



**JUDO  
BLACK BELT  
ASSOCIATION**

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By Steve Scott

Jigoro Kano (1860-1938), the founder of Kodokan Judo, introduced the basic form of the ranking system that continues to be used to this day in judo as well as many other martial arts.

**Mudansha and Yudansha:** Fundamentally, there are two steps or grades used for ranking in judo. A proponent of Kodokan Judo is ranked as either a mudansha (“ungraded”) or a yudansha (“graded”). This is the case for other Japanese gendai budo (modern martial ways developed after 1868) such as kendo, aikido and karate. Mudansha is a phrase that refers to someone not in possession of a rank (mu is an esoteric term that translates to “a void or null,” dan translates to “step, class, grade or level” and sha translates to “person”). Yudansha is a phrase that refers to someone who possesses a rank (yu is an esoteric term that translates to “possessing or attaining something,” dan translates to “step, class, grade or level” and sha translates to “person”). Either someone has attained and possesses knowledge, skill, understanding and appreciation (yu) of judo or he does not (mu) and is still on the road to acquiring this level of ability and understanding.

**Kodokan “Dan-I” Rank System:** From this framework, Jigoro Kano developed his ranking system for Kodokan Judo. However, Professor Kano was heavily influenced by western educational systems and included the different “classes, steps or grades” as used in elementary and secondary education where students advance in grade as they mature and attain more knowledge (as used in elementary education where first grade advances to second grade, and so on). Within the framework of mudansha and yudansha, Kano initially devised three kyu ranks (another way of saying step, class, grade or level different from the word “dan”) and three dan ranks. Later, during a period of time between 1926 and 1931, the ranks were increased to five kyu ranks and five dan ranks. After Professor Kano’s death in 1938, the dan ranks were increased to ten with Professor Kano being awarded the 12<sup>th</sup> Dan. No one has ever been awarded a 12<sup>th</sup> Dan other than Professor Kano.

Initially, a light blue belt was issued to novices (who would then advance to a white belt) but this practice was changed to the use of a white belt for all novices around the late 1890s. For the ranks of 3<sup>rd</sup> kyu, 2<sup>nd</sup> kyu and 1<sup>st</sup> kyu, a student wore a brown belt (or a purple belt for youth). Upon earning the rank of shodan (initial grade or step), a student was entitled to wear the kuro obi (black belt). Ranks of 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> dan wear the black belt. When the dan grades were expanded, the ranks of 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> dan were entitled to wear the kohaku obi (red and white paneled belt) but could also wear the black belt if they wished, especially for everyday training. The ranks of 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> dan are entitled to wear the red belt (or black belt for everyday training).

There are different opinions about how the use of a black sash or belt was decided upon by Professor Kano to designate a yudansha. Some say a black sash was used to denote varsity swimmers, while others say the practice came from baseball. (Professor Kano was an avid baseball player in his college days, playing the position of pitcher). There are others who say that it is likely that Kano was influenced by Shinto and Zen where using the color white represents a

void or nothingness and the person who wears a white belt is open to learning. The black color symbolizes a fullness or possession of understanding and skill.

In 1907, Jigoro Kano introduced the modern judogi with the intention of standardizing the clothing worn during judo practice. The jacket was made of heavy-weave cotton and had sleeves that extended to the lower forearm as well as wider lapels that could be better used for gripping. The pants were extended to the lower leg and the belt was made of heavy-duty cotton that wrapped twice around the judoka's waist. It was at this time that the first kuro obi (black belt) came into use, no longer using a black sash tied about the waist of the judoka.

**Additional Belt Colors:** Some sources attribute the first use of colored belts to be about 1922 in Great Britain and is credited to Gunji Koizumi and the London Budokwai. This quickly became popular, providing additional external motivation for students to learn and advance in skill, and spread to the rest of Europe and eventually to the Americas.

**Non-Japanese Systems:** This system of mudansha and yudansha differs in concept and practice from the martial arts developed later in the twentieth century. This is true in Brazilian jiu-jitsu and other forms of martial arts that were developed outside of Japan but based on Japanese martial arts. While these westernized martial arts use the colored belt system with the black belt often as the designation of a skillful practitioner, the delineation between the concept of mudansha and yudansha is not used. This has led to confusion, as a black belt means something different to a person who does judo, kendo, aikido or Japanese karate than it does to an exponent of taekwondo, Brazilian jiu-jitsu or other martial arts developed outside of Japan.

**Earlier Japanese Rank Systems:** When Jigoro Kano formulated the “dan-i” system of ranks using “kyu” ranks and “dan” ranks in 1883, it departed from the “menkyo” or license system used in koryu (ancient or old school) martial disciplines in Japan since the eighth century. Additionally, in 1895, a system of titles called Shogo was developed. Here is a brief look at these ranking systems.

**Menkyo Ranking System:** “Menkyo” translated to license. This was a system of licensing instructors in the koryu (ancient) bugei (martial disciplines) in Japan. The menkyo system has been used in other Japanese cultural arts such as the tea ceremony, calligraphy and painting.

Basically, a menkyo is a diploma designating a license or certification. There are several levels of menkyo. The first is Okuiri, or entering into the secrets or knowledge of an art. The second is Mokuiri (meaning entering into the scroll), where the student advances and his name is entered onto the official membership scroll of the art. There are three different levels of mokuiri. As the student advances, he earns the Menkyo (license) of the art. The student graduates from shoden menkyo (initial license) to chuden menkyo (middle license) to gedan menkyo (upper license) and on to okuden menkyo (secret license). From this, a select few students receive the Menkyo Kaiden (the license denoting a full initiation into the art).

