

# Understanding Karate's Myriad of Grades, Belts and Titles



A special report for the Society of  
Martial Arts (SOMA)

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by

Gary Simpson

## INTRODUCTION:

Understanding the various karate grades, belts and titles can be a confusing issue for novices and even some experienced *karateka* (karate practitioners).

Compounding the confusion is the fact that no two karate styles have quite the exact same systems of rank and virtually no club or style recognizes the rank of another club or style unless, of course, those clubs or styles are affiliated or have an understanding of each other by virtue of being members of a governing body like an Association.

In reality there can be vast differences and requirements to fulfill with respect to grades, belts and titles. The same can be said for other martial arts such as Korean Taekwondo and Chinese Kung Fu.



## TWENTY LEVELS OF RANK:

Before proceeding too far it is generally accepted that there are twenty levels of belt ranks within most Japanese martial arts. They start at the lowest, white belt

(novice) or 10<sup>th</sup> kyu, and progress through ten levels to the first level of black belt, 1<sup>st</sup> Dan. Then they progress through another ten levels to the highest level, 10<sup>th</sup> Dan.

Depending on the specific requirements of each club, every level requires certain conditions to be fulfilled. These consist of physical examinations, level of training, experience, age, time between ranks, seniority and the like.

To get a grasp of it all we need to look back through history to find a common starting point and progress from there. But before doing so, let me pose a question. How was the very first 10<sup>th</sup> Dan achieved? This is a bit like the proverbial chicken and egg conundrum. But more on this later...

### **THE PRACTICE OF AWARDING GRADES AND BELTS:**

The practice of awarding grades and belts is a fairly recent innovation. In fact, it is only around eighty to ninety years old. The traditional warriors of Japan, the samurai, had no need for it.

Put simply, if you were a lesser warrior you were killed or maimed in battle. Therefore those who survived to more senior years were generally more highly venerated because they were still alive. Their skills had served them well.

When *Senseis* (teachers) opened their doors to non-samurai the various *ryus* (schools) were established. This gave birth to the different styles.

Because life and death battles were no longer required to prove one's worth in battle, practitioners were naturally inquisitive as to how they were going. To accommodate them, the Senseis began to issue licenses, called *mokuroku*, to denote proficiency.

A student with a basic knowledge of the ryu's requirements was awarded a *sho-mokuroku*, the first level. As he progressed in his training he gained the second level – *ni-mokuroku*. It was a simple system that followed the Japanese counting system. But not all ryu used the system. Some just followed the samurai system of making their most feared exponents the senior grades. *"If you want a higher ranking just go and beat that guy."*

But for those who awarded licence grades, the ranking system was more orderly. And Japanese society is built on protocol. Virtually every aspect of life has an orderly system governing it. The martial arts are a perfect example of this. They are extremely ritualized and steeped in tradition.

When a student understood the full complement of the ryu's techniques, philosophies and teachings he was issued with a certificate of mastery known as a *menkyo*. Those who advanced to the next level, where they were allowed to

teach the style in their own right, were awarded a *menkyo-kaiden*. Such a person could then leave the ryu, if they so decided, and create their own style.

### **HISTORY OF THE FIRST BELT SYSTEM:**

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century the belt system was used for the first time in martial arts.

**Jigoro Kano**, the founder of Judo was reportedly the originator of this system. And it is generally believed that he 'invented' his system of awarding ranks based on an even earlier concept that was used in the Japanese board game of Go. But I won't 'go' there. You can research that for yourself if you are interested.

Reportedly, Kano took lengths of cloth and presented them to his students. A similar system was used in swimming. At this point things get a little murky and fact and fiction begin to merge.

It is not known whether Kano used specific colours or whether only the most proficient exponents were given black sashes or whether the sashes were, in fact, white cloth that became dirtier and dirtier over time.

I rather like the idea of the white sash or belt becoming dirtier as the exponent trained and sweated in his dojo. I have seen this phenomenon with my own karate belts and even *gis* (uniforms) over the years.

