



2. THE MEANING OF THE BLACK BELT

In many activities in which the participants wear uniforms, rank is indicated by easily recognized insignia. The elevator starter has more gold braid on his uniform than the elevator operators. The resplendent doormen at luxury hotels have more gold braid, brass buttons, and feathers than do the porters. In military organizations rank, designated by various insignia, is of fundamental importance to the functioning of the unit. Rank establishes the structure and the insignia are the structural guideposts so everybody knows what the structure is.

There is rank in every form of life: it is basic that there are leaders and followers. There are doers and drones. Birds have their pecking order. Baboons have their leaders. Dog teams fall into line behind the superior dog. Humans are no different. Ranking of members of a society is a natural process. Even among the clergy there is rank which is shown in the vestments of those who hold it. Among the Catholics there is but one white skullcap, and there is a distinctly limited number of red ones. In the cloistered ranks of academia there is rank which is shown in the clothing. The gowns and the hoods show who graduated at what level and from where.

One of the rewards for ability is advancement in rank. With the advancement comes recognition. In some fields, such as the military, it is necessary to have the ranks shown. In other fields there is no necessity for insignia to show rank; nevertheless the insignia of rank are quite pervasive.

In Tae Kwon Do we wear uniforms. The uniform itself does not show the rank of the wearer, but merely serves a utilitarian purpose. It is designed to suit the activity for which it is worn. Although the jacket and the trousers are indistinguishable among the various ranks, the belts

which hold the jackets in place are not. It is these belts which show rank in Tae Kwon Do.

Although the organization of Tae Kwon Do is not highly structured in relation to lines of authority, the rank is established on the basis of ability and experience. The color of the belt keeps the student aware of his own stage of development and it lets him know the stages of the other students. Letting the students know their own rank and the ranks of the other students serves two purposes. One is that the higher ranked students are readily identifiable so the lower ranked ones can seek out their advice and help. Much of the learning in Tae Kwon Do is transmitted from student to student, since students are more numerous and more accessible to each other than are instructors. The other purpose served is that the belt identification gives the student constant incentive to move up.

Various martial arts associations have different colors of belts to identify ranks from the bottom to the top. Usually the beginner wears a White Belt and the highest ranks wear Black Belts. In our schools the progression is from White Belt to Yellow to Green to Purple to Brown to Black Belt. The amount of time spent at each level depends upon the individual and how much effort, thought, and concentration he puts into Tae Kwon Do. There are minimum requirements: a minimum of two months comprising 24 hours of class time at White Belt, a minimum of three months and 36 hours of class time at Yellow Belt, a minimum of three months and 36 hours of class time at Green Belt, a minimum of four months and 48 hours of class time at Purple Belt, and a minimum of one year and 150 class hours at Brown Belt. Even when a student meets these minimum requirements he is not automatically ready to be tested to move up. It

is up to the instructor to decide whether the student has met all the requirements and is ready to be tested. This decision is based on general performance, attitude, self-control, general decency, and whatever other criteria the instructor feels are appropriate. If the student is exceptional, the instructor may vary the Yellow Belt and the Green Belt minimum requirements.

If an instructor finds that many students fail their tests to move up to a higher belt, he ought to examine his own methods. Perhaps his standards are higher than his ability to teach.

After the Brown Belt test has been passed, there comes the big step, from Brown Belt to Black Belt. This will take at the minimum an *additional* one year and 150 hours of class time. That means that the absolute minimum requirement for the Black Belt test is two years of elapsed time since the student commenced his participation in Tae Kwon Do and three hundred hours of class time before the Tae Kwon Do can even be considered for his Black Belt test. No matter how good he is, both the elapsed time and the class hours are required and there is no way of getting around those minimums. The elapsed time allows the student to mature in the field of Tae Kwon Do, to absorb what it is all about, and to learn its objectives and methods. At the same time, the class hours allow the basic principles to be shown and allow the student to practice under supervision so he does not learn incorrect techniques and perpetuate bad habits. The class hours also provide another essential ingredient, time spent sparring. Sparring is what the financial people call "the bottom line." It is the end product of the whole business. It is in the sparring that the student puts together all he has learned, that he learns how to handle himself under attack and thus prepare himself for the ultimate emergency

in the event that it ever happens. Sparring is enough of a reason by itself for the student to keep coming to class regularly.

