

# Bushido, Black Belts, and Broken Boards: Avenues for Character Development in the Traditional

## Karate Dojo



Steve Fisher is known for his mastery of traditional style forms.



Bill Wallace originally practiced martial arts in a traditional atmosphere at a time before the introduction of super dojos and relaxed training styles became the norm.



Ernie Reyes and Erney Reyes Jr. are able to maintain the traditional aspects of the martial arts even though they are identified with a more modern approach.

Karate students develop a peaceful attitude by practicing violence. Here's why.

Karate instruction offers an individual the opportunity to learn self defense and in so doing gain confidence, respect, a feeling of self worth and other enviable traits. Ask any karate instructor what he teaches and almost always mention is made of the acquisition of self defense, confidence, discipline, etc. as part of his overall program. Most schools have developed both elaborate systems for teaching sophisticated physical techniques in self defense and equally diverse patterns for attaining the character traits (confidence, assertiveness, etc.) which are so highly regarded.

In any highly regimented-leisure activity such as karate, one might expect to find evidence of a socialization process i.e., a process in which a participant takes on the values of the group which may easily be compartmentalized to efficiently accomplish the goals of behavior which the activity members feel are important to proper

maintenance of the group. In karate practice, individuals engage in a challenging program in which they are asked to submit to the requirements of a symbolically dangerous activity. By carefully leading the students through exercises, self defense skill is acquired. By carefully leading the students through exercises, self defense skill is acquired. And in the process of learning the potentially destructive techniques, the students come to recognize the importance of acquiring such skills, and by internalizing the values of his group tends to refrain from using his skill in all but the most threatening situations.

Since the development of a "right attitude" is thought to be equally important to the acquisition of self defense skills, it is understandable that equal time be spent outlining a plan to accomplish character development. And with minimum

effort, an effective method for providing the other part of instruction, the "right attitude" can be easily acquired. The outline acts like a "rites of passage" system in which the student will be at ease in the proper setting (the dojo), recognize the values of the group (etiquette), learn the skills of self defense (in the class routine) and demonstrate his ability to others (promotion). It is intended that this article outline the socialization process evident in the traditional karate school and discern the manner in which right attitudes (which may be further defined as helping others, walking away from a fight, honesty, courage and other traits mentioned as the Code of Bushido) can be developed in the process of learning self defense.

### The Traditional Karate Dojo

Most karate students learn the martial art in a specified area or school, called the dojo (a Japanese word referring to a training hall), which typically illustrates the traditional method of practice. Most large towns and cities have one or possibly several karate schools.

Some schools go to much effort in attempting to recreate, if only for a while, the enchanting mystique of the orient for the all too often analytical American who, by virtue of his presence, has chosen to explore the possibilities in stimulating the mind through the sensory process of physical acquisition.

While variations in the designs of dojo may be easily differentiated by most observers, considerable understanding is required to fully appreciate the intricate patterns of behavior characterizing each style of the art or sport. Some practice methods may dictate strict adherence to the suggested social patterns carried out in daily activity in the dojo. Other methods by nature may deviate in some manner or direction. However, in almost every case, individuals who complete several years of intense study in the dojo recognize a sense of accomplishment and maturity that is often unlike the effect of participation in the other more common sporting endeavors. For the true karateka, one often hears that his skill is always with him, for it will become a part of everything he will do.

In effect, the karate dojo is that area in which the physical techniques and cultural traditions of the art of karate are taught. The grand patriarch of the dojo is the sensei, who as teacher and chief role model, sets the example for students to follow. Due to much camaraderie and "in group" identity, reference is often made to the dojo as a family unit in which students are called brothers and the sensei is referred to as a father. The organizational structure of the dojo is rigidly stratified and the effect is readily demonstrated in the clearly defined strata which compose the dojo hierarchy. As the student matures from novice to black belt, he comes to accept a disciplined way of life which is reflective of the cultural traditions, the pagentry and the ritual existent in the karate dojo.

The karate dojo discussed herein represents a traditional approach to the practice of karate and exists as the basis for development of the art. The dojo stresses a long range approach to learning martial arts through perfecting role performance and developing corresponding

character patterns. As we shall see, students of varying rank often go to much effort in attaining a recognizable difference in behavior based on their belt color and seniority in the dojo. While strict adherence to role patterns is not necessary for acquiring physical skills, it is most functional for developing the martial character and acquiring belt rank.

The experienced martial artist, after spending several years of study in the dojo, will eventually recognize increased awareness of his environment as well as a display of fighting skills. Thus, it is the karateka who at once maintains discipline in character and stresses utility of skill who is most efficient in the combat arena. The process of acquiring this skill is often long and drawn out, and quite complex in its development.



