

Judo's Dan Grade System

Kano had seen the need to distinguish between beginning and advanced students. He adopted a borrowed system of Kyu / Dan ranking, known as Dan-I, that was being used throughout Japanese cultures in other areas such as the logical board games Go, Shogi and Renju.

In 1883, Jigoro Kano awarded the first known "Dan" grades in the Martial Arts. The two recipients of the new Dan grades were Shiro Saigo and Tsunejiro Tomita, both received Shodan's (1st Dans). The same two, were the first to both receive Nidan's (2nd Dans) a year later.

As a side note, Tsunejiro Tomita was Kano's first pupil at the Kodokan and arrived on 5th June, 1882, After him arrived: Higushi, Nakajima, Arima, Matsuoka, and the famous Shiro Saigo. Saigo was the best among the competing pupils of Kano's early formative Kodokan, who as a Judo champion, was never beaten in any contest against famous fighters from the different Jujutsu schools.

Although these Dan grades were awarded, practitioners still wore the "Shiro No Obi" or white belt regardless of rank. The belt itself was actually a sash that was used throughout Jujutsu schools. It was not however until 1886, that the recognisable "black" coloured sash, was first worn to identify a Dan graded student. This was made customary, as an outward expression of a students Judo's ability within the Japanese Martial Arts.

Judo was now evolving, more practitioners were joining Kodokan's ranks and this brought many challenge matches from other Jujutsu schools of the time. These schools snubbed Judo as being an inferior Art, due in some part to their wearing of white belts.

Kano cleverly used this first display of wearing black belts to promote Judo abilities, skills and proficient practitioners, at the decisive meeting between the Jujutsu school of Hikosuke Totsuka and Kano's Kodokan Judo at the Tokyo Metropolitan Police tournament. This move was used more as a statement to place his seniors students on the same par as the Jujutsu schools senior students. The Jujutsu schools had already been wearing black sash's as a means to identify senior practitioners for several generations.

The actual black belt or Kuro Obi, as we now know it today, was first introduced in 1907 along with the full sleeved and full legged Keikogi or practice uniform known as Judogi in Judo.

The Meaning Of "Dan"

"Dan" itself means step or degree. The wearing of the black belt is a statement that the student has passed the basic level of instruction or Kyu grades. However most will acknowledge that the gaining of the 1st Dan means, that while one is no longer considered a beginner, one is not yet necessarily an expert. A wearer of the black belt is termed a Yudansha, or "person in possession of rank".

Usually it is thought that at Kyu level, the student is learning techniques from a structured syllabus, from Dan level onwards, the student is learning the essence of the system by applying the skills to use those techniques in varying ways.

The awarding of a “Dan” rank, was adopted throughout the majority of the worlds Martial Arts systems and is usually shown by the student wearing a black belt. It is by far the most common and recognisable symbol to the general public.

Ultimately, all beginners of Martial Arts yearn that one day they too will wear a coveted black belt. Many beginners however and the general public, make the mistake that a black belt has achieved expertise in their Art, not that the black belt holder is an advanced student honing their skills and building further upon their knowledge.

The “Dan” Syllabus

Kano was an educator and used a hierarchy in setting learning objectives to Judoka. The Judo rank system represents a progression of learning with a syllabus and a corresponding grade indicating an individual's level of proficiency.

As with the Kyu system, the Dan syllabus is not standardised internationally. It can change from country to country and from one association to another within a country.

Juniors cannot grade to Shodan until they have reached an age pertaining to adult practice, this is set at the minimum of 14 or 15 years old in most countries. Again, not only is this for safety due to the adult’s use of chokes, strangles and arm locks, but it is thought that the students are not old enough to understand the wider philosophical meanings of Judo.

However, some associations in countries have adopted a junior Dan grade, indicated by a different colour stripe running through the middle of the black belt. This practice is generally accepted that these “junior Dan grades” have been practicing over a long period often from pre-school and can show competency in theory, standing techniques, ground techniques and competition, however this stripe also recognises that as a junior Dan grade, for safety reasons, they are not skilled in applying techniques in chokes, strangles and arm locks.

As the Dan syllabus can change from association to association, there is no set way to compare belts and ranks between them. However it is commonly agreed, regardless of syllabus, that the testing for each black belt level is rigorous. Some do think that the handing out of black belts in the west is far looser than in the east, however in Japan, some black belt ranks can come more or less automatically with time done.