### **EVOLUTION OF COLOURED BELTS TO DENOTE GRADES:**

Sweat and dirt becomes embedded and not even washing and bleaching can remove the stain from around the neck and wrists of the karate gi. The belts, of course, should never be washed. There are two reasons for this:

**1** – as you sweat and toil in your training the *obi* (belt) absorbs your "spirit." It therefore becomes an extension of you and

**2** – the *obi* becomes easier to tie and "sits" properly as it follows your body shape.

So, taking a white belt, a lot of sweat and some grime it will turn a yellowy colour. More sweat and more grime makes it go darker – a light greenish colour. More sweating and soiling turns it a light brown. Even more over the years will turn it a charcoal or black colour. This can take between three to five years which is the standard time to reach a level of proficiency otherwise known as the black belt.

### **THE ADVENT OF THE BELT SYSTEM INTO KARATE:**

History shows that the coloured belt system was widely used in Jigoro Kano's judo prior to 1922 when **Gichin Funakoshi** (credited with being the "Father of

Modern Karate”) introduced kara-te (the art of “empty hand”) to Japan.

Funakoshi decided that it was such a good idea to measure proficiency in this “new art” of karate that he also used the coloured belt system. Various colours are used in all karate schools to denote kyu grades (the *mudansha*).

But let’s now turn our attention to the various black belt levels. Some of the following drifts into areas of folklore but, bear with me.

After a few years the fabric begins to break down and the black wears away to show white patches. We have all seen karateka whose black belts have been tied so often over the years that the belt looks as though it has been through a shredder. We have also heard of unscrupulous black belt practitioners who have scrubbed their obis on rough surfaces like bricks to age them prematurely.

Aged black belts can be stained with blood giving the combination of red and black belts that we see for 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Dan (the “Renshi” belt, also known as a “poon” belt).

As more black wears away and more blood stains are added the belt becomes red and white. These are the red and white “blocked” belts (the Kyoshi belts, also known as “master’s belts) that we see worn at 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and sometimes 8<sup>th</sup> Dan.

It takes between three to five years of dedicated training to achieve a 1<sup>st</sup> Dan black belt. Then another two years to reach 2<sup>nd</sup> Dan, another three years to reach 3<sup>rd</sup> Dan and so on.

10<sup>th</sup> Dan takes a virtual lifetime of training. Based on the generally accepted standards of the *Dai Nippon Butokai Kai* (an exclusive Society of Japanese martial arts practitioners dating back to 1895), it could take upwards of 57 years. That is why so many wearers of high Dan grade belts are between 50 and 80 years of age.

So, if you see a 6<sup>th</sup> Dan or higher with no grey hair then he or she is either too young or they dye their hair. No legitimate senior Dan grade can be held by a young person.

Obviously, as one reaches such senior years the ability to engage in hard physical contact declines.

This is why most Dan grades above 5<sup>th</sup> Dan are based on years of service, experience, seniority, age, ability to teach, ability to analyse, writing technical theses and books, creating systems and styles, being a good example of a budoka and the like. In other words, most often they are honorary in nature.

## THE AWARD OF TITLES:

Titles are also confusing. Again, there are discrepancies across the various karate styles and from one club to another. Some styles and clubs prefer to wear standard black belts from 1<sup>st</sup> Dan right through to 10<sup>th</sup> Dan and use only two titles – Sempai and Sensei. Everybody else is a Deshi, or student.

Some clubs will allow tags (usually gold in colour) to be sewn on the end of belts to denote rank. One tag denotes 1<sup>st</sup> Dan, two tags means 2<sup>nd</sup> Dan and so on.

Other clubs wear the alternate belts and use the additional titles of *Tashi*, *Renshi*, *Kyoshi*, *Hanshi*, *Kancho*, *Soke* and even the erroneous term “O’Sensei.”

I will start at the top end of the scale first – O’Sensei.

That was the term that Jigoro Kano’s followers gave to him upon his passing. So revered was Kano that he is the ONLY person ever considered to be worthy of sitting above the ten dan system.

Kano was posthumously awarded the 12<sup>th</sup> Dan.

No other person in any martial art has ever (legitimately) been awarded more than a 10<sup>th</sup> Dan. However, having said that, there is a current practice in certain Ninjutsu schools and escrima styles that advertise 11<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> Dans.

In my opinion, this is an ugly commercial innovation designed solely to extract more money from students by creating extra levels of payment. It has no place in true martial arts schools. If such a practice were allowed to flourish then where would it end? Would some person one day boast of having a 28<sup>th</sup> Dan?