*Billy Blanks, although known as a free-stylists can trace his roots to a very traditional tae kwon do.*

### The Dojo Design

Peter Urban, in his classic book *The Karate Dojo*, tells us that the dojo is in reality much more than simply a building or room in which karate enthusiasts practice. The dojo, says Urban, represents even a broader meaning as it becomes a "way of life" for the karateka who comes to know a feeling of brotherhood and love for the place in which he practices. As a result, the art and the practice area together make possible the forming of a union of mind and body. A well arranged and decorated dojo may serve to provide a setting which encourages the student to relax or

disregard his former behavior and more fully accept the teachings of the sensei.

Characteristically, a dojo may include an office area in which certificates or awards are shown. Additionally, an area for seating guests or parents serves to separate the students from influence of parents or friends so as to provide the sensei with complete control. The area for teaching usually includes mirrors or other teaching aids and appropriate decorations suggesting the school's style, former masters, etc. Finally, the dojo should include changing areas separate from other facilities.

The traditional dojo is decorated with calligraphy composed of characters which correspond to the appropriate language. In a Korean Tae Kwon Do Dojang, one may expect to find the Korean flag, statues representing Korean art and perhaps a few pictures of famous Korean Tae Kwon Do masters decorating the wall. Likewise, the Japanese dojo would exhibit Japanese art and calligraphy so as to associate the student or visitor with cultural traditions. In general, it may be said that the dojo provides the necessary and proper setting in which the student may become enamoured with the enchanting qualities of the Orient.

Sociologically, one may interpret the emphasis placed on achieving a satisfactory setting as an attempt to lend an air of legitimization to the dojo. The student enters the dojo by way of the office in which certificates, trophies, etc. are placed in fine view of the student. The structuring of various areas serve to separate spaces through changing moods and decorum. Guests and parents are made to stay in the waiting rooms so that practitioners (especially youthful karateka) are effectively separated from the influence of family or friendship support, thus permitting the sensei to exercise complete control in his methods. In effect, the structure and design of the dojo is directed toward satisfying customer interest by providing an area replete with the trappings of an Oriental mystique and legitimizing operations by a functional separation of dojo space.

### Etiquette in the Dojo

Students are expected to follow a

precise set of rules of conduct while in the dojo. Dojo etiquette is a form of ceremony which has been adopted from the martial customs which reflects the Japanese code of Shido, or the Korean Hwarang, and serves to encourage each student to recognize the values of the group.

Upon entering most dojo, the student bows to the practice area and in the direction of the national flags. If a sensei (instructor) is present before class begins, students bow to the sensei and exchange words of appreciation. The manner of the bow may vary with the particular martial arts. Basically, in bowing, the student begins by standing erect then bending at the waist, hands by the side, then regaining the erect position. Certain styles of karate may require that the student strike the chest with the hands as he bends forward, perform a particular hand movement, or recite a series of phrases declaring his allegiance to his art and his country. Before leaving the mat area, students bow to the sensei, then to the flags and once again to the dojo as they leave.

### The Chain of Command

The ranking structure present in the karate dojo tends to reflect habits and customs of its enveloping society. It is generally known that there exists an emphasis on a junior/senior structure in which the individual assumes a rank which corresponds with his particular place within the society. The system provides each individual with an indication of his position in relation to others within the group. In essence, each member loses a sense of individuality by maintaining an allegiance to the organizational structure. Membership in the organizational structure serves to cause the individual to feel some responsibility to the group—he accepts their values, he adheres to group norms, etc. Thus, the individual subsequently supports the system which has included him in its order.

The important consequence of the ranking system is that it provides an opportunity for the status conscious American students to recognize a sense of achievement. The student, regardless to his problems or

relations outside to the dojo, may find the sense of recognition in the dojo which may serve to encourage him to achieve similar status outside the karate school. Many karate practitioners are aware of individuals who may have started from humble background and, through the skills acquired in the dojo, have gone on to own several karate schools or simply raise the quality of their life.

Most karate styles have clearly defined ranking systems. As students move through the rank, they expected to demonstrate skills as well as character traits which reflect the values, morals, norms, etc., of the society. For these reasons we often hear of karate students arranging assistance for other groups e.g., older citizens, women desiring special defense protection or instruction, etc.

