

The Black Belt: Myth and Reality – Putting it into perspective (November & December, 2006)

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The picture is courtesy of Mr. Dag A. Ivarsoy

As you probably know, in recent years the value of the black belt has been diluted because a few martial arts organizations have lowered their standards. Others issue very impressive black belt certificates based on nothing more than the payment of a fee, often selling them by mail or over the Internet. Investigations by journalists have resulted in warnings to consumers that not all black belt certificates have the same value. Unfortunately, these actions have had a negative effect on the credibility of all martial arts organizations.

What can the ITF do about this situation? The answer is education and communication. We need to demystify the black belt and explain what it really should mean. This is why I have chosen to write about this important subject.

What do outsiders think a black belt means?

I started practicing Taekwon-Do at a young age and I was fifteen years old when I earned my 1st degree black belt. Being rather shy, I didn't tell very many people about it. When eventually they did find out, people seemed to think having a black belt made me dangerous. They would say things like: "I'll have to be careful around you." or "We'd better not make him angry!" The perception seemed to be that a black belt holder was a kind of superman, and this is the way many people still think.

Of course it is natural for people to think that way, since their perceptions have been shaped by the media, primarily by what they see in films that concentrate on spectacular martial arts action and a lot of violence. This perception has evolved in recent years. With more people practicing martial arts and achieving black belt status -- including an increasing number of women -- it is no longer seen as so unusual.

On the positive side, people do seem to recognize that a black belt holder is someone who has acquired certain skills, knows how to defend himself, is confident, and has achieved a goal.

How is the black belt perceived in the martial arts world?

The black belt is a relatively recent development in the martial arts world. Apparently the inventor of the black belt was Grandmaster Jigoro Kano, the founder of judo, who awarded the first black belts in the 1880s.

In the martial arts world, a black belt holder is viewed as worthy of respect. Those who practice any of the martial arts know that one must meet certain standards to earn a black belt. The ITF is not the only Taekwon-Do organization and we should not refuse to recognize that their black belts have value, when they are based on solid criteria. To be fair to those who have earned black belts from other organizations and who now wish to join the ITF, we have established criteria for the recognition of their black belt degrees.

However, there is no international standard for black belts in all the martial arts and, because there are so many styles of martial arts and a large number of organizations, there never will be.

More than ten years ago, we did a study here in the Quebec City region in collaboration with Laval University, asking Taekwon-Do practitioners and their entourage this question: "What makes a black belt holder different?" This study involved a relatively small number of respondents and it was certainly not exhaustive; never the less, the results are interesting.

We learned that only 5% of those who begin to learn Taekwon-Do go on to earn a black belt.

The personal characteristics of those who did were identified as:

- *They know how to persevere (training and exams);*
- *They are active people (physically and mentally);*
- *They show good judgment.*
- *They are leaders;*
- *They are polite and respectful;*
- *Parents noticed that their children became more confident;*
- *At school, teachers remarked that children practicing Taekwon-Do showed leadership and better judgment.*

What does an ITF black belt mean?

To earn any ITF color or black belt, the student must meet the specific criteria for that level. A belt is not awarded simply for a certain number of months or years of training.

The ITF system of color belts (six colors) has evolved over the years. I remember General Choi describing the system; he compared it to a tree. (At that time there were four colors.) He explained:

- The **white belt** is like the roots of the tree, where it all begins;

- The **yellow belt** represents the color of the soil, which is required for the development of a strong root system, a solid foundation for the tree;
- The **green belt** is like the new growth just pushing out of the soil;
- The **blue belt** (the color of the sky) means that the tree is continuing to grow;
- The **red belt** – when the tree has reached a good size but the wood is still green – means danger. This is when the student must pay attention to more than physical training. It is a time to reflect about your personality and your control of Taekwon-Do techniques.

Earning a **black belt** means the student has acquired a certain expertise. The color black is the combination of all the other colors and signifies the achievement of maturity. There is a certain prestige attached to wearing the black belt, but we must point out that there are different degrees of black belts and the difference from one level to the next level up is substantial.

Some years ago, I was with General Choi at a seminar when he was asked about the meaning of the black belt. **General Choi said it meant that person was capable of defending himself.** I would add that the holder of a black belt has reached a certain level of skills and is now autonomous for his training.