It is usually during the period between the Brown Belt and the Black Belt eligibility that those unsuited for the Black Belt drop out of Tae Kwon Do. The work gets harder and the progress becomes less apparent: the student feels he is standing still and that he will probably never make it to the Black Belt test or pass it even if he does get that far. It gets quite discouraging because the progress is so slow. When progress does come, it comes in quantum leaps, but the leaps are so far apart that the euphoria from one turns to discouragement before the next one comes along. Furthermore, more is expected of the Brown Belt than is expected of the lower belts. When he spars with the other Brown Belts and with Black Belts, his opponents are less forgiving of his mistakes. They block harder and they attack harder. Although the Brown Belt's body has become considerably more hardened than he realizes, he will find that it still becomes bruised and still hurts from time to time. Another factor which makes the Brown Belt year difficult is time itself. That additional year is a very long and trying one. The Black Belt is in sight yet it seems so far away. The student feels as if he is walking up a mountain of sand.

This is the time for bullies and cowards to drop out. Those who do not have the self-restraint and discipline to stick with it are those without the self-restraint and discipline to handle a lethal weapon.

We must pause here to make clear that someone who drops out of Tae Kwon Do is not necessarily a bully or a coward or lacking in social responsibility, courage, self-restraint, or discipline. Like sculling or tennis or gardening or playing the accordion, Tae Kwon Do may just not appeal all that much to a particular in-

dividual. Also there are jobs, families, and other responsibilities which cannot be ignored. Not all who drop out are unfit by any means.

When the minimum time and number of class hours have been completed, there may still be aspects of one's performance or attitude that need to be worked on. Whatever is not right must be corrected before the test is given. When the instructor feels the Tae Kwon Doist will pass his Black Belt test, then he is ready for that test.

Naturally the student is nervous once the date has been set for his Black Belt test. He becomes his own worst enemy. There is nothing more likely to make him fail than his nerves. Anxiety spoils concentration and uses energy better channeled to physical performance. But controlling one's nerves is a part of the test. If the student is attacked on the street, he cannot tell the attacker to come back later because he is too nervous. In an emergency he must think clearly and immediately to determine the best way out, whether he ought to flee or defend himself and his conditioned reactions must not be slowed up by a miasma of nervous indecision. Thus, even the student's reaction to the Black Belt test is in itself a part of the total test. Instructors expect students to get themselves into a nervous funk for their Yellow Belt test. After at least two years, students ought to have enough control so they can take their Black Belt tests in stride.

Self-doubt is an impediment because it causes the mind to devote some of its energy to the doubt when all of the energy is needed for the task at hand. Thus, Tae Kwon Do serves the student well if it helps him conquer self-doubt. We are not referring here to self-examination and reasoned doubt, but rather to the lack of the ability to make up one's mind and act.

The program of the test is up to the

individual instructor. It ought to test the student in every phase of what he is assumed to have learned. When the test is completed, the instructor considers what he has learned over the period of two years about the student's personality, his adjustment to society, his integrity, his stability, his ability, and his performance in the test. The instructor evaluates everything about the student in terms of whether he is worthy of the Black Belt. Then the instructor either awards it or tells the student he will have to come back and try again another day.

There is always the other way to get the Black Belt—dishonestly, without earning it. The simplest way to do that is to go to a martial arts supply house and buy a Black Belt. A belt come by in this manner has a meaning directly proportional to the effort put into getting it, none. Such a belt might inflate the purchaser's ego and might be good for cocktail party talk but on balance it is harmful to the person who would degrade himself by perpetrating a fraud like this. He knows he is a fraud, and such a performance cannot help but lower his self-esteem. It is done though.

There are instructors who sell belts. Belts purchased from an instructor have more of an aura of authenticity because they are usually accompanied by an elaborate certificate with dragons and various Oriental symbols on them. It is difficult to say who is more reprehensible, the seller or the buyer. One cannot imagine what the buyer gains. If the need to protect himself arises, he cannot wave his Black Belt at the attacker and drive him off. He can brag to his friends, but eventually the truth will find its way out and make him look like a fool. At some time one is bound to encounter the loudmouth who will challenge a Black Belt just as young toughs challenged known gun fighters when the West was young. If the Black Belt is a real one he can say, "Run along, Sonny Boy,"

in such a way that the loudmouth will probably go away. If the pseudo Black Belt is challenged he may be stupid enough to accept the challenge and then be hurt or humiliated, or both. There is one good thing about the bogus Black Belt, though. You will never see him cluttering up a Tae Kwon Do gymnasium.

