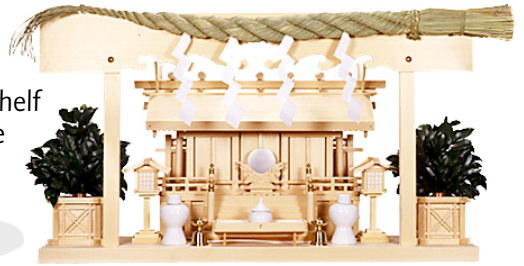


神座 The Kamiza

If you have ever been inside a traditional Japanese martial arts school or Japanese home, you may wonder what that interesting looking shelf in the center of the room is all about, and just why do people bow to it. The 神座 Kamiza (literally “spirit seat”) is a focal point in most Japanese 道場 Dojo and homes. The 神棚 Kamidana is an actual shelf that holds a shrine and other items related to the Kamiza. The 神 Kami is a term used to describe the deities found in the native Japanese religion of 神道 Shinto. So the term “Kamiza” means “a place for the Kami to reside”. It is a small shrine that is used to signify a place of reverence, purity, and respect. In addition to its specific application to the shrine itself, Kamiza also has a broader meaning of “seat of honor”. Another important facet of the Kamidana is that when found in homes, it represents the worship of one’s ancestors. “Worship” is used lightly here; think of it as more of a respect toward one’s ancestors. In a martial arts Dojo, we think of it as respect of heritage of our art and a way to pay homage to the current generation 宗家 Soke (“headmaster”, “generation steward”, or “grandmaster”) and the previous generation Soke. So looking at it in this way, there does not have to be any religious elements imposed. Think of it as a Japanese cultural icon. We do not “pray” to any “gods” in our training, and we are not supplanting any religion with those found in Shinto or any other Japanese philosophy.



When students bow to the Kamidana at the beginning and end of a training session, they are displaying respect to the heritage of their art. It is possible that Westerners may have difficulties with the idea of bowing, especially to objects or inanimate things. However, to follow a traditional Way requires an attitude of open-mindedness. Bowing to the Kamidana is not a sign of religious significance or submission; it is a reminder of an obligation voluntarily being taken over. The small shrine in the school is there because it represents something spiritual, whatever the belief is. Why we bow and which religion we believe in or practice is our own business (your own business). We use the Shinto style Kamidana to remind us of that; that we should train to better ourselves as human beings and not just train to turn ourselves into fighting machines.

So what are all those little things on the shelf, and what do they represent? Some Kamidana are different from others. There are a wide variety of shapes and sizes, as they mimic a real Shinto shrine that may exist somewhere in Japan. Common to all Kamidana is the centerpiece - a shrine (神社 Jinja). This is traditionally made from Japanese Cypress wood, called “Hinoki”. This type of wood comes from a special place in Japan, and is known for its pure and elegant texture and color. Since the shrine represents the heart of family, or heritage of the martial art, it should be displayed on a shelf in a clean place - 5 to 6 feet high on the north wall (or west if north is not suitable) in a bright room. The following are items you will usually see on a Kamidana:

- 神鏡 Shinkyo - This is the mirror that is on the stand. It represents a place for the deity to reside in an actual Shinto shrine. In martial arts, we see that the qualities that are represented on the shrine are actually a reflection of those found within ourselves.
- 神具 Shingu - This is a set of porcelain offering dishes and vases that are usually white.
- 注連縄 Shimenawa - This rope made from rice straw is used to mark the boundary between the sacred and the profane. It keeps impurities out and purifies the space within. The paper thunderbolts hanging from the Shimenawa are called “紙垂 Shide”, and are used to signify a mark of the Kami. Usually this rope hangs from the Kamidana or the actual Jinja itself.
- 神立 Sakaki Date - These are vases that hold leaves from the Sakaki tree, an indigenous Evergreen in Japan. They are symbolic of the presence of nature, and represent our ties to it.
- 水玉 Mizutama - This is a small round vessel that contains fresh water, an offering to the deity.
- 徳利 Tokkuri - These are small covered bottles filled with お神酒 O-miki, a ritually purified 酒 Sake (rice wine).
- 三方 Sanpo - This is a small offering plate, made of wood. The Shingu set sits on this tray. Sometimes this is used, sometimes it is not.

- 篝火 Kagaribi - This is a candle holder, and there will generally be either 3, 5, 7 or 9 of these placed in front of the Jinja and Sanpo.
- 皿 Sara - These are offering saucers that hold お塩 Oshio (salt) and お米 Okome (washed rice).
- 春日灯笼 Kasuga Toro - These are lanterns, usually constructed of wood. They represent the actual stone lanterns found at Shinto shrines in Japan.
- お札 Ofuda - This is a good luck charm that is drawn or written by a Shinto priest, and comes from an actual Shinto shrine in Japan. It is placed inside the Jinja.
- 達磨人形 Daruma Ningyo - Generally the person who administrates the Dojo (head instructor) places a personal object on the Kamidana. Oftentimes we will see a small round and red doll, which represents the founder of Zen Buddhism (Daruma). It represents the setting and achieving of one's goals in Japanese culture. Sometimes you will see only one eye painted on the doll. This means that a goal has been set. When both eyes are drawn in, that means a goal has been achieved. Though Buddhism is a completely different philosophy from the religion of Shinto, the Japanese do not raise issue with these elements sharing the same space as both are widely accepted practices.

The Kamidana can represent, to the martial artist, many important elements. The Sakaki leaves that represent nature also represent life, or something growing. In our training we hope to grow in skills and other areas. The offerings of salt, rice and water can represent the elements needed to sustain life. Just as if our training can help us to protect and sustain our lives and the lives of those around us. And by making an offering, it can symbolize sacrifice or even compromise. A martial artist is willing to sacrifice time, effort, money, energy, etc. in order to gain the knowledge taught inside the school. The fire from the candles can represent the light we give to the world of darkness. The Sake bottles and water bottle can also represent the pure and impure entities that exist within ourselves. By recognizing that the world (and humans) are made up of pure and impure, we can work towards striking a balance in our lives. All of the qualities reside in the reflection we see when we look into the mirror that sits on the shrine. So in a way, the Kamidana can represent a reflection of our true selves.

