

The Academic Analogy

As much as the traditional Asian martial arts have a military heritage, they have an artistic and educational heritage as well. In a general (no military rank implied) sense, martial artists go through levels of school just like students in academia. In order to understand the depth of instruction that the traditional martial arts can offer (assuming a qualified school and instructor), it may be helpful to non-martial artists to consider the parallels between academic levels and typical martial arts promotions.

In the analogies listed below, I use a Japanese grading system with which I am most familiar, but regardless of specific art, the analogies, I believe, will hold true in a generic way.

PRE-SCHOOL: A fledgling martial artist is like a pre-school child just arriving in Nursery School or Kindergarten.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL: A beginner martial artists having received his/her first pre-black belt rank (*kyu* rank) is like a first grader. Through the early *kyu* ranks (white belts) the student is in elementary school.

MIDDLE SCHOOL or JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL: When the student achieves an intermediate rank (green belt in my experience), he/she has entered middle school.

HIGH SCHOOL: Upper *kyu* ranks (brown belts) parallel high school grades. (An indirect implication here is that kids would take 12 years to earn a “black belt” if they started at 6 years old. Many modern martial arts schools tend to award black belts after 2 or 3 years when kids are 9 or 10 years old. In this analogy, that would mean that a fifth grader would receive a high school diploma. When you consider the national test scores, this exact thing happens too often in academia and is unfortunately likely to be reflected in modern martial arts grading.)

UNDERGRADUATE COLLEGE: A new black belt is like a freshman in college. What? I thought a black belt was some sort of expert! Well, compared to an elementary school student, a high school graduate is pretty awesome, but compared to a Ph.D., a high school graduate is just a beginner.

A first-degree black belt has been accepted in to college as a freshman.

A second-degree is like a sophomore.

A third-degree is like a junior.

A fourth is like a senior or perhaps like a college graduate with a BA or BS, ready to teach beginners but probably in need of some further education to be fully qualified.

GRADUATE SCHOOL: A fifth-degree black belt has attained the equivalent of a Master’s Degree and may apply to be a teacher at the high school or college level. Remember that for traditional martial artists, fifth degree is the top of the lower black belt ranks. The *kodansha* (upper black belt ranks) are sometimes earned, sometimes awarded, but always imply skill, age and experience.

Post-fifth-degree black belts are comparatively rare in traditional martial artistry and equate with a Doctorate Degree (Ph.D.) and post-doctorate levels. How many PhDs do you know (if you don't live near a college or work in an Academic field)? May be one or two? How many multiple PhDs or people with post-doctoral degrees do you know? How old are they? How long were they in school? The number of sixth, seventh and eighth degree black belts, in this writer's opinion, should be just as rare and should have at least as many years experience.

Next time, we use an analogy to artisanship to describe the traditional martial artist's progress.