

The Student's Guide to

Surviving

A

Traditional Dojo



Practical advice for students of all ages on how to behave, survive, and thrive in the martial arts

By Matthew Apsokardu

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Introduction

When people first take a martial arts class, their goal is often to gain real-world survival skills. But has anyone taught them how to survive a martial art?

It's rarely explained how complex a dojo can be. Weaving business, violence, philosophy, and etiquette together into an ornate tapestry, traditional schools offer much more than the ability to punch and kick.

This guide is here to take the mystery and confusion out of training. Through these tips and insights you can avoid the most common pitfalls that send would-be martial artists into early retirement.

Although I think any practitioner can benefit from the information inside, I believe this book is especially well-suited for...

- Potential students who have never stepped foot in a dojo.
- New students who are trying to adapt.
- Experienced students who want to better understand the way they have chosen.

If you fit one of these descriptions, read on.

What You Can Get Out of This Book

You may be wondering how I could possibly give you advice about your art when I am way...way...over here in my art. Good question.

Although many martial arts seem different on the surface, they actually come from very common ancestries. Korean TaeKwonDo, Japanese Karate, Judo, Okinawan Karate, and even Kung Fu share historical connections if you go back far enough. And even though these styles have branched away from each other, they share core beliefs of physical skill, mental acuity, and strength of character. It is within these traditional pursuits that we can connect with one another.

This book comes most heavily from a Japanese/Okinawan perspective (as that is the experience of the author), but the advice contained within is applicable to all traditional styles.

A Warning

Never use this book as a substitute for training, and never attempt to prove an instructor wrong with something read in this book.

What I provide here is not the hard-fast rule and students must balance what they read with the practices of their own dojo.

With that in mind let's get started. First, before we dive into anything heavy, we need to talk about what a traditional dojo (or school) actually is.

Not every martial arts school is traditional.

What is a Traditional Dojo?

By definition, dojo means “place of the way”, or “place for seeking the way”. And what THAT means is a dojo is more than just a practice hall; it is an institution for bettering oneself through effort and determination.

One of the most dominant characteristics of a traditional dojo is the emphasis placed on serious self defense and combat. No matter how graceful or beautiful an art, the techniques *MUST* boil down to stark effectiveness.

Almost as important as technique is the development of character. While some fighting styles in the modern world are indeed effective, they lack a sense of deeper personal perfecting that is a trademark in traditional arts. This is not a critique on either traditional or nontraditional – simply an observation about priorities.

Traditional dojo are often austere places that utilize methods handed down over many generations. However, as time moves on, teachers find what space they can to offer their arts. To determine if you are in a traditional dojo, you need to examine the mindset of the place more than the walls. And part of that mindset involves formality.

If you are having trouble deciding which martial art to pursue, [visit this webpage](#).

A Matter of Formality

An important factor when analyzing a school is formality. There are martial arts like Tai Chi that have great character development aspects but little formality. Conversely, some militaristic schools have strict formality but little philosophy.

Traditional dojo, in general, will contain higher-than-normal levels of etiquette. In fact, learning that etiquette is often a big stumbling block for new students.

What Styles have Traditional Schools?

Although there are definite exceptions, the following martial art styles can have traditional schools:

- Karate
- Tae Kwon Do
- Aikido
- Judo
- Others: Jujitsu, Hapkido, Kung Fu, Kenjutsu, etc

What Styles Don't have Traditional Schools?

- MMA
- Krav Maga
- MCMAP and Military Training
- "Street" Self Defense Programs

Some people choose convenience over quality. That's a personal matter, but I recommend going the extra mile for a good school.

Even within styles that do have traditional schools (like karate and taekwondo), students have to be wary of teachers who pretend to be something they aren't.

Am I in a Faux-Jo?

This is a question that comes up a lot, and not just when people are first shopping around. As students train, they tend to ask themselves about the legitimacy of their dojo and instructors. As they branch out and learn, they begin to see the strengths (and weaknesses) of the school they selected. With that in mind, let's examine what a good dojo will have vs. a "fake" traditional dojo (or faux-jo).

Dojo	Faux-Jo
* Few belts and external rewards	* Excessive belts, ranks, promotions, certificates, patches...
* Clean, modest uniforms	* Fancy Uniforms with stripes, patches, logos, etc
* Clear, traceable lineage of style	* Convoluted history
* Head Instructor with documented experience and licenses	* Head Instructor with many belts in different styles and few real credentials
* Reasonable fees and few contracts	* Many contracts and signup gimmicks
* Simple dojo adornments and federation affiliations	* Extensive dojo decorations, trophies, flags, posters, slogans, etc
* Teachers with years of experience	* Teachers from accelerated 'teacher programs' and black belts mills
* No feeling of cheesiness	* Strong cheese vibe

These are just generalities, but they should give you a good feeling for how legitimate schools are run vs schools that are trying to compensate for their lackings.

**If you're a blank slate,
rejoice! You're ready to
receive a style.**

Getting the Beginner's Mindset

So let's say you've made it into a traditional dojo. You're getting a good feeling from the instructors and everything seems on the up and up.

Now what?

Before you throw a single punch or kick, you need to establish a beginner's mindset.

The Beginner's Mindset...For Beginners

This is going to be easy, so long as you keep a couple things in mind.

First, fear and anxiety are to be expected. Walking into a new environment is never easy. Don't worry about feelings of dread or reservation – they will pass.

Next – savor the sensation that you have no idea what's going on. Believe it or not, it's going to be one of your greatest tools in learning your art. Martial arts instructors actually like blank slates. When a new student comes in with no former knowledge of fighting, they can be molded much easier to a new style.

BAD BODY BEHAVIOR

At first your body is going to do a lot of complaining. If you're younger and in great shape, you'll find new aches and pains from stances and maneuvers that you've never attempted before. If you're older, your body will gripe at the increase in activity and exertion.

Knowing that, you can use your body's feedback as a mental springboard. For every sore spot you know you are teaching yourself something new.

Of course, there are ways of decreasing body issues, but we'll talk about that later ([in the stretching chapter](#)).

THE THREE KEYS TO LEARNING

It may seem deceptively simple, but here are the three things you should keep in mind to be an effective beginner: **observe, try, and take it slow.**

Always look before you leap when performing a technique. Analyze every part of your instructor as he/she moves. From there, never be afraid to try and try again as you fail to grasp certain intricacies. Finally, always take things slow. Even though attacks happen fast on the street, you must remember that the best learning occurs slowly, and is then methodically increased in speed.

If you're a current student, there are things you can do to help you learn even more.

The Beginner's Mindset For Established Students

So far things have been pretty straight-forward, but now it gets a little trickier. How do you keep a beginner's mindset when you are no longer a beginner? Why would you?

One of the great pleasures of studying a martial art is those 'ahh ha!' moments when you finally come to understand a technique, kata, etc.

Naturally, as you gain more understanding, your ego feels boosted and you come to believe yourself an adequate practitioner. In fact, you may start excelling and teaching others!

This is great, up until it hinders your practice. When you believe yourself good enough at anything in particular, you stop paying attention to the details. When an instructor starts pontificating about a stance or punch, you begin to phase out what he/she is saying because you don't 'need' to listen to those basic concepts anymore.

Unfortunately, by operating this way, you create a mental brick wall that prohibits deeper understanding.

It is often said that the martial arts are as much a battle within yourself as with an external opponent. Here is a situation where your internal self can really sabotage your progress.

These aren't Jedi mind tricks...but hopefully they'll still prove helpful. Also, these aren't the droids you're looking for.

TRICKS TO HELP KEEP THE RIGHT MINDSET

For current students, here are some helpful tips and tricks you can use to keep on the right mental path:

- **Ask questions.** By being inquisitive, you keep your mind actively engaged on the lesson being taught. This tactic might be harder than you think – it is our natural instinct to choose the method of least resistance. You'll be very inclined to 'not make waves' during class so that you needn't expend more energy or, worse yet, become the demonstration dummy for the instructor. Resist the urge to blend in. Create thoughtful questions and go for it.
- **Practice with people better than you.** This is another case of fighting your instincts. As you get better, you'll feel the desire to work with people that can't compete against you. Not only will this bolster your ego, but it will lessen the likelihood of them using unpredictable, effective techniques on you.

By working with new or lesser students, you may in fact avoid embarrassment or ego burn for awhile, but you'll never get to experience first hand what the more advanced people know. Find the kind, knowledgeable students in your class and take full advantage of them.

Thousands of mediocre martial artists get to the intermediate level and quit.

- **Begin reading.** This might seem a little blasphemous to some teachers, but I think the green-brown belt range is a great time to start investigating martial arts literature from both your style and others. (all titles should be reviewed by parents or guardians before being given to children).

Here are some books/websites to get you going:

[Living the Martial Way](#), Forrest E. Morgan

[Karate-Do: My Way of Life](#), Funakoshi Gichin

[The Best of Dave Lowry](#), Black Belt Magazine

[Masters Magazine](#), Empire Media

[Koryu.com](#), Diane and Meik Skoss

[Zen in the Martial Arts](#), Joe Hyams

And some movies worth acquiring:

[Enter the Dragon](#), Bruce Lee

[Rumble in the Bronx](#), Jackie Chan

[The Karate Kid](#), Ralph Macchio

[Bloodsport](#), Jean Claude Van Damme

[Ong Bak – Thai Warrior](#), Tony Jaa

- **Stay with it.** Other sports and interests are going to come up, but you have to power through and stay with it. There is more good stuff to be had.

