

The Origins Of Judo's Kyu / Dan Grading System

Background to Jujutsu's Ranking System

Prior to the formation of the Kodokan in 1882, all Martial Arts of Japan used a system to recognize proficiency and achievement based on certificates, licences and scrolls to indicate the skill level, which the practitioner of a given Martial Art had attained.

This system was known as the Menkyo system, "Licence" system. It was broken down into three separate levels, named Shoden (entry level transmission), Chuden (middle level transmission) and Okuden (inner level transmission otherwise known as "secret teachings"). Different intermittent levels could be also included in each level to designate further achievement depending on the Jujutsu school. Most Jujutsu schools had between 3 and 5 total levels, some slightly more, but none more than 9. The levels were taught as transmissions of techniques throughout the student's whole life span and could take many years to acquire each one.

The Okuden level was taught to only the highest senior practitioners of the particular Martial Art being practised, by the "Soke" or founder of the "Ryu" or school. The Okuden techniques were often practised behind closed doors or in privacy, hence the term "secret teachings", they were not, considered at the time, for the general practitioners of the Art being practiced.

Jigoro Kano, himself, at a young age, was licensed in the "Okuden" secret teachings of the Tenshin Shinyo Ryu Jujutsu under Hachinosuke Fukuda and the Kito Ryu Jujutsu under Tsunetoshi Iikubo.

There was a more senior licence and this was known as the "Menkyo Kaiden" meaning "licence of total transmission". This was usually given to one person, as a method to denote the only successor to the head of the school.

However the "Menkyo" system was flawed. Each individual Jujutsu school had their own criteria for the issuing of certificates, licences and scroll. The particular sequence and even the various titles used, were often completely different from school to school.

The ranks were usually designated by the founder or licensing teacher of the school, through the use of handwritten letters or specially created certificates. The higher ranks were usually presented with a "Densho" or scroll of manuscript records and instructions in "secret" advanced techniques. Some "Densho" used detailed drawings and instructions of particular techniques. Others used characters or words, which were symbolic and used as mnemonics, or memory aids for advanced techniques. These "Densho" were meaningless outside of a particular "Ryu" or school that was unfamiliar with the terminology and techniques of that school.

Due to much secrecy among the various Jujutsu schools of the time and the techniques being taught within these schools, the Menkyo system of ranking had several disadvantages.

Firstly, there was no definite way by which to compare or evaluate equivalent skill levels between schools. Secondly, the various time spans and degree of skills required between licences could vary tremendously depending on the particular teachers own philosophy and personal style. Therefore, the steps between these licences could take a matter of months or even many years, such was the variation in the Menkyo system.

Kyu / Dan Grade System

The majority of people believe that Jigoro Kano was the founder of the Kyu / Dan grade system, this is untrue. However, he is recognised as the first person to use this grading system within the Martial Arts. The idea of the Kyu / Dan grade system, or Dan-I, was in fact “borrowed” from other sources of Japanese culture.

The Kyu / Dan system was first introduced in the 17th century by Honinbo Dosaku, a grandmaster of the Japanese 2 player logical board game “Go”. He introduced the system, as a method of handicapping the game. Honinbo itself, was the name of one of the four famous major schools of “Go” in Japan, the head of the school was given the schools title.

Later the Japanese public schools were using the Kyu / Dan system as a means to rank ability throughout the different athletic departments. These departments were using belts or ribbons to identify ranking ability, most notably within swimming, where advanced swimmers wore a black ribbon around their waist to separate them from beginners in swimming tournaments.

Many other areas of Japanese culture had also adopted this system, i.e. Chado (Tea Ceremony), Ikebana (Flower Arranging), Shogi (Japanese Chess), Renju (Connect Five), Calligraphy, to name just a few, etc, etc.

Kano’s Kyu / Dan Grade System

Kano had therefore adopted this same system as a modern method of differentiating Judo from the older Jujutsu systems and a means by which to standardise ranking achievements throughout his Kodokan Judo. This was a radical move from the older complicated Menkyo system and was seen as a rejection of the older Jujutsu practices and a deliberate way of distinguishing his new and improved method of Judo.

Kano had decided the need to divide his students into two groups, the non-ranking (Kyu) and the ranking (Dan). He started his modern system in 1883, awarding the first “Shodan’s”, the lowest or first black belt level, to two of his senior students (Shiro Saigo and Tsunejiro Tomita). Incidentally, these two were also the first to be awarded Nidan, or 2nd level black belt a year later.

Even so, at this time, there was still no visual difference, i.e. the wearing of coloured belts, to identify the difference between the Yudansha (black belts) and the Mudansha (those without Dan).

Actually, the term, Yudansha, breaks down into, Yu meaning “possession”, Dan means “rank” and Sha means “person”, therefore “person in possession of rank”. Mu

comes from the Zen term “nothingness”, an expression of negation, a “person who knows nothing”.

It was not until three years later in 1886, that Kano saw the need to distinguish between beginning and advanced students and began the custom of his Yudansha wearing black belts, to signify the difference.

All Judo practitioners until now had worn a plain white belt sash, or no sash at all, regardless of ability or level. As Judo was now being recognised in its own right and challenge matches were often being made from older Jujutsu schools, these white sash’s were partly being considered by these other Jujutsu Ryu, to signify that Judo, as a Martial Art, was of a lesser ability.

