

# Dispelling the White to Black Belt Myth

Bob McKean

Recently an old Danzan Ryu friend stopped by my home for a social visit. After a filling BBQ dinner we sat down and discussed martial arts over a couple bottles of premium sake.

During our conversation my friend told me about a recent incident involving one of his new students. His student had prior training in a different discipline and this was his first exposure to Danzan Ryu. One evening after class, he and his new student had a discussion about martial arts and the topic about belts and belt ranks came up. The student told him that he had been taught that traditionally, only a white belt was worn and that it eventually turned to black after many years of hard work. My friend politely told his student that this was an “urban legend”. The student insisted that the story his prior teacher had told him was true. Not to offend the student’s prior teacher, my friend asked his student to research the topic and to present his findings to him. After about a week the student presented his findings to his new sensei. The student apologized to his new sensei and said, “I was wrong and you were right.” My friend told his student, “No, you are right for finding the correct information.” My friend later sent me a copy of one of the research articles his student gave him on the subject of white to black belt.

*One common “Legend” concerning the tradition of belt claims that early martial artists began their training with a white belt, which eventually turned black from years of sweat, dirt, and blood. However, there is no evidence for this story, so it should be relegated to the status of myth. In fact, given the standard of cleanliness common in the traditional Judo and Karate dojo, a student arriving with a bloodied or dirty uniform would probably not have been allowed to train. In some arts and schools there is the opinion that the belt should not be washed; by doing that one would “wash one’s Ki away.” This is all related to the “dirty belt” myth.*

The white to black belt myth has been floating around the martial arts community for decades and has not yet been put to rest. Unfortunately it is still being passed on by some martial art instructors as being “traditionally accurate”. During the early 1970s I was told the white to black belt story by my American Kenpo Karate instructor. At that time I believed the story was accurate and true. After all, why would my instructor tell me something that was not true?

In 1974 I became a student of Professor Bill Montero (1916-1992), a relationship that lasted for the next 18 years. Professor Montero had been a student of Professor Henry Seisharo Okazaki (1890-1951) for more than 13 years and he had received the rank of sandan and a Nikko Restoration diploma from Professor Okazaki in 1943. In 1953 Professor Montero became the second person to receive the title of Professor from the American Judo & Jujitsu Federation. One morning after class I told Professor Montero about the white to black belt story that was told to me by my past Kenpo instructor. He smiled and told me that the story was nothing more than a myth. So as not to offend my Kempo instructor he went on to say that my instructor was probably incorrectly told this

story by someone else. Professor Montero also had the strong opinion that no respectable sensei would allow one of his students to wear a filthy obi in his class. Professor Montero gave Dr. Jigoro Kano (1860-1938), the founder of Judo, credit for developing a progressive belt system that utilized different belt colors. Dr. Kano developed a standardized curriculum that divided his Judo program into organized and progressive learning lessons. Upon the successful completion of each lesson, the student was awarded a different belt color. This new belt color system accomplished three things.

- It rewarded the student with a different belt color for each course of instruction he was able to successfully complete.
- The progressive colors gave the student a guide as to where he was with his own training and where he stood among the other students in the dojo.
- It gave the instructors a visual clue as to what level of training each student had obtained and what their next course of instruction would be. This way a student could be taught in an organized and systematic manner.

Professor Montero said Professor Okazaki was heavily influenced by the teachings of Dr. Kano and that he incorporated many aspects of 1920s and 30s era Judo into his Danzan Ryu Jujitsu.

Professor Montero would jokingly tell his students that a belt and its color served two purposes.

- The belt kept your gi jacket closed.
- The color reminded you where to line up at the beginning and at the end of class.

The white to black belt story is only one of many myths that are often told in the martial arts world. Danzan Ryu has many of its own myths and I'm sure you have heard some of them at one time or another. Many involve stories about Professor Okazaki and his students as well as the history, philosophy, translations and teaching of Danzan Ryu.

Every Danzan Ryu instructor and school head has a duty and responsibility to pass on accurate and correct information to their students. As teachers we should devote time and effort conducting accurate and professional academic research on topics concerning Danzan Ryu and the martial arts. Stories such as the white to black belt tradition should only be told for what they really are - urban legends and myths.

Professor Okazaki gave us his Danzan Ryu, which is rich in tradition, history and philosophy. In his honor, we should maintain the accuracy and integrity of Danzan Ryu and refrain from passing on urban legends and myths as being true events or martial art traditions.

---

*Bob McKean has been a student of Danzan Ryu for more than 42 years. If you would like to share your constructive comments, additional facts or evidence based information on this subject, please contact Bob at [cop2rn@aol.com](mailto:cop2rn@aol.com)*

May 2011