* * *

Once you're armed with the right mindset, you can strap on the uniform and get going!

Learning the Gi and Obi

This book is about surviving in a traditional dojo, and you aren't going to survive very long if you can't get dressed!

Gi (gee) = uniform

Obi (ohh-bee) = Belt

Let's talk about the Gi first.

Anatomy of the Gi

The standard martial art uniform is made up of two pieces – the jacket and the pants. The jacket is referred to as uwagi (u-wah-gee), and generally looks like a durable kimono top. The pants are referred to as zuban (zoo-bahn), and are fairly unremarkable except for the way they are tied.

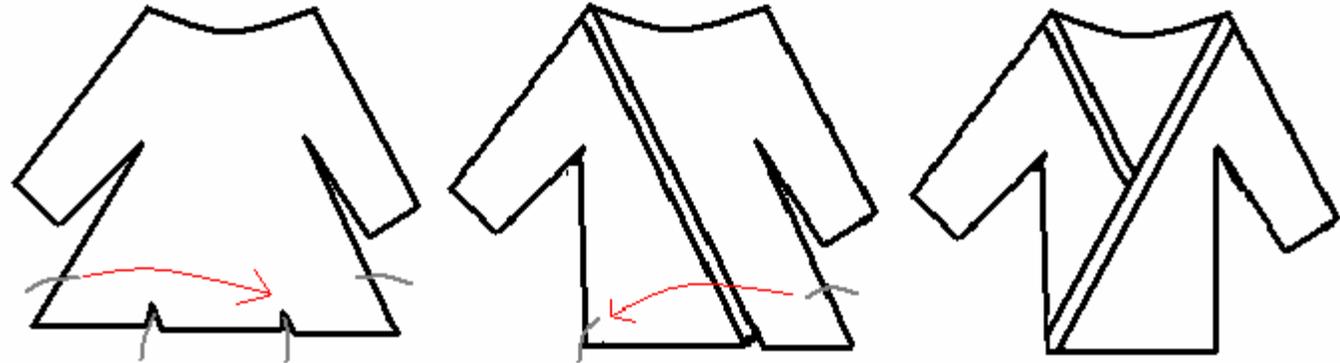


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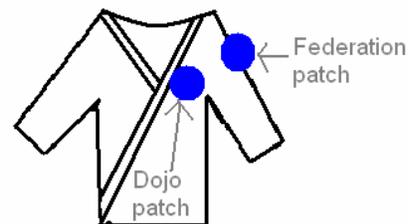
You'll encounter two potentially different obstacles when trying to tie your pants. The first is elastic. This is a more modern approach and is accompanied by a simple shoestring tie.

The other is drawstring. This is a more old-school style and involves pulling the strings tight on both sides before tying. Although a little bit of a hassle, I have come to prefer this type.

The gi top, or uwagi, is pretty standard in design. The front is open with two flaps. The right flap is tied shut first, followed by the left flap.



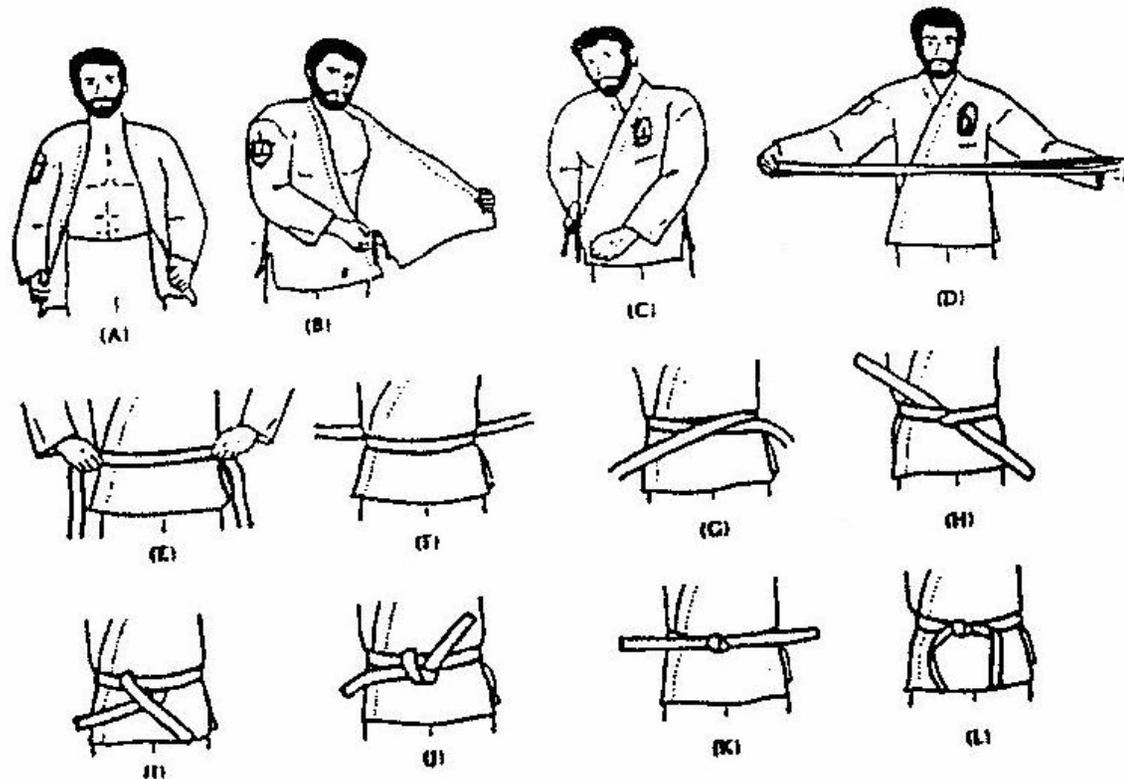
Most schools will require you to put a dojo patch on your uniform. Furthermore, if your school is a member of a federation, you'll likely need a patch for that too. The generally accepted places to put these patches are as follows:



All colored belts are tied the same way until black belt. At that point you have to be mindful of where the lettering (if any) is placed.

Working the Obi

The obi, or belt, is an important part of the uniform, but tying it can be a bit of a struggle. Included here is a walkthrough of how to go about it (just follow the bearded fellow):



Images courtesy of Shihan Joe Webb

If you can, keep your uniform as simple and unadorned as possible.



Alternative Gi and Colors

Generally speaking you're probably going to start off with a white gi, but there are no guarantees. Some dojo like to use black gi as well. In some styles the black gi is reserved for black belt and above students, while in other styles anybody who is so inclined can have one.

In certain judo and jujitsu schools you might also see blue. The blue gi was introduced around 1997 for sport purposes and can help judges differentiate competitors.

An alternative uniform for arts such as aikido and kenjutsu is the hakama (hah-kah-mah) with uwagi top. The hakama is a pleated skirtlike-pant that is actually two separate, but wide legs.



The hakama generally follows the same color patterns as other gi – white, blue, and black. However, colors can be occasionally mixed and matched depending on dojo preference.

Be sure to ask your instructor about the particular rules of your dojo as there can be many possible restrictions and precedents set.

* * *

So we've talked about the clothes; now let's talk about YOU specifically!

Some of this stuff might seem like common sense after you read it. Conversely, you may not realize what bad habits you have!

Taking Care of Yourself

With so much emphasis on the martial art itself, people sometimes forget to take care of themselves. There are certain things you can do to properly prepare yourself for training.

In this chapter, we are going to examine some good habits that have helped people train successfully.

First, let's get physical and make sure you put your best foot forward when walking into the dojo.

Dojo Style – Get Hip To It

These might seem like fashion tips at first, but believe me, they aren't. Following these simple guidelines can help you and your training partners stay safe during practice.

KEEP NAILS IN CHECK

Long, sharp nails might seem like good self defense tools (and they are), but your dojo-mates might not be so enthusiastic after getting scratched and sliced.

Remember, most arts use both hands and feet so keep those nails trimmed back as far as comfortably possible and everyone will still want to work with you.



ouch.

If an instructor asks you what time it is, the answer is: time to take off your watch.

LEAVE JEWELRY IN THE LOCKER ROOM

Jewelry can be dangerous for you and your training partners. I've heard (and seen) too many incidences where people get punched with rings or get an earring torn out.

Watches, chains, necklaces, earrings, toe rings, piercings...they should all be removed if possible.

Sometimes people with piercings are told to leave in a stud/ring for a certain amount of time to prevent the hole from closing up. Most instructors will understand and accommodate you – but it is good to let them know the situation so they can guide your training around it.

If you get your belly button pierced and no one knows about it, don't be shocked when it gets punched or kicked and hurts like crazy.

A lot of times adults aren't sure if they should take off their wedding bands, and in some cases aren't able to because the ring gets stuck. The general rule here is if you can take it off, do it, if not, try to be careful both for your fingers sake and for the well being of your partners.

Don't let real-world fashion compromise your ability to train safely.

As martial artists train, their belts develop Sabi, or beauty that comes with age and wear. Sabi should not be cleaned off or fixed.



KEEP IT CLEAN

It might seem obvious, but pay close attention to personal hygiene like teeth, showering, deodorant, etc. You will be in much closer proximity to people than normal, so make sure getting up close and personal with you is not an exceptionally unpleasant experience.

This concept is especially true for grappling arts, which can get more invasive than a tax audit.