All syllabi are structured in such a way, that an adult beginner entering a Dojo, should be able to attain the Shodan level within around 5 – 7 years of arduous competent regular practice.

The varied syllabi, regardless of Dan rank level, all take into account the ability to be able to demonstrate theoretical knowledge, terminology, standing techniques, ground

techniques, combination techniques, counter techniques, arm lock techniques, choking techniques, strangulation techniques, escaping techniques and Kata.

Likewise each syllabus makes use of “Shiai” or competition, where the individual must be able to demonstrate competency in applying techniques in motion either in individual matches or against a line up, therefore accumulating competitive points. These Shiai are designed for students to test their skills against others that they are not likely to know or practice against regularly.

Merely entering any available Judo competition does not accumulate the use of competition points towards Dan grading. i.e. club, local, regional, there are often specific competitions that are tailored towards points scoring for accumulation points towards Dan rank and then only the scoring of Waza-Ari (7 points) and Ippon (10 points) count towards the Dan point competitive accumulation system itself.

All associations make use of both competitive and non-competitive Dan rank. Usually the non-competitive Dan syllabi are reserved for those who can no longer compete actively, maybe due to injury or are of an age that they do not wish to compete actively.

These non-competitive grades are usually termed Technical Dan Grades. They require the individual to demonstrate a very high level of technical competency more so than the competitive Dan grades. However to be considered for a Technical Dan Grade all individuals must have been competitively graded up to 1st Kyu, unless the governing body accepts extenuating circumstances of the particular individual.

However, it is also usually the case that an individual undertaking the Technical Dan Grade syllabus, has progressed through the Dan ranks on a longer time scale basis than the competitively active individual.

Kodokan Dan Ranks

It is also not automatic between differing associations, both nationally and internationally, that Dan grades can transfer freely from one association to another and to get their grades will be instantly ratified. It is not uncommon for people who move associations to state different Dan ranks from different association e.g. 5th Dan BJA, 3rd Dan AJA, etc, because of this ratification process.

At one time the Kodokan was seen as the overall authoritative Governing Body of Judo in the world, and the chasing of a Kodokan rank was the penultimate goal of many who wanted to have their National Governing Body's Dan award ratified by the Kodokan. For example, if you were say a 2nd Dan BJA, this could be sanctioned by the Kodokan, however process this has now stopped, as the Kodokan no longer "automatically" recognises gradings from other National Governing Body's.

Therefore if this was still your aim, you will now first have to attend the Kodokan in Tokyo in person, then join the Kodokan as a member, then you will have to join the International class, then you will need to apply for a Shodan grading, then you will need to successfully pass that exam. The Kodokan will not grade up above Shodan,

therefore if you are 3rd Dan, you will have to start again within the Kodokan, hence another reason why people may state different Dan rank from different associations.

The Kodokan is now seen and run as a club, although Kodokan rank is recognised world wide and seen as the most coveted Dan rank of all, for historical reasons (regardless of grade), it is no longer easy to obtain.

The International Judo Federation, is seen as the overall authoritative body of Judo in the world today, and most National Governing Body's have systems in place to apply for their Dan ranks to be ratified by the IJF if required.

The "Dan" levels

Whilst training at the brown belt level is very demanding and the attainment of a black belt is seen as significant, black belt status really only indicates a graduation to a new beginning.

The Kyu / Dan system was never designed merely to indicate a level of technical achievement. It also represents Budo's goal of spiritual and ethical attainment towards perfection of the self. Thus Dan rankings, and even Kyu levels, should reflect a level of moral and spiritual development or attainment.

For this reason, first level black belts are known as Shodans, rather than Ichi (first) Dans, "Sho" meaning beginning, the same character as used in Sho Shin, meaning "beginner's mind". Reaching this first, beginning rank, means you have achieved some proficiency in basics and are prepared to really start learning, and learning means a lot more than just techniques and skill. Thus a new Shodan becomes a beginner again.

In contrast to the Kyu system, the "Dan" system's order of numbering was reversed to indicate that with each "Dan" level, the higher the number, the higher level of skill and proficiency had been attained.

Today, the total number of "Dan" levels is very specific to a given style of Martial Art, some Arts go to 5th Dan only, others to 9th Dan only. However in Judo, Kano had originally intended only for 3 Dan grades, but as more people became competent and were attaining Dan ranks, he settled on 10 levels of "Dan" in the belief that few could gain such a high level.

