

Grading System and History

Introduction:

There are many variations of the kyu/dan grading system in operation. Some use 10 kyu grades and some only 3 with many having a variation between these numbers. In some clubs, like ours, we use a merit system to allow sub levels of kyu grade so that more frequent feedback on progress can be given.

However, the origins of the grading system, although not perfectly clear, do have a long history and things have certainly changed with the introduction of karate to the sporting fraternity.

Older Systems:

The older martial arts grading system from the 18 Classical Arts was called Menkyo Kaiden and used 4 levels of skill measurement as follows;

1. Shoden - initial level
2. Chuden - middle level
3. Okuden - Inner level
4. Menkio Kaiden - Qualified Instructor

The Kyu/Dan grading system seems to have been used in many oriental arts and the earliest reference I have currently located is from the Go (board game) master Dosaku (1645 - 1702) who introduced it as a means of handicapping the game.

Kyu and Dan Grades:

Initially there was only a white belt for Mudansha and a black belt for Yudansha.

The black was thought to have originated from the ribbon worn by the experienced swimmers in tournaments.

Jigoro Kano (Judo founder) used 6 kyu grades and 10 dan grades. However, many karate groups only introduced 5 dan grades and used titles such as Renshi and Kyoshi to represent further development.

Dan Grades and Interpretation:

There is general consensus on the view that the first 5 dan grades represent developing skill and some associations

perform physical tests up to this level, other stop at 3rd Dan or 4th Dan. This indicates that a yudansha holding a grade of below 5th Dan is still developing his skills and should still be training, not necessarily in a standard weekly lesson but more likely in special seminars to develop those skill areas where he feels development is needed.

Dan grades 6 to 10 are usually long service awards and issued to Yudansha as their involvement in the martial arts continues into the later years. Most organizations of repute have an age limit and active Yudansha time frame for these grades but they do not necessarily mean an increase in knowledge and certainly not personal skill. One must judge the karateka on their personal abilities in the whole area.

Belt Colours:

Most UK organizations use Black belts for all dan grades but Jigoro Kano implemented the Red/White segmented belt for 6 to 8 dan and a red belt for 9 to 10 dan. He wore a double width white belt and ranked himself 12th Dan.

Some karate organizations use the red/white belt but others, such as Kanazawa Shihan, still prefers to wear a black belt at 10 dan..