

## **Beyond The Black Belt**

Around 1930 Jigoro Kano created a new coloured belt to recognize the special achievements of those reaching high Dan ranking black belts of 6<sup>th</sup> Dan or above.

These Dan grades became known as the Kodansha, meaning “person of high rank”, the “Ko” in this case meaning high, “Dan” meaning rank and “Sha” meaning person. However the actual recognition of Kodansha itself starts at 5<sup>th</sup> Dan, when it is deemed that a student has completed the school’s curriculum or syllabus of Judo techniques.

Jigoro Kano chose to recognize the achievements of 6th, 7th, and 8th Dan black belts with a special “Obi” or belt, made of alternating red and white panels, known as the Kohaku Obi. The Japanese ideograph “Kohaku” may be directly translated as Red and White.

### **The Significance Of Red And White In Japanese Culture**

The Genpei Wars between 1180 and 1185 were a conflict between the Taira and Minamoto clans, equally matched sides, in the late Heian period of Japan. These wars, however eventually, resulted in the downfall of the Taira clan and the establishment of the Kamakura Shogunate under Minamoto Yorimoto in 1192.

The Taira clan was often referred to as Heike and the Minamoto clan as Genji. They were identifiable on the battlefield by the use of coloured flags. The Heike used red flags and the Genji white flags.

Following this war and its aftermath, the colours red and white, of the Taira and Minamoto standards, were established respectively, as Japan's national colors. The white represented purity and peace, whilst the red represented not only the “Rising Sun” but the intensity within the Japanese people themselves, combined, the flag represented a national unity.

This unity of colours represented the opposing sides of equal ability.

### **Opposing Sides Of Equal Ability**

As a direct influence of this event, the Japanese began to use these two colours to represent opposing sides of equal ability, in just about any area of social cultural activity, whether through logical board games, sporting activities, Martial Arts or other areas of Japanese culture such as Chado (Tea ceremony) and Ikebana (Flower arranging).

These social cultural activities often resulted in contests against different schools, and the colours of red and white were used to differentiate the individual contestants or even the schools themselves, often by the wearing of small red or white ribbons.

The colours red and white are an enduring symbol of Japanese Culture, and they have been used in Judo since Jigoro Kano started the first ever Judo tournament, the Red and White Tournament, known as the Kohaku Shiai, in 1884. This tournament seems to have had a direct influence on

Kano's use of the Kohaku Obi.

### **The "Kohaku Obi" – Red and White Panelled Belt**

Generally, the Kohaku Obi is often worn for special ceremonial occasions only, it is not a requirement to be worn at all by Kodansha and the black belt still remains the standard attire for all the Yudansha (Black belts) ranks regardless of level.

The uses of the combined colours of red and white on one belt also have been a symbolic representation of the principles of harmony suggested by the balance of yin and yang. This use of contrasting colours is used throughout Japanese culture.

These colours represented the deeper symbolic philosophy of Yin and Yang, or opposite forces. The white representing purity, peace and calm whilst the red represents the intense desire to train and the sacrifices that have been made. Therefore the wearer has reached a level where these forces meet, they meet equally united, the opposing of complementary harmony.

Usually it is thought off, that the wearer using the Kohaku Obi is on a ceremonial function i.e. instructing formally, conducting a demonstration, a course or a seminar. If the holder is in general practice, i.e. regular training, randori training or still actively competing, it is the norm to still use the black belt.

In Japan, it is very rare for high Dan ranks, regardless of level, to outwardly display the wearing of the Kohaku Obi unless it is on a formal occasion. The very opposite can be said in the west, where it is common place for Kohaku Obi wearers to use the belt on a general day to day basis, regardless of occasion, although this practice can vary immensely between different associations.

Originally when Kano created the new Kohaku Obi, they were presented only to the 6<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> Dan seasoned veterans of the Kohaku Shiai, hence his natural use of the combined colours of Red and White. The Kohaku Shiai itself will be discussed in a future article.

### **Kohaku Dan Graded Syllabus**

Generally, in the west, when practitioners have reached the level of 5<sup>th</sup> Dan, it is unusual for the individual to have to take another formal grading.

Most associations hold an annual review, set up by a steering committee which usually includes members of their National Governing Board of Directors. This committee meets and assess's all current 5<sup>th</sup> Dan practitioners for suitability for further promotion to 6<sup>th</sup> Dan, the successful applicants will have had to meet several stringent guidelines, some which will contain minimum requirements such as time in present grade, competition achievement record and such areas as services to Judo. Also other areas such as current practice involvement, coaching ability, leadership, or research, publication, etc. In some associations, 5<sup>th</sup> Dan or above can put forward proposals for themselves to be considered for higher Dan rank, in other associations the process is an automatic yearly evaluation of all 5<sup>th</sup> Dans.

Technical Dan Grade promotions require similar guidelines with the exception of competition achievement record.

The Kodokan, however require all higher Dan ranked individuals to be apt at Judo Kata, the performance of a stated designated Kata is still a requirement of senior gradings from 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> Dan. At the Kodokan, these same candidates also undergo a written or verbal examination prior to any subsequent successful promotion.

The practice of Kata itself has somewhat been lost in the west in most associations, however there is currently a large resurgence towards Kata. The need to perform Kata for Dan grading of all levels, is now becoming a standard within a lot of Dan syllabi.

### **Beyond 8<sup>th</sup> Dan**

Jigoro Kano also created the solid red belt to recognize 9th and 10th degree Yudansha. Very little is known behind this actual creation, however it is believed that the solid red, signifies the holder as having trained intensely for many years and sacrificed much in their pursuits of the study of Judo.

However for women, the difference between belt colours also still exists, with the solid red belt being an option for a Joshi Hachidan (woman 8th dan), whereas for males it indicates a 9th Dan minimal.

There are no testing requirements for promotions to 9th or 10th Dan. Those promotions are based on time in grade, achievements and status by the promotions committee. In the entire history of Judo, there have been numerous promotions to 9th Dan, but very few to 10th Dan.

However there does appear to be some definition to constitute the awarding of either a 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> Dan and they are as follows : -

The Competitive Record Of The Candidate  
The Coaching Record Of The Candidate  
Organizational Leadership  
Refereeing And Understanding The Rules Of Competition  
Teaching Of Judo  
Creative Contributions to Judo  
Devotion To Judo Without A Break

There are many definitions within these classifications, however they are not for discussion in this article.

Kyuzo Mifune, 10<sup>th</sup> Dan, was once asked what made a person a 10<sup>th</sup> Dan and he answered “That the person should have added something new to the theory of Judo”. Mifune himself was famous for his analogy of the way a ball reacts when pushed, and this was apparently considered to be an important theoretical contribution to the theory of Judo.

Kano also signified the use of a solid white belt for anyone who could be deemed beyond 10<sup>th</sup> Dan i.e. 11<sup>th</sup> Dan or above. This solid white belt would be of double width thickness to the usual beginners white belt, to signify the substantial difference and to recognise that holders of this rank would have come full circle....the final objective of any Judo student.

However, in the entire history of Judo, no-one has ever been promoted above the rank of 10<sup>th</sup> Dan. (Discussions surrounding Kano's 12<sup>th</sup> Dan have been previously written).

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