt to distinguish the modern Korean martial



American love to use the title "professor," but they forget that Kano was an actual university professor.



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arts from the Japanese systems (even though the initial Taekwondo was simply a clone of Japanese karate—they even used the same kata). Ironically, even though the Koreans despised the Japanese they took the colored belt ranking system from them (primarily from Shotokan, since Choi Hong Hi, the supposed founder of Taekwondo, had heavily borrowed from that system). It was decided that Korean Taekwondo would only award up to a 9th Dan because it is “the highest of the single digit numbers,” whatever that means. Well, it probably means they wanted something in their system to be different than the Japanese. It has also been claimed that the reason they put the color red into their ranking system BELOW the black belt was as a subtle insult to the Japanese (since many Japanese karate schools used the color red to signify a very high dan rank). Today, many Westerners who practice Taekwondo (sometimes still called Korean karate) use Japanese terms and even have a 10th degree black belt.

But back to old Japan. Chojun Miyagi believed that bringing dan grade rankings to karate would splinter it into competing factions. At a dinner party in 1942, a group of Japanese practitioners tried to bribe Miyagi into awarding them black belt ranking. Not only did Miyagi refuse to do it, but the whole episode infuriated him and he left Japan to never return. He never awarded any belt ranking to anyone in his lifetime, nor did he ever claim one. Miyagi stated, ***“I believe once dan ranks in karate are awarded, it will inevitably lead to trouble. The ranking system will lead to discrimination within karate and karate-ka will be judged by their rank and not their character. It will create ‘inferior’ and ‘superior’ strata within the karate community and will lead to discrimination between people.”*** (Perhaps Miyagi should be remembered as a prophet rather than a karate master). He died in 1953 and **dan ranking in Okinawan karate did not occur until 1956**, three years later, and only then after the founding of the Okinawan Karate Federation.

At the end of WWII, the Dai Nippon Butoku-kai was suspended and practically vanished but the **titles** it awarded were still highly prized and sought after. Many of the various karate styles that developed incorporated the titles of Renshi 練士 (polished teacher), Kyoshi 教士 (a teacher of teachers), Hanshi 範士 (a model for others),

into their ranking systems. Shihan 師範, is another widely used license title, but it did not originate in the Butoku-kai, but with the Japanese sword schools. In some systems Hanshi is a higher license than Shihan and the reverse is true in others. Both generally mean a teacher of the highest level and an example for others. Different schools use them differently, but typically the license of Renshi is awarded to 4th and 5th degree black belts, 6th through 8th degree are awarded Kyoshi, and Hanshi or Shihan generally to 8th, 9th, and 10th degree black belts. There is NO hard and fast custom for this. Even whether or not a particular person in the system awards the license or if it is automatic, varies from school to school.

"Teaching licenses" are titles that are not spoken (at least not in Japan).

Incidentally, these three licenses are not spoken titles. Many Westerners will call themselves “Shihan Jim Jones” or “Hanshi Mike Smith,” this not correct (at least not in Japan). They are not spoken titles. The only spoken title used in Japan is “Sensei,” regardless of rank. The teaching license, if used, is noted as “licensed as Hanshi” in

writing or in writing after the name, “Jim Jones, Shihan.” Frankly, a title isn’t even spoken in English. Would you walk across a college campus and say something like, “Hi, Professor Emeritus Smith?” How about when the plumber arrives at your house to unclog the toilet, “Greetings Master Plumber Jackson?” So introducing yourself as “Hanshi Browne” is either ignorant of Japanese usage or simply prideful (or quite possibly both).

By the way, Soke 宗家 is a Japanese term that simply means “the head of the household, or family.” In Japan it was used very rarely (only for very old martial systems—and remember that karate is NOT an old system) and was sometimes used synonymously with the term, Iemoto. It means the leader of a school or style (Americans love to use it to mean “grandmaster”) and does not necessarily mean the founder of a style. If an actual system’s founder dies then there can be an “inheritor” or new Soke.