The legitimate Black Belt is an insignia indicating rank. It can best be compared with the one star in the U.S. Army which represents the rank of Brigadier General. The gulf between a full Colonel and a Brigadier General is more than the step up of one rank. The Brigadier General has become, as his title indicates, a General Officer. This gives him certain latitudes in the selection of his uniform and it means that he is on the road to the top. How far he goes along that road depends upon circumstances and upon his ability, but that first star means he has crossed the dividing line between just a military career and the possibility of a distinguished military career. Similarly the Black Belt is the dividing line between the beginner and the Tae Kwon Doist who can go on to become really good. In the military the officer cannot rise to the top without getting that first star. In Tae Kwon Do, the student cannot progress above the fundamentals until he gets the Black Belt.

As we have already pointed out, the Black Belt is the beginning of the real learning process: it is a license to learn. It is not a terminal point but a staging area, an important intermediate step. It is indeed unfortunate that most of the students who finally earn their Black Belts do not understand what the Black Belt really means. Films, magazines, novels, television, and other sources of misinformation have presented a wildly distorted picture of Tae Kwon Do. To many of the uninitiated, the term "Black Belt" means a brutal and usually stupid fighting machine which can be stimulated to kill or maim with

little provocation. Students, especially the young ones, cannot help but be influenced by what they see and hear.

In spite of their training and the years they have devoted to learning Tae Kwon Do, some new Black Belts feel that they have come to the end of the learning process. They show their new Black Belt to friends, talk about it, and are satisfied. They stop exercising. They get soft and fat. They lose the skills they worked so hard to get. Worst of all, they simply do not understand what the Black Belt means.

It is true that some of the students who stop at this point do so because they have gotten all they want from their training and are now ready to do something else. These are not the types of Black Belts we are discussing here. We are talking about the ones who think they have learned all there is to learn. They do not understand what the Black Belt is all about.

You may ask why they were awarded the Black Belt in the first place. Is not the mental attitude as important as the physical ability? Is not quitting after having been awarded a Black Belt a demonstration of a lack of understanding of what the Black Belt actually is? Ought the person who thinks he has reached the summit when he is awarded the Black Belt be allowed to keep it? These are all sensible questions, germane to the development of the subject.

The answer is that if the instructor could lift up the hood and look at what goes on inside before the Black Belt tests, such students would have to go through further training until they had a full understanding of what it is all about. Unfortunately the instructor must make the decision on the overt evidence before him. He cannot possibly know what the student will do under certain circumstances in the indeterminate future. Even if he did know the student intended to stop participation in Tae Kwon Do after his Black Belt

test, the instructor would then have to determine whether it was because the student did not understand the meaning of the Black Belt or because he wanted to use his time in some other way. The student who understands the true meaning of getting a Black Belt but who wants to go on to something else is more deserving of the award than the student who has no idea that he is only at the threshold. The fact is that sometimes the lack of understanding does not surface until after the Black Belt has been awarded. Unfortunately, prescience is not one of the attributes that Tae Kwon Do instructors possess. Once a Black Belt is awarded, it is not possible to recall it.

We might compare the Black Belt to the Ph.D. degree in academics. There is probably no legitimate holder of a Ph.D. degree granted by a recognized (accredited) American university who is not fully aware that he really knows very little. The Ph.D. degree means that the holder of that degree has gone through a strenuous, tiring, and at times discouraging period of study over a number of years: he has worked hard. He has done original research in the field of his specialization in his dissertation, he has defended his knowledge in his chosen field orally before a group of professors. Then, if all this has been successful, he has become the proud holder of the Ph.D. degree. It is impossible after all that exposure to learning and knowledge not to realize that the Ph.D. is not the end but the beginning of a never-ending quest. Attaining that degree is merely the opening of a door. The same is true of attaining the Black Belt in Tae Kwon Do.

To carry the Ph.D. analogy a little further, good colleges require that their professors have the Ph.D. degree from an accredited university in the field in which they are to teach. Having the Black Belt in Tae Kwon Do also means that the holder is qualified to teach. Teachers in either

field who have not met the appropriate requirements are not fully qualified.

There are two aspects to teaching Tae Kwon Do. One is actually conducting the class. The other is passing along the philosophy of Tae Kwon Do to the students. The mechanics of conducting the class also has two aspects. One is leading the class in the basic exercises, teaching the stylized sequences of moves known as forms to the various belt levels, and keeping things moving during the class period so the student's attention does not wander and concentration is not destroyed. The second aspect of conducting a class is instructing the students in fighting techniques. The new Black Belt does not yet have a complete repertoire so he must be careful not to try to teach advanced techniques he himself does not fully understand yet. He should never try to teach more than he knows.