During an exam for belt rank, the student may advance or be demoted (or receive not promotion). Generally, students are encouraged to test for advancement since higher rank carries with it increased status and authority in the dojo. While white belts are considered "babies" and relegated to standing in the back of the class, the higher grades such as brown belt (or student black belts) assume position at the head of the class next to the sensei. Full progression in what is often termed "pecking order" would develop as the student advances from the back of the lines (white belt) to the center lines (green belt) to the front lines (brown belt) or perhaps eventually acquire the position of instructor and reside at the head of the class.

Examinations for rank are generally given every three months. A student is usually ready to test to a higher grade rank at each promotion.

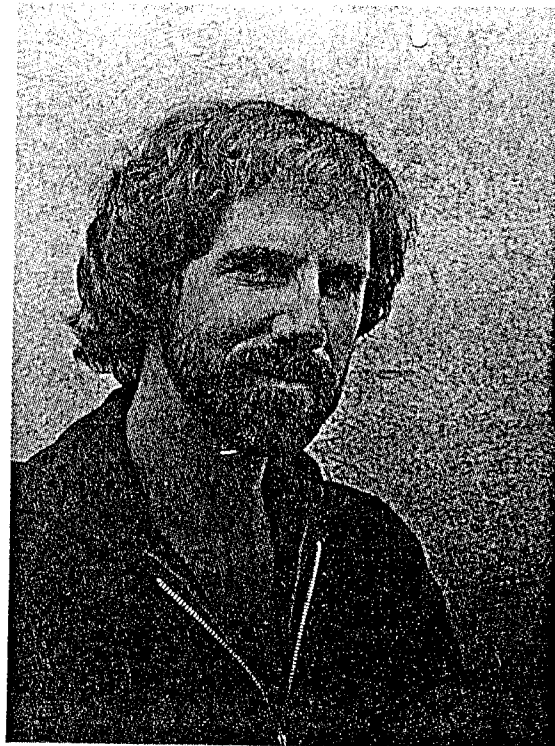
### The Traditional Class Routine

Karate training carries with it an interest in moving from one rank to the next. Each student attempts to learn as much as possible during instructional periods so as to lessen his chances of failure during the promotion. For the karate student, each series of class routines represent a training period in which he becomes acquainted with the next level of advancement. As he assumes a particular rank, he learns the skills associated with the rank and prepares to advance for new rank at the end of the three month

period. It is as though the student follows a cycle in development—earn rank, adjust to the position, test and assume a new rank, adjust, test, etc. Before, during and after each class routine, the student takes part in a learning process which will eventually assure his acceptance into the cultural group that is the karate dojo.

As the student enters the dojo, he observes proper etiquette by bowing before entering the workout area and then proceeds to change clothes. The practice uniform, or gi consists of loose fitting pants, a wrap around jacket and a belt. In many cases, different styles will have different practice uniforms.

When it is time for class to begin, the senior man signals the beginning of formal training. The students who have arrived early and eagerly await the beginning of class quickly form ranks. The highest ranking students move to the left of the instructor. Others are situated according to their rank in straight lines close together in militaristic posture. Suddenly, without a sound, everyone drops to the floor in a formal position ready to bow, for the instructor has now entered the dojo. When the instructor is ready, the senior student calls the command to bow to the teacher. The teacher return the bow and class begins.



In numerous cases, a very-high ranked or respected sensei will take several minutes after the students are in kneeling position (a very uncomfortable position with the feet situated underneath the body) before entering the class and returning the bow, thus testing the student's patience. So also some venerable instructors institute a chain of command, from high belt to low belt, in addressing the class. In some traditional dojo, only the highest ranked and most dedicated student may speak to the sensei directly.

After a period of exercise, the actual instruction in technique begins. The teacher, calling out the proper phrases, instructs the class in both manner and method of technique. By setting the manner of a perfect technique through demonstration, the students are expected to imitate the motion of the instructor. Each student works long and hard to perfect his technique and gain recognition from the teacher.

The basic instruction consists of a series of universal techniques which are practiced in most dojo. The basic techniques include blocking and attacking methods and are arranged so as to physically exhaust the student as well as develop skill in performance. After proficiency has been demonstrated in basics, students are then taught kata, or prearranged fighting dances. Beginners usually make awkward attempts at performing a particular kata, as advanced students attempt to gain personal enlightenment in the performance. While performing the kata, students visualize imaginary opponents and in effect act as though they are engaged in actual combat. A successful kata practitioner would convince an audience that he is truly involved in mortal combat. Those students who are adept in kata usually look down on others who, for various reasons, have not demonstrated skill in kata performance.