Again, and only in my opinion, any ranking beyond 10<sup>th</sup> Dan is pretty meaningless. But, as I often say, “*To each, their own.*” Nobody really has any right to pontificate over any other club or style. In other words, we should all mind our own business.

O’Sensei was a term of endearment for Kano and Kano alone. It meant “great sensei.”

It has, over time, been used to refer to other great masters who have passed away. For instance, **O’Sensei Funakoshi** of Shotokan karate, **O’Sensei Oyama** of Kyokushinkai karate and **O’Sensei Ohtsuka** of Wado karate to name just a few.

Only the greatest martial arts leaders and pioneers are referred to in this manner. And **only** in death.

For any living person to be referred to as O'Sensei is patently wrong. For any living person to refer to themselves as O'Sensei is patently ludicrous. Sorry to have to tell you this but you have to be dead and then you can't use it anyway. You can only be remembered by others as "O'Sensei." But, the term is becoming more popular.

I'll now move back to the more common terms that we hear. And what I will speak of in the following, again, is not 'hard and fast.' And I won't be covering any of the more obscure and unusual titles that we sometimes hear.

### **SPECIFIC TITLES IN ORDER OF RELATIVE SENIORITY:**

The first is Senpai or Sempai.

A Sempai is an assistant. A Sempai may be a high kyu grade but more commonly it is a low Dan grade, somewhere in the order of 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> Dan. A Sempai assists a Sensei who instructs others. Sempais do not have their own student base. They are assistants only, under the supervision of a Sensei.

The Sensei therefore is the teacher.



A Sensei is a collective term for any black belt who has his or her own students. Sensei, literally, means "one who has gone before." However, it is generally accepted that it means teacher.

A Sensei therefore may be any teacher of the Japanese arts who could be ranked from 1<sup>st</sup> Dan right up through the ranks even to 10<sup>th</sup> Dan. However, it is most commonly used for 1<sup>st</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> Dan black belt teachers.

After several years of teaching a Sensei may be referred to as Tashi.

Tashi means "experienced or respected" teacher. It is usually reserved for very senior 2<sup>nd</sup> Dans (Nidans) or, more correctly 3<sup>rd</sup> Dans (Sandans) and sometimes even 4<sup>th</sup> Dans (Yondans), though this would be unusual.

The next level is Renshi.

### **RENSHI:**

Renshi translates as "polished teacher." A Renshi may, most often, be a 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> Dan rank. It is never conferred below 4<sup>th</sup> Dan and not usually above 5<sup>th</sup> Dan (but there are exceptions).

A Renshi would almost certainly have around 12 to 20 years of experience. The term is always reserved for outstanding 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Dan ranks. To be a Renshi you have to be of special character, dedication and ability.

The fact that anybody achieves a 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> Dan does not necessarily confer such a title. It is a special title.

As such, a 4<sup>th</sup> Dan Renshi outranks a 4<sup>th</sup> Dan Sensei. Similarly a 5<sup>th</sup> Dan Renshi outranks a 5<sup>th</sup> Dan Sensei. But a 4<sup>th</sup> Dan Renshi does not outrank a 5<sup>th</sup> Dan Sensei. The Dan rank is the primary delineator of seniority.

A Renshi title is like a Bachelor of Arts in academia.



A 4<sup>th</sup> Dan Renshi may wear a black belt with a red stripe running through the centre.

A 5<sup>th</sup> Dan Renshi may wear a black belt with a half red stripe running around the uppermost band of the belt.

But, again, different schools and styles can have different belt combinations.

We now move to Kyoshi.

### **KYOSHI:**

Kyoshi means “senior teacher.” Again, Kyoshi is a special title. It is awarded to outstanding 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Dan exponents.



A Kyoshi usually has one or more Renshis or Tashis below him or her and certainly has trained many hundreds of students, some of whom will have reached Sempai or Sensei level.

A Kyoshi almost invariably wears the red and white block master's belt. A Kyoshi title is the equivalent of Master of the Arts.

The next and final seniority level is Hanshi.



## HANSHI:

A Hanshi can be an 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> Dan black belt. Hanshi means “teacher of teachers” or “model for others to follow.”



A Hanshi is permitted to wear a red belt. Just to add to the confusion, red belts are often used in the lower kyu grades (usually around 8<sup>th</sup> kyu).