In general, keep your gi as clean and ironed as possible. It's not a critical issue, but helps show your commitment to self perfection.

As for your obi, do not wash it. The stains, rips, and age that are shown on your belt are a testament to your training and shouldn't be "fixed".

Conversely, be certain not to make any attempts to overtly wear out your obi. Efforts to make yourself look more experienced and hard-working through roughening up your belt is in bad taste and is obvious to people who have achieved the kind of "sabi" that is legitimate.

Once you've figured out your uniform, you can turn your attention inward and begin balancing yourself for the stresses of training.

Keep the Mental Balance

Billy Crystal once said "It is better to look good, then to feel good." (If you don't get that reference, ask your parents you darn kids).

Unfortunately, if you want to last in the martial arts, you'll have to ignore Billy's advice. While it may take only minor effort to look your best, achieving a mental balance is much more difficult.

There are two main ways people lose balance and drop out from their training – burning up and fading away. Let's look at both.

DON'T BURN UP

Burning up (or burning out) is something people rarely see coming.

Once you train in a dojo for awhile you'll notice that new students, from time to time, pop onto the scene with extreme zeal. They want to be involved in every class, bang as hard as possible, and go to every tournament.

At first, it's tempting to be envious of their energy and commitment. Here's the problem – it's those same individuals who become ghosts a year later. Either dropping out entirely or stopping in only when their fizzled motivation allows it, burners are rarely suited for the long haul.

By not overly indulging your enthusiasm, you can keep that feeling of excitement for longer periods of time.

To avoid becoming a burner, first analyze your own tendencies. Ask the following questions:

- Do I go all-out, 120% on everything I do?
- Have I quit many things in my life?
- Do I often get an exasperated feeling at work or school of things just being 'too much'?
- Who do I identify more with, the tortoise or the hare?
- Have I set a strict deadline on my martial arts progress?
- Do I get quickly discouraged at setbacks?
- Do I generally have a short attention span?

You needn't share your answers with me or anybody else; just be honest with yourself. Once you recognize your own behavior, you can work to consciously avoid pitfalls and mistakes.

The key for burners is to pace themselves. Instead of training 5 nights a week for 6 months and then having to quit for 'personal reasons', train 3 nights a week and keep a refreshed spirit.

Burners often want what they see in more advanced practitioners, and they want it now. They want the recognition, envy, and attention of other people in the dojo. These are natural feelings, but if unchecked can cause negative growth.

**Dojo survival is 90% mental,
10% physical.**

Here are some tips to avoid being a burner.

- As stated earlier, pace your training regiment. Leave a feeling of wanting more.
- Avoid constantly telling others, both inside the dojo and out, about your training and progress. The thrill of their external envy and awe can become an addiction that ultimately bottoms out.
- Don't expect to 'beat' your fellow students, both in promotions and fighting, due to your enthusiastic work ethic. Internal, unnoticed progress is the true goal of martial arts training.
- Be careful not to solidify bad habits.
- Expect setbacks and delays, even for you.
- Don't quiz other students about how much they work out.

DON'T FADE AWAY

More easily labeled than folks who burn out are the ones who fade away. These are the individuals that slowly start showing up less and less. Or, more abruptly, they take a break for an alternate sport/work/relationship and never really get back into training.

Fading away is extremely easy to do and there are more causes for it than you might think.

Fading away often boils down to giving yourself excuses.

Fading away can be justified. There are certain things in this world that have to take precedence over training. Family, children, and responsibilities can all crop up and before you know it, training has to take a back seat.

If you find yourself in this kind of situation, don't feel bad. Of course your Sensei (sen-say, or teacher) and peers will be disappointed to see you go, and they might even give you a hard time about it, but ultimately you'll know in your heart that you did what you had to do.

That being said, it's extremely easy to con yourself into believing you don't have time to train. Being forced out of the dojo by responsibility is not the same as not making sacrifices to get there. Just ask any long term martial artist and they will tell you about the difficult choices they've had to make.

As a young adult or child, the biggest obstacle to overcome is interest. Schools demand a lot of a child's time. Sports, homework, projects, etc. all demand attention.

Furthermore, there are more activities than ever available to children. Depending on what trends go through your neighborhood, who knows what you or your child could end up doing one summer to the next?

Students often fade away when they focus on external goals and rewards rather than internal.

Fading away for adults can be a bit more complicated. As stated earlier, it is often the case that adults convince themselves that other, less strenuous responsibilities are more important and therefore take precedence over training.

This can serve as an almost bulletproof way to convince yourself that you need to quit.

But, even deeper rooted than that is what I consider the most central cause for fading away: not training for the right reasons.

When adults train for external reasons like self-defense, a work out, a time killer, etc they often find that their interest dwindles within a few years (or even months). Martial arts are complex and labyrinthine on purpose, and much like organic chemistry is used to weed out med students, so too do traditional martial arts naturally weed out unmotivated students.

Consequently, this weeding out is one of the causes of the rise in commercial schools and the occasional drop in traditional martial art quality. The business of running a school often stands in stark contrast with keeping students feeling rewarded, successful, and happy at all times.

Unfortunately, these external rewards lose their luster rather quickly and commercial schools count on high turnaround rates rather than student retention.



These are great...for awhile.

Helping others grow is the best way to keep yourself motivated.

Here are some tips to avoid being a fader.

- Enjoy your ranks and awards, but don't become emotionally dependent on them.
- Recognize that external pursuits like exercise, self defense, and tournaments are great – but are rarely enough to keep people in the martial arts for the long term.
- Investigate the 'art' side of your martial art. Figure out how it can improve you physically, mentally, and spiritually (and by that I mean strength of character rather than religious spirit).
- Get involved with helping other students and ultimately teaching.
- Keep one foot in the dojo. It is surprisingly hard to make yourself go back to training after you have been completely out for awhile.
- Read martial art books, watch movies, and explore Youtube.
- Read Seth Godin's ["The Dip"](#).

* * *

Next up – make yourself into a high kicking, hard practicing machine...

Stretching and Effective Practice

The point of this chapter is to make the most out of your day-to-day training. It is very possible to go to a class and learn nothing at all because you weren't mentally and physically prepared for it. Even worse, it's possible to study for years and do nothing but spin your wheels.

Don't let that happen – optimize your practice!

First let's talk about stretching. Martial art techniques require agility and stamina, and the more supple you can make your body, the better. For people that are already flexible – let's make you more flexible. For people that remind themselves of the Tin Man – don't worry.

Stretching Mindset

One of the worst mistakes people make is considering stretching a mild 8 minute annoyance before class starts. It's true that dojo time is limited and should be focused on technique, but if good stretching gets sacrificed you might as well invest in ice packs and frustration.

Furthermore, assuming that faster and harder stretching can condense the time while getting the same quality results is incorrect and dangerous.

Fast and hard stretching without proper warmup can lead to pulled muscles, soreness, stiffness, and a generally unpleasant experience (which will deter you in the future).

When going into stretching, you have to accept that it's going to take some time. You also have to understand that improvement in your range of motion will be a very gradual process, and trying to force your body into flexibility before it's ready can cause damage and setbacks.

Potential Stretching Cycle (before workout)

- Warmup
- Limb shake out
- Body rolling
- Shallow stretching
- Deep stretching
- Muscle conditioning/building
- Limb shake out
- Class

Let's take a closer look.

WARMUP

Warmup is glossed over more than it should be. A lot of practitioners want to get right into leg stretches (for example) because that's where they want to see results. Unfortunately, without proper preparation, they are working against themselves.

Don't just launch into splits and straddles. Your classmates don't feel like helping you up.

My personal favorite form of warmup is jumping jacks. It's light, easy, and involves all aspects of the body. Furthermore, you can involve the whole class by having everyone count out 10 reps one after the other.

Another option is jogging around the dojo floor/building (or something similar depending on what you have nearby). This needn't be a sprint as you don't want any real hard exertion yet.

You can also do gentle kata utilizing light punches and low kicks.

Whatever you eventually decide on, make sure to get your blood pumping and muscles warm before you stretch. Cold muscles are tight, grumpy, and unwilling to cooperate. Warmed up muscles will let you achieve that vaunted increase in range of motion that you want.

LIMB SHAKE OUT

After doing your warmup, take a really loose stance and shake out your limbs. Start with your wrists. Relax them completely and flop them up and down and around. Then move to your arms as a whole. After that do the legs and the ankles.

There is nothing fancy or secret about this stage of stretching, it just helps get the rust out.

BODY ROLLING

I'm not talking about roll falls here. Body rolling is the simple act of moving different body parts in circular motions to work out kinks and get your joints loosened up and ready to go.

Here is the order I like to do. I generally do every direction for 15-20 seconds. Feel free to adapt it to your particular needs and tastes.

- **Neck Roll.** Very slow clockwise rolling of the neck, letting it bend as far as possible. Switch to counterclockwise. Follow up with straight front-back and side-side motions.
- **Wrist Roll.** Moderately paced wrist rolling, both clockwise and counterclockwise. This can be combined with tense opening and closing of the hands. Use this opportunity to stretch your fingers also. If you intend to do kote gaeshi techniques (wrist turning/locks) make sure to take time to stretch your wrists, like so:



- **Shoulder/Arm Roll.** Utilize both small and large circles when doing the arm roll. Using both arms, swing frontward, backward, and if you can, one front one back.
- **Hip Roll.** This one is very important. Keeping the legs apart at a natural stance, place the hands on the hips and roll in clockwise/counterclockwise motions. Allow the hips to flex as far as comfortably possible and stretch out the spine.
- **Knee Roll.** Place the knees together and gently roll clockwise/counterclockwise. Small circles first for the knees then front/back bending.
- **Ankle Roll.** Use this as a chance to test your balance as you roll out one ankle after the other.

