

# Colored Belt Ranking System

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**N**owadays, nearly all Asian (and even some non-Asian) Martial Arts uses some kind of belt ranking system. Usually novices wear white belt, then progress through several colors (mostly yellow, green, orange, blue, brown), until they reach the coveted “black belt”. After reaching “black belt”, they will get “Dan Ranks”, ranging from 1<sup>st</sup> Dan to 10<sup>th</sup> Dan. Of course, very few people reach 10<sup>th</sup> Dan, because this rank indicates grandmastership. In reality, even the most prestigious teachers sometimes stay in the 7<sup>th</sup> — 8<sup>th</sup> Dan for the rest of their lives. Usually the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Dan are reserved for the founder of the style and his immediate successor.

## ***There was no colored belt rank system 100 years ago!***

If people hear that you practice martial arts, the first thing they might ask is: “What belt are you?” Such is the popularity of belt ranks. However, despite what you may have heard, 110 years ago there was no belt rank system in China and Japan. Belt rank systems were created by Prof. Jigoro Kano, the founder of Jūdō. Before Prof. Kano, Japanese martial artists did not have any belt system or even a rank system. Everybody simply learned from a Master, memorized everything the Master wanted them to learn, and if they had to leave the Master, he might give the student a hand-written scroll containing a list of techniques they had learned. Or maybe he would not give the student anything at all, despite all the years spent training with him.

It is well-known that Japanese Masters gave teaching licenses and secret scrolls of teaching to a select few only, usually to the people they deemed worthy to succeed him. The most famous example is Master Sokaku Takeda of Daito Ryū fame. It is said that he reportedly

had 60,000 students, but only about 20 of them received “teaching license” (called *Kyoju Dairi*) from him and amongst the 20, only two of them received a certificate of full proficiency (called *Menkyo Kaiden*) in his Jūjutsu system. The rest of them only had their names written on a “student’s list” scroll which was kept by Master Takeda himself. They got no certification whatsoever. And the Master had every right to decide which student learned which techniques. He had the monopoly to teach only a handful of techniques to most students and to save the most powerful ones for his successors. This was done to ensure that the essential techniques of the art remained in “good hands”.

In China, it was also not uncommon for someone to follow a Master for 10 years and not get any certification or any rank designation whatsoever. A Chinese Master usually gave their secret books of arts and techniques only to their immediate family or to the students he deemed worthy to succeed him. This does not mean that the rest of the students were illegitimate, though. Even though they did not have a “certificate” or “black belt”, they considered themselves legitimate because they could perform the forms and techniques of their particular style. So the emphasis was not on “formal certification” but on “actual skills”. But, just as in Japan, some particular forms and techniques were hidden from most students and were given only to a select few. While this kind of secrecy is understandable (the Masters only gave their secrets to their most trusted students), this kind of over-zealousness in guarding the system’s secret (and often their most effective) techniques caused many students to quit because they believed they had been neglected and fooled by their Masters.

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## **The belt systems grows out of Jūdō**

In 1900, Prof. Kano, who was also a high officer in the Japanese Ministry of Education, designed a system of belt-ranking to promote his martial arts of Jūdō amongst young people in his country. Prof. Kano had learned the Western Education System and he decided that he needed to design a logical curriculum based on identifiable goals, where each goal would be achieved in rank progression. He also decided that each rank needed some sort of symbol to signify the student's achievement. From there he designed his now-famous belt-ranking system.