However, the Hanshi red belts are a slightly different shade of red. They are more ‘blood red’ in colour and usually have gold embroidery with the name of the wearer on the right hand side of the belt and the name of the organization on the left side.

No kyu grade has an embroidered belt. The Hanshi level is the PhD of karate, Professor of the Arts.

## OTHER TITLES:

The term *Kancho* is used to denote the founder of a style.

This title applies only to the founder of a style of martial art based on the Japanese budo principles. A Kancho may be a 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> dan black belt. A Kancho is almost always a Hanshi because such a person is deemed to know everything about their art. After all, this person created it.

If a Kancho is able to spread his or her martial art style into countries other than their own then they are known as *Soke*. A prime example here would be **Masutatsu Oyama**, founder of Kyokushinkai.

From 1952 he traveled the globe teaching his new style. The fact that it is now practiced in almost every country of the world is testament to his success. Kancho Oyama became *Soke Oyama* as the style he created spread worldwide.

Later, he was referred to as *Sosai* which translates as President or Director General. As I indicated earlier, it can certainly get confusing.

## A COLLECTIVE TERM:

A collective term that encompasses all 5<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> Dan Renshis, Kyoshis and Hanshis is *Shihan*.

*Shihan* is the respectful term that would be used if a student did not know the official title of a senior black belt. A 5<sup>th</sup> Dan Renshi is a *Shihan*. A *Kyoshi* is a

Shihan. A Hanshi is a Shihan.

A 4<sup>th</sup> Dan Renshi is not usually considered to be a Shihan as the substantive rank is not quite high enough. Adding even more to the confusion is the fact that even untitled 5<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> Dans may be referred to as Shihan.

Here's a good tip. If you don't know... ask. If you visit a dojo it is always good form to ask a senior person how the Yudansha (senior members of the dojo or Association) should be formally addressed in class.

By far the greatest test for any senior black belt to be awarded a special title is for his or her senior students to regard them as such. There is no point in proclaiming oneself any title at all if it is not respected by those you purport to teach and lead.

And respect is a two-way street. If you are given respect you should, in turn, show respect. There is no place in budo for disrespect.

Budo is built on respect.

### **CONFERRING TITLES:**

So, who can give or grant a title? This is a good question.

Specific titles can be conferred by governing bodies like Associations or by more senior karateka.

For instance, a Hanshi can confer a Kyoshi, Renshi or Tashi title.

Similarly a Kyoshi can confer a Renshi or Tashi title.

And a Renshi can confer a Tashi title.

However, no title should ever be conferred unless the recipient is worthy by virtue of ability, seniority, knowledge and experience. Furthermore, no individual can claim such a title unless he or she knows that they are worthy themselves. These titles are restricted to outstanding teachers and mentors. They are not automatic.

Such titles are conferred by consensus and, although not mandatory, it is more usual for a Hanshi title to be awarded after one has been a Kyoshi for many years and a Kyoshi after one has been a Renshi for many years and so on.

### **THIS RAISES AN INTERESTING QUESTION:**

This leads me back to my early question – how was the first 10<sup>th</sup> Dan achieved?

The first recorded 10<sup>th</sup> Dan was obviously judo's Jigoro Kano. But who promoted him? The answer is simple.

Kano assumed the position and it was confirmed by his student base. The first 10<sup>th</sup> Dan awarded by Kano himself was to **Yoshitugu Yamashita** (1865-1935) in 1935. From that time to 2006 only 15 judoka have been promoted in the Kodokan to 10<sup>th</sup> Dan. That shows how rare this rank is in judo.

In other arts it is not so rare though.

Since the entire ranking system is less than 100 years old we haven't seen many legitimate 10<sup>th</sup> Dans in the world. Those who have reached this status have almost exclusively been Japanese.

However, the numbers are about to swell. Western practitioners of Japanese and Okinawan martial arts (and Korean too for that matter) have now been exposed to these arts for over 50 years (from the time that military personnel returned to western countries from Japan). Many of them now have as much experience (if not the intimate knowledge) as the creators themselves.

For example, Gichin Funakoshi, the founder of Shotokan karate and who is credited with the title "the Father of Modern Karate" was born in 1868. He began to teach Shotokan in Japan in 1922. He passed away in 1957. Although he trained as a boy in Okinawa it could be said that his "style" only came of age in 1922. That means that he had somewhere more than 35 years of experience.

