

**“Reflections on the Journey to Black Belt”**  
**An Essay Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements**  
**for 1<sup>st</sup> Degree Black Belt, Community Fitness Martial Arts**  
**by**  
**Ben Myers, 1<sup>st</sup> Gup**

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In my opinion, attaining the black belt level requires a journey of the mind and a test of the spirit. My journey began in the fall of 2004 when I decided that the best way to support my then five year old son in his introductory martial arts class was to put on the Gi and try out something new by his side. Aside from helping my son, my personal goals were simple: exercise, lose weight, relieve stress, and progress as far as my skills and limitations would allow.

Those goals haven't changed, but as I moved up through the ranks, I also came to realize that the belt itself is not what's important, but how we've succeeded in the journey thus far. In my case, there have been several “tests of the spirit” including a torn anterior cruciate ligament of the right knee, bruised ribs, many sprains and strains, and my current injury – a fractured sternum. At the beginning of my white belt training, when I hurt my knee, I had doubts about whether I was too old to start martial arts and whether I should train more casually or less frequently. By that time, however, martial arts had already begun to fill a void in my life that I can't exactly define. Perhaps it was the need for a personal challenge, or the opportunity to forestall a mid-life crisis in a positive way. Regardless, I came to realize that to participate fully in the martial arts as an adult requires a commitment: mentally, physically, and spiritually. I also learned that if the mind remains eager, open, determined, goal-oriented, and most important, willing to learn, the body will eventually follow regardless of what obstacles lay in wait. And I believe it is in the learning and understanding that comes from persevering through adversities such as injury that is perhaps just as much of a test for a black belt attitude as anything else.

When discussing the “meaning” of a black belt, I think it's helpful to first talk about what a black belt “isn't”. Thanks in large part to Hollywood, the media, and to some extent the martial arts community itself, I believe much of the general public, at least in Western society, thinks there's some kind of mystical, transcendental quality behind the black belt or as Black Belt Magazine columnist Dave Lowry put it, an “aura” or “connotation” that invokes terms such as “masterful skill”, “expert” and “extraordinary abilities”. To many, the black belt represents, incorrectly I might add, a pinnacle or “holy grail” of martial arts training, as if there were nothing more to learn once the individual receives his or her black belt. I don't mean to say the black belt shouldn't be viewed as an

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important goal for all martial artists, but to view it as the end of a journey and not the beginning is naïve, misleading, and potentially dangerous.

Rather than use terms like “mastery” and “expert”, which I leave to those very experienced martial artists who have practiced their arts for decades and in some cases, who have gone on to create their own arts, I prefer to think of the black belt level in terms of fluency, of the body and of the mind. For lack of a better analogy, think of martial arts development like learning a new language. We start out with the basic parts of speech, and progress through sentences and learning more terms. We learn to put words and phrases together, studying their context, and we practice writing and speaking the language, until some day we say we’re “fluent”. But, just because after several years of study I may have become fluent in say, French, that doesn’t mean that I have mastered French Literature or even that I have learned most of the language. Like the fluent French student, I believe the black belt has also achieved a level of competency to be fluent in his or her art, and in the case of adults and some children, to be given the privilege to teach their art, but I don’t agree that a new black belt has a right to be called a master of anything, including the basics, because there is simply too much more to learn.

So, what is the meaning of a black belt? First, I agree with the concept that a black belt is a serious student of his or her art, but not in the sense that “serious” only refers to how hard they train, practice their forms, spar, and so on. For the serious student, and therefore the black belt, a martial art is not a hobby or pastime to be scheduled in between the kids’ soccer practice and dance lessons, but rather it is a way of looking at and living life. The black belt’s way is the warrior’s way, and the concepts of “honor”, “respect”, “justice”, “trust”, “discipline”, “courage” and “obligation” that have fallen out of favor in today’s “in your face” pop culture, are just as relevant to the black belt’s success in 2007 as they were in the days of the samurai. In his book, Living the Martial Way, which will be required reading for my students in the future, Sensei Forrest Morgan notes that mastering a martial arts system is not an end in itself but rather is an artificial means toward the true end of mastering The Martial Way. As he explains,

