

Many of my students are often confused on how to earn the black belt rank and what it truly signifies. There are many ways to earn a black belt and it all depends on the type of dojo you belong to but the end result should be that you TRULY EARNED IT. If training comes easy then you never will appreciate what you have gone through to earn it. This article defines what it takes and what is symbolic of becoming and being a black belt in the Aiki Te Ryu Karate Kai system.

Let me begin by stating that earning a black belt is only the beginning of the real training for a martial art student. It is also a pathway not just something a person participates in and eventually gets. The reason we call it a pathway is because true martial arts training will open up doors to your physical, mental and spiritual abilities that you would have not ever gone through before or may have never experienced. It must be traveled and just like taking a journey you will encounter roadblocks, structures and other items you must overcome to achieve. It does not come easy and it is definable based on the individual not the group. In other words one person may be able to do a 360 degree jump kick while others will never develop that ability. They are not judged on their physical merits alone but rather on their development within the system as martial artists and a member of the Ryu, or system.

The journey along this pathway to black belt is filled with growth and accomplishments. You will develop your body to be in good physical condition. Your mind will become sharper and more focused as you move up in rank. The spirit, which is that little piece inside us all that kicks in when it we need most will become your best ally. It is a path wrought with dangers but all these dangers are easily overcome once you develop the mindset required to become a black belt. I have always told my students that martial arts are a way of life. They are not something you pick up and put down when you want to. To truly be a black belt you have to follow and learn about these defining principles.

Discipline is one of the most important to beginning students. You begin studying and find yourself making all kinds of mistakes. You get discouraged and will feel like quitting because you feel like you just are not getting it. All the while you are learning how to discipline your mind. Let's face it our mind is the only real thing that ever will truly hold us back from accomplishing anything. It tells us when our bodies are tired and can not go on. The mind defines what we set as our priorities in life and how we perceive things we are in contact with. It is the biggest drawback on the pathway to black belt, more than anything else. The reason I say this is because we never use more than 3% of our brain in our lifetime and many times we allow that 3% to hold us back from realizing what one can truly accomplish. Your first few months of training is on developing the discipline required to truly begin learning the martial arts. Sure you will get sore muscles. Yes it will be hard and confusing but do you honestly think that the black belts up there teaching you did not stand in your shoes? Of course they did and they learned how to beat the defeatist attitude of the mind and how to discipline the mind to do what they want it to which will lead the body.

The body must be conditioned in several manners. We do exercises to increase our strength and power in our strikes. We learn how to truly use our balance, or center. Our legs get sore from doing stretches and our stomachs will yearn for a rest period after a few crunches but your sensei will push you and push you. Why is this so important? If we are learning to develop our mind into a balanced state which we control and our body fails the mind because it is not properly conditioned then you begin the battle without cause and are doomed to failure. The body must be in good physical shape. Sure you are going to complain because you are using muscles that you have never used before. They will ache and hurt but eventually the pain goes away and in its place is the true training of Aiki Te Ryu...and guess what...you get to keep the bonus...your are in great physical shape. Another reason is that the underlying purpose to train is to learn self defense. If you do not develop the body into a weapon you can not win a battle. It must be strong physically. You must have the stamina to last in a real fight. Many of the fights I have witnessed in my lifetime were won by the person who was in better shape because they maintained their strength throughout the conflict while their opponent became weaker. A strong body will allow you to push your spirit to new heights.

Indomitable spirit is much more than development of the needed ability to kick it into high gear when you think you are through. It means to develop your inner strength as well. Deep inside each one of us

is a special tool that will enable you to be faster, stronger and give you great strength. In the martial arts we call this the Hara, or Spirit. It is defined by sciences as an aura that everyone has, or an electro-magnetic pulse system eliminating from the center of our body outward to our external limbs. Through scientific study it has been shown that martial artists with proper training can project this into their movements increasing their strength and ability ten times over their set standard. It also requires discipline to manage this power as it can be used for bad purposes as well as destroy your health if not trained in properly. The ultimate goal is for you to balance your mind, body and spirit before you test for your black belt since they must be on the same page in order to pass this test. Any separation of any of them will result in a failure that could cost you and if you are ever in a real life situation where you must defend they have to be available immediately for you to survive. To accomplish the balancing you must be dedicated.