The first quality a new Black Belt must develop in order to teach is personal presence. He must take charge completely. He must run the class showing no doubt or hesitation. He must not be tentative or shy about shouting out his commands. Even the slightest hesitance or uncertainty in his mind will be communicated to the students. If they sense that nobody is in charge, the class will quickly fall apart.

In order to take charge, the teacher must have "strong eyes." This does not mean that he must have good vision. He can even wear glasses and still have "strong eyes." The teacher must look at the class and say through his eyes, "I am in charge and what I say is the way it will be done."

There are two ways of taking charge. One is acceptable and the other is not. The acceptable way is to project a strong personality which lets the students know that the teacher is running things and that no nonsense will be tolerated. The unacceptable way of taking charge is by bully-

ing. An instructor who is not sure of himself will generally try to cover his confusion by using a loud voice and abusing the class. The class picks up immediately that the instructor is not sure of what he is doing and is covering up his lack of knowledge, poise, and ability. The instructor becomes ineffectual. Proper taking charge is necessary. Bluff taking charge through bullying is destructive at worst and just a waste of everybody's time at best.

Not everybody is blessed with a strong, clear voice. There are many big, hairy men with small, squeaky voices. In a Tae Kwon Do class it is a serious impediment to have a small, squeaky voice because the quality of the response to commands is in direct proportion to the authority carried in the teacher's voice. To have authority, the voice need not be inordinately loud, but it must be clear and sharp and certainly loud enough to be heard easily by everybody in the class. A voice like this may be difficult for some people to achieve, but it is a "must" for the wearer of a Tae Kwon Do Black Belt because he is supposed to be qualified to teach and one requirement for teaching is a commanding voice. A commanding voice can be developed by practice. The new Black Belt who does not have the required type of voice will feel silly practicing shouting commands to an imaginary class, but that is exactly what he must do. He can practice in the basement, in the garage, in the woods, in an open field, or anywhere there are no spectators to make him feel self-conscious. Remember that the quality to be developed is authority, not just noise.

It is essential that the teacher know all the various exercises which are a part of any class period. He must be able to take the class through the entire lesson smoothly and without stopping from time to time to figure out what comes next. It really does not matter what comes next as

long as the pattern is smooth and one activity follows the previous one without an interlude of head scratching and indecision. Some teachers vary their routines from day to day to make the classes more lively so the students do not fall into automatic patterns which they can execute without really thinking.

It is so obvious that it hardly bears discussing that the teacher must present a good appearance. First, his uniform must be clean and neat. He himself does not need to look like a model for men's fashions, but he must be personally clean. A dirty, disheveled, ill-smelling teacher will not command the respect necessary to hold his class together. Also, the disreputable looking teacher will find quite soon that his class reflects his own personal disarray.

Another requirement for teaching is that the teacher must himself be able to perform all the techniques he teaches correctly. If the teacher has defects in his techniques, the students will turn out with those same defects. That goes for personal peculiarities which may not necessarily be serious defects. Examples of such peculiarities are sticking out the backside while doing the basic exercises, or leaning back when doing a double arm block, or being pigeon-toed. Students pick up big and small faults from the teacher. There is nothing more ludicrous than to see a whole class doing the basic exercises each with his backside pushed out to the rear just like the instructor. The good instructor ought to be free of such faults and the Black Belt is expected to be a good instructor.

In some forms of Tae Kwon Do or Karate, the instructors correct the students by hitting or kicking them. Probably the rationale of hitting students who are afraid to hit back is that a sharp, painful blow will make more of an impression than mere words and thus better ensure that

the student will not lapse into the same error again. We disagree with this method of teaching because we feel that hitting or kicking a person who cannot, for whatever reason, retaliate is bullying. Furthermore, it tells the student that part of the martial art is hitting people who cannot strike back, so the student will see nothing wrong in bullying. Everything is wrong in bullying.

