

ETIQUETTE WITHIN THE DOJO SOCIETY

In any karate dojo, one of the most important rules of etiquette is behavior.

Since by nature we all learn by trial and error, many things will be forgiven in a dojo, but bad behaviour is definitely not one of them.

This rule applies to every student within the dojo society regardless of their rank, in fact the higher the rank, the less tolerance there is for any breach of etiquette what so ever. Starting with the "sensei" or "teacher" down through the "sempai's" or "assistants" in the black belt ranks, and then finally through the "kyu" or coloured belt ranks, known as "kohai" it is the responsibility of each student to make sure that those who follow in their footsteps, do so with the highest possible level of personal behaviour.

It is very important to remember, however, that correction for acts of misbehaviour always come from the top down, not the bottom up.

Entering the dojo;

The first lesson you will ever learn once you have been accepted into any karate school is how to enter and exit the "dojo" or "training hall" properly.

Prior to entering the dojo for the first time a senior student or "Sempai" will usually instruct you in the art of "bowing in". Every karate dojo in the world has a shrine at the designated "front" of the dojo, this is referred to as the "Shomen" and regardless of how many times you enter or leave the dojo during the course of your daily training, you must always bow to the "Shomen" first. This is done by standing at the dojo entrance and facing towards the "Shomen", be sure that your feet are together, keep your legs straight, your arms should be at your sides and touching the sides of your thighs, your hands should be open and facing downward along the seam of your gi with your fingers and thumb together. To bow, bend forward at the waist to about 45 degrees, keep your eyes looking downward and do not let your arms move or leave your side, pause for a second at the bottom of the bow then unbend. The entire bow should take only a few seconds, but it should be performed with the utmost courtesy and respect.

Should you ever find yourself entering or leaving the dojo with a large group of students, do not push or shove, but instead patiently wait your turn. If the opportunity presents its self always allow those senior students in the group to enter or exit the dojo first, since in a karate dojo everything is dictated by your rank within the dojo society.

Arriving late;

In a karate dojo, as is it is in life, it is very bad manners to be late.

Sometimes, however, this may be unavoidable, in which case you will be required to bow in quietly and then kneel in seiza just to one side of the dojo entrance. If you arrive while everyone else is also kneeling in seiza or reciting the dojo kun, do not make any noise what so ever, just wait quietly until the sensei or senior instructor acknowledges you and invites you to join the class.

This may not happen right away, and it is important to remember that you must remain kneeling where you are until you're invited in, at which time you may be asked to perform some task as a penance for being late.

Once you are invited to join the class, you must first bow while still kneeling, then get up quickly and join the class by finding a place in the last row unless some other space is indicated to you. This may or may not be your normal place of rank within that particular class, but as I mentioned earlier, in a karate dojo as in life, arriving late usually requires you to pay a price for your tardiness.

The line up;

At the beginning of each class you will hear the most senior student present call, "line up".

Upon hearing this command you must move quickly and quietly to stand in "heisoku dachi" or "informal stance" at your appropriate place of rank within that particular class. Depending on the size of the class you will often find that your place within the rank of students will vary from class to class.

This is to be expected since the more senior students there are in a class, the further down the line you will be.

The line up is done in rank order from right to left facing the "Shomen" or the "front" of the dojo. As a result unless you are actually teaching the class, you will always have a more senior student to your immediate right, this could even be a student who wears the same colour of belt as you, but who would have achieved that rank before you did.

To your immediate left you will then find a student of similar or lesser rank and so on down the line until finally at the end of the line you will find the newest or most junior student in the class. If you are ever required to start a new row due to the number of students ahead of you, be sure to start the row by standing behind the student on the extreme right end of the line in front of you, be sure that the line you start is of the same width as those in front of you, and that you are lined up directly behind the student in front of you.

The standing bow;

The single most important technique in Shotokan karate is the bow.

The standing bow for example, is used not only to bow into and out of the dojo at the beginning or end of each class, but it is also used for example when bowing to another student, or an instructor before performing any form of partner training. The standing bow is also performed prior to the beginning of each kata, and at the end of each kata, and it must never be omitted or performed casually as it is extremely important that all of your karate training and all of your katas begin and end with courtesy. Starting from a "heiko dachi" or "ready stance" bring your feet together while at the same time bringing your hands to your sides so you are now in "heisoku dachi" or "informal attention stance" remember, when bowing bend forward at the waist to about 45 degrees without letting your arms move or leave your side, pause for a second, then unbend. The entire bow should take only a few seconds, but it should always be performed with the utmost courtesy and respect.

