

Why Belts Do Not Exist in Jeet Kune Do

by Chris Kent

I was contacted the other day by an individual who asked me about whether or not “belts” exist in JKD because he had recently seen a school advertising that they taught JKD, but he noticed that the participants wore belts. The following is my perspective on this issue. I’d like to state at the very outset that I have no desire to criticize, belittle or denigrate anyone who is pursuing or has earned any form of belt-ranking. This is simply about the relationship of belts as they relate to Jeet Kune Do.

It might help out if we start with a little about the development of the belt-ranking systems. In China, within the martial art school, family titles such as “older brother” and “younger sister” were used instead of rankings. If someone had been training longer than you, they were simply your older brother or sister. If they started training after you, they were your younger brother or sister. In the Japanese martial arts, there is no firm historical proof as to where the idea of “black belt” came from. One of the most accepted theories is that it came from the idea that the only part of the training uniform that was never washed was the belt. So an individual started with a white belt, and as they trained for years and years the belt became dirtier and dirtier until it eventually, after many years, it looked black. Again, there is no firm documentation regarding this. The colored-belt ranking system as we know it today came about when Dr. Jigaro Kano, the founder of Judo, wanted the art to be taught in public schools in Japan. In order to do so he was required to create some form of tiered ranking system because the school’s required standardization.

The fact is the term “black belt” has become very nebulous nowadays. Basically all it means is that a person has fulfilled the necessary requirements established by a particular school or system that are needed to receive it. Various schools may have huge differences in what it takes to earn a black belt. Some require many years of hard work and diligent training, while others offer drive-thru service in which a person is guaranteed to become a black belt in two years.

Let’s move on to Jeet Kune Do. Originally Lee did establish what he referred to as a ranking system of “no ranking” for Jeet Kune Do. The first rank was an empty circle which signified original freedom (it was also known as “unranked without sophistication”). This was followed by his school’s emblem in 6 different colours, finishing in red and gold. The eighth level, the highest, was again an empty circle, which symbolized the return to the original freedom (also referred to as “unranked with sophistication”). Later, as he moved along his martial evolution path he discarded it because he felt that belts were non-essential to martial art training, and that they should not be the goal of why a person studies JKD, or any martial art.

Lee believed that the motivation for meaningful improvement lies within the will of each individual as opposed to chasing after external accessories such as colored belts. In many cases, the “chasing after” the next belt or stripe often becomes more important to the student than the self-knowledge and personal growth they acquire through training. (Supposedly this ranking system was going to be re-established by Taky Kimura and Dan Inosanto, however it never came about).

Many parents who want to enroll their child in martial art will say, “My child needs a belt.” My response to them is, “Who says they do and why do they say it?” Some people will say such things as, “Students won’t know what their level of achievement is without a belt. They won’t know how far they’ve come.” My reply is, “How far they’ve come in relation to what?” I tell them, “Look at your child. When they first started training they didn’t know their right foot from their left. They were awkward, they couldn’t move. Now they can move; they’ve developed grace and mobility; they can throw kicks from all angles, as well as hit with speed and power. That is not something they need to wear a belt around their waist in order to know. It’s something they carry with them 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, because they “own it. Nobody can take it away from them.”

Others say that without a belt system students will not know how far they have to go. Again, my question to them is, “How far in relation to what or where?” Jeet Kune Do training, as I have said before, is a process, not a product. There is no end-point. And as a teacher, one of my primary goals is to get students to literally “fall in love” with the process. In that way, even when they leave my school, they will have developed the attitude and skills that carry with them for the rest of their life.

Name one other athletic endeavor in which such forms of ranking are given. There are differing levels of expertise and sophistication in any sport. Does an individual receive different colored caps in baseball? What about different colored shorts in Soccer? Why then are they necessary in martial arts?

Teaching a training process without a belt system shocks many people because they tend to judge or label a person by the belt they wear. “Oh, he’s only a green belt, so he only knows this or that.” And, “If a person doesn’t have a belt then they cannot be any good.” These people have been entrained to think in such a way by the martial art industry, media, etc. I always like to remind such people that Bruce Lee never possessed a belt or sash. So therefore, does that mean that he wasn’t any good or didn’t know anything?

The bottom line is that belts are tradition-based and have nothing to do with reality. When it comes to martial art, you can either apply the technique in a combative situation if necessary, or you can’t. It doesn’t matter how many belts

you have, if you are not comfortable with it, and your ability to execute it when necessary, that you can do it reflexively, you can have as many belts that say the contrary, it doesn't mean it's true.

There may be individuals or groups who have decided to bringing belt-rankings into their teaching of JKD. I personally disagree with such actions. For myself, I prefer remain true to Bruce Lee's principle of not awarding colored belts or sashes as an indicator of progress in his method of martial art philosophy.

People brought out the point about various phases that some schools have in JKD and could they not be conceived of as a belt. I suppose that given the schools offering a multitude of phases or levels, they could be. So here is a little history about the origins of the Phase Program.

When Dan Inosanto opened the Filipino Kali Academy in 1974, his approach was to use the same kind of structure as a college or university. He explained that in the same way that a college has Freshmen, Sophomore, Junior, and Senior, at the Kali Academy we would use 4 training levels, which he decided to call Phases 1-4. As in university, each succeeding phase would build upon the previous in terms of knowledge, etc. If a person successfully completed all four training phases, they could then be voted into the "JKD class", which at the time was a closed-door class. At the time, there were no awards, no certificates, nothing which indicated who was a phase one student and who was a phase three student. The individual's training attitude, skill would represent that. There was no guaranteed time of how long it would take for an individual to move from one level to another. There was no formality. Dan or Richard would simply walk to a student and inform them something like, "Starting tomorrow you're in phase four" and shake their hand. And that was it. As time went by, different instructors developed their own phase systems. Some stayed with four levels, others expanded, some to ten or more levels. In such cases one can see how a phase training system could be considered the equivalent of a belt ranking. The one thing that I must point out with regard to the Filipino Kali Academy though is this. At the time, the majority of the people who trained there trained purely for the enjoyment and skill development. With the exception of a possible few, no one gave a damn about certificates, levels, etc. Would that we could maintain such an attitude in these times, eh?