Americans also seem to love to use the title, “professor.” It is difficult to trace where that came from. Some say that the word Shihan can be translated as such but that is not the case. It seems that the earliest use of this title was by Jigoro Kano himself and so some have mistakenly concluded that experienced martial arts teachers are routinely called this in Japan. They overlook the fact that Kano actually had a Ph.D. and was a university

professor. Since we are trying to anglicize terms from a language that doesn’t even use our alphabet, translations are difficult and imprecise. So on one hand, what does it matter? On the other, both of your authors have actually earned the title of “professor” in a university setting and it is kind of grating to have a person with a high-school education and a few karate trophies call themselves a “professor.”

Incidentally, in Portuguese, the direct translation of “teacher” is indeed “professor” so it would be appropriate to call a Brazilian JuiJutsu instructor a professor because that is correct in their language. In the English language, however, a professor is a title reserved for an academic.

Speaking of Americans, the titles of “master” and “grandmaster” are of Western origin, and how they are applied and used in any organization or school varies greatly (often depending on the ego of the person involved). In some styles a person is a master at 3rd degree in another one must be 6th degree to be so addressed. Grandmaster can be, depending on organization or school, a title given to anyone 5th to 10th dan. Some equate the teaching license of Kyoshi as master others equate it to grandmaster. The license of Shihan or Hanshi is generally considered to equate to grandmaster. The license of Renshi is equated to master in some schools and in others they are still called sensei. But again, at least in Japan, attaining a certain rank does NOT mean one “gets” a teaching license.

Americans are also largely the reason there are so many colors of mudansha (or kyu rankings). This may be attributed to the fact that Americans are impatient and do not want to remain a white belt for a year or two. It also may be due to the fact that many schools charge up to a hundred dollars for a belt test. There are now even army-green camouflage belts, and belts with a stars and stripes motif. This is not to say that professional martial arts instructors are to be criticized for making a living, just that the multitude of colored belts is not traditional in Japan, or Okinawa, or even in China (kung fu added the “black sash” only recently).

Speaking of tradition, the title of Sensei 先生, used

in so many martial arts movies and TV shows, simply means teacher (or, more accurately, “one who has traveled farther down the path”) and is a title given to every teacher in Japan, be it in martial arts, music, or basket weaving. It is a spoken title and replaces the polite “San” after a person’s name. A non-teacher would be “Jones San” and if he or she were a teacher they would be “Jones Sensei.” Generally one receives the title of Sensei when someone who is already called Sensei, first addresses them as such. They never lose the title of Sensei even if they cease to teach. Typically, in Japanese martial arts, it is considered to

be a name referring to 3rd degrees and higher. First and second degree black belts are simply addressed as Sempai (elder or senior).

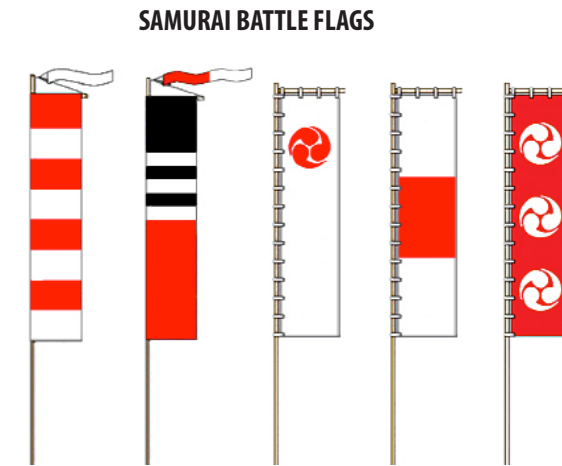
In America, perhaps one of the greatest myths centers around the Renshi title and the red and white belt. Many believe it is purely Okinawan. But there is no license of Renshi issued in Okinawa. A few schools may attach the title to the rank certificates of 4th – 6th dan, but no separate license is given. The

popular Renshi belt with the red and white panels through the length on the front (usually worn from white up at 4th dan and from red up at 5th dan) actually originated in Japan and not Okinawa. Around 1930 Kano chose to recognize 6th through 8th Dan with a “kohaku obi,” (or literally, red white belt). According to noted martial historian Meik Skoss, the colors were probably based on the typical Japanese division of red and white groups coming from the famous dispute of the Genji and Heike clans who used red and white flags to identify their troops on the battlefields. Incidentally, in 1943 the Kodokan created a solid red belt for 9th and 10th dan (Kano himself was awarded the 11th Dan, the only one, which reverted back to the color white).