If you find yourself bowing to a partner always keep your eyes focused on theirs, however, when bowing to your sensei or to the Shomen always be sure that your eyes are looking downward.

Seiza;

The "seiza" or "kneeling position" while a very common occurrence, is used most often at the beginning and the end of each class, or when you are instructed to sit and watch a demonstration of some kind.

To get into the seiza position from an attention stance, bend down on the balls of both feet then first place your left knee on the ground, then your right knee, then sit down and tuck your feet underneath you. Be sure and always keep your back straight and your shoulders relaxed when sitting in seiza and your knees should be aligned with, but not touching, the knees of the person on your right or your left. Rest your open hands comfortably on the upper portion of your thighs with your fingers and thumb together and pointed slightly inward. Proper posture in seiza is very important, and for anatomical reasons male students should have about a 12 inch to 14 inch width between their knees, while female students should have their knees together.

Bowing in seiza;

At the beginning of each class prior and to any form of training, the entire class will kneel in the seiza position and bow in turn to the Shomen and then to the sensei.

The first bow is to the Shomen and the shrine at the front of the dojo. This is done in rank order at the command, "Shomen ni rei" this first bow is done as a sign of deep respect to the memory of the long line of Masters and Sensei who came before you and who in turn passed the art of Shotokan karate down to your sensei.

This second bow is to your sensei. This is done in rank order at the command, "Sensei ni rei" this done as a sign of deep respect to your sensei without whom there would be no dojo for you to train in and therefore no one who could pass the art of karate on to you.

In return the sensei bows to the entire class as a sign of deep respect to the students who come to train, because without students to teach there would be no one for the sensei to pass his or her knowledge on to.

When you are bowing to either the Shomen or to your sensei you will either remain respectfully silent, or as is the practice in many dojos, it is permissible to say "onegaishimas" which roughly translated means "please teach me".

To perform a bow from the seiza position first move your left hand from your left thigh and on to the floor about two hand lengths out in front of your left knee with your finger tips pointed inward, then, slightly behind in time, move your right hand from your right thigh and on to the floor about two hand lengths out in front of your right knee with your finger tips pointed inward so that your right hand is facing your left hand so that your and your index fingers are slightly touching. Now without letting your elbows touch the floor lean forward and bow your head stopping this motion just short of touching the back of both your hands.

The bow is done entirely from the waist and since it is a more formal way of bowing you should pause for slightly longer than you do when performing a standing bow. When coming up from the bow slide your hands back to their starting position in reverse order, that is your right hand first followed by your left hand and then sit up straight in a relaxed posture.

Respect by all students regardless of their rank for the past, the present, and the future is the best way of assuring that the art of Shotokan karate will be spread in tact to the next generation.

Mokusoh;

This is the command to meditate.

When "mokusoh" is called, you must close your eyes, lower your gaze, tuck your chin in towards your chest, relax and quietly begin taking long slow breaths in through your nose and out through your mouth. It is important to learn to breath not just with the upper portion of your lungs but also from your lower abdomen or "hara" as the Japanese call it. Your "hara" is the lowest part of your abdomen and is located approximately three fingers widths below your navel. By learning to breath from here you will develop greater power and speed as your karate training progresses. It is during this meditative process that you want to "quiet your mind" and to try and rid yourself of all thoughts unrelated to your karate training, you must seek to find an inner sense of peace, or a relaxed state of being, this will help you to stay focused through out the training that is about to begin.

If you use the time spent in "mokusoh" to properly focus your mind prior to each class, you will over time in all likelihood notice a definite increase in the quality of your techniques.

Mokusoh yame;

This is the command to stop meditating.

When "mokusoh yame" is called open your eyes immediately and sit up straight. When your turn comes quickly rise up by starting with your right foot, then your left foot and stand in "heiko dachi" or "ready stance" and await further instructions. It is usually at this time that the sensei or a sempai will lead the class in the "dojo kun" or dojo creed.

Student creed;

After the ritual of bowing and mokusoh is complete in many karate dojos the class will recite the "dojo kun" or "dojo creed".

The "dojo kun" can best be described as "a verbal affirmation" of certain principles or truths. You must make a point to learn your dojo's creed as soon as possible and when reciting it always try and speak it in unison with the other students, but never so loudly that your own voice stands out from all the rest. It is important that you believe in what you say, and you must then use this belief to help you do your very best, not only in the training that lies ahead but also in your daily life outside of the dojo.

