

Seirin Dojo Training F.A.Q. (Frequently Asked Questions)

Q. I have a friend who might be interested, can I just bring him/her?

A. No. Please ask the instructor when an appropriate time would be to bring your friend. To save embarrassment, please do not just show up to class with friends interested in training without first alerting the instructor.

Q. If it's a really old martial art, how is it still useful?

A. The world changes, but people stay the same. We do train with a lot of traditional weapons that you're not likely to encounter today, but the things you learn from using them are still relevant. Defending yourself against a person with a baseball bat, stick, or barstool uses the same principles as defending against a sword, short staff or unarmed attacker. We concentrate on learning why we do things, on the core principles of each technique, so that we don't rely on set forms, but instead on our own experience, intuition and ability to improvise.

Q. Do I have to be physically fit in order to train?

A. No. You do not have to be physically fit to start training with us. If you're unfit to start with, you'll get fitter the more you turn up. If you haven't done any exercise for a long time, or you have a medical condition that may affect your ability to do a martial art, then please consult with your doctor beforehand. Feel free to turn up and watch a class, and to talk with the instructors to get a feel for what it's all about, and to get their experiences of teaching the wide variety of people we've had through our doors. One other thing - it is a common misconception that martial arts training serves as a solid method of improving one's overall level of physical fitness. Health clubs better serve those who are solely looking to train in martial arts as a means to increase their level of fitness. Fitness training requires constant and consistent physical methods over a duration of time to really become effective. Martial arts training is rarely a full 90 minute workout from start to end, where one can sustain a high level of aerobic exercise needed to increase the fitness level.

Q. Who turns up to these classes? Will I be really bad compared to others? Will I hold others back?

A. Everyone starts somewhere, and everyone feels like they're terrible at it when they first start. It's true of anything, not just martial arts. The truth is, we're all learning - you never stop. Some people in the class have been training in the martial arts for over thirty years, others might be on their first lesson. What matters is that if you turn up and genuinely want to learn things, then we'll welcome you. If you're partnered with someone who seems better than you, they'll be more than willing to help you. Everyone in the class benefits by helping others to improve.

Q. Am I too young to train?

A. Unfortunately, we do not accept students under the age of sixteen. This is for various reasons, including the cost of insurance, and the fact that many aspects of our training carry an increased risk when applied to people whose bodies have not finished growing.

Q. Does the training include forms (Kata), as in Karate?

A. Not quite like those. In the old arts such as ours, 型 Kata are generally performed by two (or more) partners and are quite brief, reflecting the reality of combat encounters. They teach an art's basic concepts: typical attacks and common ways of dealing with them. Kata may also refer to a class or set of 技 Waza (techniques), especially groupings which embody a particular principle or group of related principles. Kata are the starting point for learning the individual arts.

Q. What really distinguishes the 古武道 Kobudo arts taught in the Seirin school from other martial arts?

A. One thing is that as a comprehensive or "total" life-protection system, it does not "specialize" in particular kinds of applications as many arts do. That is, it does not "emphasize" primarily grappling and throwing as in 柔道 Judo; striking and kicking as in 空手道 Karate-do; or any particular weapon as in 剣道 Kendo. Everything is used freely, including unconventional weapons; unconventional applications of common weapons; and concealed weapons. Much more significant, however, is the fact that the physical training is approached via a completely different conceptual paradigm from that of other martial arts. In other systems the focus is on learning particular techniques and applying them against an opponent. In Kobudo study, there is a very different way of viewing one's relationship with the opponent. Just as in a Japanese Zen garden the shapes of the spaces between objects are every bit as important as the nature and positions of the objects themselves in the overall composition, so in our martial art perceiving and controlling the shape of the space between yourself and the opponent is critical to mastery.

One way of thinking about this is that if you try to deal with an opponent's weapon (fist, knife, gun, etc.) the person himself may still kill you. It is more effective to try to control the opponent himself, because then you control the

weapon also; but in that case you still will have a fight on your hands and the outcome is still in doubt. If you control the space your opponent wishes to use, however, he is totally neutralized and all his efforts are ineffective. Another way of expressing the concept is that where other arts tend to operate from left-brain hemisphere processes (linear, logical, focused on performance of technique), Kobudo study draws more on right-brain hemisphere intuition and perception of shape, pattern, and the total context of the situation.

Q. How long does it take to learn these arts?

A. How long do you have? You begin learning effective life-protection principles and skills from the first class, but there is no end to the process, and no end to learning. We are all students, just some of us are a little ahead of the others. Martial arts study is more about the journey, and not the destination.

Q. I have never studied any other martial art, is this a problem or will this hinder me?

A. You do not need to have studied any other martial arts in order to train with us. In fact, our training is probably unlike any other martial arts that you may have studied in the past, so it's best to throw away any preconceived ideas of what the martial arts are about!

Q. What's with all this Japanese? Am I going to have to learn Japanese to train here?

A. As this is a Japanese martial art that we study, knowing about the culture, including the history and language, will greatly help in our learning efforts. Plus, we visit Japan every year and you know what they say - "when in Rome...". It will not hinder you if you do not know a Japanese term or mispronounce a word. We are all here to learn, as long as you keep an open mind and enjoy the training at your own pace, that is all that matters.