The lower "Dan" grades of 1st to 5th Dan, can usually be attained through a theoretical technical grading examination along with competitive skill in graded competition on a points accumulation scheme, unless undertaking a Technical Dan Grade. Usually a combination of a points record, time requirements and age limitations are used between each Dan grade before the student can progress to the next level. So, in general, the lower Dan ranks are validated on the basis of knowledge and physical skill.

Most associations consider that by attaining the 5th Dan level, the student has completed the curriculum or syllabus of Judo techniques. From this level, the student

becomes termed a “Kodansha” meaning, “person of high rank”. 1st to 4th Dan's are termed “Yudansha” meaning, “person who possesses rank”.

The higher “Dan” grades, those of 6th Dan and above, are usually received through contribution, dedication, service and furtherance to Judo. These higher levels require years of experience and may be gained through instruction, research or publication. The higher the Dan rank, the more leadership ability, teaching experience, and services to Judo, play parts of the roles in promotion. These grades can only be awarded by a steering committee or by higher graded representatives of the principal Dojo. Usually, it is also recognised that the individual has at least obtained a 3rd Dan competitively at a high level i.e. national and /or international competition.

The black belt is thus seen not so much as an end, but rather as a beginning, a doorway to advanced learning, the individual now "knows how to walk" and may thus begin the "journey."

Today's Black Belts

However, in today's modern Judo, many “black belts” seek further recognition of their achievements, and it is now not uncommon, especially in the west, to see practitioners, placing stripes or tabs on their belts to distinguish what “Dan” grade they have attained. This practice seems to be very commonplace in the younger competitive generations.

This enthusiasm for tabs seems to follow the Kyu system, where practitioners can recognise others of the same grade and similar proficiency easily and in the case of Dan grades, gives the other practitioner an idea of length of time of practice. This display of hierarchy, is quite common in larger clubs where there are several Dan grades of differing levels practicing.

However, as often is the case of Dan grades, this practice can create false pretenses, as many people remain at a certain “Dan” level because they no longer wish to grade further for one reason or another but their learning curves may still continue.

The practice of openly showing your Dan grade as a 1st to 5th Dan is immensely frowned upon in Japan itself, where the use of just wearing a black belt, regardless of rank, is customary for all practices, with the exception of Kodansha for ceremonial purposes.

Women's Dan Grades

Similarly in Japan, it is customary for women, regardless of Dan grade, to wear a black belt with a white stripe running through the centre. In the west, this practice is now considered historical preference and is little used by women, with the exception of a few associations i.e. in Germany.

In 1923 the Kodokan Women's Division, the Joshi-Bu, was established and three years later the women's curriculum was finalised. Kano got his instructors together to devise how Judo should be taught to women. It was decided the teaching was to be academic in nature and students were set research projects and attended many lectures

on theory and history of Jujutsu and Judo. The first woman to earn Dan grade in Judo was Katsuko Osaki in January 1933. Other early female black belts were Masako Noritomi, Ayako Akutagawa, Yasuko Morioka, Masako Wada, and the famous Keiko Fukuda, Kodokan 9th Dan, born April 12th 1913, now aged 92 (in 2005), the grand daughter of the famous Jujutsu Master Hachinosuke Fukuda (Master of Okuyama-nen Jujutsu, Kiraku Ryu and Tenshin Shinyo Ryu Jujutsu), one of Jigoro Kano's first influential teachers.

They did not participate in Randori, (free practice), in the same way that men did, it was more arranged practice. Nor Shiai (competition), it was considered wrong for women to compete against each other and it was thought that they would not want to compete against each other. Nor Newaza (groundwork), as it was not considered correct for women to go to ground and wrestle.

Their study of Judo was based on Kata, the grading requirements for this were thought more difficult than the men's. It is one theory that due to this difficulty and purity of women's Judo that the white stripe was used to indicate this. It is also thought that the white stripe distinguished the fact that women were not contesting. As a result women's classes were segregated from the men's. This still happens today at the Kodokan.

Even today these differences, whether they are viewed as discrimination or not, still exist, and while men are labelled 5th or 6th Dan, women at the Kodokan are still referred to as Joshi 5th dan (woman 5th Dan) or Joshi 6th dan (woman 6th Dan), etc.

