

Ranks Are Goals, But Goals Are Not Ranks

Having been a martial arts instructor for over four decades, I appreciate the value of the traditional ranking system. I like the fact that I can look at a class and be reminded by the color of the belts approximately what they have learned and therefore what I need to introduce next.

Whether the ranks are represented by simple stripes on a belt, different colored belts, a change of uniforms or more involved symbols, ranks also serve as incentives to move forward, rewards for having achieved and, perhaps most importantly, goals. Whether or not Jigoro Kano (the founder of Judo) realized it when he invented the modern ranking system in the late 1800s, ranks have made goal-setting part of the martial arts well before inspirational speakers and self-help programs got a hold of them. Ranks, after all, were a natural development in hierarchical societies like Japan and other Asian cultures. The West, conversely, aspires to egalitarianism while pulling oneself up with one's own bootstraps. The West wanted the best of both worlds while the East, ironically, wanted a hierarchical structure that accepted limited social mobility.

As the traditional martial arts "Westernized," they also flattened out the hierarchy. More people get to be higher ranked practitioners, but fewer represent top-level abilities or achievements. Today Japan, like many Asian countries, is very "Western" in many ways, despite lasting Eastern traditions. I have spoken with several Japanese and fellow martial artists who agree that even in the homeland of *budô*, the quality and skill represented by high ranks is often lacking. I think this is at least partially because students and their instructors think of ranks as goals and goals as ranks.

To clarify this, let me say that with certainty ranks can and should be used as goals, but that they are only sorts of mini-goals, short-term signposts in a system that holds certain other accomplishments in greater esteem than ranks. Ranks, which supposedly mark how high one has climbed up the mountain of mastery, cannot measure how much health one has gained, nor can they measure the self-respect one has gained, or the confidence, or the ability to deal with others cooperatively but assertively. Ranks cannot measure the improvement one has made over one's starting point. For example, having improved 1000%, you might be just an average black belt, while the really impressive, athletic black belt you trained next to has improved less than 10%. Ranks cannot measure the joy that self-development brings, your inner strength, your resiliency, your fortitude, your courage, or your spirit.

Goals are not mere ranks, belts, certificates or awards; they are personal prizes that only an individual can achieve. Often there is no awards-ceremony, no celebratory dinner, no trophy, plaque, or belt. Often the goal is never fully achieved, so it cannot fully be acknowledged, *but it is approached*. And, as it is approached, it rewards the individual in process, subtly, quietly, and privately.

A friend of mine, John, was discussing the various martial arts with an interested teenager. When the teenager discovered that John had been studying a martial art that did not have ranks, he was shocked and burst

out, “Then why do you study it?” If you study a martial art for the achievement of a rank, ranks become your goals, but if you study a martial art as a tool to make you a better person, then your goals are far beyond ranks.