Q. I have noticed that many students of the school can do lots of gymnastic and acrobatic maneuvers. Will I get to learn those, and if I can't do them will it hold me back from advancement or learning?

A. Our instructor was a former gymnastics coach and can teach many of the more acrobatic maneuvers correctly. Students will be given an opportunity to learn those if they are interested. Students will not be judged if they cannot perform the more acrobatic maneuvers found in the training. The student doesn't fit the art, the art fits the student.

Q. I am a girl, is this training good for me, can I learn it as well? Or is it just for the male half of the population?

A. It is not at all just a concern of the male population and luckily it never was, not even in Japan. There are many girls and women training in these arts, who are extremely skilled and equally respected. In fact, these arts actually cater more to women than many other arts that are strength/power based. The Japanese are not big people like those of us in the West. It's very rare to see a muscle-bound Japanese guy with no neck walking down the street.

Q. Will I get hurt training?

A. As with any physical activity, there is always the possibility of injury. But that is reduced by the degree of care taken in instruction at the school. No student is ever asked to do something they can't or don't want to do because it is beyond their ability level at the time. The students, and instructors, are responsible for each other's safety while training, and consistently meet that responsibility. There is contact involved in this martial art, so it is not like point Karate where you don't actually touch your opponent.

Q. Do you do sparring?

A. Sort of. How about "yes and no". We feel it is important that you know what it really feels like to get hit and how difficult it can be to execute what you've learned in this realm. If you've never been in a fight, this is a good training ground to understand what can happen and why you should or should not do something in a given situation. Too many people get overconfident that they are training in martial arts and think they are invincible. Additionally, how do you know that you can really handle a Judo throw or a fast series of kicks and punches unless you've been there? Therefore, we feel that sparring is an important aspect of your training and we do incorporate sparring to a degree in our training. We refer to our sparring as "乱取 Randori", where we control the type of attack, but allow the student the freedom to respond. If we just went at it in a sort of controlled freeform sparring, people would get broken up, as in broken limbs, torn ligaments, etc. We do however "go all out" at certain levels, and when we knife fight. Experience is a great teacher.

Q. Do you offer Beginners, Intermediate and Advanced classes?

A. We take a different approach than most of the schools here in the United States. We teach our classes like they are taught in Japan. That method is that everyone is part of the same class. Thus, it is possible for you to be training with someone who just started and someone who is a black belt. What this does is that it gives you a chance to train with people of all abilities. In this art we all have something to teach each other. Never be intimidated that the person you're working with has more experience than you. You'd be surprised at the number of people in martial arts who can have

difficulty when a monkey wrench is thrown into their training. Furthermore, it is always good to train with people of all sizes, shapes and abilities to better round out your training. Don't be intimidated, we typically take beginners and have them learn some basic moves for part of the class with an advanced person and then bring them back to the whole class so that they are part of the action. This way you get training on two levels. One for your beginning level and one to plant a seed in your mind that will grow when your abilities do. From time to time the instructor will limit the training to the overall level of students in that particular class. For example, if there are more lower levels than higher levels in a given class, the instructor may go over material more relevant to the lower level, but show the higher level students ways to improve on the techniques in a way that is more fitting their level.

Q. How long will it take me to become a black belt?

A. First, let's explain here that the Black Belt is not some coveted item of worship in classical arts that it is in modern martial arts. Black Belt means "beginning student" from a certain perspective. It means that the student has learned the basic fundamentals and is now ready to begin putting them together and learn the more advanced lessons of the arts. This really is a case-by-case basis as everyone learns at a different rate. Typically you can expect that to be around 2.5-3 years but it requires that the student attend classes regularly. We do not hand out rank like candy, you will have to earn it like everyone else. We are not interested in the quantity of students but rather in the quality of what they know.

Q. I love the training so far, but have fallen on some hard financial times and do not wish to quit training, is there anything I can do?

A. Of course. This is always a case-by-case basis, but if the student is diligent, polite, respectful and trains hard, arrangements can always be made. We're all human, and these sorts of things happen to us all. We expressly do not force our students to sign stupid contracts in order to train because we know life can throw us curve balls from time to time. If one is truly serious about learning the art and is committed, something can always be worked out. That action of making students sign a contract by modern martial arts schools signifies a flat out poor instructor and low quality of training. Someone who teaches martial arts as a livelihood is bound to make money-oriented and business savvy moves that will adversely affect the student and the training. Beware.

Q. I have read that the school takes a small group to Japan each year. How do I get in on that action?

A. Easy. Join the school, reach at least the rank of 五級 5th Kyu, and then sign up as early as possible and save your pennies! A lower ranked student will learn much, but someone who is higher ranked will be poised to gain much more, as the training in Japan is much more intense and geared towards more experienced students. For some people, going to Japan is a once in a lifetime experience. We want to make sure that they get the most out of that experience.