SHALLOW STRETCHING

Finally, we've gotten to the crux of the matter! Unfortunately I'm going to reign you back in just a little bit. When stretching out the legs, back, groin, etc it's important to utilize shallow stretching before going deep.

Shallow stretching is the natural solution to your body's resistant instincts. When first met with tension, the body will tighten up and attempt to protect itself from over-extension. If you try to push through this pain you can end up hurting yourself. Instead, do 2-4 minutes of stretching just on the edge of discomfort.

Wait patiently for your muscles to relax.

You have to build up to deep stretching, otherwise you might injure yourself.

As time goes by your body will untense and grant you access to deeper stretches. If it sounds like you're negotiating with your body at this point – you are. Listening to your own feedback is a skill that will be immensely helpful during your training.

DEEP STRETCHING

Now that your body has relaxed, it's time to increase the pressure. Use deep inhaling as you come out of your shallow stretch, and slowly exhale as you bend back in.

This transition period will allow you to sink deeper into each position.

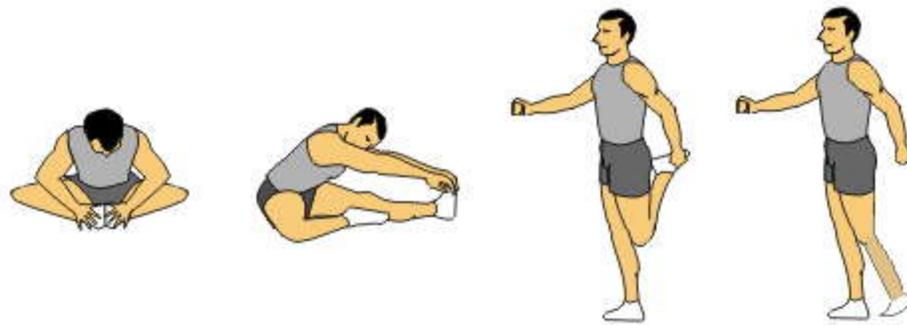
Hold your deep stretches for as long as you want, but be sure to come up from time to time in order to return proper blood flow that may have been lessened from your postures.

Although you should ultimately build your own routine, here are the stretches that I always do. You might be surprised by the simplicity.

- **Butterfly stretch.** Feet together, elbows on the knees. Slight pressure downward with the elbows.
- **Hamstring stretch.** Lots of time spent on this one. One leg out, one in. Use a straight down approach, trying to touch both hands to your extended foot. Then use a turned approach where one arm reaches over the head in the direction of the extended foot (helping stretch the back).

Factoid: The Achilles tendon got its name from the Greek hero who was killed by an arrow shot into his heel.

- **Quadricep stretch.** Standing or laying on your side (I prefer standing to test my balance), pull your leg straight back toward your butt.
- **Achilles/Calf stretch.** Using a natural stance, place one foot forward and one back (with the rear heel slightly lifted). Apply mild bouncing pressure on the back heel to loosen the muscles.



<http://copellenterprise.com/stretching.htm>

There is a lot more you can do, but I make sure never to miss these.

TIPS FOR INCREASING FLEXIBILITY

The time you are provided in class to stretch is rarely enough to improve flexibility to any extent. The instructors of the dojo have too much technique, kata, sparring, etc to worry about to spend half the class stretching (remember, most martial art schools are indeed

businesses and have to provide the customer with “what they paid for”).

Since that is the case, it’s up to you to find the time to do extensive stretching on your own. Here are some great opportunities to do so:

- **While watching TV.** Pull up a floor and simply hang out in a stretch for 10 minutes a position.
- **While listening to music.** Time flies when you have the stereo or ipod on.
- **While reading online or watching videos.** If you have a decent monitor you’ll be able to read (this?) while doing your stretches.
- **While bored.** Nothing to do? Guess one option.

MUSCLE CONDITIONING/BUILDING

After spending so much time being stationary you may want to work out some energy. If you’d like to build ab strength through crunches, arms and pecs through pushups, or any other muscle-intensive exercise, do so now.

Gauge the level of intensity with what you intend to do for training right afterward. It’s probably not a good idea to blow out your arms if you need to do carefully controlled weapons work.

Conversely, it can be good to challenge your muscles even after extensive exercise. Always use caution and common sense.

**Finally you're done...but
don't you feel better?**

STRETCHING WRAPUP

After your finished be sure to shake everything back out. Get the blood pumping a little bit as you may have cooled down.

Listen to your body and feel if anything is still tight or tweaked. This is a chance to give a few extra seconds of stretching to anything that might need it.

One last piece of advice – take time to stretch after a workout too. This is actually one of the best times for range-of-motion increase because all your muscles are warm. This is especially pertinent if you are working out at home and don't have to worry about class reishiki (courtesy) or other people needing the floor.

Tapping – A Quitter's Best Friend

No matter how supple and loose you get your muscles, there are still going to be techniques and locks that work well on you...*very well*..."I think I'm about to pass out!" well.

In order for everyone to stay happy and healthy during training, there is a universal symbol of submission called "tapping". Tapping is as simple as it sounds - when something hurts, you use a hand pat on yourself or your partner.

Tapping is a basic concept for sure, but there are a few things I'd like to clear up about it.

“Tap or Snap” is really dumb and doesn’t belong anywhere outside a paid MMA fight.

As cage fighting and UFC continues to grow in popularity, so does the mindset that tapping is for wussies. You often hear ‘tough guys’ proclaiming “I’d rather snap than tap!” (meaning have one of their joints/bones broken before submitting).

DO NOT TRAIN THIS WAY.

There should never be a feeling of shame for tapping during practice. In fact, the person who truly cares about his art will realize that keeping the body as healthy as possible will allow him to continue training and improving. Accepting more abuse on your body than you should is a quick way to [burn out](#).

When it comes to the actual act of tapping, there are a few options. The most common is a hand pat against your own body or your partner 2-3 times. If both of your hands are tied up, you can use a foot against the ground or your partner’s leg. Barring that you can use a verbal queue such as “hai!” or “matte!” (which mean yes, and wait).

Keeping your body in fully functioning condition is critical to long term success. Equally important is being able to control your breathing.

The Importance of Breath

It’s an interesting part of human nature that when faced with something difficult or unknown, we subconsciously hold our breath. Part of a built-in defense mechanism, breath holding can be detrimental to the effectiveness of your practice.

Mr. Miyagi was a big proponent of breathing (that's how you know I'm on to something).

There are certain kata in arts like karate that focus predominantly on breathing. In these kata, practitioners are instructed to tense their lower abdominal as they slowly push air up and out of their system. Furthermore, they are told to tighten their body slowly and deliberately. On the inhale, they are to relax and quickly accept air into the lungs.

While performing these special kata, it's easy to think about breathing. But what about during the rest of practice? During two man drills and when learning a new technique? It can be much more difficult.

Always remember to breathe. If you are getting stuck on a technique, go back to breathing. If you are getting overwhelmed during sparring, go back to breathing.

Although there are different ways to do it, my favorite breath is a simple in-through-the-nose, out-through-the-mouth system. To calm down, I use a deeper and slower pace. By controlling breath you give yourself a chance to control your frame of mind. As you exhale, feel yourself focusing in on the objective at hand.

Perfecting the cycle of your breath can zone you into the task in front of you and create what I call "dojo focus".

Don't look over here! This is a distraction!

Dojo Focus

I don't care what age you are, where you live, or what your background is – chances are you've got reasons to be distracted and preoccupied.

When walking into the dojo, it can be exceedingly easy to bring day-to-day baggage along for the ride; work, school, relationships, family...and who knows what else. The mind has a tendency to dwell on perceived problems at the expense of other tasks at hand.

To make the most of your training, you have to learn to shift mindsets. Consider the dojo floor a gateway that **ALLOWS** you to put down your issues.

In addition, you must adopt a mindset of seriousness and respect. Classes can be fun, exciting, and lighthearted, but it is up to you as a student to maintain yourself and not lose focus.

One of the goals of traditional martial arts is a mastery over mind and spirit. In some dojo, this can be as important as physical technique. Every time you step onto the training floor you have a chance to express your dedication to the art.

Keep your body safe, master your breath, and stay focused every time you walk out onto the floor. These simple habits can make your practice astoundingly more effective.

The Bow, The Sensei, and Other Dojo Classics

There are certain dojo experiences that seem universal. This chapter is dedicated to exploring those basic, yet often misunderstood paradigms of the traditional martial arts school.

First let's analyze something you are going to use A LOT. The bow.

Talking About Bowing

Is there anything more iconic to the martial arts than bowing? You see it done all the time and in a dozen different ways. At its core, bowing is a means of showing respect to other individuals. Instead of a western-style handshake, Asian cultures developed the bow.

The bow is an effective form of greeting because it is expressive and logical. From a health perspective, it requires no interaction (which means no germ spreading) between people. Furthermore, the way the bow is enacted (from depth to length) can signify different levels of respect (or disrespect).

