

礼法／礼の仕方

Reiho/Rei no Shikata

Bowing Methods/Bowing Etiquette

Class opening and closing ceremonies

It is important that all students understand the formalities of 道場 Dojo (training hall) training, and this is for several reasons. First, we are here to learn more than just martial arts. Without formalities, etiquette, and other aspects we become nothing more than trained, fighting animals. Because of the Japanese language and cultural barriers, it is important to better understand the art, the people and the culture by learning to overcome these barriers through understanding of the formalities. Japanese culture is filled with social pleasantries, polite interactions, ritualistic formalities and respectful etiquette. For us to train in Japanese martial arts, especially ones as old and traditional as the 古流 Koryu (classical, old martial arts) in the Seirin Dojo, it is important to learn the principles, procedures and ceremonies relevant to training in the arts. And second, we strive for creating an authentic training environment and atmosphere, one that mirrors how training is conducted in Japan. As all students are encouraged to train in Japan and at special training events held throughout the world, you will find that knowledge of etiquette and training formalities will not only be helpful, but will be necessary to practice. We will go over the special ceremony used for opening and closing training sessions in a formal Dojo here.

In Japanese culture (and other Asian cultures as well), bowing serves many purposes. First and foremost, it is a simple way to communicate a greeting. The Japanese people are not as “touchy-feely” as we are here in the West. One can imagine a bow as the Japanese equivalent to our Western handshake. Bowing is also a sign of respect for a place of learning, for an instructor, and for fellow martial artists. There are different types of bows used for different occasions, and oftentimes a bow is altered to show more or less respect for the person/place one is bowing to (one may bow slightly lower and longer towards a high ranking teacher versus a same-ranked training partner). We are not Japanese, and as Westerners may find some of these pleasantries to be nothing more than hollow gestures, or useless structure. Below we will explain why we do each bow, and hope to make sense of the bowing methods used in martial arts training.

The 漢字 Kanji (Japanese characters/ideograms) for the terms “Reiho” and “Rei no Shikata” break down like this:

礼 - Rei - Literally “expression of gratitude”. When translated it takes the meaning of “bow/salute”.

法 - Ho/Po - method, law, rule, principle, system

礼の仕方 - Rei no Shikata - “way of bowing”. “Shikata” means “way of” or “direction of doing”

Bowing in

Upon entering the Dojo, all persons involved in the training session perform a 自然礼 Shizen Rei (standing bow). This includes all students and instructors, and is a show of respect for the training hall. If there is a 上座 Kamiza (lit. “seat of the spirit” - a shrine) in the training area, the bow is to be made facing it. This bow made when entering and leaving the training hall is referred to as a 道場礼 Dojo Rei. Students are encouraged to enter the training area prior to the start of the training session. This time can be used to perform stretching or warm up exercises, prepare for the training or to simply talk amongst other 武友 Buyu (“martial friends”, classmates). Trainees are not permitted to train with a partner in the training area unless a licensed instructor or appointed assistant instructor is present.

When training begins

1. The call of 並ぶ “Narabu” (line up) will be made and all students will then line up left to right facing the Kamiza according to their rank. Also note that students are encouraged to line up prior to the instructor asking them to do so, as a sign of respect and preparedness for the training session.

2. Standing in 自然体 Shizen Tai (natural standing posture), begin to relax, breathing naturally and clear your mind of any distractions. The lead instructor will then kneel into 正座の構え Seiza no Kamae (traditional kneeling posture), with students following. There is a very particular way that we are to move into this traditional, seated position. If the student is already sitting in Seiza, it is not necessary to stand back up and then sit back down. When moving to the Seiza position, always move the left foot down to the knee first, followed by the right knee. Remain on the toes briefly before sitting down with the toes flat underneath you. The reason for this is for constant preparedness - in older times, a sword

was oftentimes worn on the left side. By moving the left knee down first, one is still able to quickly draw the sword using the right hand as the situation demanded it. As one sits down, remaining on the toes also permits the ability to quickly rise back up and either draw a sword or come to the feet quickly. It is important to maintain a straight back when sitting in this posture. The hands are placed on the lap, facing downwards towards the knees, not sideways. Do not stick the elbows out towards the sides as this can be viewed as arrogant, as if one is “posturing”.

3. At this time, we observe a short period of silence, called 黙想 Mokuso (“closing of the eyes to observe a moment of silence”). At this time students may meditate in an effort to clear the mind and obtain 無心 Mushin (no mind/no thought state), but this is not a time for formal meditation, merely a time to mentally prepare for the training.

4. After Mokuso the lead instructor will turn to face the 神棚 Kamidana (“spirit seat”, a small shrine in the Dojo) and raises his hands to 合掌 Gassho (prayer hand formation). The instructor will then recite the 正心 Tadashi Kokoro poem and give the 言霊 Kotodama (class benediction). The last phrase of the poem is then repeated by all students after the teacher has said them. This phrase is 詞韻波羅密大光明 Shikin Haramitsu Daikomyo (“the powerful light of wisdom”). Students will repeat by saying “Shikin Haramitsu Daikomyo” (pronounced shee-keen hah rah meet soo die ko mee yo), and then clap twice (using large, circular hand motions to clap), perform a 正座礼 Seiza Rei (seated bow) to the Kamiza, clap once more, and bow again.

5. After returning to the upright Seiza position, the instructor will turn to face the students. The senior-most student will call out 姿勢を正して、先生に礼！ “Shisei O tadashite, Sensei ni rei!”, which translates as “present yourselves to the instructor and bow!”. While in the bowing position, both teacher and students say aloud, お願いします “Onegai Shimasu”, which translates as “please teach me” (“Onegai Shimasu” is a Japanese term with many different meanings, all depending on the context in which the phrase is being used. Sometimes it can mean “please” or “this way”, all said in a polite manner).

6. The instructor will then make any statements and/or discuss details of the training session.

7. Finally, the call of 始め “Hajime” (“let’s begin”, or “begin training”) will be made and class will formally commence.

During training

Regardless of the surroundings (indoors/outdoors), before performing a training exercise with a partner, all practitioners will perform a short Shizen Rei as they face each other. There are a few reasons for this, for tradition and safety. By bowing to each other, students make the “connection” of serious, focused training. This can be especially catastrophic if training with any type of weaponry, because it is never safe to assume that your training partner is actually mentally and/or physically prepared to begin the exercise. Sometimes if a teacher is talking, one might look towards the teacher, and take their focus off of their training partner. This can be dangerous. Therefore, making the connection by bowing to each other is a way to acknowledge that each training partner is focused and ready to train, allowing the commencement of the exercise. If training with someone unfamiliar, please introduce yourself and welcome the other person to the training. Any special requests which would have an effect on your training should be brought up at this time as well (for example, “my foot is injured, do not stomp on it please”, etc.). As training with the partner concludes, all participants should bow to one another, as a way of thanking the other for participating in the training exercise.

When the training session has finished

The same ceremony is to be performed at the end of class as is performed at the beginning of class. The instructor will usually clap his hands two or three times and say “Narabu” to signify that training has finished for that session and to line up. But instead of the students and teacher saying, “Onegai Shimasu”, they instead say, どうもありがとうございました “Domo Arigato Gozaimashita” pronounced “doh moh aree gah toe go zye mashta”. This means, “thank you very much for the training”, and again, is used in context depending on the event.

It is customary to bow towards the Kamiza upon exiting the Dojo, just as when one arrives at the Dojo and performs the Dojo Rei. Always make sure to keep the training area tidy, and always assist with the gathering of training materials after a session.