Judo’s black belt sash’s, were first introduced around the time of the famous decisive encounter between the Jujutsu school of Hikosuke Totsuka and Kano’s Kodokan at the Tokyo Metropolitan Police tournament. They were introduced as a means to identify Kano’s senior and more skilled students, and to place the students on the same par as the Jujutsu school entrants.

These belts were not the belts we known off today, Kano had adopted the wide sash belt, which were being used in the older Jujutsu styles. This “black belt sash” was used as a means to link Judo back to its origins in the older “Koryu” Jujutsu systems that Judo had originally developed from. This wide sash type belt was the kind being worn with the formal practice “Kimono’s” of the time.

The “Keikogi” or “uniform for practice”, known as the “Judogi” in Judo, was not introduced until much later. At this time, all practises were carried out in formal kimono’s, loin cloths or more commonly shorts cut off above the knee and sleeves above the elbow. The formal “Keikogi” full uniform with trousers and the smaller width Kuro Obi, (Kuro – black, Obi – belt), as we know them both today, were first introduced in 1907.

Why Black and White Belts ?

In Japanese culture, the contrasting colours of black (ranked) and white (unranked) are laden with deeper symbolism. They reflect the basic polarity of opposites, or yin – yang in nature, known as In and Yo or Inyo in Japanese.

In Taoism, Budo’s (Martial Arts) roots are represented using this concept by the term “Do” or path, hence Kano’s Ju “do” not Ju “jutsu”. This same dualism is also expressed in the Chi Hsi school of Confucism, which also has an important impact on Budo’s formation. Confucism’s concepts of “form”, or Yukei, represents rank in Budo and “non-form” or Mukei, represents non-rank.

Kano’s original formation of the Kodokan and concept of wearing a white sash or belt along with a white uniform, reflect Budo’s values of purity, avoidance of ego and simplicity. It gave no outward visual indication of class or level of expertise. Therefore, everyone began as an equal (without class). His system was a system that all and anyone could train in, therefore you could be stood next to a noble or a farmer, without anything separating you. This was a significant change from the pre-1868

Jujutsu practises, where social classes were strictly separated and most (general public) were prohibited from the practice of Martial Arts.

This white to black concept signified the transition from someone of purity (or emptiness) to someone filled with knowledge. In contrast, there was also a natural transition in the off colouring of the white belt, becoming darker as it was worn over a long period of time, somewhat identifying the practitioner's length of practice.

Wider Acceptance And Further Developments Of The System

The Kyu / Dan system was further developed in 1894, when Kano awarded the first certificates and diploma's to ratify grades within the Kodokan, nearly eleven years after the creation of Judo's Kyu / Dan grade system.

In 1895, the Japanese Government sanctioned the formation of the first Martial Arts association, The Dai Nippon Butokukai (Japan Great Martial Virtues Association). This was formed to oversee, standardise and promote the various Martial Arts traditions of Japan.

As a result, Kano's Judo Kyu / Dan system was given a mighty boost, as the committee set up to oversee the Dai Nippon Butokukai, adopted Kano's innovative grading system to grant Budo / Bujutsu martial rank certification (Budo / Bujutsu Menjo) and to grant teaching licences (Shihan Menjo)

The Butokukai, revolutionised the practice of Budo and Bujutsu in Japan and a common system of uniforms, ranking, belts and promotions was adopted. Even Jujutsu practice methods were to become standardised along the lines of Kano's Judo. The Butokukai promoted the practice of Budo training to the nation and the teachings of Bushido (The Warriors Code Of Ethics). Judo and Kendo were promoted as sports.

The Judo practice uniform, Judogi, and Kyu / Dan belt system eventually spread to many of the other modern Martial Arts, such as Aikido and Okinawa's Karate, which adapted them for their own purpose.

Karate practitioners in Okinawa didn't use any sort of practice uniform at all. The Kyu / Dan ranking system, and the Karategi (a modified Judogi) were first adopted by Gichin Funakoshi, in an effort to encourage Karate's acceptance by the Japanese people.

Funakoshi awarded the first Shodan ranks given in Karate, to Tokuda, Otsuka, Akiba, Shimizu, Hirose, Gima, and Kasuya on April 10, 1924. The adoption of the Kyu / Dan system and the standard uniform based on the Judogi, were 2 of the 4 conditions which the Dai-Nippon Butokukai required before recognizing Karate as a "real" Martial Art.

Today, most Martial Arts of the world have adopted the Kyu / Dan system as a means of measuring skill and proficiency within their respective disciplines.

However, the Kyu / Dan system was never designed to merely indicate a level of technical achievement. It also represents Budo's longer-term 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 children have always been classified differently within their own Kyu and Dan status, with their own distinct belts. This is because children are judged to be not fully mature and too young to have developed those aspects of character that Budo represents.

For this same reason, many schools retest their students at an age of 14 or 15 to qualify them for adult standing. Thus the Kyu / Dan system reflects evaluation of a person's spiritual progress towards perfection (attainment of discipline, values, ethics, manners, deportment, etc.) within a martial discipline.

Kano himself, never claimed Judo rank, it was supposed that only the founder of a system could verify another's rank. However, it is reputed that Kano received his 12th Dan after he had died. This "12th Dan" award was rumoured to have been made by senior Kodokan members. The award was that of a double width white belt, to differentiate it from the normal width 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.

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

Further articles on the individual Kyu and Dan grade systems will follow.

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