

The Significance of Bowing

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A beginner recently asked me about the significance of bowing in karate-do. Every time you enter or leave the dojo you must bow.

Bowing is a very serious practice. It is important to understand the significance of each bow.

We begin each training session with a ceremony involving three bows. The first bow is to the *shoman*, to those who have come before us. What this means is we bow to the art and its traditions and to the fact that we have a place to train. During the second bow, Sensei is bowing to the students, thanking them for being there. As Sensei says, without students he can't be a Sensei. The final bow shows our thanks to Sensei for being there to teach us. Sensei would like us to think about the *Martial Virtues* during this ceremony. You should have respect for your seniors, compassion for your juniors and be grateful for: your parents, your friends, your teachers, your country and for your God (whoever it may be).

During the ceremony it is important to be focussed and quiet. It is a time for you to calm yourself, to clear your mind and to focus on what you are about to do, leaving the outside world behind.

The next type of bow is the *shki*, which is Sensei bringing the class to attention so that we will prepare ourselves for the task ahead. The correct way to bow to Sensei is: you bow from the waist and your head should be lower than his. You remain bowing until Sensei has completed his bow.

The final type of bow occurs when you are about to work with a partner. The meaning of this bow is: you and I are here to do this thing together and we will do it to the best of our ability, having respect for each other.

Now that you understand the meaning of the bows, I'll discuss when to bow. Of course, you always bow when Sensei tells you to bow (when he says *rei*) and you should show the courtesy and respect noted above each time you bow. When you work with a partner, you bow before you begin working together and you don't have to bow again until you stop working together (or, as noted above, when Sensei tells you to bow). To bow at any other time, or to be constantly bowing, results in a loss of time and, as Sensei Urban says in The Karate Sensei: "Nothing is free because it costs time. There is nothing else." The second problem with constant bowing is that you minimize the significance of the act, which manifests itself in half-hearted, sloppy bowing.

"Bowing is a very serious practice. You should be prepared to bow, even in your last moment. Even though it is impossible to get rid of our self-centred desires, we have to do it. Our true nature wants us to." Shunryu Suzuki Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind