

Having A Black Belt

I honestly have no intention to insult or demean anyone, but I want to state what I believe to be a fact and then perhaps smooth the edges a little so it fits more comfortably within our modern, relatively peaceful, reality.

There is no doubt that people earn their black belts. Oh, you can argue that Sensei Schmendrick has lower standards than Sensei Hochstände, but few students of budo wear a black belt that have not gone through some sort of requirement process. Having a black belt does not mean one can defend oneself anymore than it means one has posted a winning tournament record. It simply means that one has graduated to a rank by fulfilling certain requirements. Just as you have met college graduates that seem no brighter than those you knew in high school, so too have you met black belt holders who might not stand up to a solid lunge punch and seem no more skilled than the brown or green belts you have known.

There is never going to be one standard for earning a black belt any more than there can be one standard for earning a BA, MA, or PhD. There are too many styles, too many skills, and too many other factors to consider (age, flexibility, speed, size, etc.) All we can assume is that a black belt in system X knows more and is more skilled than the average kyu-rank in that same system.

The uninitiated public used to see black belt as the mark of a death-dealing recluse-jock who would rather meditate than mix it up, but who could, if the right switch were turned, put you in an ambulance and vault the fence before the tires squealed. Since the advent of mixed martial arts competitions, and the simultaneous profligation of kiddy karate, the perception of a black belt has been reduced to the mark of a self-deceiving effete with bragging rights. But I am less concerned with the public's view than I am with a black belts' perception of him/herself.

There is no telling to what extent I may be correct, of course, but it seems to me that a large number of those who have earned a black belt, having attended the classes, mastered the requirements, and perspired through the examination, feel that they are modern day samurai and that if Freddie Kruger ever shows up, well, he'd just better board that ambulance on his own before he is carted into it.

Let's bring our idea of "samurai warrior" into the modern age and make some simple comparisons. Today's military warrior is a young, trained, and mentally conditioned killer. He/she may not know classical hand-to-hand combat as well as your local green belt karate-ka, but you would not want to engage him on the battlefield. He is tougher than most, even though his training was shorter, and society frees him to kill where it restrains the average black belt from even striking out. Now age that soldier a decade or so and put him in a police uniform. He is not as fast or as tough and has many more restrictions place upon him, but you still wouldn't mess with him. His effectiveness, appropriately, comes as much from his authority as from his physical prowess. Now let's walk into the mall and see a

mall guard, weaponless and out of shape, whose power resides completely in his assigned authority and our willingness to cooperate so that we can maintain a civilized respect for order. A tough high school student, without any martial arts rank, could knock him on his backside and jump into J. Crew before he could thumb the button to his emergency mic.

Now let's go back and face the sixteenth century Japanese samurai, a foot shorter than you and without armor. If you think that having a black belt means you could take him down and toddle into the tearoom before he could adjust his obi, it only shows that the mental training of a modern black belt is, in fact, less than potentially lethal, less than command presence, less than ethical authority, and more self-deception than most of us care to admit.

If we could see ourselves, having earned a black belt, as simply better than we used to be, we would have gone a long way to reducing embarrassing comparisons with warriors or anyone who has to put his backside on the line and take the chance that an ambulance is in the offing.