“[T]he individual must be able to subdue the external gratifications of rank, prestige, competitive victory, and ego in general for the truer rewards of personal development. The prospective adherent must realize that The

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Martial Way does not start and end at the door of the training hall. It is a way of life in which every action, in and out of the training hall, is done in the context of warriorship....The Martial Way is a holistic discipline aimed at the pursuit of excellence. Its disciples strive to apply the Way in every vocation, and its adepts tend to be achievers in any field of endeavor. This is what separates The Martial Way from other pursuits and makes it so valuable. Where one may play a sport or have a hobby, one lives The Martial Way.”

While it may be technical proficiency that has defined the black belt for many in Western society, and certainly the black belt must be proficient for how else can he or she pass on their art, I would humbly submit that it is the way in which the black belt lives The Martial Way, and incorporates the core ethical principles in his or her life, that truly defines the meaning of that person’s black belt.

I’ve talked a bit about getting to the black belt and the traits that should be inherent in the black belt practitioner, but what about life after the black belt? Well, to paraphrase another Forrest, “a black belt is as a black belt does”. Mr. Taylor has remarked on several occasions that black belts need to be “known for something”, and they need to be “creators”, meaning that the black belt’s legacy or worth is defined by how he or she betters their art and by the overall contribution that he or she makes to their school, their students, and the community. We all have different strengths and make contributions in different ways, but I would not consider my legacy very worthy if the only thing my students could remember about me years from now was that I could do an awesome break fall!! Clearly, having students trust in you and go on to succeed in the art and in life would be a much better indicator of my worth as a black belt. As black belts and serious students of the martial arts, it is our duty to not only be the best practitioners and teachers we can be, but to also be ambassadors of the martial arts community. Like the boy or girl scout leaving the campsite, we must leave our martial art in a better state than when we found it.

Many of the students at Community Fitness Martial Arts, including my son and me, transferred from another program. It’s one thing to read about The Martial Way and concepts such as honor, respect and discipline, but it wasn’t until I met Kevin Taylor that I saw these principles put to use in a martial arts setting every day,

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every class. Saying “Yes, Sir” and “No, Sir” are not just pleasantries at Community Fitness, and Mr. Taylor instills respect and self-respect in all aspects of the program. He is a patient instructor, and has a way of making people feel good about themselves regardless of how bad a day it had been. He never accepts less than 100% from himself, his instructors, and his students, and he always puts the children first. In short, Kevin has been a great role model and I am extremely lucky to have found Community Fitness at just the right time. I think it’s safe to say that my martial arts career may have ended as a green belt with stripe were it not for Kevin Taylor and Community Fitness.

As a Community Fitness Black Belt, I give my solemn pledge to seek out opportunities to better my school, students, and the martial arts community; to develop my mind, body, and spirit as I continue a lifelong study of the martial arts; to uphold the standards of honesty, integrity, and loyalty; to act in all areas of my life with the honor, courtesy, respect, humility, and dignity worthy of my rank; and to lead by example in all that I do.

Thank you for the honor and privilege of presenting these thoughts on my concept of a black belt. I am deeply indebted to my teacher and friend, Mr. Taylor, who taught me The Martial Way, the Masters and Grandmasters who have supported and guided me in my martial arts journey, and my fellow students, both younger and older, who have inspired and motivated me to approach each training session as if testing were the next day. Finally, and most important, I want to thank my family for their support, understanding and patience, and the sacrifice they’ve made because of my martial arts pursuits. Whether it’s because of training, teaching, tournaments, demos, or administrative work on the computer, they lost their father and husband for significant periods of time while I have been on this journey, and it’s to them that I dedicate the black belt I hope I’m fortunate enough to receive. Thank you – Ko Map Seup Ni Da.

Respectfully submitted,



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Benjamin I. Myers  
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