Being dedicated to your system, Sensei and Ryu are extremely important. A good student will want to see the dojo and Ryu become successful. They will want to participate in all the activities for their dojo to help it grow. If they recognize that something needs done to make the school more successful they take the initiative and plan it out and put it in motion to help their dojo. This helps to protect the Ryu or system. The Ryu is more of a family. Through your years of training you are not going at it alone. You will develop with the person right next to you and each of you will struggle emotionally, physically and spiritually. During this time you develop a bond with your fellow students who remain in training as long as you do. By the time you are ready to test for your black belt, all the students testing with you will have developed a closeness that is unbreakable. The good martial arts student will do nothing to dishonor their Ryu and will be very respectful to their sensei and other black belts at all times, even when they do not agree with them because they understand they are there to learn and the sensei is there to teach. There is a reason for everything the sensei has you do and you may not like it but to truly learn you have to take the good with the bad and just do it. The lesson you miss because of your personal feelings may just be the lesson you needed to be successful in both martial arts as in life so which is more important? All this requires you to be very sincere in your training and have an open mind.

It is easy for a student to show sincerity in their training but it is an entirely different requirement to become sincere. A good student will be sincere and understand their responsibilities with training. They will be at class regularly and train with vigor and intensity at all times, regardless of how their day went. They are training to become the best they can be and will never display inappropriate behavior or willingly violate the traditions or etiquette defined for the Dojo or Ryu. This good student is not training to just become a black belt but rather to earn their belt and begin the true training the martial arts provides. They are a BENEFIT to the dojo and not a problem. If their sensei asks them to participate in something or help out with something for the dojo, they JUMP ALL OVER IT and give it their very best at all times...many times at a personal sacrifice.

Sacrificing is part of the learning process. We all sacrifice for things we truly want to do. For example if you want good grades you give up TV and sometimes make your friends upset because you know you need to study. You do all this because you will get the rewards. Sometimes our parents or grandparents pay us for each A or B. If you are knowingly seeking a reward you are not truly sacrificing but rather trying to get something done so you can get what you want. A true sacrifice comes when you have to make changes to help others, in this case your Ryu or Sensei without any acknowledgement for your efforts. When you think it is unreasonable for you to hit your goal on that fundraiser, or you think Sensei is being demanding because he made something mandatory for you to attend...just remember this...it is all a test of your sincerity. You must remember that your Sensei is capable of the things he does because he was sincere and he teaches without any need for recognition, fame or fortune. A Sensei will test your character as well as your physical skill at all times and this will last as long as you are training under a good Sensei. If you fail the test of sincerity you will soon find those that didn't passing you in rank because all these things are part of the learning process, not just how well you can run a Kata or spar. If you can truly learn to sacrifice then you are developing the mind set to be a member of the Aiki Te Ryu Karate Kai system as a black belt.

The mindset required to be a black belt is not self serving. You must rid yourself of all your ego seeking mannerisms. In the Aiki Te Ryu system our black belts only wear their rank on their belts during ceremony. All the rest of the time we all wear the same solid black belt with our Kanji on it. This is to remind us all that we are equally responsible for the success and failures of our Ryu. Just because I am in charge of the Ryu does not mean I am responsible for the success of the Ryu. My black belts play the largest part in my life when it comes to the direction of the Ryu. The reason I trust them is because they have proven themselves to me time and time again and truly gained my respect.

Respect must be earned by all students and maintained by all black belts. In order to earn your black belt you must have the respect of your seniors and most of all your head instructor and the head of the Ryu. The problem is that most of us do not understand how the respect ladder truly works and expect to be respected because we respect ourselves. Respect in the martial arts filters from the high ranking instructors and down. No one is to be more respected than the head of the family and failure to respect that person at anytime can be very dangerous. It is not dangerous because they will beat you in to a pulp, but rather because if you are on their bad side you can miss out on a world of training that others will get...all because you were not respectful. In the martial arts your senior students, signified by belt ranking, or to be treated with the utmost respect because they have been where you stand now and beat it to earn their next belt. If you disrespect any student who out ranks you, expect to be given a severe punishment. If you disrespect a black belt you will be punished severely because they have definitely earned the right to be bowed to and have been through more than you could ever imagine. For you to earn respect is very easy. All you have to do is follow all the above definitions to best of your ability, master your belt requirements, give us 100% effort in anything you do and you will earn our respect. **YOU MUST EARN THE RESPECT OF YOUR INSTRUCTORS BEFORE BEING ALLOWED TO EVER TEST FOR YOUR BLACK BELT.** Once you have earned the respect of your senior students and the black belts you then must do everything you can to never tarnish or destroy that respect because in the martial arts world once it is gone you will have to work 10 times harder to earn it back.

