

Student or Master?

Shodan

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Is the Shodan truly a master of their art or are they finally at the point where they can begin learning what their art is really all about? This question is asked more than any I know of. What does that first level into the Dan ranks signify?

Modern Western philosophy would have us believe that the "Black Belt" should be the master of every technique in their system, move like greased lightning and be unbeatable. The general public has no concept of the levels within the Dan ranks. To the majority of people a Black Belt is a Black Belt. In actuality, the Shodan is merely a senior student. They have learned the mechanics of the required techniques, they are able to pass these techniques on to the junior students in the dojo but they are a far cry from a master. The person that has attained the rank of Shodan should be consistent with the execution of their techniques; they should have a good knowledge of all of the techniques and the mechanics that make those techniques work. They should be able to teach those mechanics to other students. But above all else, they should be aware of their limitations, strengths, and weaknesses. They should have the drive to improve their weak areas and broaden their limitations. As they continue to strive for the unattainable perfection that we all seek they will continue to find new weaknesses to work on. The training cycle never ends.

Students at the rank of Sankyū through Ikkyū should look deep into themselves and ask, "Am I ready to be a Black Belt?" But this question should not be based on their appraisal of their skills, that is for the instructor to decide. Their search should be into their motives, their attitude toward the art and the training, and whether this is a commitment that they are willing to take on.

So what then are the "prerequisites" for promotion to Shodan? Most definitely, the student should have a grasp of the techniques of their chosen art and be consistently proficient in their execution. They should be competent enough in those techniques to pass them on to the junior students and assist the Kyū level students in "perfecting" those techniques. They must be open-minded and always remember that as they are teaching, so are they learning. Every opponent will be a totally different encounter, and the more "opponents" you "battle" in the dojo, the better skilled you will be when a real altercation besets you. The perspective Shodan should be of good character and a role model for others to follow.

I have seen so many Shodans that immediately after their promotion take on a new persona. They develop a "Greater than Thou" attitude and feeling of invincibility. To me, these are the Ikkyūs that should have spent more time exploring the spiritual aspects of their art (if any were taught).

The Shodan is in fact, an advanced student. They should display confidence in their ability, tempered with humility. They are like the high school senior at graduation, facing a new and exciting world with open arms, an open mind and full of expectations of what yet lies ahead for them to learn.