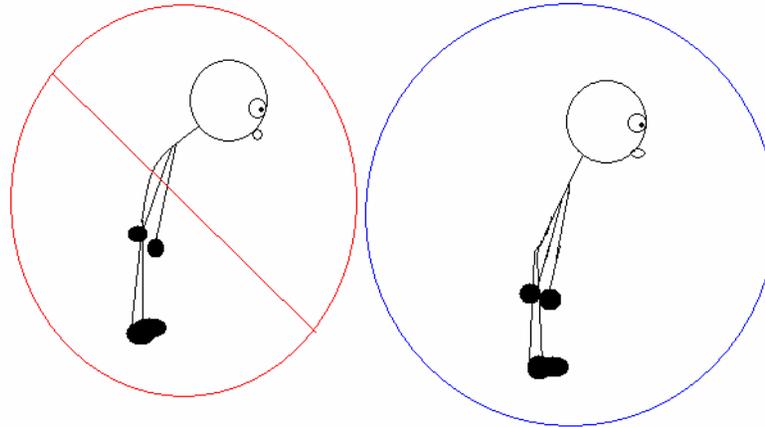
In Japanese culture subtlety can be very important. It's no wonder they developed a way to say so much with so little.

Sometimes I draw stick figures. They are terrible, but you get the point.

HOW TO BOW

The actual mechanics of bowing are more complex than you might think. At first it seems like a bow is a simple bobbing of the head in the general direction of someone you know. The truth is you have to be mindful of your posture, hands, feet, and eyes at all times.

Here is an example of bad posture and proper posture:



You'll notice the unfortunate fellow on the left has bent his spine. This is the lazy way to bow and holds no formality. The fine, upstanding student on the right has kept his back straight while bowing from the hip. This is called "hip hinging" and should be kept in mind at all times.

Tip: Find some alone time in the dojo or at home with a mirror and practice the posture of your bow over and over again. It will say more about you than you might think.

The eyes are extremely powerful and expressive. Be careful what you do with them in the dojo.

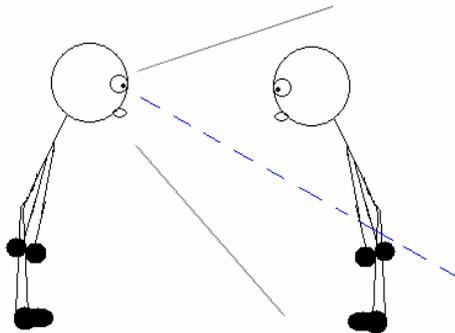
Next consider your eyes. There are a lot of contrasting theories about where exactly to focus when bowing.

Some schools recommend looking the other person in the eye, as dropping your gaze shows weakness and invites sneak attacks.

Other schools recommend dropping the eyes toward the floor as a sign of respect and reverence toward the person you are bowing to.

The truth is, there are different implications for different kinds of bows.

Let's start with my favorite and the most generally appropriate – eyes on the 45 degree angle.



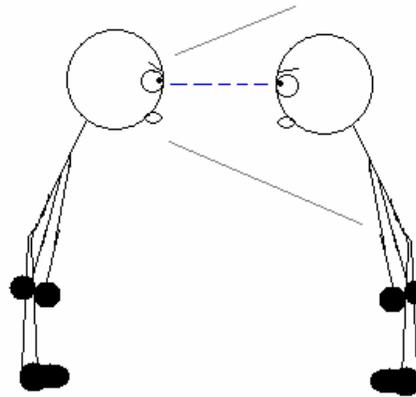
This is an excellent bow because it shows respect by not staring daggers at your partner, but at the same time, maintains peripheral vision of everything he/she is doing.

The next bow is eyes locked on eyes. This subtle maneuver can say a lot to an opponent.

First, it declares "I don't truly trust you".

Second, "I don't feel any subservience or fealty to you".

Third, "I am very strong and confident".



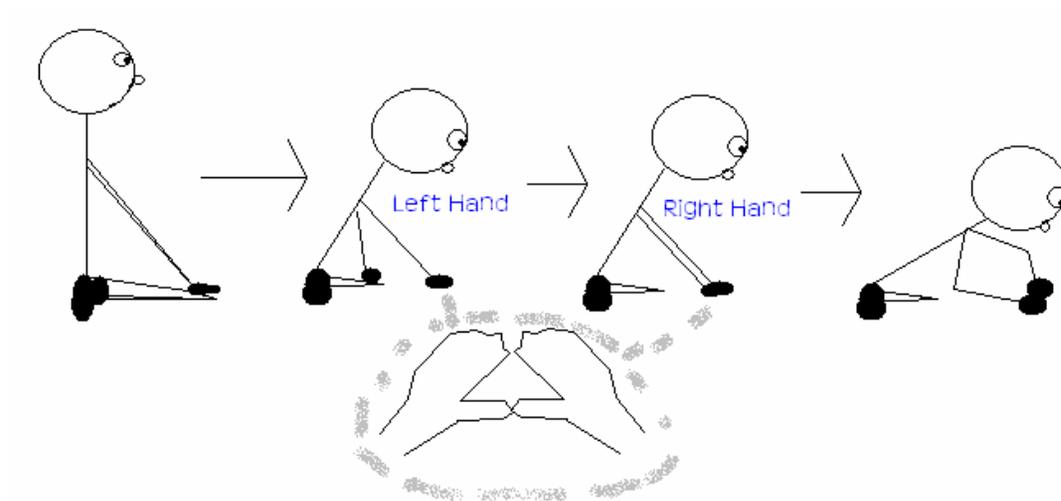
This bow is most appropriate during times of sparring, tough negotiation, or other conflict. As you can see in the picture above, the cone of vision is a bit hindered in regards to the hands and feet of the opponent. However, you gain the ability of reading his/her intentions.

The third main type of bow is with downcast eyes. This is done to show great respect or subservience. It can be used toward other individuals, but is more often used as a matter of dojo reishiki (re-she-key).

Performing the kneeling bow correctly is an art.

Often in the dojo there are locations or objects that hold great philosophical significance ([we'll talk more about that later](#)). Sometimes when honoring past teachers, ancestors, or the dojo itself, it can be appropriate to do a kneeling bow with downcast eyes.

Speaking of which, let's take a quick look at how to perform the kneeling bow.



As always, good back posture is important. The left hand is extended first, followed by the right. The upper body is then lowered using the elbows, keeping the hands in a triangular pattern.

The eyes are cast downward, but posture is maintained.

Sharp slaps during bows are mostly a military integration from the marines returning from war overseas.

Let's go back to the standing bow now.

Placement of the feet during a standing bow isn't terribly important except for balance. If you leave your feet straight ahead, you run the risk of pitching forward.

If you angle them out at 45 degrees, you are a bit more stable. Find your comfort spot somewhere in-between and practice diligently.

Placement of the hands is a bit more controversial. The first piece of advice (and most important) when it comes to hand placement is figuring out how your dojo likes to do it. Some dojo have the hands placed on the side, others toward the front. Some have you smack your sides in a military fashion. Whatever the case, do what is appropriate at your school.

Traditionally (as if you were visiting Japan), you would want to place the hands gently on the front of your thighs, arms straight. The hands should be opened and relaxed. There should be no slapping motions or quick movements of any variety. As you bow, the hands slide slightly down toward the knees, but never actually touch them.

* * *

If there is one person you will be bowing to a lot, it is your Sensei. So let's talk more about how to interact with that most venerated of persons.

Sensei is a very respectful term.

Dealing With a Sensei

There always seems to be confusion and trepidation about how to deal with a Sensei. *Can I look him/her in the eye? Can I speak before being spoken to? Should I call him/her master? Should I bow profusely?*

There is a lot of pomp and circumstance attached to the title of Sensei and I'd like to give some guidelines for dealing with a martial arts instructor.

First, a definition. Sensei means "one who has gone before" or "one who is ahead". Many people are surprised to learn that Sensei is not a martial arts specific term and is more indicative of a level of accomplishment.

In Japanese culture, it is customary to place the honorific of Sensei *after* a person's name. For example, if your karate teacher was named Jane Smith, you could call her Smith Sensei.

The term master, on the other hand, does not work the same way. Most old style instructors shy away from the term master. It is often seen as overly grandiose. They allow others to call them master out of respect, but would never actively seek it.

If you are dealing with an instructor that demands to be called master, consider it a potential red flag.

When discussing an individual who has created a style, such as Morihei Ueshiba for Aikido or Tatsuo Shimabuku for Isshin Ryu Karate, you'll occasionally hear the term OSensei used. This is an honorific that essentially means "big" teacher, and is reserved for individuals who had significant impact on the creation of an art.

Be careful not to use OSensei where it doesn't belong. Many modern martial artists create their own styles and have very high rank, but they are hardly OSensei.

SENSEI INTERACTION

How you interact with your instructor is going to be dictated largely on how your school operates. You'll want to watch other students carefully and mimic the details of their etiquette.

Here are a few good general tips to live by:

- **Never demand attention.** Wait patiently for the instructor's attention to turn to you and if there is a hand-raising-type policy, abide by it.
- **Never call out an instructor if they mess up during class.** It can be difficult to teach, talk, and do at the same time. Even Sensei are human. If you are confused by a technique they are doing, phrase a question like this: "Sensei, could you explain technique xyz? Can it also be done like this?" If you show the instructor the correct way to do it, he/she will likely remember and suggest you do it the right way.