#### **A GENERALLY ACCEPTED METHODOLOGY:**

So, how can ANY 10<sup>th</sup> Dan be achieved when the generally accepted convention states that NO black belt of any grade can award a higher Dan grade than two below their own substantive rank? (That may be a reason why Kano himself was considered to be the only 12<sup>th</sup> Dan. It may also be responsible for the "two dan rule of promotion.")

Again, we have somewhat of a conundrum.

There are two ways that a 10<sup>th</sup> Dan can be achieved. The first is by a panel of the highest ranked peers. For instance, if an association has several highly ranked exponents they may, by unanimous agreement, deem that one of their number be elevated to 10<sup>th</sup> Dan.

There is another method but it requires three existing 10<sup>th</sup> Dans to make it work and legitimate 10<sup>th</sup> Dans are as rare as hens' teeth so I'll drop the level a few rungs and show, for example, how a 6<sup>th</sup> Dan may be elevated.

As we know, a suitably qualified high ranking black belt can promote a lower rank up to but not beyond two ranks below their own rank. This is a universally accepted convention. So, for a 5<sup>th</sup> Dan to be promoted to a 6<sup>th</sup> Dan would require the agreement of at least one 8<sup>th</sup> Dan or a 9<sup>th</sup> Dan or 10<sup>th</sup> Dan.

However, TWO 8<sup>th</sup> Dans can promote an individual up to one level below – ie from 6<sup>th</sup> Dan to 7<sup>th</sup> Dan.

First a word of caution...

It is a very bad practice to promote any black belt grade more than one Dan at a time. It has been done but it is generally frowned upon. The more accepted practice is to accelerate the time between ranks rather than to jump them.

Following on, THREE 8<sup>th</sup> Dans can elevate a 7<sup>th</sup> Dan to join them at their own level. Obviously if there are not enough higher ranks to do this then the most senior ranks of a style can promote one of their number to the senior position (but only by one rank at a time) by unanimous consensus.

Time between high ranks is often misunderstood. The “general” rule of thumb is that the number of years between the dan ranks should be equal to or higher than the rank itself. For example, to go from 4<sup>th</sup> Dan to 5<sup>th</sup> Dan should take five years. But that is largely a myth perpetrated by Japanese karateka and ‘ruling bodies’ to depress the growing number of highly ranked Westerners. It is a consideration but it is not the prime consideration. Other factors have to be taken into account and an “overall” assessment made.

### **OTHER FACTORS:**

Overall training time, ability, knowledge and being of good character are more important than “time between ranks.” The word “reasonable” springs to mind. Is the promotion, based on ALL factors, reasonable? But most karateka blindly believe the false edict of time between ranks being equal to or above the rank being aspired to.

### **THE CASE OF MASUTATSU OYAMA:**

Here are some glaring examples that should be taken into account:

**Masutatsu Oyama** achieved his 2<sup>nd</sup> Dan at 17 years of age and his 4<sup>th</sup> Dan at 20 in Shotokan karate under **Gichin Funakoshi**.

Applying the strict rule – expected of others by the Japanese – he shouldn't have been able to achieve a 4<sup>th</sup> Dan until he was at least 24 years old. That is, 2<sup>nd</sup> Dan plus 3 years for 3<sup>rd</sup> Dan plus 4 more years from 3<sup>rd</sup> Dan to 4<sup>th</sup> Dan.  $17 + 3 + 4 = 24$ .

Granted, Oyama was exceptional. Progressing along he would have qualified as a 5<sup>th</sup> Dan at 29, 6<sup>th</sup> Dan at 35, 7<sup>th</sup> Dan at 42, 8<sup>th</sup> Dan at 50, 9<sup>th</sup> Dan at 59 and 10<sup>th</sup> Dan at 69 years old. However, in 1955 at just age 32 Oyama was awarded a 6<sup>th</sup> Dan by Gogen Yamaguchi of Goju Kai.

Then, in 1974, at age 51, Oyama was promoted by his branch chiefs to 9<sup>th</sup> Dan. But, like I said, he was exceptional. And there are often exceptions to standard rules.

