

The Black Belt Book of Life - Topic #13 – Substance Before Symbol

Symbol before substance -
pandemic renowned.

Symbol before substance -
deluded clown.

Substance Before Symbol -
turn it around.

Substance Before Symbol -
deservéd crown!

*Beware that you do not lose the substance
by grasping at the shadow.*
Aesop

*Be not deceived with the first appearance of things,
for show is not substance.*
English proverb

*The leader shows that style is
no substitute for substance.*
Lao Tzu

In so many ways the civilization of the 21st Century lives in the delusion that symbol is more important than substance, that the character of who we are has been turned inside-out and upside-down to where it's more important to be superficially adorned with the trappings of celebrity, fame, name, power, wealth, status, popularity and gamesmanship than it is to be anchored in principles of character, humility, honesty, honor, dignity, purity and substance.

When we sacrifice substance for symbol, we destroy the nobility inherent in our spirit and play the role of clown while foregoing the crown of all that is decent, whole and noble. For example, this is an age where black belt rankings are quite often placed on the sale block and sold for thirty pieces of silver, or less, by unscrupulous individuals who care nothing for their character or reputations, let alone those of the art. Their focus is centered in the size of their bank accounts rather than in the size of their student's progress, achievement and well-being. This kind of behavior not only dilutes the great meaning of martial arts training, but it also casts a dark cloud over it, diminishing the art as a whole, negatively impacting future generations.

Three true stories. The first involves an individual who wanted a black belt rating so he could show it on his resume and get a promotion from the organization that employed him which wanted to see extracurricular activities on his resume. Rather than expend the effort and time to obtain a competent black belt rating from a reputable studio, he enrolled in a school which promised him a black belt for a specific price within a year. He paid his money, got his "black belt" and probably his promotion. Black Belt in a year? For a certain amount of money? Can excellence be purchased? Can attainment be promised within a time limit? Can a piano enthusiast become a concert pianist or competent performer in a year? Unlikely. Same for becoming a true Black Belt. A legitimate black belt program involves years of study, five at the least, if the curriculum is worthy and varied, one teaching basic skills, fighting, kata [forms], weapons, self-defense techniques and extemporaneous combat. Attaining a so-called black belt in today's world has become so watered down it is shameful, not to mention dangerous. If a person is a Black Belt, he or she had better be a Black Belt in the truest sense of the word. Not only are the courts going to hold such a person accountable for his actions should the event ever arise, but the individual's life, and possibly the lives and well-being of others, could be at stake.

Second story. A gentleman had been in a rush to get a black belt rating because it holds a certain degree of respect which he felt would give him respect in the eyes of others. After attaining a purple belt [an advanced beginner status], he visited a competitive studio in which the instructor invited him into his office and asked him to demonstrate six ways to kill a human being. Having been in the military, the man demonstrated six ways of taking someone's life, whereupon the instructor awarded him a black belt on the spot and entered him into their organization's log as a black belt!

Third story. This is just as ludicrous as the second, but true nonetheless. An organization, separate from the previous one, advertised a one-day black belt training and promotion workshop. For a price of \$150, participants would receive training on a Saturday from 9:00am to 11:30am, break for lunch, resume training from 1:00pm to 3:30pm, and then be awarded a black belt at the end of the event! The ad promised that the individual would also be certified by the hosting martial arts organization. Is this the great height to which our culture has aspired, instant black belt?

The reality is that none of the individuals who granted or received a so-called black belt rating in these stories was competent, let alone ethical. Yet, this kind of instant gratification, make-it-easy-for-me behavior, has been instrumental in devaluing the rich legacy of black belt legitimacy. Any accomplishment of merit takes time and effort. Nothing of any true worth, especially that of attaining a black belt, is accomplished without hard work, dedication, devotion, determination, patience, persistence and courage for an extended period of time. Competence creates confidence as noted earlier. Regardless of the subject involved, especially that of a performing art, excellence involves sweat and tears for years in order to achieve a level of expertise.

In the world of martial arts, the Black Belt is a symbol of excellence awarded and rewarded *after* the student develops the *substance* to support it. This would seem to be common sense, and it is. Yet, there are those who think differently. For them, it's all about the symbol, not the substance. For those in pursuit of a true black belt, here is some instructor advice: as long as you hold to the *substance before symbol* principle, you will be able to walk with dignity and nobility in life. However, make sure you are worthy of the black belt before you put it on because you will be known for what you are or, more tragically, for what you are not.

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