Bad Sensei behavior is more prevalent than you might think.

- **Don't be a bobber, bowing at everything said and done.** Traditionally, after you do a formal bowing ceremony at the beginning and end of class, you won't need to bow to your instructor every time he/she says something.
- **Do not playfully punch, grab, or kick a Sensei.** It is seen as poor manners. Conduct horseplay with other students.
- **During sparring, it is ok to try and "win",** but always exhibit control and respect. Do not take cheap shots (unless the lesson is how to take cheap shots).
- **Never be afraid to look an instructor in the eye.** However, don't try to win a staring contest. It's rude.
- **Try not to turn your back on a teacher** after you've spoken to them.
- **Accept correction and criticism.** Never feel like you are above advice.

SENSEI BEHAVIOR YOU DON'T HAVE TO TOLERATE

The student/teacher relationship is a two-way street. The student has a lot of responsibility in treating a Sensei the right way, but it is just as important for the instructor to behave properly.

Here are some things you don't have to accept as part of training:

- **Open mocking and berating.** This is not boot camp and there is no "drop and give me 20 maggot".
- **Physical abuse** to the point of bleeding, broken bones, etc. Martial arts training is tough and you will get bumps and bruises, but serious injury is never par for the course.

Make sure you do your homework and check around about an instructor. His/her character is not a given.

- **Sexual ANYTHING.** I'm not talking about women's self defense courses or rape prevention. Those are specifically designed to deal with sexual situations in a mature way. Instead I am referring to uninvited touching or conversation. You do not need to talk about sex, your love life, or your body with an instructor. If you are being touched in a way that makes you feel uncomfortable, respectfully disengage from the situation. Never be afraid to tell a parent or loved one about what happened during class.
- **Gossip.** As strange as it sounds, some teachers love to talk about themselves, other students, and the latest "dish". Avoid it. Martial arts are about training.
- **Bribery and Negotiation.** If your instructor is bargaining with you for any reason and using rank/prestige/training as a tool to get what he/she wants, consider it a red flag. Some instructors try to use their students as minions or simply enjoy the power of manipulation.
- **Political Agenda.** MSNBC may be "The Place for Politics", but the dojo is not. There should never be a correlation between training and political beliefs.
- **Strong Religious Overtones.** A dojo can have elements of Shinto, Buddhism, Christianity, or any other religion, but there should not be a forced religious doctrine involved. There should always be room for your religious beliefs AND training, not necessarily together.

OSU! (also known as oss)

"Oss" is a noise you hear coming out of a lot of training halls and can be confusing. What does it mean? Why and when should martial artists use it?

Let's examine.

Definition: "Oss is a Japanese word written with two different characters. The first character means 'to push'; the second means 'to suffer'. Combined, these two characters symbolize the importance of pushing and persevering while suffering through whatever difficulties life presents." – Brian R Fey.

Many times students will overuse Oss as a simple way to agree with or greet people. They might also use it to disagree, or emphasize certain techniques in their kata.

In actuality, Oss is better served as a way to convey an understanding of effort. Appropriate after training or learning a new technique, Oss is not a kiai or verbal filler.

Be frugal with Oss. Do not use it as a substitute for saying nothing. Monitor your school's usage of the term and join in when appropriate.



Breaking Stuff

Sometimes traditional schools like it when you break stuff - boards, bricks, tiles...things of that nature.

The reason is generally to conduct a test of the student's technique and willpower. Most of the time breaking a board is more a matter of mental willingness rather than lack of power.

I'm not going to give any specific advice on breaking because I don't think people should try it without the guidance of a skilled instructor. Do not casually break things at home. There are a lot of factors that go into a successful break and you have to take the time to learn them under a watchful eye.

One thing I will say is that breaking is not an essential part of the martial arts process. It is a useful tool to help students grow and test themselves, but is not a stand-alone indicator of progress.

If your school has mandatory breakings for testing, don't worry. Take it slow and build your confidence.

If your school doesn't do breaking, don't worry. Your training is not inferior - your instructor has simply chosen to focus on other things. If you want to increase your punching power, use heavy bags and makiwara (padded hitting boards).

Lesser Known Pieces of Etiquette

Last chapter covered some very common issues that almost every student will encounter. This chapter will be taking a different approach. Although less universal, the following sections will explain some of the more cryptic and misunderstood aspects of traditional dojo training.

Read on and integrate what you think could be useful to your studies.

The Mysterious Shinza

Does your dojo have a little area in the front that seems to hold special significance? Do you rei (bow) to it before and after class? You may very well have a Shinza (shin-zah) on your hands – an interesting part of the traditional dojo.

The Shinza is the spiritual focal point of the dojo and often contains important elements of the school's philosophy and history. Sometimes found are portraits of past instructors, flags for federations or countries, and other small possessions of significance.

Occasionally the Shinza is encompassed by a Torii, or symbolic gate used in the [Shinto belief system](#) (the red structure in the picture to the left). When passing through a Torii (as students symbolically do when bowing in and out), they are entering sacred time and space.





Of course, how much of that etiquette a student dives into is completely up to them. The bowing they do can be purely out of respect for the instructor and those people who have trained before them.

In addition to a Shinza, you'll sometimes see a kamidana. Kamidana (or spirit shelf) is where a kamidana-jinja is placed. Kamidana-jinja, or Jinja for short, is a small shrine made out of natural woods.

The Jinja (jin-jah) is traditional to the ways of Shinto and often contains a circular mirror (one of the three official Japanese regalia - the other two being a sword and jewels). The doors of the Jinja are generally kept closed, save for special events.

Beginning students should not be intimidated by the Jinja or feel religiously threatened by it. It is a simple thing that demands nothing, but can offer a lot.

The significance of the Jinja is that of respect for nature, our ancestors in training, and to ourselves in the pursuit of the martial arts.

To learn more about the deep roots of the Shinza and Kamidana, consult the book "[In the Dojo](#)", by Dave Lowry. He explains in much deeper detail the historical background of these special areas and discusses all the small accessories that can make good kamidana complete.

Tip: Don't touch the Shinza or Kamidana unless you have to.

Bowing In and Out of the Dojo

Without understanding the previous point about the Shinza, it would be very difficult to explain this point.

In many schools it is appropriate to bow in and out of the training floor. Although part of that is simple courtesy for entering the training area, it is also a bow to the Shinza.

By bowing to the Shinza when stepping onto the floor, you are recognizing the significance of the training area as more than just a place to play with techniques, but as an area to improve your body, mind, and character. This bowing also helps to establish [dojo focus](#), as discussed earlier.

Avoiding The Mon

Virtually every school has a crest or patch. This symbol is often referred to as a mon. In addition to putting the mon on their uniforms, some schools put a large painted mon somewhere near their dojo entrance.

If you encounter this, be certain not to step on it. It is seen as very bad etiquette. Avoiding the mon is a great way to show the instructor of a school that you respect what he teaches.

Warning: Some vocab words are up next. Don't be afraid! Also, if you practice a Chinese or Korean art, you can probably skip ahead.

Just a quick vocab brush-up. Don't worry, it won't be painful.

Gomen Nasai

There are a lot of occasions when the word "sorry" will leave your lips in a dojo. Or, more accurately, "oops, sorry". If you'd like to avoid becoming a sorry machine, learn to use the term Gomen Nasai (go-men nah-sai).

Gomen Nasai is a very polite way of showing remorse and can be accompanied by a bow if even more regret is needed.

Sumimasen / Shitsurei Shimasu

If you need to get the attention of a Sensei, or even another student in class, Sumimasen (sue-me-mah-sen) is a great way to go about it. By saying "excuse me" with Sumimasen, you show politeness while maintaining proper reishiki.

If you have committed a faux pas, use Shitsurei Shimasu (shit-su-rey-shi-mahs). This is a way of saying "excuse me", but in the context that you have done something rude and would like to be excused for your transgression.

Ohayo Gozaimasu / Konnichi Wa / Konban Wa

These are three Japanese greetings. Ohayo Gozaimasu (ohio-gooz-i-mahs) is the proper way to say good morning and should be used in the early hours. Konnichi Wa (cone-ich-i-wah) is the general purpose greeting and can be used in afternoons (or any time else). Konban Wa (cun-bahn-wah) is the way to say good evening and can also be used as a goodbye.

Taking Off Your Shoes

Most schools these days have a waiting area for spectators, parents, etc that is considered general-use. However, once you step foot onto the training floor, it is proper to take your shoes off.

A little bit of this tradition is cultural, and a little is practical. On the cultural end, Japanese people have long made it a habit of taking their shoes off before entering one another's houses. It was a natural extension to make the same habit a part of dojo life.

On the practical side, shoes are dirty and instructors want to keep their training area as clean as possible. A clean dojo is both safe for practitioners and respectful to the seriousness of the art taking place there.

The Use of San

San (sahn) is a title that can be used instead of Mr/Mrs/Ms. It is a polite, all-purpose term that is placed after someone's name. For example, if you had a friend named Bob Smith, you could call him either SmithSan or BobSan, depending on your level of familiarity.

One tricky part about San is that you should never use it when referring to yourself. A respectful and almost honorary title, it is in poor taste to place upon yourself that level of importance.

Master XYZ is Mr. XYZ in the real world.

Real World Run-ins

It's bound to happen – you're going to run into other students and instructors from your dojo out in the real world. Most dojos are local affairs and students/teachers will frequent the same stores, malls, restaurants, etc. When a run-in happens, there is always a little bit of confusion as to how you should behave. Should there be bowing? Official titles? Formality/Informality?