**Shogo Ranking System:** “Shogo” translates to “title” and is the system developed in 1895 for teachers by the Dai Nippon Butoku-kai (All Japan Martial Virtue Society). This organization was recognized by the Japanese government (until it was disbanded in 1946) as the administrative

group regulating the various martial disciplines (including Kodokan Judo). There are three primary ranks in the system with some sub-ranks that were designated by specific groups within the organization. These three ranks are: Renshi, Kyoshi and Hanshi. Renshi (translated to “polished person”) is the lowest of the ranks and assigned to what would be the equivalent to 6<sup>th</sup> Dan in the dan-i system with the minimum age of 40 years old. Kyoshi (translated to “professor person”) comes next and equivalent to 7<sup>th</sup> Dan and a minimum age of 50 years old. Hanshi (translated to “example person”) is the highest title issued and assigned to what would be the equivalent of 8<sup>th</sup> Dan with the minimum age of about 60 years old.

For a brief period (in the 1890s to early 1900s), the Kodokan recognized these titles along with the dan ranks that they issued. However, this practice was not supported by Professor Kano to any great extent and the practice of using these titles in Kodokan Judo stopped in the early part of the twentieth century.

**The Purposes of Belt Ranks Today:** Human beings are hierarchical in every aspect of life and the study and practice of judo is no different. Professor Kano was an educator and based his ranking system on sound educationally-based principles. Judo is first and foremost, a method of physical education. As such, an “education based” approach should be taken when advancing people in rank. “Education based” means that as a logical progression of knowledge, skill, ability and understanding increases, the person attaining these attributes advances and progresses in the hierarchy of judo. Jigoro Kano knew human nature quite well in that people are motivated by positive and external rewards for their efforts and compared the advancement of rank in Kodokan Judo to advancing academically in school.

**Four Purposes:** Belt rank in judo today serves four realistic and functional purposes. First, belt ranks provide a good external motivation for learning the many complex movements of judo. This is especially true for novices and junior students, but certainly is true for anyone of any age including adults. It’s only human nature to want to achieve a tangible reward after fulfilling a goal. In this instance, the use of belt rank can-and is-excellent for the advancement of students as well as the promulgation of the activity (judo). Using belt ranks in this way, the student advances in technical skill, appreciation of what judo is and maturity as a human being as he or she advances to a higher belt rank. Many judo instructors use the different belt rank requirements as lesson plans, providing a structured progression of learning.

Secondly, belt rank is used to designate the relevance and standing of the person who holds a particular rank. This hierarchical use of rank is common in all aspects of life. We go through different grades in school, the military uses different ranks and every sport uses some type of ranking; you get the idea. Every species has a hierarchy and we humans are no different. The higher the rank a person has, the higher the standing he or she has in the particular activity that the rank is awarded in.

Keeping in line with one’s standing in a particular activity based on rank, a third purpose of belt rank is for the control of the people in the activity. The people who have attained high rank (and with it a higher standing in the community or organization) are most often the people who are in charge of determining who else gains belt rank. This makes sense, generally, as these

people have the responsibility to arbitrate and determine who will succeed them in the hierarchy of the organization. The entity (organization or the people assigned the task) that controls rank most often controls the activity and the fact remains that this has certainly been the case for judo as well as the other martial arts. Unfortunately, belt rank has not always been determined or awarded based on technical skill, the promulgation of judo or other merit-based factors. In more than a few cases, people have been, and continue to be, either rewarded for their adherence and loyalty to a particular group or organization or penalized for their lack of it. In this instance, belt rank is a tool, and in some cases, a hammer to nail down any discontent or behavior that the organization finds objectionable. Any objective or honest observer will admit that this has taken place; both in judo as well as in the other martial arts. It's human nature.

A fourth purpose of belt rank is revenue for the organization awarding the belt rank. The promotion fees garnered by the organization that issues the rank is used to finance the activities of the organization.

**Educational Equivalent:** Earning a shodan in judo is very much like earning a Bachelor's degree from a university. A student has learned and gained the ability to apply the basic skills and is now ready for advancing to a higher level of learning and ability. In our modern university system, the next step is the Master's degree and in a judo sense, the ranks up to and including yondan might best correspond to this. Once a person achieves godan, he or she could be compared to having earned a Doctorate degree. This doesn't imply that every godan should be called "professor" but it does provide an analogy between how people are graded or ranked in judo and how people advance in our educational system.

**What Shodan Represents:** The rank of shodan is the "initial or first grade" in the same way a person takes the first step when climbing stairs. In too many cases in our western culture, people tend to view a promotion to shodan as the end of their studies rather than the beginning of more advanced and deeper study of judo. We all know people who worked hard for many years in judo only to stop their involvement in judo once they were promoted to black belt. They've "graduated" in their way of thinking and don't view the shodan as the initial step it should be in furthering their study and development in judo. Achieving yudansha status a person is a "judoka" in the original sense or meaning of the word, where a judoka is a *skilled* exponent of judo and not merely an enthusiast or practitioner of judo.

**Rank Recognition:** What is a "legitimate" belt rank? Who really decides this? Until there is a government mandate on who issues "official" ranks in judo in the United States (or in individual states) in the same way licenses are granted for teachers, therapists, doctors and other professional vocations, the free market establishes the validity of belt ranks. A person's knowledge, ability and understanding of judo is more important than the person's rank. A belt of a particular color doesn't give the person wearing it magical powers. It's up to the person wearing a belt rank to be good enough to possess that rank and if he does that, that is what is ultimately important. Belt rank is much like money. It's a currency that indicates what the bearer is worth and as such, rank can be inflated and lose its real value. Currency also depends on the reliability and trustworthiness of the agency, government or organization who issues it.