This brings us to possibly the most important aspect of teaching: by means of example and by teaching, inculcating the student with the all-pervading feeling of self-restraint, the feeling of personal discipline, and the awareness of social responsibility. Remember that from the moment he gains a Black Belt, the Tae Kwon Doist is himself a deadly weapon, and it is vital that he be impressed with that fact. Sometimes students, especially young ones, get so wound up in their new skills that they never relate them into the context of a social structure. It is therefore the important and specific obligation of the Black Belt to make sure that those he is teaching are fully conscious of the fact that every bit of power they gain carries with it a proportionate amount of social responsibility. The Black Belt must remember this as his skills increase and he must implant this message firmly into the consciousness of all those he teaches.

A side effect of this attention to self-control, self-discipline, and social awareness is that the Black Belt becomes a much better adjusted human being. We must all fit into the social structure in which we live whether we like it or not. If we do not like it we can work for change within the rules of that social structure or we can seek another place to live. As the Black Belt becomes aware of his power and the need to keep it under control, he becomes aware of the society in which he lives and his place in that society. Tae
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society by making Tae Kwon Doists into people who are conscious of their responsibilities. Possibly very few people in general think specifically about their responsibilities to society as a whole. The Black Belt Tae Kwon Doist must.

It is because self-restraint and personal discipline are so lacking in our society today that people eat too much, drink too much, smoke too much, fail to bring up their children properly, put off necessary exercise, let their minds go to seed because it is easier to watch TV, and generally lead sloppy lives. The restraint and discipline which are necessary to the Black Belt cannot but help him to live a better ordered life and thus to contribute to the stability of the social body. For the ordinary person doing ordinary things from day to day only the minimal amounts of restraint and discipline are required or exercised. For the Black Belt they must become a part of him.

Since the basic human being always shows through, particularly in the case of teachers, the Black Belt teacher must become a fairly decent person. If he is not, it will become apparent rather quickly. When he is not and when the students realize it, the teacher's effectiveness diminishes rapidly. Thus, the Black Belt, if he wishes to be an effective teacher, must strive to be a decent person. This is not to say that all Tae Kwon Do Black Belts are knights in shining armor, but they must strive at least a little in that direction.

Lest the foregoing about social responsibility and decency be taken with a big yawn and cynically viewed as mere window dressing, may we say that all this actually works. Anyone who has had a Black Belt for a few years knows that it works.

But let us suppose for a moment that restraint and discipline and social responsibility do not become deeply ingrained in the Black Belt. Let us further suppose

that a drunk insults the Black Belt with vile language and offensive actions or perhaps a reckless driver cuts him off with dangerous, illegal driving, or that somebody pushes ahead of him in a line while waiting to buy a ticket. Let us suppose that any one of a thousand such infuriating incidents which cause fist fights every day happens to our Black Belt. Let us further suppose that he has a quick temper and that the altercation becomes physical. If this happens, the Black Belt has already lost control of himself. That means the safety catch is off the dangerous weapon and somebody will get hurt. If there are many incidents in which there are injuries, the martial arts will be recognized as breeding grounds for dangerous people and they will quickly become illegal.

In the gymnasium sometimes sparring can get a little rough. If one participant loses his temper just a little because he was hit too hard or because one of his blows was blocked with what he considers unnecessary roughness, and if he retaliates with a little bit of unnecessary roughness himself, the roughness will tend to escalate. Somebody will be badly hurt. It would not take much of this sort of thing either to have Tae Kwon Do banned. There must be a feeling of social responsibility.

We have all seen people get angry at something they are unsuccessfully trying to fix. They kick it and hurt their own feet. It is, of course, silly to kick an object because the kicker is too stupid to repair it, but people do things like that. The Black Belt cannot give in to such impulses because, if he does, he can hurt somebody or he can be hurt himself if he is faced with an attack against his person with a deadly weapon.

Thus, the matter of having restraint, discipline, and a social consciousness is not empty morality or being "Mr. Nice Guy" for the Black Belt. Being in complete

control of oneself is not a luxury or just good citizenship. It is a matter of survival for the Black Belt himself and for Tae Kwon Do. Becoming a good citizen in the process is a fortunate by-product.

What then does the Black Belt really mean?

It means that the person wearing it has passed from the novice stage of Tae Kwon Do into the effective phase in which he learns how to become an effective fighting machine. It means that he will use his ability to fight and to destroy only in defence of himself when all other alternatives have been cut off. The Black Belt carries with it the responsibility to use the power one has achieved with the utmost care. It carries the responsibility to be a self-controlled, normal member of the social body, not an outlaw. Those who wear the Black Belt are required to teach those coming after them that the way to the Black Belt and beyond is the way of restraint, self-control, and social responsibility.