A great general rule is that when out in the real world, society manners apply over dojo manners. You wouldn't call a grade-school teacher Sensei would you, even though he/she is literally an instructor? Probably not, and the reason why is because western society dictates a Mr/Mrs/Ms title for those individuals.

Martial arts instructors (and adult students) can usually be addressed with polite titles rather than the formal Japanese/Chinese/Korean. Insisting on martial arts titles in day-to-day life is seen as a little affected.

Conversely, it is important that you don't treat one of your teachers like an ol' buddy ol' pal. You may be older, richer, and of higher status, but some of the martial art relationship DOES seep over and there should be a consistent show of restraint and respect on your part.

* * *

Enough etiquette, let's get on with fighting shall we? Ohh yea!

Fighting – How to Do It (Safely)

Fighting is a key component of traditional martial arts. Without some form of combat training, you become a performer rather than a life protection practitioner.

There are a few different approaches to combat training, all of which have value. The most well known is sparring (aka jiyu kumite). Sparring is the free exchange of techniques between two (usually padded) individuals. The fighters often compete within a set of guidelines to keep everyone safe.

One important factor when discussing sparring is knowing the difference between tournament and traditional.

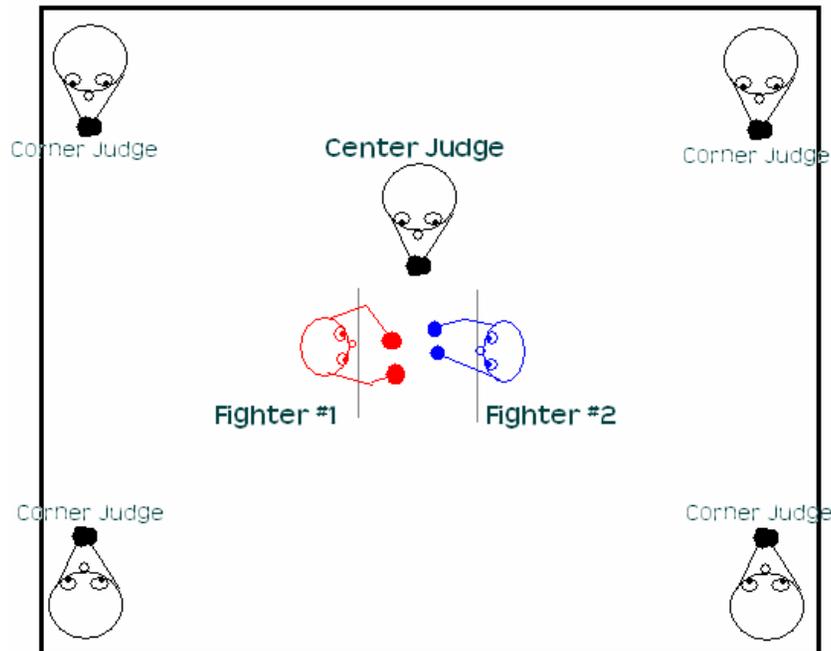
Tournament Sparring

Tournament sparring is very popular due to its inherent safety and application to sport. Although most tournament circuits have their own specific rules, generally a match goes like this:

- two competitors line up across from each other
- They bow to the judges and to each other
- A center judge yells 'begin'
- The competitors attempt to score a point
- A judge stops the round when someone scores

A point can be scored to the head or the body, both of which are covered in protective gear.

For a better look at how tournament fights go, consider this picture:



You'll notice that the two fighters are being guided by the center judge. The corner judges are relatively quiet throughout the fight, but are integral for making a unanimous decision once a judge stops the fight for a potential point.

Tournament sparring is seen mostly as a sport, but it is still a test of will to get out there and compete.

To be prepared for a tournament fight, first make sure you have the proper equipment. It is a good idea to wear hand pads, foot pads, headgear, a cup (if applicable), and a mouthpiece. Optional (but recommended) are chest protectors and shin guards.

Next, make sure to follow proper etiquette. Generally, you will be asked to bow to the center judge first, then to your opponent, then perhaps touch gloves as a sign of good sportsmanship. From there you will be asked to take your on-guard stance and the center judge will yell 'begin' or 'hajime' (haa-gee-may).

The fight then starts and you try your best to score a point.

The amount of contact allowed at tournaments varies, but for students under black belt it is mostly light contact to the body, light/no contact to the head. For black belt and above, it can range from medium-to-full contact to both body and head.

Traditional Sparring

Traditional sparring is a bit different than tournament. First of all, there are no points awarded. Without points, there is no official winner. Furthermore, the same rules and regulations that make tournament fighting fair do not really apply. Success is mostly dictated by damage taken vs damage given.

Control is the most critical element to becoming a great fighter because you can actively aim for devastating strikes on the body.

In traditional sparring you still tend to see protective gear in order to keep the fighters safe (but not always, as is the case in Kyokushin Karate). However, control is much more critical here as the striking targets are only limited by your imagination.

The body, the head, the limbs, the joints...it's all fair game if you know how to pull your punches. Traditional sparring takes away the mindset of winning and instead utilizes a mindset of surviving. This kind of encounter is more closely related to actual combat (although nothing truly simulates combat except combat).

During traditional sparring, there are no judges. Most of the time there is a single Sensei watching over a fight. Or, if the class is big, a Sensei running the class and advanced students monitoring the fights.

When Sparring Goes Bad

Sometimes sparring can be the house that ego built. All too often there are situations where students/instructors feel that sparring is nothing but a proving ground for them to display their dominance. Having to deal with these kinds of individuals is an unfortunate fact of martial arts life.

A lot of people, both students and parents of students, feel confused and powerless when this happens. They are stuck between trying to build toughness but at the same time survive to see the light of tomorrow.

Some people really do want to get knocked out every week. Assess your own goals and the objectives of your school.

In order to properly deal with a bad sparring situation, you first have to decide how much pain and punishment is too much. Remember, you are in a martial arts school and you will get hit. Sometimes accidents happen and you will get knocked for a loop. If you decide to bail at the first sign of contact, you might as well not join a dojo.

That being said, you never have to tolerate abuse. Getting knocked unconscious every Thursday is not the secret to becoming a great martial artist (in fact, it's a quick way to early retirement).

WARNING SIGNS OF TROUBLE

For those individuals who aren't sure if they are in a bad situation, consider some of these symptoms:

- People you are fighting are routinely angry and agitated
- Certain opponents consistently mock and berate you
- Instructors don't seem to notice excessive bullying or contact
- You are being repeatedly knocked out, choked to the point of unconsciousness, or otherwise beaten until you can't get up
- You receive cheap and dangerous shots under the guise of 'anything goes'
- Control is never discussed as a valuable asset
- You get a sense of Cobra-Kai militarism ([See "Karate Kid"](#))
- People use the excuse that full contact is allowed in MMA fights (if that happens, remind them that you aren't making six figures to get your butt beat at the dojo every week)

Never feel stuck or cornered.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU FEEL AT RISK

Even harder than acknowledging that you are being treated improperly is figuring out what to do about it. After all, the last two chapters in this book dealt with reishiki and etiquette in the dojo (and that barely scraped the surface). It can be a real challenge trying to speak up without breaking any dojo rules.

Here is some advice that, while not prescriptive, can at least get you started toward a solution:

First, if there is a specific individual causing you problems, try to address it directly. All too often a lack of communication turns small, fixable problems into something bigger. If the culprit is a fellow student, take them aside and chat about the issue. Do so in a light manner and keep the conversation positive.

If you're lucky, the person will realize that they have been too aggressive and will fix the problem. Unfortunately, sometimes he/she has deeper seeded reasons for wanting to harass you and will not stop so easily.

If a conversation with the problem student doesn't work, you then have to discuss it with the teacher. Do not bring it up in class; instead, find some alone time with the instructor and inform him/her of the issue in a mature way. Do not whine or unload – simply talk about your concerns and ask if the instructor sees a solution.

Due to the hierarchical nature of the martial arts, the instructor should be able to fix the problem very quickly.

If he/she is unable to rectify the situation, or is instead encouraging a bad kind of behavior, it is then up to you to decide if you wish to stay on as a student. Furthermore, if the teacher is the one causing the problems and you have no one higher up to turn to, you may have to make the tough choice to leave.

Helpful Hints to Improve Your Sparring

Don't let me scare you with all this doom and gloom – sparring is a great way to improve and doesn't have to be an unpleasant experience.

The best way to learn how to fight is under the careful watch of a skilled teacher. That being said, here are some useful tips that can help you no matter what your style:

- **Keep your hands up.** People get so caught up in trying to attack or figure out a winning strategy that they let their guard drop. That's exactly when they get popped in the headgear.
- **Stay Calm.** Fighting can be a very stressful thing, and it's easy to get overwhelmed with excitement/anger/anxiety. These powerful emotions cloud your judgment and hinder your reactions. Staying calm and cool helps you stick to your own strategy and not play into your opponent's.

Don't be afraid to "lose" at sparring. It's a great way to learn.