In the west however, it was always usual for women to train alongside men, segregation was seen as sexual discrimination. Therefore women of Dan grade have pretty much always used a plain black belt and if higher than 6th Dan wore the same red and white as men.

I do not know of a Dan grade syllabus in use today where they separate women grades from that of men. All syllabi are studied and examined the same by both genders, for theoretical, technical and competitive competency.

As a side issue, some associations do use a black belt with white stripe to distinguish players with special needs, so that if they do wish to participate on a mainstream mat, they are easily recognisable as special needs practitioners.

The Titles & Belts

The "Dan" grades in order are : -

Yudansha : -

1st Dan - Shodan (初段 しょだん)

2nd Dan - Nidan (二段 にだん)

3rd Dan - Sandan (三段 さんだん)

4th Dan - Yondan (四段 よだん)

Kodansha : -

5th Dan - Godan (五段 ごだん)
6th Dan - Rokudan (六段 ろくだん)
7th Dan - Nanadan (七段 ななだん) also Shichidan
8th Dan - Hachidan (八段 はちだん)
9th Dan - Kudan (九段 くだん)
10th Dan - Jūdan (十段 じゅうだん)

The black belt, even today, still remains the standard for all levels of Dan rank. The ethos of this being that, as the individual progresses and the belt is worn over a longer period of time, eventually it wears away the black and returns to white, thus the practitioner has come round full circle i.e. reached enlightenment. Oddly, you will often see younger black belts wearing worn or frayed belts, as if they have been practicing for many years beyond their actual age.

Kano himself, states “One transcends such things as colour and grades and therefore returns to a white belt, thereby completing the full circle of Judo, as of life”.

However Kano later devised further other coloured belts to denote the higher Dan ranks of 6th Dan and above, the wearing and colours of these will be discussed in another article.

In theory, the Judo Dan system is not limited to 10 degrees of black belt. The original English language copy (1955) of Illustrated Kodokan Judo, by Jigoro Kano, quotes Kano's words : "There is no limit...on the grade one can receive. Therefore if one does reach a stage above 10th Dan...there is no reason why he should not be promoted to 11th Dan."

However, since there has never been any promotion in Judo to a rank above 10th Dan, the Kodokan Judo promotion system effectively has only 10 Dans. There have only been fifteen 10th Dans (as of January 8, 2006) awarded by the Kodokan in the history of Judo since its creation. There are however, a further two 10th Dans awarded by the International Judo Federation to Anton Geesink (NED) and Charles Palmer (UK), both were promoted to 10th dan in 1997.

Kano's 12th Dan

Kano himself, never claimed Judo rank, it was supposed that only the founder of a system could verify another's rank. Kano therefore stood outside of the grading system. However, it is reputed that Kano was awarded his 12th Dan posthumously, therefore after he had died.

This “12th Dan” award was rumoured to have been sanctioned by senior Kodokan members. The award was said to be that of a double width white belt, to differentiate it from the normal width beginners white belt, symbolising that Kano had come round full circle back to the beginning.

In Japanese culture this would elevate him to a god like status, a Meijin or “Brilliant Man”.

It should be noted though, that this award has only ever been a rumoured assumption, no direct reports, evidence or statements have ever been published from the Kodokan or by affiliates to the Kodokan, to support this award.

However the claims behind this 12th Dan award, seems to be based on the fact that as Kano himself had promoted individuals to 10th Dan, he would have to be at least 2 grades higher than the grade awarded, hence 12th Dan.

The same 1955 copy of Illustrated Judo also says “If he should be of such mettle as to deserve further recognition he would then be raised to 12th dan and given the title of Shihan, which until now has only been applied to our founder”. This statement was influenced by the then Kodokan president Rise Kano, nephew and adopted son of Jigoro Kano.

Later versions of the book had the statement omitted and the book was republished under the name “Kodokan Judo”.

Historical footage and pictures of Kano practicing Judo, often shows him wearing a wide “black belt”, people therefore believe that he was displaying rank in Judo. However to be correct, this belt was the black sash that he had received from studying Tenshin Shinyo Ryu Jujutsu under Hachinosuke Fukuda and Kito Ryu Jujutsu under Tsunetoshi Iikubo. Both licensed him as an “Okuden” master in these Jujutsu systems and the black sash therefore displayed a direct link of Kano’s Kodokan Judo back to its older Jujutsu origins.

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