

## The Top Five Grading Issues

### Things to think about on your journey

Over the years I have had the honour and privilege to participate in many martial arts gradings, both as a candidate and a grading board member. Often a grading provides the opportunity to push yourself to your personal limits in many ways and to demonstrate your technical, emotional, physical, and cognitive competence.



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Many times I have noticed that practitioners of different arts identify themselves as **being** a “blue, brown, or black belt” when in fact they are merely practicing at a given level at a given time. When this seemingly inconsequential identification is made (I am a blue belt) it makes it very difficult for a student to hear constructive and corrective comments. If a student believes that they **“are”** a blue belt or a black belt, for example, any criticism of technique, intention, or spirit can feel like a direct and personal attack.

Most often when we feel a direct personal attack we naturally push back and disregard any constructive comments. Some would say this is a stubborn display or ego getting in the way of learning but I think it also includes an attachment with “being a thing” when we are just beings having an experience.

If, in fact, I accept that I am a unique person who is studying in the martial arts and doing the best I can each day then it is possible to hear constructive criticism and use it to fuel my personal growth and development.

All of that being said, I would like to share with you some common issues that students struggle with in their grading experience. These observations are not from a single grading but are an amalgam of thoughts base on observing many Black Belt gradings, in a variety of arts, over the years.

As a reminder, **we practice the combat arts!** In some systems that is expressed in a very harsh and definitive way. In other systems the practice is more suggestive of the final outcome and may be considered “softer”. In any event it is not the final expression that is of paramount importance but the motivation behind the practice that gives teeth to the combat arts. So, consider why you train, consider why you submit to gradings, and consider what your core motivation is behind your participation in the martial arts.

Ultimately, as we train in the martial arts we continue to change, grow, develop, and understand more deeply, all the way to our final day.

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The following observations may appear simple on first reading but consider them deeply because they continue to show up in gradings where students (beginners and advanced) struggle and fail to demonstrate their full potential.

#### Get off the direct line of attack:

This can be expressed  
aggressor kicking  
defense is ... well,

in many different ways but if you consider an  
punching or trying to throwing you, the best  
“don't be there”.



On one level we can remove ourselves from a  
challenging situation, move to the other side of  
the street and just move on. The concept is  
also valid in the heat of combat and is in  
fact a fundamental principle. When an  
attack is launched by the aggressor it is

best to be out of the direct line of fire. Many styles use  
linear diagonal steps or circular steps and motions to move out of  
the way but the common element here is moving “off the line of attack” or  
out of range in some way.

By moving out of the way we accomplish a variety of positive goals, first we don't take the full force of the aggressor's attack. Second, we are likely to cause physical and mental unbalance for the aggressor because they have missed their target. Third, we are in a more advantageous position than we were moments before and we have time to respond.

*What are you talking about!!! Of course we know we should get out of the way!!! I learned that in White Belt !!!!!*

Well, I am not sure about that. The number of times I have seen the demonstration of a “technique” (hip throw or leg sweep, for example), with little understanding of the dynamic nature of the attack launched by the aggressor clearly indicates a missed understanding of the martial aspect of the arts.

Remember the technique (response) does not exist in isolation from the energy of the aggressor's attack. The two events together form a unique convergence of principles. The technique in the absence of the attack is only half the story and the technique with a lack of awareness or disregard for the other half of the story is fool hearty or contrived.

When an aggressor launches an attack you are instantly put into a relationship with that aggressive intention. Your job is to manage the relationship in a way that yields the best outcome. So, I would suggest that standing rigidly in one place and taking the full force of the attack while thinking about your counter attack is a very poor way to manage that relationship.

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As obvious and basic as this seems to be, this lack of fundamental understanding shows up in almost every grading, at some point.

### Breakfalls (Ukimi)

Although, I have heard the argument that in the early history of the throwing arts there was not much attention given to being competent at falling or being thrown. Ok, that may have been true in the distant past but today we want to train with our partners and continue to learn over a long and productive lifetime.

Learning to fall safely will enhance your ability to understand and learn the intricate details of a technique. It will help your partner to learn more easily and safely, and it will ensure your training longevity.

If you are fearful of falling you will likely cling onto your partner as you are being thrown. You will hamper their learning and your rigid fear will likely cause injury to you or your partner.

On the other hand, if you don't care about your partner's capacity to fall safely then it reflects on your personal character and your relationship to others in the dojo.

Throwing and being thrown allows for the full range of learning about a technique. If you do not regularly practice breakfalls and rolls you will only be seeing a small part of the full picture.

If you are going to include throwing techniques in your training then it is imperative that you and your training partners are skilled at rolling and falling safely. If you choose to neglect this training opportunity you will likely be injured and you will likely demonstrate a less than full understanding of throwing and balance breaking techniques.



### Striking Targets and Techniques (Atemi)

Many of the martial arts utilize striking techniques of some sort. Some styles emphasize legs others emphasize arms and hands and others utilize striking with other body parts or weapons.

Without question those who train their striking techniques by directly targeting the body with control are most effective. That is to say, if you train by stomping on the ground or punching to the left or right of your training partner you are missing the point. In a stressful confrontation you will respond the way you train so why train to punch off target or



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kick off target. This is an example of removing the teeth from a martial art.

By targeting off the mark you rob yourself of the opportunity to learn distance, timing, power, control, and balance to name a few. Additionally, your partner is robbed of the opportunity to learn how to evade, block, parry, judge range, and more.

