

WHAT COLOR IS YOUR SASH... REALLY?

We sign in the roster. We count the days until our next test. Some students have already done the math for a kyu exam that is three ranks in the future. Some of us forget to mark out hours. Slowly, and sometimes quickly, we all climb the sash ladder of "success".

On a piece of paper we read Sensei's criteria for us to move up a rank. But what are our own requirements? What motivates us to test? What is the color of our sash... really?

It is natural for us to approach this eastern discipline with our western mind. How fast can I cross the finish line? We are an achievement society -- this award, this degree, this certificate. Faster is better. Titles and letters after our name define us and impress others. We have a rational mind and our ego loves to put everything in a tidy box for comfort and control.

But can we ever put any art in a box, in a sash? Sashes show something, certainly not everything, and not always what is most important. A sash is only a sash. The color of a sash does not necessarily make one person more skilled, wise or compassionate than another. A sash received in 4 months vs. 4 years does not necessarily make the better martial artist.

Our sash can become a great teacher if we have the courage to look in its mirror. Do we see comparison and competitiveness with others? Or worse, within ourselves? Are we focused on a fixed goal instead of the journey of tai chi? Are we memorizing forms on the mat and yet not taking the principles of tai chi into our daily lives?

We sometimes focus feverishly on learning the "technical requirements" for our next kyu exam, but what about the "personal characteristics (humility, helpfulness, care of the dojo, nonjudgmental attitude, sincerity) that constitute 50 percent of the test? How often do we say "Help me, I need to learn this form for my test" instead of "I need to be helping other students more." When we advance in rank do we then attend only our own training classes or do we continue to come to the beginners classes to offer back what was so generously given to us.

Sashes create expectations. When gearing up to test, we tend to look to Sensei for more nurturance, structure, and accountability for our development. We somehow expect all of his teachings to revolve around the color of our next sash. But that is an impossible task. Sensei shows us the forms but it is our responsibility to steal his art. Then, with the spirit of mentoring that defines our dojo, advanced sashes are available to pass on their knowledge of the forms to their fellow students.

Sashes have their yin and their yang. They can be good but, in reality they are only external markers. They can give us a sense of accomplishment and completion, a point of focus and motivation, and a series of yardsticks to measure the path. They are a great teacher's aid on the mat, quickly and clearly defining where a student is in their training.

But how do we really measure the depth of our training, the breadth of our commitment and our deeper understanding beyond the form? A teacher and a sash can never do that -- only we as students can. Only we know the true color of our sash.

Tai Chi is not a race for the next color sash. In fact, tai chi is really about slowly letting go of the need to go anywhere, only just returning to the moment and letting the bigger picture take care of itself. Sensei tells us that in the past a martial artist would receive only one belt. The beginning white belt naturally turned black as it gathered the sweat, dirt and blood of hard training over a long period of time. Then it gradually began to unravel until there were no threads left and the person was once again without a belt. Full circle.

There is no finish line. Only just train. If we return to the mat, time and time again, our sashes will naturally and effortlessly turn from one color to the next.