So the red and white belt and the license title of Renshi were created in Japan. Later, in the U.S., and in a few other countries outside of Japan, some schools of Okinawan origin adopted its use and belt, attributing it to Okinawa.

Another great myth is one that shows the prejudice of many Asian teachers towards their non-Asian students: the myth of the elderly higher dans. We’ve heard that no one should be 6th dan unless they are 50 years old or older.

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master renshi hanshi chief master kancho sempai jyudan soke judan tashi professor shihan sabimnim

Interesting indeed, considering that in 1951, in Japan, the Kodokan shows records of over 2,700 6th dan in Judo who were under the age of 30. Rokudan (6th dan) was considered to be a teacher's degree. Anyone who operated his own Judo school or club pretty much received this rank. That there was a glass ceiling, for non-Asians, in attaining higher dan grades is no secret.

As for the Judan (10th Dan) requiring very advanced age, both Nagaoka (61, with 44 years training) and Mifune (62, with 49 years of training) were promoted to Judan in their early 60s. Perhaps in their generation sixty-years-old was considered a very advanced age, but in today's world it is not.

We should note that the Butoku-kai, the very institution that founded the kyu/dan belt system, has, in the past, "sold" rank for a fee. But then, in Japan, ranking has always been looked at much differently than in the West. In America people are impressed when they hear you are a black belt. In Japan it is not a big deal (although it does take some time and effort to be high dan ranked).

The idea that just anyone starting their own karate system automatically entitles them to the rank of Judan (10th Dan) is arguable. Typically in Japan, a peer committee awards the ranking. One does not promote oneself or "automatically" obtains any rank. Remember, almost all the founding masters of the great karate systems never held any rank, and only a few awarded any type of ranking. The idea that one has to have a 10th dan to award high dan grades is another myth. Founders of systems can and do grade their students, just like a school system might grade them. For decades in Japan ranking was based purely on seniority rather than any other factor. It took little note of skill, tournament wins, and contributions to the art. In fact there was a very large number of American sensei (and still are) who have trained, taught, competed, and given of themselves in the promotion of the art for over three decades and who have made great contributions but who are still ranked 4th degree or less. Asian prejudice perhaps?

In the United States it seems at though every corner has a karate school where the owner is a "grandmaster." Can there really be that many grandmasters running around? Well, consider that the martial arts have been practiced in this country for well

over 50 years now and the number of practitioners has grown so much that it is not at unreasonable that there should be so many high dan grades on the U.S. martial arts scene. OK, yes, there are plenty of "grandmasters" with less than a dozen years of practice and many who founded their "style" from watching a Karate Kid or Kung Fu movie. There will always be deluded people. But, stop and think of the very large number of practitioners who trained in the late 1950s to early '70s who have now been black belts 40 to 50 years. It's quite a large number. True, not all of them continued to practice and teach, but many did.

So, having said all of this, after giving you the actual history of the ranking system and of martial titles, **does it really matter?** Does it really matter that the American words (titles) master and grandmaster appear to have been taken from the game of Chess during the years Bobby Fischer was challenging Boris Spasskey for the world Chess title (remember that the kyu/dan ranking system was taken from the game of Go)?

Does it really matter what we call ourselves today? Renshi, Kyoshi, Shihan are Japanese words, and American karate really isn't a Japanese art anymore. Nor do Americans speak the Japanese language (remember, if they did we would never verbally address anyone as Renshi, Kyoshi, or Hanshi). We wouldn't say Gichin Funakoshi but Funakoshi, Gichin because they put their family name first. Actually, we wouldn't say, "Everyone put on your gi's" either, because there is no plural in Japanese, you would say, "Everyone put on your gi." It's all relative.

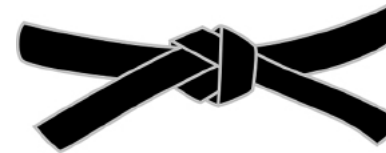
Does it really matter who awards rank? Judo originally used a yudanshakai system. This was a regional group of black belts who would come together and nominate (promote) a candidate for dan grade to the Kodokan, which the Kodokan would then automatically certify. The instructors themselves were considered the authority on the ranking of their own students. A peer group of black belt practitioners came together to promote and improve standards of instruction in schools and assist with each other's personal advancement in the study and practice of the martial art in question. Can not a group of American practitioners who have a long history of legitimate practice also do the same?

