

Taijiquan Skill Evaluation - Part 1

Understanding Skill Categories

Often the subject of grading in Taijiquan study comes up as students are interested in knowing where they stand in terms of their development. The following article presents both a short critique of standard martial arts grading methods and a means for establishing an accurate perspective on general skill level. This will enable the student or teacher to evaluate his/her own skill level in specific areas.

Grading for a novice is important as it provides a tangible measure of progress which motivates study and practice. For the advanced student of Taijiquan who knows he/she is skilled, the lack of a means for self-evaluation can be frustrating since there is no specific measure of where one is going or where one has been progress-wise.

Belt Ranking

One of the earliest measures of achievement was simply the paying of dues by years of involvement. In Shuaijiao (Chinese wrestling), the wrestler wore a sash around the waist of his jacket to hold it in place. Since wrestling matches were held on a dirt playing field, the cloth would get filthy. Jackets were washed and replaced over the years but a tradition of never cleaning the belt (for fear of washing away its experience) developed. A blackened belt was a sign of an experienced wrestler.

The first formal system of belt ranking came in 1882 when *Jigoro Kano* (founder of Kodokan Judo) advocated the use of white, yellow, orange, green, blue, brown and black belts in the grading of his new martial sport. This idea spread and was adopted by other Japanese and Korean martial arts. Some Chinese systems

have begun to adopt a similar approach by sewing coloured stripes or crests on their uniforms. The purpose of the belt grading system is simple and sincere — to provide the student with a means to evaluate his/her progress and motivate diligent study of technique and principle.

While valuable in some ways, the belt ranking system also has its drawbacks. Firstly, the tendency of such systems is to promote a value system which in my opinion, stresses too highly the acquisition of the various coloured belts and stripes, often at the expense of being focused on the technique of the art itself. Secondly, belt ranking is actually very subjective, even when standard testing procedures are used. This is because much depends on student-instructor rapport, competition performance, varying standards of time in grade and unfortunately sometimes on a student's financial resources. Finally, the belt is not the person wearing it. It may occur that a blue belt can defeat a first or second degree black belt consistently in fair matches.

This leads to the most important point: Grading by belts is usually not specific enough about a individual's abilities or weaknesses in terms of particular skills. Possession of the new belt tends to placate the student for a period and instructors are often unable to give the time and effort to point out and specifically train individual strengths and weaknesses. An over confident martial artist with a fine looking belt and uniform but inadequate skill and perspective may be literally putting his/her life on the line in a more critical self-defence situation. While there is much merit in the idea of encouraging personal confidence in students, this potential for a distorted sense of martial arts ability is probably the most fundamental flaw in the belt ranking system.

None of these three criticism are directed at any individual. They are born out of an over reliance on tradition and lack of information and awareness on the part of instructors and students

who perpetuate the approach. This tradition is, however, only a few generations old. At the time of its development, the belt system was an innovative idea which presented a new, relatively scientific way of evaluating martial arts performance. It serves as a good historical lesson on which we can improve.

An informal form of categorization does exist in China for defining the skill and experience level of Taijiquan practitioners. It is by no means thorough and does not attempt to structure innate hierarchies as specifically or as rigidly as the belt and stripe systems. It approaches the issues 'level' by defining the practitioner's participation in general terms based on his or her time and *way* of being involved in the art.

Enthusiast

An enthusiast is essentially anyone who studies Taijiquan at any level. It does not refer specifically to an individual's ability or experience but does imply that he or she is at a lower stage of skill development.

Expert

Regardless of age, an expert has mastered many skills in Taijiquan forms, sparring and weapons training. A younger person might stand out as an expert based on a high level of ability. Practitioners of expert status are frequently fine instructors as they are usually very enthusiastic and conscious of their own development.

Veteran

One who has studied the art for many years is referred to as a 'veteran'. This suggests that the practitioner has achieved some real ability although is not necessarily particularly outstanding in terms of skill level for their time involvement. Being a veteran in Taijiquan is a social honour and is a generally respected status.

A veteran may be a good instructor and will no doubt have much experience to offer practitioners who are younger in the art.

Master

When one has acquired a vast wealth of knowledge and understanding from years of mastering many of the skills in Taijiquan training, one may be called a ‘master’ of the art. In China it is common to refer to a teacher of any sort as ‘master’ however, regardless of their skill level (especially when the teacher is advanced in years). It is used in this context out of respect but does not necessarily mean that the individual is a master of the art in the sense of having mastered its skills to a high level. The term Master also implies a certain level of mature self-discipline on the part of the individual.

The title of ‘Master’ may be appropriately used for:

1. One who has, over time, mastered the many skills in his/her art or discipline.
2. One's teacher (in the sense of a school master).
3. The mentor/authority to which a disciple looks for guidance.
4. An instructor generally addressed by the Tai Chi and martial arts community as Master.

While this method of categorizing practitioners is somewhat vague in terms of defining the practitioner’s actual knowledge and ability of specific skills in Taijiquan, it does help practitioners to place themselves fairly clearly in a general context within the art.

Unlike the belt ranking system, this approach does not confuse the notion of general practitioner categorization with skill level, a topic to be addressed specifically in part 2 of this article.

(This article was originally written in 1986 and slightly revised and edited in 2005.)