

## ***Bow to Your Seniors!***

Why? Why should any Westerner bow to anyone? To Americans, bowing smacks of what royal subjects did in the presence of their sovereign. Americans are bred on a tradition that says each of them is sovereign in his/her own right. But that is taking Western cultural history and applying it somewhat inaccurately to an Eastern cultural tradition. The Japanese bow to denote a momentary submission required by etiquette, not necessarily an absolute subservience. The Eastern bow is like the American salute in a military context, a tipping of the cap in the culture of the earlier centuries, or a wave and handshake in current times. The bow's submissive implications have been continually downplayed especially since the West has adopted the arts of the East.

When a Western student bows, he or she is making an entrance into a new culture — not necessarily a culture that duplicates that of Asia — but one that values politeness, order, and authority. In the West, we try to level the playing field, thinking or acting as if everyone were equal since they are supposedly equal under the law. We also know that Rock Stars, Movie Stars, Super Athletes, and many Politicians get treated more like royalty than did Fergie (either the duchess or the singer) or Diana (either the princess or the goddess), so that often we are not equal to them under the law or in any other way. The Eastern custom assumes no real equals in any given social context — someone is always higher ranked or got there earlier. Certainly in a dojo this is true. The hierarchy of a dojo is made up of both rank and time-in-grade. That hierarchy, like any other, is subject to abuse, but by and large, in a dojo you get to be senior because of hard work and longevity, not because of your momentary popularity or because of the perks of your political station. Both West and East have hierarchies, but at least in this context, the Eastern one is, ironically, more mobile. Students start at the bottom and work their way up. Talent counts, but work and time count just as much.

This means that in order to improve, you must learn, and in order to learn, you must be taught. The *sensei* (in a Japanese dojo) is there to teach you. The senior students (*sempai*) are there to help. Traditionally, seniors have a duty (a *giri*) to help improve their juniors. The juniors, in turn, have a debt (an *on*) of gratitude to pay. You don't get much help from seniors to whom you are impolite. Your first step is to approach them; your second is to bow.

The Western macho-type doesn't like the idea of needing anything. To him, studying the martial arts is just learning a few tricks and then practicing to make them faster and stronger. Many martial arts studios have "bowed" to this propensity — not only do not require bowing, but also do not recognize any seniority except that of the head honcho or perhaps that of a tournament champ or the studio tough-guy.

Although seniority in a traditional school does not necessarily mean greater skill and knowledge, it is likely a senior will teach better than a junior, thus everyone is constantly helping those less senior so that all students are constantly improving.

It is not uncommon to hear stories of non-traditional instructors berating their advanced students for helping a less advanced student. “Teaching him is my job! Are you trying to take my livelihood away?” In a dojo that studies its art in depth, there is so much to learn that no amount of help from a senior can diminish the knowledge the instructor has to impart. Any help from one student to another is welcomed by the sensei (because it spreads out the teaching load), welcomed by the senior (because it helps him solidify his knowledge), and welcomed by the junior who can activate the whole process with a simple act of politeness called the bow.