There are many different types of martial arts associations out there today. Some have a direct lineage to Japanese, Okinawan or Korean organizations. Some still operate on that yudanshakai (peer review) system, while others may have a single leader who alone is the promotion authority.

Let us be clear, we certainly don't believe in "fly-by-night" degrees and highfalutin names but Americans ARE just as qualified as Asians in determining high-quality martial arts. What should matter is a commitment to learn, to advance, and to improve. A teacher is a qualified instructor if they know their craft well and can communicate it well, all the while motivating their charges. After all, a title won't defend you if your life is in actual jeopardy, and a belt is just for holding your gi jacket closed.

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JAPANESE Black Belts

- First — Shodan
- Second — Nidan
- Third — Sandan
- Fourth — Yodan
- Fifth — Godan
- Sixth — Rokdan
- Seventh — Shichidan
- Eighth — Hachidan
- Ninth — Kudan
- Tenth — Judan

KOREAN Black Belts

- First — Chodan
- Second — Yidan
- Third — Samdan
- Fourth — Sahdan
- Fifth — Ohdan
- Sixth — Yukdan
- Seventh — Childan
- Eighth — Paldan
- Ninth — Koodan
- Tenth — Sipdan

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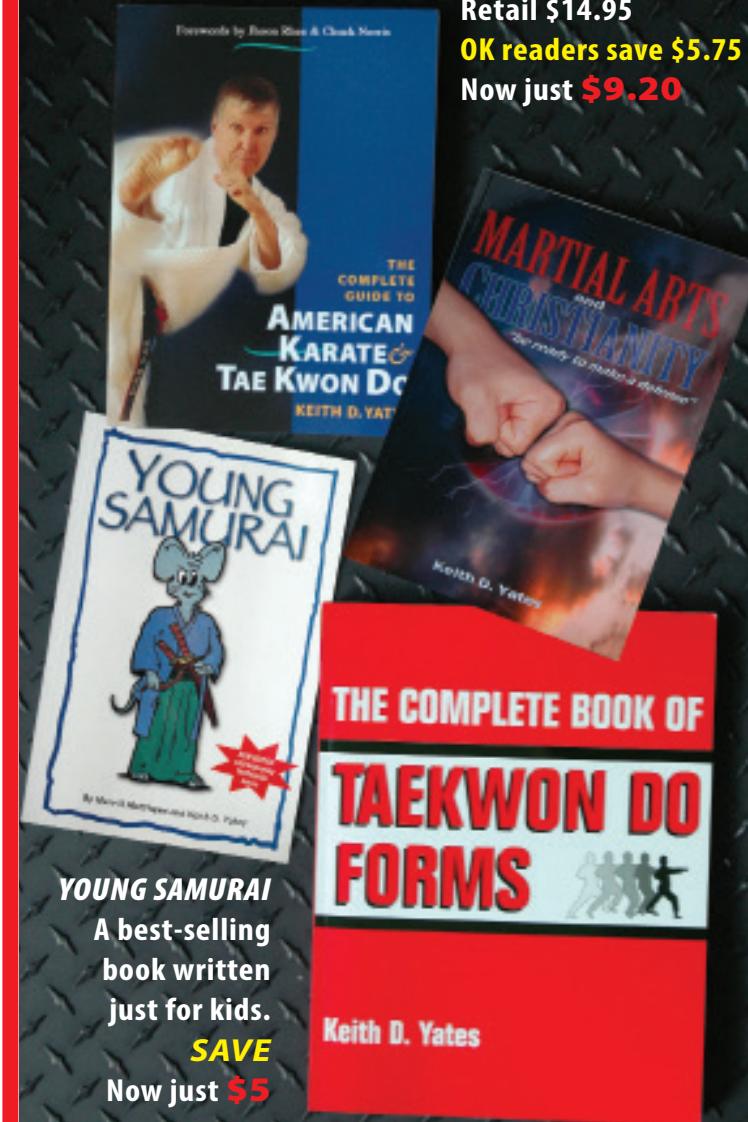
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