At first, his system only included two grades : Mudansha (non-graded) and Yudansha (graded). The Mudansha wears a white obi (to signify that he has not learned anything yet) while the Yudansha wears a black obi (to signify that he had learned some techniques). It is said that the very first person Prof. Kano promoted to black obi was Mr. Yamashita in the 1880s. The belt system grew slowly right after that. In addition to the Mudansha-Yudansha system, Prof. Kano created the Kyū-Dan system. He broke down his curriculum into techniques, which then he assigned to Kyū ranks. For example, at the 5<sup>th</sup> Kyū a person will learn breakfalls, etiquette, basic throws, and basic grappling. At the 4<sup>th</sup> Kyū he will learn a bit more, and he will learn more and more everytime he passed a Kyū rank. At the rank of Ikyū (1<sup>st</sup> Kyū), he hasd learned most of the basics and is ready for the more advanced techniques and Katas. After he finishesd the central Kata of Jūdō (*Nage No Kata, Kime No Kata, Katame No Kata*, etc), he might wear the Black Belt to signify that he had mastered all the basic techniques within Jūdō and is ready for more improvements, refinements and variations of the basics.

With the addition of Kyū Ranks, it was necessary for Prof. Kano to add a number of colors in his belt system. I do not know all of the details about the belt system Prof. Kano used (because there were not one but many), but my sources indicate that the belt rank system

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employed in the 1920s was White, Blue, Purple, Brown and Black. There were two Brown Belt levels, which makes a total of five Mudansha levels (five Kyū levels from Gokyū to Ikkyū), which corresponds to Prof. Kano's teachings (*Go Kyo No Waza*, the five teachings of techniques).

### **Belt Rank Systems Being Adopted by All**

Belt rank systems did not start to catch on amongst other martial arts until the Dai Nihon Butokukai (Japan Martial Arts Virtues Society, founded in 1895 by members of Japan Imperial Family) required their members to adopt Prof. Kano's belt rank system. This requirement was established in 1905. And so, most of the schools registered on the Butokukai (including many Kendo and Jūjutsu schools) adopted this system. In the 1930s, even the Karate art

from Okinawa began to adopt the belt-ranking system. Some Jūjutsu schools decided to stay in their old system, but nearly all newer Jūjutsu systems (*Gendai Jūjutsu*—Modern Jūjutsu), especially those founded by Westerners, adopted Jūdō's belt rank system.

With the standardization of belt-rank system, learning martial arts has become an easier proposition. Gone are the days where a student could spend 10 years+ learning under a Master and get nothing. Using the belt rank system you will, at the very least, get a Kyū rank. Gone are the days where a Master will teach you only the handful of techniques he wanted to teach you. Under Prof. Kano's curriculum, you will learn a specified number of techniques on each rank, giving

you identifiable goals for your next promotion. This is a huge improvement. In the ancient days every teacher, even from the same Ryū, could teach a different syllabus to different people, which makes standardization of teaching material very difficult. With the Kyū-Dan system, standardization of techniques within a Ryū is easy. With a standardized curriculum, you will

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learn the same techniques with other students at your rank, no matter where you practice. For example, the throwing techniques you learn at 3<sup>rd</sup> Kyū level at Yokohama is the same one that was taught to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Kyū level at Hiroshima, Kobe, Tokyo, and any other part of the world.

***Even the Non-Japanese arts started to use it!***

Since they have standardized the belt ranks (and their curriculums), Japanese Martial Arts such as Jūdō, Karate Dō and Aikidō have been successfully imported all over the world. This testifies to the effectiveness of the belt rank system. Non-Japanese Martial Artists recognize this too, and they have begun to adopt the Japanese belt rank system, albeit with different colors and different “philosophies” assigned to it. Silat from Indonesia, Tae Kwon Do, Hapkido and Tang Soo Do from Korea, Kung Fu from China and many other martial arts nowadays have been using the Japanese belt ranks for years.

Therefore, it is logical to state that the Kyū-Dan belt ranks system is Prof. Kano’s second most important contribution to the martial arts world, in addition to Jūdō. (Some people argued that Prof. Kano must also be honored for his efforts to preserve Jūjutsu, but that is a different story). So every time we tie up our Obi, no matter what color, no matter what style of martial arts you practice, let us say a prayer to Prof. Kano, may his soul find peace in the hands of God. Amen!

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