The third area of instruction in practice is kumite or free style fighting. During free style, one student prepares to meet another in mock combat. The participants first bow to the referee, then to one another. The referee then gives the command, "Hijame!—to begin. The fighters attempt to gain points by striking at target areas (head or front

of body above the waist and sometimes including the groin) with a suitable offense (i.e., a ridge hand, a reverse punch, a front kick, etc.). Since actual contact in these matches would cause injury to the participants, each opponent "plays at" hitting the other. While good performers gain much recognition from other members, poor fighters receive much scrutiny and are often ostracized from the group.

The main instructional method is learning by rote in which the instructor sets the example for the students to follow. In learning a new technique or principle, the students attempt to mimic the instructor's voice and in general "ape" the instructor's every move. As the instructor defines the performance of



each technique through acting out the part, students respond with a group effort in an attempt to perfect their proficiency in individual skills. As the students perform the techniques, advanced students or assistance instructors are usually available to show the student exactly how the technique is performed or to reinforce a student's action by agreeing that his techniques are valid or functional.

While classes are in session, students begin to receive recognition on the basis of their acquired skills. The emphasis placed on achieving higher ranks may often result in forming particular groups or cliques which are functional for several purposes. First, the members of a particular clique, who may in some

cases be brown belts, tend to congregate so as to avoid mixing with the lower belt ranks. Having achieved status and prestige by virtue of their belt color (and corresponding skill), brown belts tend to serve as examples for lower ranks. Realizing that they will be emulated by lower ranks, brown belts or similarly high rank students may often be found engaging in light kumite or practicing techniques. Although the brown belt sometimes appears though he is in fact involved in practicing a particular technique, he may simply do so to impress others with his ability. Members of a clique exchange ideals so as to spread knowledge and also act as pressure groups to enforce required modes of conduct.

Status groups which are composed of the highest ranking members of the class make a point of acquainting new members or visitors to the dojo. As class representatives, they present a favorable image—by virtue of their respective skills—for persuading visitors to join the class. So also they act as a greeting party for unwelcome visitors. In the "old days" of karate, these unwelcome visitors were often called "spies" who came to the dojo to "steal" techniques or challenge dojo members. Dealings with "spies" usually resulted in an invitation to join in kumite competition in which the class champion would attempt to soundly defeat and perhaps humiliate the opponent or by a combined effort to simply ignore him. The possibilities of dealing with a "spy" from another dojo was thought to be great since it was common practice to steal "secret" techniques from other dojo.

These and other minor incidents serve to give cohesion to the group.

The incidents which take place in the dojo serve to effectively socialize the individual into particular roles which project a corresponding identity. As the karate student takes on a sense of recognition, he often demonstrates increased loyalty to the group and the sensei. By carefully allowing for incidents in the dojo, or simply recalling from his own experiences, the sensei is in the position to facilitate the acquiring the karate values and, in the process become accepted as the

spiritual "giver of the truth" for the students.

A strong indication of each individual's position in the dojo hierarchy may be seen in the student's overall appearance. The traditional gi—depending upon its condition—carries much prestige. The gis worn by beginners are usually large and almost yellow in color. As the gi receives repeated washings, it becomes whiter, more lime and tends to cling to the body as if to give a tailored fit. Similarly, the belt, as it is dyed to change colors as one advances in rank, becomes very loose and somewhat



frayed. It is often interesting to note that since many schools purchase pre dyed belts for each rank, a new belt is acquired with each new rank. The black belts who often achieve prestige by wearing highly frayed belts (a natural condition of years of practice or redying) would often achieve the worn look from their new belts by shaving the edges. Thus carrying on the old tradition of the well used belt.

Finally, the karateka's hands are true indications of his years of dedication. A common practice for toughening and strengthening the hands is to strike the "makiwara" board. Over a period of time, calluses form on the knuckles, giving the hand weapon-like appearance. Whereas the gi is removed after practice, the hands continue to give the student recognition. The condition is especially pleasing to some students who may take pleasure in displaying his symbolic battle scars. Here again, the emphasis on adhering to

tradition has resulted in at least a few practitioners attracting attention to the knuckles via dye or hand cutting the top layer of skin. The end result is callused knuckles without the accompany years of makiwara practice. The practice while looked down by most, simply exemplifies the pressure to "fit in" felt by lesser students in the dojo.

It is during the class that the student becomes acquainted with the formal organization of the dojo. During the practice session, the student registers new moves, learns new ideas and displays his knowledge of technique and etiquette in an attempt to gain acceptance in his peer group. As each three month practice period ends, students prepare to be examined. The student's progression through the ranks totally depends on his success during the promotion.



