

The making of a Master Shihan? Who? What? How? - Paul Starling-Shihan discusses

I have noticed that in the past few years the claims being made by various Martial Arts Instructors are becoming more and more grandiose with virtually no control being exercised over the Dan levels or the titles being used, many of these claims being self-awarded.

Many relatively young 7th and 8th Dans are popping up, and titles such as Shihan, Renshi, Kyoshi, Hanshi, Kaicho, Kancho, Saiko Shihan, Soke, O'Sensei, Dai Sensei, Dai Shihan, Dai Sempai etc., seem to be handed out to people who either make up their own styles, or break away from parent organisations whilst still relatively low grades, and become instant 'Top Honcho' overnight.

The much used cliché of "evolution" and "progress" is being used to condone the watering down of many fine traditional Styles and Organisations which have been around for many years. People break away from parent groups, then someone breaks away from that breakaway, and so it goes on, until eventually somewhere down the line, the new Saiko Shihan O'Sensei Dai Sempai Kaicho Kancho 8th Dan Technicolour Belt in charge of the revolutionary new 'State of the Art 1991 Style' claims that his product is the best thing since sliced bread.

It was the early 1960's when I began my Martial Arts career, firstly with Judo, and then Goju-Kai Karate-Do. In those days, even 1st Dan was considered a high grade in Australia. The Martial Arts Schools were few and far between, and we all knew who the genuine people were, and who the phonies were.

Instructors just did not make preposterous claims for fear of being ridiculed or laughed at. And, besides that, it was obvious who were teaching the genuine product by their performance on the mat.

We all used to go and watch each other's classes, and sometimes we would have inter-club training sessions, from which we all built up a healthy respect for each other. In those days inter-style tournaments were rare, and few people swapped styles, or broke away and formed their own.

Now that the sporting side of Karate is being pushed so much, it seems that many of the old ethics and standards are being disregarded, and that the measure of an Instructor's success is based on how many Champions he produces, or what position of power he holds in some Organisation or Federation. The old desired benefits of studying Martial Arts, such as improvement of character, improvement of technique, self discipline, self-control, selfdefence, loyalty, life ~ lasting friendships, ethics etc., are being replaced by ego, self-promotion, self-glory, win at all costs attitudes. The humility aspect is fast dying out!



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I will attempt to explain to the readers the Traditional Grading system of our



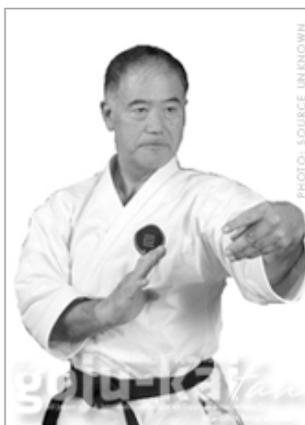
organisation, the International Karate-Do Goju-Kai (IKGA), so as to clarify the mess of titles growing daily on the Martial Arts scene.

You could compare the titles of Renshi, Kyoshi, and Hanshi with graduating through a University with a Bachelor's Degree, Master's Degree, or Doctorate/ Ph.D. (Most Japanese forms of culture have three teaching levels, such as Shodo, Ikebana, Tea Ceremony, etc.)

This system is based on the more Traditional Japanese Martial Arts such as Kendo, and when I first started Karate-Do very few Organisations besides Goju-Kai used this method. It still varies greatly from style to style. with some only calling their Grandmaster Shihan, and others using Menkyo. Menkyo Kaiden etc.

In IKGA now, there is a tendency to steer away from Instructors' Dan levels. and make more use of Shihan, Renshi, Kyoshi, and Hanshi, because of the numbers game being played in the "Dan Race". (Just pick up any Martial Arts Magazine these days. and see the huge amount of people 5th dan and over, all mixed together, both the ones with legitimate grades, and those who have signed their own certificates - or, worse still, had their students do it for them ...)

In my opinion, a grade or a title is not worth having, unless it has been issued by a higher authority. The only grades that are worth anything to me are the ones that were awarded to me by my teachers; Gogen Yamaguchi, Goshi Yamaguchi. and Motokatsu Inoue. If such world-renowned masters saw fit to grant those titles, then I believe that should put those qualifications beyond dispute.



If you ask me who I consider as present day Masters of Karate-Do, I would say Hirokazu Kanazawa. Tatsuo Suzuki. Morio Higaonna, and Goshi Yamaguchi, to name a few. If you asked them who they would consider Masters, they would no doubt reply Gichin Funakoshi. Hironori Ohtsuka the first, Gogen Yamaguchi, and Nakayama Sensei from the JKA. Then if you had asked all of these deceased Masters, whilst they were alive, who they considered as Masters, they would have said ChojunMiyagi, Kenwa Mabuni etc.



So you can see that the true master doesn't regard himself as a Master. In stead. they regard their teacher, and their teacher's teacher, as Masters; and it is up to the higher authority to pass their know edge and titles back to the next generation. Not for someone to give

themselves the title of Master. or some high Dan grade. just because they made up their own style.

In any other profession. people must be properly qualified to set up business, Doctors. lawyers, accountants, police officers, defence forces officers, etc, all must receive the necessary training, then graduate, and become qualified in order to practise their trade. Why then, can we in Martial Arts, have Green Belts. Brown Belts, or 1st and 2nd Dans, breaking away from parent organisations, and becoming Instant 'Shihans' or 'Top Honchos' over night.'

I would like to relate to the readers* a funny experience which I had many years ago at another style's tournament. at which I was an invited guest. A rather strange young man came up to me and said: "So you're Paul Starling are you'. What's it like!" To which I asked him. what's what like'? He then said: "What's it like to be Paul Starling'? Does it give you a buzz!" Then: "Can you do the splits.'" My Instructor can do the splits!" He obviously had learned nothing about the etiquette, or the spiritual side of Karate- Do. I would blame this on his Instructor, not the poor misguided student.

My students call me Shihan or Sensei out of respect: because they want to use these titles because it makes them feel good - not because it makes me feel good. Respect is something that "I" earned, not demanded.

My advice to the proliferation of '10th Dans' and 'Saiko Shihans' "springing up everywhere (many under 40 years of age). is that you can fool some of the people some of the time, but you can't fool all of the people all of the time' As a matter of fact. these days many of the legitimate Instructors don't advertise their grades anymore. Because every man and his dog seem to have a high grade, and it usually brings a negative reaction from the readers: "Yawn, not another super-duper 7th Dan!"

Don't forget that in a Traditional Karate-Do system it should take a minimum of 19 to 30 years of training to achieve a 7th Dan. and of course 37 to 40 years to achieve 10th Dan. In any case, I consider myself an advanced student of Karate-Do. After all, it is a lifetime pursuit. .. and there is plenty of time left for me to Master my Art.

Yours Sincerely,
Paul Starling (Shihan)
Vice President IKGA.

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