

What does it mean to be a black belt?

It seemed like such an easy question; if I was asked three years ago, perceptions change. In the beginning I would have said that being a black belt meant reaching the end of the road, now I understand that it is more like the tenth step on a ten kilometre run. Things that I thought I had “mastered” at blue belt now appear a mystery, not because my understanding has faded, but more because my field of view has widened. I have found out a lot about myself in that time, and the people around me, especially my family. When I first started, I looked up to people who had reached black belt with awe, what they were capable of seemed to be such an impossibility for me, their speed and technique made me feel that I could never achieve these things, now I feel that, with a few of these people at least, I can consider myself an equal.

This adventure has many people along for the ride, each with their own time schedules and expectations; and with that people’s expectations of others is also vastly different from one person to the next, from the moment I decided to make being a black belt a priority, and I set daily, weekly and yearly goals. I had to remind myself of this early on when other people were not as engrossed in advancing as I was. I constantly wanted to learn the next kata, the next technique and the next flow drill, while others are happy to move along at their own pace, learning whatever was on the curriculum that day, maybe coming to training this week and missing a day next week. This has also been one of the greatest learning experiences for me, it has spilled over into my career, dealing with people on a daily basis, understanding that there is more than one way to explain a situation, technique, or just getting your point across, and no matter how much you push some people they will only do what they are comfortable with.

I have been fortunate to have the full support of my family, and special thanks go out to Suzi. She has been invaluable with training at home, helping all the family by watching our kata’s and giving constructive suggestions to improve our craft. Karate has brought our family closer together by having a common interest that we all share a passion for and this support network has helped elevate each of us. As our journey continues, I am grateful for this and rank it high when it comes to explaining what it means to be a black belt.

I have also relearned a passion for teaching others, first with my own family; which leads onto other practitioners in our dojo, and through experiences such as the Goju league of instructors, helping other dan graded people sharpen their skills, and receiving excellent advice and tutorials from people with many years of experience to back them up. There is a great joy in seeing the “penny drop” when a single technique is opened up to a wider and hidden meaning; and also that same feeling when something becomes clear to me. The sharing of knowledge is an important part of karate; I believe it does not belong to one person, but to everyone who is willing to broaden their lives. I feel that it is part of my duty to teach, and part of my makeup as a black belt to help others on the journey.

There are always people who come into your life at the right time, that is to say when you are ready to receive them. I feel that our association with the dojo and especially with Sensei Bernie has come at the best point in my life. His knowledge and his willingness to share this has been an important part of my growing, I appreciate his patience with explaining aspects of our style, and his willingness to include me in classes that I was way out of my depth for. There were times when I really thought I would never grasp a concept or even the basics, however he persisted with me and for that I am truly grateful.

I am not the same person I was, this is a good thing. I feel more confident with myself and in my dealings with others; I have learnt to control physical and mental aspect of my person through training and interacting with like minded people. My relationship with my family has improved and my standing among my peers has increased, these are part but not all of what it currently means to me to be a black belt. I look forward to the next step on my journey. Perceptions change, and even though the years of training have been hard, I know that in the future I will look back on my kyu grades with fondness and feel that they were easy years in terms of learning and accelerating. Being a black belt means a lot to me, the sense of achievement at reaching a goal, one that long ago I had placed so high; the knowledge that I will hopefully continue to learn and improve and be able to help others realise their goals of being a black belt and beyond. A sense of pride in watching my wife and children progress through the ranks and watching them grow, to see how each of them has a different interpretation of karate and what it means to them, being able to take that on board and use it myself. These things and more are all part of what the past years have come to mean to me, the black belt is the icing on the cake, but the party is just getting started.

I hope to see many more people on the rest of my journey, I hope to find and polish a few gems; to help mould future students, someday maybe have my own style of karate based upon a kata handed down to me, something I can shape into my own and have recognised by my peers, maybe then I will have reached the end, or once again, maybe this is just the beginning.

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