### **THE CASE OF MATSUI – SUCCESSOR TO OYAMA:**

Also, from the Kyokushinkai style we have **Kancho Shokei Matsui**. Born in 1963, Matsui was Oyama's chosen successor.

Reportedly, he commenced his karate training at age 13. In 1982, Matsui was a 2<sup>nd</sup> Dan. From 1982 to 2008, a period of only 26 years and at just 45 years of age, Matsui had achieved 8<sup>th</sup> Dan. You can do the math on this as easy as I can.

There are so many other examples of the "time between Dan grades" being waived, mostly depending on *who* you are.

### **ANOTHER SPECIAL CASE:**

**Kanken Toyama**, founder of the Shudokan, gave a lot of very high ranks out prior to his death in 1966.

It has been reported that he was known as **Dai Shihan** and had the authority to promote anyone to any rank in any system.

For example, he reportedly promoted **Eizo Shimabukuro** to 10<sup>th</sup> Dan in 1959 when Shimabukuro was only 34 years of age. Shimabukuro became the world's youngest 10<sup>th</sup> Dan.

So anomalies abound. It appears that it certainly helps more rapid advancement through the ranks if one has a Japanese surname.

### **THE SYSTEM IS ARBITRARY:**

In reality, the entire ranking and title system is open to conjecture and many times even abuse. There are too many high ranks who are simply not worthy of them. Add to this the fragmentation of even the most powerful styles and we contribute to even more conjecture.

## MY OWN OPINION:

I have my own opinion of who is worthy and who is not. My test is this: *“The merit is on the mat.”*

What I mean by that is the level of worth of any individual is based upon what they can do in battle, what they can teach to others, their respect within the club, association, nationally and internationally.

Has the person authored anything worthwhile? Have they shared their knowledge freely with others who are keen to learn? Have they created new knowledge that works?

It is pointless stomping around the place with a 10<sup>th</sup> Dan Hanshi title, rank and belt if all you are is a big bag of wind. Many of these types are always willing to give advice and criticism but we rarely see them in ‘action.’ If asked to teach or demonstrate they are always too busy or injured.

Nobody respects a trumped up, overblown self-promoter who never shows why they should have such a title or rank. A friend of mine calls them “Sidewalk Samurai.” These people talk a lot and tell everyone how wonderful they are but they never put themselves in a position for anyone to see it.

My experience is that those who talk the most about what they can do and what they supposedly know are usually those who have the least to offer. **Put it on the mat.** Show us. Write it on paper. Teach us. Lead an exemplary budo life. Be a model for us to follow.

When it is all boiled down most people, in their own mind, know where they sit in relation to the ability, experience and knowledge of others.

There is no greater contention within the martial arts than the award of equitable ranks and titles. I hope I have been able to throw some light on it for you and give some broad guidelines on the subject.

As mentioned, there are always exceptions because exceptional people certainly exist. **Kano** was one. I have already mentioned **Funakoshi**, **Oyama** and **Ohtsuka**. **Yamaguchi** (Goju) was another. **Mabuni**, founder of Shito-Ryu was another. **Miyagi** (Goju Ryu) was another. The list goes on.

But, as I said, the high ranking westerners are coming. With 30, 40 or 50 years of training, study, experience and knowledge, how can they be denied? It takes a lifetime to master a martial art.

As Confucius said: *“To know is to know that to know is not to know.”*

## A WORD OF ADVICE:

Even if you are a high ranking exponent with a special title it is always good form to ask the most senior person of any club that you visit if it is appropriate for you to wear your special belt or be referred to by your special title. If you are in any doubt you should wear a plain black belt and simply be referred to as Sensei. That would be the humble thing to do.

## CONCLUSION:

Finally, if your club has a different grading and title structure to what I have presented here then don't worry or be concerned or dismayed. The main thing is that you learn something worthwhile. The belts and titles are ancillary to that.

I hope this has cleared up some of the confusion with this very confusing subject. In essence, the Japanese have made it confusing and the confusion has been built on by western nations.

Study well. Train hard. Practice budo. Be humble. Be the BEST that you can be with what you have to work with. We're not all the same, nor should we aspire to be. Diversity can be a wonderful thing.



**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Gary Simpson, Hanshi, 9<sup>th</sup> Dan – 50 years of training and experience in numerous martial arts including ju-jutsu, kung fu, tai chi, kobudo and karate.