### Promotion

While the class routine may be seen as a series of "dress rehearsals" in which students perfect their techniques and learn their parts, the karate promotion is the final stage performance in which heroes are born and future roles are established. The standard method of conferring rank is the examination. During the examination, utmost care is given to insure that everyone knows his part. Visitors often come to watch this examination. Although such visitors have no vote in final decisions, their acceptance is desirable.

Students usually arrive early before the exam and practice their techniques. At times, students who know ahead of time that they will be

tested together may rehearse a free sparring sequence. Since free sparring is to be spontaneous and unrehearsed, the referees usually recognize who is actually sparring and who is waiting a cue to attack. The students' gis are especially clean and neat and the common practice of starching the gi "for extra snap" is often observed. In general, the candidates for promotion are quite active as they try to rid themselves of the "stomach butterflies."

When the sensei enters the dojo, the students hurriedly line up and are particularly to find the right order



in the lines. Exam time in the traditional dojo is special time for the sensei who usually dressed in a "kimono" which covers his karate gi. Honored guests and fellow examiners arrange themselves in a line with the sensei and the formal examination begins. After a brief introduction of guests, the sensei address the candidates, bows and takes his seat at the head of the dojo.

Students one by one perform for the sensei, first the white belts, then the advanced students. During the exam, students are careful remain seated and refrain from talking. Each student is expected to do his best for he will not be given another chance to test for three months. After a period in which basic techniques are demonstrated, katas are performed and boards or tiles are broken, the student is given his final chance to perform as the free-style sparring exam begins. during free style, those who have truly learned the ways of the warrior

attack with total commitment. The weaker or more timid students are usually defeated and may fail the test. After repeated attempts at unsuccessfully gaining ranks students often terminate their membership in the dojo.

During the exam, the period of kumite emphasize the "survival of the fittest," thus insuring that only a select few will advance in rank. The exam signifies a kind of "trial by ordeal" after which successful candidates partake in the "rites of passage" symbolically dealt with in the ritual exchange of belts during the awards ceremony.

When the exam is over, students form lines and bow. The sensei then dismisses the class and retreats to his office to grade exams. Visitors



and guests usually congratulate the students who have performed skillfully and reassure them that they did their best.

When the class meets again, the sensei reads the list of candidates who successfully passed the exam. Upon hearing the names announced, the students form lines for the presentation of belts during the awards ceremony. The lower ranks are called first. For the white belts, the chance to wear a colored belt is a great reward for the hours spent in the dojo. The green and blue belts are happy to have received promotions, but by this time the excitement of higher rank is restrained as they tend to act very mature and refrain from displays of laughing and congratulations.

The promotion has special meaning for the brown belts of first kyu who receive their first dan black belts. While kyu refers to boys, says

author Peter Urban, achieving dan reflects full maturity and manhood. The years of work and dedication spent inside the dojo requires much discipline and the results are significant. As noted, author Frazer relates in his article, "The Psychology of the Samurai," discipline in all Japanese traditional arts is so demanding that it reshapes the student completely—mentally and physically. A man who has attained mastery of an art reveals it in his every action." The "change in character" which has continuously been referred to is perhaps the most significant part of martial arts training. The process of reshaping the individual to fit the "image of the warrior"—trained in proper etiquette, skilled in the martial arts and loyal to his sensei or dojo—begins with the initial lesson and continues to develop.



Moreover, the entire karate culture is directed to this end. The dojo provides a necessary setting, a setting which protects another worldly effect as if to entice the novice to respond with a favorable attitude.

Once admitted into the dojo, the organizational structure maintains the student's allegiance by providing avenues of advancement and reinforcing his development by peer group pressures. Dojo groups tend to exhibit norms about the importance of life and maintain values which are reflected in reactions to various stimuli. Membership in the groups permit the students to receive reinforcement from others for his

ego. Finally the student comes to accept the dojo values as he achieves maturity in the dojo.

Once the socialization process is completed, it is never forgotten. Traditional karate training represents behavioral patterns are unlike the pattern developed in most other American sports or games. Through meeting the challenges or ordeals in the dojo, the student tends to understand the pleasure of a peaceful existence. And as Peter Urban so expertly concludes, "He unwittingly changes his way of life, for he can never be the same person again."

Though the promotion to first degree black belt signifies notoriety in the dojo, it can in no way be considered the final stage. As the



brown belt is removed and the black belt accepted during the promotional ceremony—signifying a ritual death of the former student and the emergence of a new man—the karateka anticipates a future life in the dojo. Again and again he will engage in combat rituals, striving for perfection and symbolically growing weary with battle, for he seeks only peace.

From the book "The Development at American Karate: History & skills by Jerry Beasley, Ed.D.

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