These are all requirements you must learn and perform to earn your black belt. Along this pathway you will begin to see developments in your daily life that are making it easier and helping you to live more successfully. These are all in addition to mastering the basic techniques, kata, self defense and abilities required to pass the physical part of the test. Whenever you feel it is to much or has become too hard just remember that I was there. I stood where you did and I just trained and kept giving it my all without ever thinking of a reward, or belt color. Just train and eventually you will DEVELOP into a black belt.

### **Defining the black belt and the symbolization with in the Aiki Te Ryu Karate Kai system.**

The black belt ranking structure in Aiki Te Ryu closely follows the manner set by the Okinawa systems when they adapted the belt method from Judo founder Jigoro Kano. It is a progressive structure but we primarily use the belts to signify where you stand in the class among your peers. Once you pass your first black belt test there is a Dan, or step ranking chart that is followed closely. Here we will examine what the Dan rank means as well as some standard requirements to earn them. Keep in mind that above 4th Dan in the Aiki Te Ryu Karate Kai system your ability to promote is based on you as a member of our Ryu.

Shodan Ni Dai - Junior Black Belt Dan ranks are awarded in the Aiki Te Ryu Karate Kai system to all students under the age of 16 who have demonstrated great maturity and dedication to their training and the Ryu. One the junior reaches the age of 16 they are tested for their Nidan rank at that time and are transferred to the adult ranking structure at the Nidan rank.

Shodan - 1st Dan Black Belt is the first level of being a black belt. Here we are recognizing your abilities to perform the basic techniques of our system with perfection. This means you have an in depth understanding of how to demonstrate all the stances, strikes, kicks, kata and etc with great skill. Shodansha are the beginners of the Dan system. It is much like becoming a white belt all over again because now the true training of what martial arts has to offer you will begin. At this rank the student is expected to be very dedicated to the Ryu and Sensei. They are to assist in running the day to day of

the Dojo as well as helping other students to learn the basic they have perfected. If something is made mandatory or an event is being planned for the Ryu they are the first to sign up and help to motivate others to follow in their lead. Being a Shodan is very tough because you have many things expected of you but none more important than for you to train harder than ever before on learning the application of these basics you have perfected.

Nidan - 2nd Dan Black Belt is a great rank because this marks that you have truly mastered the basic principles of a system and are now ready to learn its inner most workings. To earn your Nidan you must perform Tora Nidan, an more intricate version of Tora Ichi and also demonstrate the Bunkai (application) of the Kata. You will be required to perform all the basics at increased levels and have logged at least 100 assistant hours helping the Sensei with the dojo and teaching students. Nidansha are very dedicated to the system, yet this is the level where your pathway as a black belt is truly defined. Either you will make it to Sandan or you will remain here for many years. A Nidan can assist in teaching but can not own their own dojo as they are not qualified to do so. You will be given a student that you must help develop into a Shodan in order to move up in rank. Length of time on average is 12 months from promotion to Shodan.

Sandan - 3rd Dan Black Belt is one of the most significant ranks one can attain. You will not be given respect from others outside the system and should have proven your worth as martial artist at this point in your training. Being a Sandan is great because you start learning the Okuden methods and begin to taste what it means to master the Aiki Te Ryu Karate Kai system. You will be required to perform Chil Nage Kata and demonstrate very advanced self defense applications which you have learned as a Nidan. This belt leads into one of two pathways in your training. You will either progress to the first level of Master in the Ryu or you will remain at this rank for many years. It all depends on you. If you are running classes for your Sensei you will be given the title of Sensei-Dai or lead instructor for the dojo you teach at. If you are just assisting with classes but are more into training you will not receive any titles at all. To receive the instructor title of Sensei-Dai you must have trained and promoted one black belt under your supervision. Length of time on average is two years from the promotion to Nidan but will vary with the dedication of the student.

