

What's In A Name?

By

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“Don’t call me that!” I personally witnessed a high dan Karate teacher, a Japanese national with whom I trained, a man who had been teaching in the USA since the early 1960’s, snap that when his own students addressed him as master. No one doubted it a valid description, but he didn’t like the title. Addressed as mister, or his first name by his long time students, was good enough for him. It still is. It was refreshingly unusual to witness this.

What’s better, a kyoshi or a hanshi? How about a Professor or a Senior Professor? A Grandmaster, a Great Grandmaster, an Elder Grandmaster, or, my personal favorite, a Supreme Grand Patriarch? Of course there’s no real answer to that, but you will certainly hear debates as to who deserves what and why. All those preceding titles actually exist in different groups. There are more too numerous to mention. The American Jujitsu Institute even offers PhD degrees. You can call yourself doctor. You never mention its non-academic. Many people think those titles carry weight. In the martial arts, we are overwhelmed by a mania on titles and rank. Many of us are consumed with getting them. Whatever happened to just acquiring skill and knowledge?

In America we love appearances. That’s not unique to America, but we all know the desire for appearance creates a big market here. Check out the ads for the plastic surgery industry. It’s common knowledge that models in ads are routinely enhanced by computer software. It’s a false image that sells billions of dollars of product. For the martial arts, for every one person who actually is focused on developing skill and knowledge, there are hundreds who just want to be regarded as being knowledgeable. There are a lot of people teaching who don’t train anymore and haven’t learned any refinement in years. No continuing education there. Titles are appealing. They invite us to confuse the image with the real thing.

Titles by themselves are just a way of distinguishing someone special in a group. It’s a way of conveying appreciation. Ideally they have actually done something special to rate that. Other times it’s a bureaucratic assembly line affair. Check off so many boxes and you are awarded a title. It only becomes a problem if you start confusing image with reality. Perceptions of what makes accomplishments special will always be subjective. Then there are those titles that go automatically with dan grades in certain groups. Master is automatic with fourth dan in some organizations. You may not know

that Henry Okazaki presented the title of Master at third dan. Whether anyone actually called themselves that is another matter. Nowadays who would consider a typical sandan masterful? In some groups the title is awarded at other dan grades other than fourth. Barely pass your exam, and you are a Master. In DZR circles, it seems renshi, kyoshi, and shihan were given in one group as participation trophies depending on your dan grade when you attended a certain program. It's not common knowledge that was the backstory of the title. Don't know why they skipped hanshi.

Shihan, by the way is only a very formal term for sensei.

The "traditional titles" aren't that old. They were introduced by the Dai Nippon Butokukai in Japan in the 1920's as ways to license teachers in different dojos under their auspices. It was as controversial then as it is now. The titles caught on with other groups, and the ball started rolling. People started to take them seriously. Of course, the use of titles has gotten off the charts with individual ego needs and the politics of organizations wanting to proclaim their legitimacy.

Special titles aren't going away anytime soon. They will always be controversial. Solution? It's simple. Don't take them seriously. Work on developing your skills and understanding. At best, titles are someone's opinion of how you're doing. At their worst, they are a mask. Show your true face. People see it anyway.