

## The Purpose of Earning Rank

By:

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Since the beginning of my martial arts career, which started in 1979, I've come to learn how the belt system in the martial arts has done a variety of things to different groups of people. In a few ways I can also compare this to earning rank within the military. The initial intention of the color belts in the martial arts was to separate beginners from intermediate students and intermediate students from advanced students. The different colored belt usually symbolizes how long a student has been training and also symbolizes a particular level of skill that the student has gained over their period of training. In theory, the belt system is to categorize students. The categories include beginners, intermediate and advanced. In the military, (Air Force) we have the "Enlisted Force Structure." This too is divided into three groups. These groups include Airmen, Non-Commissioned Officers and Senior Non-Commissioned Officers.

In the traditional mind set, skill and rank MUST be the same. Meaning, I would not give a beginner a green belt the first week they are in class. They have not learned the physical, mental and spiritual aspects of the art. This takes time. Just like any human living their life, we must learn to mature in each of the ranks. If you see a nine year old black belt and a thirty year old black belt you will see a difference in maturity. The style of martial art you train in might have different material you must learn along with different time lines for promotion. Some martial art schools require you to attend a minimum number of classes before being eligible to grade for the next rank. Again, the original purpose of belts was to match skill, time and maturity of a student.

In regards to the business world in the martial arts you have instructors who add more belts, promote quicker for student retention and etc. Not all schools do this, but some have found ways to add more income to their martial arts program. Today we see students wearing belts that don't match up to their skill level. Many instructors will state, "I promoted this person due to their dedication to the art or school rather than by their skill." Others may say, "I promoted this person because of their future potential rather than by their current skill, knowledge or maturity level." Some people are promoted for political reasons. For example, a black belt might be promoted earlier because they are the "Second in Command" and perform official duties for a Master or Grand Master.

There's always another side of the coin. Some instructors at times keep a student at a particular rank longer than expected. For example, a school might have a program where to go from 1<sup>st</sup> degree black belt to 2<sup>nd</sup> degree black belt you must train two times per week minimum for two years. A student will do so and not be advanced following that time line. I've seen many Masters and Grand Masters who have a mindset of making their students promote slower so that they are a higher caliber. Some students have a great relationship with their instructor and that is fine with them. Other students will feel their peers in that martial art are promoting and they are being left behind. A sense of resentment could occur and eventually the student could possibly leave the instructor or school due to feeling neglected in their training goals.

So, what happens when a student promotes to the next rank? Well, there are two different thoughts on this topic. One thought process is to go back to the beginning and learn to master all the material once again. Another thought process is now they can begin learning new material. Regardless of the thought process the student should always stay humble and be thankful for the opportunity for advancement. The scary part of earning rank both in the martial arts and in the military is now you're expect to know

what you're doing and you must perform even better than before. Students and subordinates will look at you for guidance so you must set a good example for them. Lead by example is a common term used in the military and I feel it definitely plays a part in the martial arts community as well.

Let's discuss your responsibilities with rank once you become a black belt. Usually, black belts become assistant instructors. Let's break down those words, Assistant Instructor. In the military we have what's called Assistant Flight Chiefs. They ASSIST the FLIGHT CHIEF. Assistant Instructors must ASSIST the INSTRUCTOR. Part of earning rank besides being a good example to other students is to assist the instructor. This could vary in helping grow the school, teaching classes, cleaning the dojang or help with some administrative duties. If placed in a position to perform gradings, the black belt must ensure the dignity and reputation of the instructor, school and art are kept in mind. If not and we allow some people to "slide under the radar," we might damage their potential, the instructor's, school's and art's reputation.

In time many black belts will become Masters and possibly Grand Masters. At this rank you have newly found responsibilities. You must promote and take care of your students, school and organization. The number one thing you must keep in mind is the health and welfare of your students. This is a priority for a Master or Grand Master. Next, you should build your school. This can be either in number of students or quality of training within your school. Finally, you must support the activities and decisions of your organization. Now, what do you do if the organization makes decisions you don't agree with? Well, I simply ask you to consider what is more important. Is it following the direction of your organization or taking care of your students? If the change does something that you feel does not benefit your students then perhaps you should consider contacting the organization and discuss it or possibly "bow out" of the organization, but in a friendly manner. Never burn bridges with an organization if you can.

So...What is the purpose of earning rank? Well, I've discussed a few thoughts. They included, matching rank with skill and maturity in rank. Additionally, I mentioned the pros and cons of promoting too late or too soon. Furthermore, the topic of being an example for juniors and peers, along with assisting the instructor. Finally, I discussed the responsibilities of supporting your students, school and organization. Keep in mind this is only my thoughts and they do not reflect the opinion of all martial arts black belts or any particular organization.



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