Yondan - 4th Dan Black Belt has two different titles and pathways. This is the last belt rank that can be earned by a student if they are not in the process of becoming an instructor of the Aiki Te Ryu Karate Kai system. If you are training and helping out the dojo but have decided that teaching is not your bag you will simply be known as a Yondan but will be called Sensei. At this rank you should understand and be helpful in teaching your juniors but are not required to run classes or a satellite dojo. If you decide that you want to run a dojo for the Ryu you will go through an extensive instructor training program between Sandan and Yondan to earn your first Master belt called Renshi or senior instructor. A Renshi is a student who is recognized as an expert in our discipline and teaches others. In order to qualify for a Renshi title you will have to have trained two students to Shodan and one student to Nidan. Yondan with a Renshi title is the first master level belt in our system. Length of time on average is three years from the promotion to Sandan but does vary based on the individual student and their efforts.

Godan - 5th Dan Black Belt is only achievable if you are teaching directly underneath Master Franz. It is also a the rank where the official title of Renshi is conferred onto the student and they are truly recognized as a master of Aiki Te Ryu Karate system. This is a very challenging belt since it requires extreme dedication to your Ryu and dojo in order attain this license. At Godan a student is allowed to seek out their own students to train in Aiki Te Ryu with the understanding that all black belt level testing are held at the Honbu Dojo under Master Franz. The student is given special training and will be recognized as a member of the Okuden council in which they will have complete voting ability in all matters as pertaining to the betterment of the Ryu. Length of time on average is four years from the promotion to Yondan and has strict grading requirements based on teaching ability and accomplishments.

Rokudan - 6th Dan Black Belt is the beginning of the Kyoshi phase. The student will need to prove their dedication, sincerity and abilities in order to achieve the next level of master licensing entitled Kyoshi.

All Rokudan are still called Renshi until they have achieved the recognition to earn the title of Kyoshi. Rokudan are directly under Master Franz and train solely with him in set training sessions to be given the transmission of knowledge that comes with the Kyoshi title. This is an exciting time in your training because you learn the history, philosophy and details of all the systems used to make Aiki Te Ryu Karate Kai. Length of time on average is five years from the promotion to Godan and has strict grading requirements based on teaching ability and accomplishments of the students under the Renshi.

Shichidan - 7th Dan Black Belt marks a student's transgression into the final phase of their training. This belt is earned solely at the discretion of the Master Franz and is based upon many martial philosophies. At this rank the student will have the title of Kyoshi conferred onto them through a special ceremony and it will place them directly under Master Franz as an inheritor of the Aiki Te Ryu Karate Kai system. A Kyoshi is the most important role a student will play under a Hanshi or Soke. They are responsible not only for the protection and perseverance of the original Ryu trainings but also with assisting in its progression and development from their own training and knowledge. The Kyoshi student trains only under Master Franz and everyone else answers to them in the lineage from White belt all the way up to Renshi. A Kyoshi will reside over the Okuden council and be given special privileges in terms of voting authority and control under the direction of Master Franz. There is no set standard for length of time since this is an inherited title and can only be awarded from Master Franz.

Hachidan - 8th Dan Black Belt is the only rank given the title of Hanshi in our system. A Hanshi is considered the head of the family directly acting underneath the master of the system. There can only be two Hanshi in our system at any given time. The requirements for this rank are only given to the student who is being considered for this rank. The minimum age requirement for this belt rank is set at 37 years old since that is when Master Franz earned his Hanshi license.

A note on 9th and 10th Dan black belts. It seems there are these belt ranks popping up all over the place with someone who claimed they made their own system after only 10 or so years of training. The truth behind these ranks is that the 9th Dan is reserved only for a retired head of family who has stepped down from teaching and has a Hanshi directly underneath them in rank that is promoting the art. A 10th Dan rank is reserved for the elderly who are incapable of performance or may be on their way to meet the maker. It typically is only given out to those who have accomplished so much in the world of martial arts that others could only dream of and few others have attained. The Aiki Te Ryu Karate Kai does not issue 9th or 10th degree black belts and reserve those for people who have either passed or are considered our formidable elders in both knowledge and respect in the system.