



A Question of Etiquette

I was prompted to write this article for the benefit of those who are not sure of what is right or what is wrong with regards to the etiquette that is used in a karate dojo. Whilst much of the information below is well known and some may be obvious, I hope it will give you, the reader, a little more insight to some of the grey areas of etiquette. . I hope you will find this both informative and interesting

The Dogi

Your uniform must always be clean, that is as white as you can get it, tidy and without unnecessary creases. I have seen some interesting colours of grey that some people call “white”.

When you interact with other dojo members the last thing they want is to train with someone whose dogi is unclean, disheveled and unpleasant smelling. I remember one incident with a leading Japanese Shotokan instructor, who walked, up to a student whose dogi was less than white. He then proceeded to sniff the student’s dogi and announce the words very loudly “Stinku, must wash dogi and self” in front of every one in the dojo, much to the embarrassment of the student in question.

I sometimes see students with their dogi done up the wrong way around, it should always be the left side on the outside. The only time that Japanese attire is worn the opposite way is at a funeral. There is only one way to tie the musubi (knot) on your obi (belt) and that is to start from the left. If you are not sure ask your Sensei.

The dogi length is also important the trousers must be no shorter than below the knee or not so long that they drag behind on the floor. The jacket sleeves must be no shorter than the elbow and no longer than the wrists. I remember seeing the extra long dogis that used to drag around the floor and made the hands disappear worn by some competitors in my old W.U.K.O days. I used to wonder whether the dogi was worn this way deliberately to disguise bad technique.

The Rei (bow)

You should always bow when you enter and leave the dojo. Students new to karate find this an unusual requirement; I tell my new members it’s a good way of settling the mind for the task that is ahead. The bow at the entrance to the dojo for me reminds me to leave all my other life’s concerns and thoughts outside. It’s a mental signal to think only about training and concentrate on what’s to come.

Seiza (formal kneeling)

When in the formal kneeling position, the knees should be no more than two fists apart otherwise the hips become tilted which does not allow full use of the diaphragm for mokuso. Which in turn will

inhibit your breathing and distract the calming of mind thought processes?

The feet should be tucked under the buttocks with only the big toes crossed left on top of right (The feet flat for Judo and crossed for Aikido). Hands placed open on your thighs. When you bow both hands come together to form a triangle on the floor which your face is placed over. Some styles, when dropping into seiza, drop the left knee first and then the right and the same with the bow, left hand first then the right. This action comes from the Samurai where the swords are drawn from the left side, therefore leaving the right hand free if attacked when bowing.

In The Dojo

When you are sitting down in the dojo, you should sit in either seiza or anza (legs crossed as in front). You should not stretch out your legs in front of you, and never lean against the wall at anytime, as to do so is considered the height of disrespect (appearing lazy in Japanese eyes). I know of an American student who was knocked unconscious in Japan for doing such a thing by the Sensei of the dojo. After being asked "do you lean against the wall in your church? Well do not lean against the wall in my church". You can guess the rest!

When greeting fellow students in the dojo, a bow or handshake will suffice, so no over exuberant greetings or other expressions of affection. If when you are training with someone, try not to order your partner around, always ask politely and keep hand movements small and gentle, otherwise is deemed threatening in Japan.

Zori (dojo slippers) should be worn from the changing area to the edge of the mat to keep the training area as clean as possible, you will often see people walk from the changing room to the dojo in bare feet and then step on the mat, a very big taboo.

If you arrive late for training kneel at the edge of the training area and await the signal to enter from the Sensei, then proceed to the back of the group, (going around the edge and not in front of others) to stand next to the most junior grade, when a suitable time arrives you may move to stand in your usual position.

Summary

These are just some of the more normal forms of etiquette I have become aware of over the last few years. Although some may seem strange to European, thought they are part of the tradition of the dojo.

To fully appreciate your chosen martial art, and experience some of it's culture, it is necessary to treat its tradition with respect, as they say "....when in Rome..."

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