Now don't get me wrong I am not saying to knock your partner down with every punch or break the bones in his feet as you are practicing your escape from a bear hug but you do have to aim for the target, with power and control. Knowing the location of the correct target is a whole other topic that includes an in-depth knowledge of human anatomy but none of it makes any sense if you punch or kick off into the wild blue yonder.

Practitioners working primarily in the striking arts spend hours and hours focusing maximum power to a point of contact. The muscles remember the proper motion, trajectory, target, acceleration, and penetration through continued training. If your training includes intentionally missing the target then you will be very surprised if you ever need those skills for real.

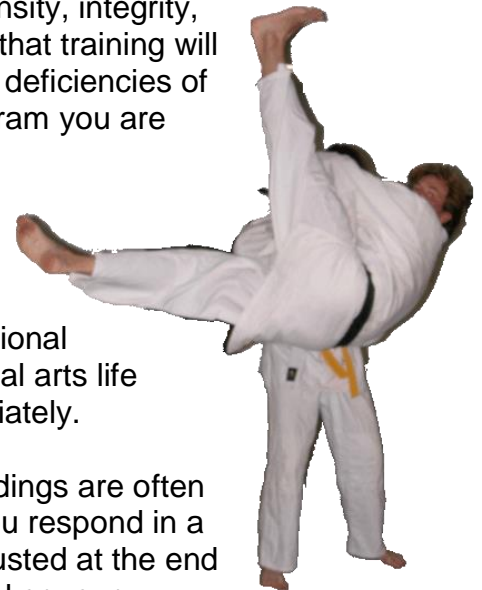
### Conditioning

So, when should we start training for a Black Belt grading? When should we really get serious ... one or two weeks before the grading or perhaps six months?

The truth is you started training for your black belt when you had your very first class. That is why it is so important that you train with intensity, integrity, compassion, and dedication **from day one**. Yes, it is true that training will intensify before gradings but that is not to make up for the deficiencies of the past but to enhance an already excellent training program you are involved in.

That is to say, our normal training routine should include regular sleep, balanced and conscious eating, and the avoidance of drugs or alcohol. Martial art training is a life style that includes attending to physical, mental, and emotional conditioning at all times, and not just for the grading. Martial arts life style enhances our lives in many ways, if we train appropriately.

In addition to demonstration of technical competence, gradings are often intended to put you under load so that you will see how you respond in a stressful and taxing environment. It is normal to feel exhausted at the end of your grading. If by contrast, you find that you are winded or your muscles are cramping early in your demonstration .... there is a problem. Your regular training has not adequately prepared you for your grading requirements. Gradings are much more than just demonstrating technical competence with a punch or throw. The quality of your grading experience is directly connected to



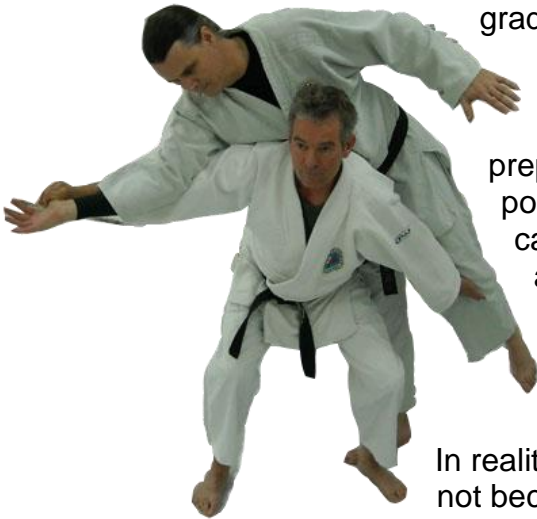
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the quality and intensity of your regular training. Your overall performance can tell the grading board much about your training program, your teachers, your training partners, your attitude, and your martial spirit.

### Spirit-Heart-Tenacity

I think we all know that that training in a martial art suggests a particular quality or strength that allows us to push through adversity. This is a life skill that we cultivate through regular training. This quality goes by many names but is a result of dedication, determination, compassion for self and others, and passion to make a difference. When this quality is missing you dishonour your teachers, the grading board, and most importantly yourself.



Some students demonstrate fear of judgment, fear of failure, or fear of success when they are poorly prepared. In addition they do not do the best that they possibly can in their grading demonstration. I have seen candidates fail because they encountered some adversity in the grading and they just gave up. Perhaps they struggled with a throw or a lock and they just said to themselves *"this is too hard ... I can't do this ... I am not good enough"*.

In reality the student has defeated themselves and they fail, not because the grading board was too hard on them but because they were afraid to commit fully and give their all.

*This kind of defeated, victim mentality has no place in the martial arts!*

The solution is training. Regular training turns us away from self-deprecating thoughts and resolves feelings of inadequacy, fear, and judgment. When we do the best we can there is no question about our passion. We are able to take constructive suggestions in stride and we learn that pushing through adversity often yields very positive learning experiences and goal achievement.

So, we are back to the idea that the quality of your grading experience is directly related to the quality of your regular training. Deciding to attend a grading and just **"give it a shot"** when you have not trained regularly is likely to provide disappointing results and that should not be surprising to you. This kind of behaviour demonstrates a cavalier attitude that is not consistent with high levels of martial discipline and personal development.

**Questions or Comments**  
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