Earning an ITF black belt

In principle, almost every student can earn an ITF black belt. The question is how long it will take.

Each student has his or her strengths and weaknesses. Some have to deal with special challenges such as physical disability or mental illness. We want to give our students the opportunity to progress and achieve the benefits of applying Taekwon-Do principles in their lives. So, although we will insist that the techniques be correct, we do recognize that a student's performance may be affected by his circumstances. For example: a student may use the proper technique for a kick but may not be able to reach the same height as another.

There is a requirement for a minimum number of hours of training. However, there is no set timeframe for earning an ITF color or black belt. If a student progresses very well, he or she could earn a 1st degree black belt in approximately three years. To move from 1st degree black belt to 2nd degree takes a minimum of one and a half years, while the next step, from 2nd to 3rd, takes a minimum of two years. The time required increases at each level. In fact, to earn a 9th degree black belt takes a minimum total of 36 years.

Obviously, earning your 1st degree black belt is only the beginning. And you can't be in a big hurry! The process of qualification for successive black belt degrees is not a race or a competition.

Earning a black belt = Climbing a mountain?

We could say that earning your black belt is sort of like mountain climbing. Earning the color belts can be compared to the preparation stage: learning the theory of mountain climbing, practicing the techniques, working to improve your physical conditioning, and gathering the necessary supplies. By earning your 1st degree black belt, you move to the next level, like mountain climbers setting up a base camp part way up the first mountain. Only then are you ready to attempt to climb mountains. In the case of Taekwon-Do, those "mountains" are the advanced black belt degrees.

Minimum criteria for each exam

One of the ITF's goals for the next few years is to define detailed criteria for qualification for each level and to offer advanced training for all ITF examiners. This will help ensure uniformity and reinforce the value of an ITF black belt degree.

A black belt degree exam cannot be simply a formality. In a competition match, the opponents are compared to each other, but during an exam the candidate must be compared to the minimum criteria established for the degree. Examiners have a duty to make sure the candidate meets the ITF criteria.

If a black belt degree is not awarded based on competence, it will be absolutely worthless. To maintain the credibility of the organization, we must ensure that ITF black belt certificates have a recognized value, and this is particularly true for 4th degree and higher.

If a candidate has not mastered the skills required, the examiner should not give a passing grade or award a degree. The examiner should identify for the candidate the points he or she needs to work on. Then the candidate will know how to prepare better for a second try. Neither the candidate nor the examiner should look at the awarding of a black belt degree as a privilege that the examiner has the power to give or withhold. The examiner must evaluate each candidate objectively.

Another important point is that the examiner must avoid any conflict of interest. If there is any possibility that the examiner could be perceived to be in conflict of interest, it is always better that he or she step aside and let another examiner evaluate the candidate.

Encouragement & motivation

It is very important to encourage students and help them motivate themselves during the qualification process.

An example:

Recently I visited an ITF Taekwon-Do school in the U.S.A. where they had posted on the walls a very official-looking certificate for each color belt student, yellow belts and up.

The certificate showed:

- *the current level of the student,*
- *each step of the qualification process to the 1st degree black belt,*
- *the month and year in which the student could earn the 1st degree black belt, if he or she continued to progress well.*

Seeing their progress posted on the wall and knowing what they had to do to reach black belt status helped the students to set goals and work to achieve them step by step. Such a program can provide a lot of encouragement for students.

I mentioned above that General Choi had identified the red belt level as a danger zone, because it represents a transition period requiring each student to reflect seriously on the role Taekwon-Do should play in his or her life. The period immediately after earning the 1st degree black belt can also be difficult. When qualifying for the color belts, the student is evaluated frequently. However, the interval between black belt degrees is longer, and it increases with each successive level. It is important to help the student to adjust to this new reality so that he will not become discouraged.

General Choi said students need direction. I would add that teachers can provide direction by demonstrating the benefits of Taekwon-Do in our lives: the opportunity to acquire new skills, to help others, to live a successful and active life. According to the student's abilities and preferences, the teacher may consider steering him or her toward teaching or competition. Remember, there are ITF competitions for all levels, not just for the elite.

For example:

A number of years ago, I became very concerned when I noted that in my region we were losing many students after they had earned their 1st degree black belts. Many of them would seem to lose interest at this stage.

We did a study and found that because of the longer interval between exams, students had a tendency to put off training and study, thinking there would be plenty of time to catch up. Unfortunately, when it was time for the exam, they were not ready.