Etiquette during class;

Once the training starts it is very important to put aside all unrelated thoughts.

You must make every effort to only concentrate on the specific task at hand and especially on improving the quality of your own techniques. On "seeing" what can not be seen. In the beginning this will be a very hard concept for you to grasp but you must push yourself both physical as well as mentally if your karate is ever going to improve. In short, "always do your best". In fact to do otherwise would be disrespectful not only to yourself, but also to your classmates and your instructor who have come to train with you. When moving from one area of the dojo to another always do it quickly and quietly. When changing positions in line be sure not to cut through the lines or to pass in front of anyone else, instead go behind and around them. Whenever you watch a demonstration, do so respectfully and silently, without leaning on the walls or doing anything that would distract others. If you have a questions about any of the techniques that are being taught during class never call out, instead always raise you hand and wait to be acknowledged, then ask your question in the politest possible terms. When training with a partner always be sure and bow properly before you begin and after you finish your training together. This applies every time you change partners regardless of their rank.

Kiai;

Sooner or later you will learn to perform a "kiai" or "spirit cry".

A kiai is not unique to karate, but it is a sound that will be unique to each individual student. This sound does not come from the throat, but instead it originates deep in your abdomen or "tanden" and is usually expressed during the maximum point of attack or defence in all Shotokan katas. In the beginning most students will simply say the word "kiai" but in fact "kiai" is simply a Japanese word that when translated into English literally means, "yell". So what is a kiai? My personal definition of a kiai is as follows : "a kiai is a unique, personal vocalization, brought about by a strong emotional feeling ." In karate a kiai is most often used at the moment when the students maximum physical, mental and or spiritual power is required in combination with a specific movement or technique. What you will learn to do over the course of your training, is to draw on all your mental, physical and spiritual energy and focus and release this energy for maximum power and effect at the appropriate moment in your kata or during class. Don't be afraid to kiai loudly. The overall tone of a class is often set by the level of spirit in the class, which can often be raised with a strong kiai on your part. So you if you have a strong kiai it will often spur others to work harder as well. On the other hand, if your spirit is poor, or your kiai weak, you might actually bring down the class spirit, so always do your very best. In the end your own personal kiai will be as unique as you are, never be embarrassed by what you think it sounds like, if there is spirit and conviction in your actions then your kiai will always be strong.

Kata;

If basic techniques are the "heart" of Shotokan karate then most assuredly kata is the "soul" of Shotokan karate.

Just what is kata?

“ kata is a series of **pre-determined defensive and offensive** movements and techniques that have been handed down from past masters as a means of helping a student to understand, and cope with, their personal physical limitations, while at the same time helping the student to develop a strong spirit, and a peaceful mind through the art of karate.”

In the end kata is all about control - physical, mental, and spiritual control.

If you do kata often enough you will finally come to understand what this means. So how often is often enough? If you need to ask you will never find the answer.

The end of class;

Often this comes all to soon.

When your class is at an end and “Line Up!” is called once again, be sure and quickly line up in the same manner and rank order as you were at the start of your class. Finish as you started, with a positive attitude and a willing desire to always do your best no matter what lies ahead. It is very important that the lessons you learn at each class leave the dojo with you. How you use and apply these lessons in your everyday life is up to you, but your progress depends on you remembering them and building upon them. Upon instruction come to attention, and then bow, after the final bow to the Shomen and the sensei students will often say “arigato gozaimashita”, which means “thank you very much” or simply say “thank you” in English in either case it is the level of gratitude is important. In truth "class" never ends.

Clean up;

After each class there is usually some cleaning required in the dojo.

Try and take an active part rather than sit back and watch others do the work.

In many dojos these tasks are often performed by the most senior students since they know that respect for the dojo or training hall is just as important as respect for your teachers and fellow students.

Exiting the dojo;

When your class is finished be sure that you exit the dojo in the same manner as you entered it, with courtesy and respect.

Once again this is done by standing so you are facing the front or "Shomen", be sure that your feet are together, keep your legs straight, keep your arms at your sides with your hands open and facing downward along the seam of your gi and with your fingers and thumb together. To bow, bend forward at the waist to about 45 degrees, with your eyes looking downward and without letting your arms leave your side, pause for a second then unbend. The entire bow should take only a few seconds but it should be performed with the utmost courtesy and respect.