The solution was to break up the longer interval into separate steps. This way, the student can concentrate on completing one step at a time and, when he has completed all the steps, he is ready for the exam.

It is logical to split each interval between the early black belt degrees into three stages, because for each degree from 1st to 4th degree, students work on three patterns. There is an evaluation at the end of each stage, and students can only present themselves as candidates for promotion if they have successfully completed the three evaluations.

This program has been very successful.

As you can see from these examples, the key is to identify the root of the problem and then make changes that will help solve the problem. The changes do not have to be major, but they do have to be tailored to the problem.

Another example:

Children who start learning Taekwon-Do at age six may reach the 1st degree black belt level at age nine. This is very young, and because they do not have the physical or mental development to move to the next level, their progress is stalled.

We created a program with extra levels before the black belt especially for young children, so that they can continue to learn and progress. This type of program also exists in some European countries, and it really does work!

I have suggested to the chairmen of the ITF Technical and Instruction Committee and the ITF Masters Promotion Committee that they study the possibility of proposing a similar program for approval by the ITF Board of Directors. We would then be able to implement this program everywhere, thus meeting the specific needs of Taekwon-Do practitioners under the age of twelve.

For some martial arts, the requirements for a black belt are set so high that it seems almost impossible to attain. Some say that you have to give up everything else in your life and devote yourself only to your martial art.

Isn't it better to adapt our teaching so that we encourage our students? After all, the purpose of ITF Taekwon-Do is to help practitioners become better people and have a happier life, so that they can contribute to making a better and more peaceful world. Students who are successful are motivated to continue to train, to learn, and to progress. If our students become discouraged and drop out, they will not receive the benefits of Taekwon-Do.

What is the value of an honorary black belt?

In the past, the ITF has awarded honorary black belt degrees to honor individuals who have made an exceptional contribution to the development of ITF Taekwon-Do.

We are currently working to develop a detailed policy for the awarding of honorary black belt degrees. Our purpose is to ensure that the ITF honorary black belt retains its value and that it be used to motivate those who have useful resources or contacts to help the ITF. An honorary black belt degree from an organization that has credibility and positive goals will be perceived as a real honor.

Importance and responsibility of high ranking black belts

According to the traditions and rules of the martial arts, a martial artist owes respect to his master and to those who are his seniors in the organization. Rank and date of promotion are the key criteria in determining seniority.

Furthermore, the responsibilities that the ITF delegates to officials to conduct the tournaments and the promotion tests are based on the rank.

Therefore, it is very important for the ITF, as a worldwide martial art organization, that all promotions be based on competence, experience, and involvement in ITF Taekwon-Do. That is why the ITF Board of Directors approved By-law No. 1 and the two policies concerning promotion, which clearly set out the requirements for promotion and for the recognition of black belt degrees granted by other organizations.

To all ITF black belt holders:

Earning an ITF black belt does bring with it a certain prestige, but it is important to keep in mind that it is just one step in a lifetime of practicing Taekwon-Do.

Remember that you are ambassadors for the ITF and for your school. You must live up to the prestige that goes with your black belt status, demonstrating not only the technical skills you have mastered but also that you apply ITF Taekwon-Do principles in all facets of your life, and that you are working to build a better and peaceful world.

In the future

I believe that the ITF system of black belts is already good for the technical requirements. What is missing is an evaluation system for the Do.

General Choi wrote that the study of the Do had been neglected and that he hoped his successors would put more emphasis on teaching the Do. This is why the ITF has put a lot of effort into developing a program for teaching the Do. We have already started giving seminars for Level I, while the course structure for Levels II and III has been defined. Eventually we will define a method of evaluation.

For example: One tenet of Taekwon-Do is courtesy (politeness and kindness). Therefore, the evaluation method will have to assist the examiner to evaluate how the candidate understands and applies this facet of the Do in his life.

It is my hope that my lasting contribution to the ITF will be the realization of my vision of the future of the ITF: a wonderful future, with an ever-increasing number of high-quality black belts in countries around the globe – black belts who are model citizens, working to build a better, happier life and a more peaceful world!

All the best to you,
Yours truly,
Master Trần Triều Quân



ITF President

ITF Black Belt holders:

Always remember that you are an ambassador for your school and for the ITF.