- **Regulate your breathing.** This can be a lot harder than it sounds. One of the first things to happen during times of stress is erratic breathing – either by holding it in or pumping it too fast. By regulating a natural breathing pace, you can improve your chances of staying calm.
- **Throw in 2-3 Combinations.** One trademark problem for beginning fighters is the 'hunt-and-peck' method of sparring. Instead of throwing a punch here and a kick there, attack in combinations of strikes.
- **Accept Black Belt Advice.** If an advanced student is taking it easy on you or trying to explain techniques while fighting, don't consider it a slight. Try to heed their advice and observe their movements.

Kumite – Gohon, Sanbon, Ippon

Sparring isn't the only way to go about training. There are other valuable drills that you can use to practice your technique. The following are known as 'step' drills and can be remarkably useful.

GOHON KUMITE

Unlike sparring, gohon kumite (go-hone coo-me-te) is a prearranged series of movements. As its name suggests, there are five steps in each drill (go=5 in Japanese).

It may seem stiff at first, but gohon and sanbon kumite can really help drive home techniques.

In gohon kumite, two partners line up across from each other. One partner steps in and performs a strike while the other partner steps back and performs a block. This process is repeated five times, and on the last block, the defender performs a counterstrike.

The two combatants can then switch roles and work their way back across the dojo floor.

The goal of gohon kumite is rote repetition combined with developing a sense of timing and distance. In order to make traditional techniques effective, there needs to be an extreme amount of repetition so that the body can perform without thinking (known as muscle memory). Gohon kumite is an excellent drill for developing these critical basics.

SANBON KUMITE

Sanbon (sahn-bone) kumite is a close cousin to gohon, just a little shorter. As go=5 in Japanese, san=3. Therefore, sanbon kumite is a three step drill.

Performed much like gohon, sanbon lines two partners up across from each other. One partner performs three aggressive attacks inward, while the other partner steps back and does three defenses.

Generally, the defender can wait until the last attack to perform a counterattack, or do a counter during each step.

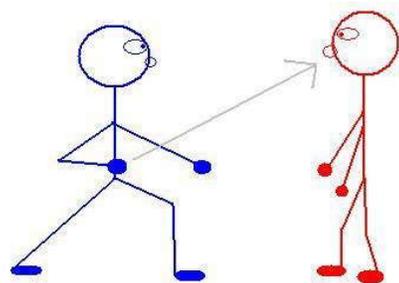
IPPON KUMITE

ippon (ee-pone) kumite is a different animal from the last two, and something that I consider very beneficial to traditional training.

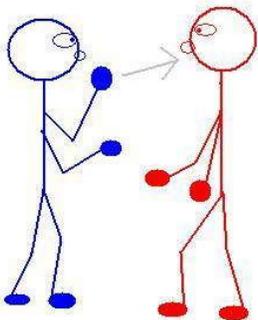
We've gone from five steps down to three, and now we are going from three to one. Although ichi=1 in Japanese counting, the 'i' in ippon is another way of signifying singularity. Therefore, ippon kumite is one step fighting.

On the surface, ippon kumite can be performed just like the last two drills. One person steps in and makes an attack, the other person steps back and blocks. The blocking partner then performs a counterattack.

The really great thing about ippon is that it can be taken from a rigid practice tool to a relaxed self defense drill. Consider this picture:



Rigid Technique Practice



Relaxed Self Defense Practice



On top you see the classic approach where the defender is given plenty of time and space to block. This is great when first starting out.

However, as time goes by, it is important to take off the training wheels and practice in a more realistic environment. Ippon is easily translated into realistic "street" scenarios where the attacker assumes a normal posture, either hands up on guard or with no stance at all.

Practice Ippon Kumite in both a traditional and unpredictable fashion.

The attacker is allowed to think “ok, how would I attack if I was an average person with little training.” Then the defender can think “how can I react so as to optimize my defense”, or even better, “let me turn off my brain for a second and see how I react.”

In some ways ippon is much more realistic than sparring, and is a great asset to any training regiment.

Self-Defense Tips

Here are some guidelines to help turn your training from exercise and sport into legitimate self defense:

- **KISS.** Keep It Simple Stupid. I know it’s an old phrase, but it’s also completely applicable. The best self defense techniques and strategies are always simple. If you find yourself engaging in long, drawn out series of moves, reconsider your strategy.
- **Aim For Targets.** In sparring there is a lot of hitting, but very little aiming. Part of that is for safety, the other is a sacrifice of technique in order to win a point. In self defense, choose your targets wisely and aim for what is truly vulnerable on the human body.
- **Learn the Law.** Investigate the laws in your area about what is considered legal self defense. Different states/countries have different statutes and it would be wise to know how severely you can react to an attack.

- **Learn to Use Your Tools.** What do you carry around with you in your pockets or purse? Can they be used as weapons? How easily accessible are they?
- **Dress For the Occasion.** Remember - how you dress will greatly impact your mobility and effectiveness. Sandals and flip-flops can't offer the same value as a good pair of sneakers.
- **Stay Smart.** The best tool for good self defense is staying confident and making good decisions. Don't get sucked into dangerous situations if they are avoidable.

* * *

Is your bloodlust for fighting satiated?? Good, let's dip into a very controversial part of traditional training - rank and hierarchy...

Rank and the Effects of Hierarchy

One of the most jarring experiences for many westerners is trying to fit into a strict hierarchy. We have the privilege of living in democratic societies, and it can be uncomfortable for us to bow, be quiet, and fall in line.

Military institutions often utilize a similar hierarchy, but most people attending martial arts schools will be doing it for civilian purposes and will not have a lot of military experience. Even soldiers will notice that the martial system isn't quite the same.

This chapter will analyze rank – what it means, where it came from, and its significance. Also, we'll examine how martial artists should interact with one another and how hierarchy can be effectively integrated into your life without compromising any dignity or beliefs.

Rank – Has it Always Existed?

Rank and colored belts are such a common part of training these days that people rarely stop to question them. Like the sun and the moon, they've always just been there, so why rock the boat?



It's surprising, but the reality of rank as we know it is quite young.

THE JAPANESE – IN THE OLD DAYS

For the Japanese, a system called Menkyo Kaiden was the predominant way of showing rank for hundreds of years. The Menkyo Kaiden was essentially a scroll indicating that a certain practitioner had received total transmission of a given art.

During its feudal era, Japan had many different clans and Budo styles. To keep the styles alive, yet not give away critical secrets, the Samurai utilized the Menkyo system to ensure proper passing.

Menkyo were not easy to come by and receiving one would often allow the holder to either branch out and teach, or help teach in the main dojo. Sometimes Menkyo were so thinly distributed that the holder of one became the rightful heir to the style upon the death of the master.

THE OKINAWANS – IN THE OLD DAYS

For the Okinawans (creators of karate), things were a bit different. In the beginning, there was no rank to speak of because karate was much less formalized. Students learned from various teachers on the island and te (later called karate) was more a gathering of knowledge than a formal style.

Ultimately the Okinawans developed a similar system to Menkyo Kaiden and called it Menjo. As styles formed in early karate, the Menjo behaved much the same as the Japanese Menkyo.

Things went pretty unchanged in the world of ranking until two men by the names of Kano Jigoro and Funakoshi Gichin started making waves.

KANO AND FUNAKOSHI – REVOLUTIONARIES

Kano Jigoro (October 1860 – May 1938) was the founder of judo and a truly remarkable man. Kano Sensei studied faithfully in the Japanese art of jujutsu until receiving recognition as a master. He then branched out and formed his own school, referring to it as judo (note: this would later give a lot of hacky martial artists an excuse to create their own styles).

As both an educator and martial artist, Kano was able to put his talents together and revolutionized the way martial arts were run, creating an unmistakable bridge between the ancient secret styles and the global arts of today.

One of Kano's most widespread concepts was introducing white and black belts, and from there developing multiple "dan" ranks to differentiate levels of black. Kano took the idea of dan ranking from the exceedingly popular Japanese strategy game [Go](#) and the players who mastered it.

In the beginning there were only white and black belts.

Kano would soon develop a specific kind of uniform and belt that students could wear to practice safely and denote rank at the same time.

Funakoshi Gichin (November 1868 – April 1957) was an Okinawan native who was integral in bringing the art of karate to Japan. In the early days, the Japanese did not consider karate a true martial art in the same vein as kenjutsu, jujutsu, and kyudo. In order to help spread its popularity and reputation, Funakoshi Sensei traveled to Japan to begin teaching and performing the art in front of large and important audiences.

One day Jigoro Kano witnessed a performance by Funakoshi and requested to meet him. The two masters became acquaintances and ultimately friends, training together, sharing ideas, and developing their martial arts.

One concept that Funakoshi adopted off of Kano was his ranking system. Through Funakoshi's efforts the Kyu/Dan system as seen in Judo became prevalent in karate as well.

It is believed that Funakoshi adopted this system so readily because it was a thoughtful way to organize students, and also put karate in line with the Dai Nippon Butokukai (the leading Japanese body for martial arts, and the establishment that would ultimately invite karate into mainstream Japanese society).

Colored belts started off as white, green, brown, and black. Red/white striped belts were often used for 7th, 8th dans, and full red for 9th, 10th dans.

The question remains – what about the colored belts we see all over the place today?

According to martial arts writer and historian Dave Lowry, the development of colored belts might be less poetic than we think.

In 1936, a judo practitioner named Mikonosuke Kawaishi began teaching his art in Paris. Kawaishi, much like Kano himself, was an innovator and often tried to find new ways to teach and disseminate judo on a global scale.

One concept that he developed was the creation of different colored belts to recognize students progress as they worked toward black belt.

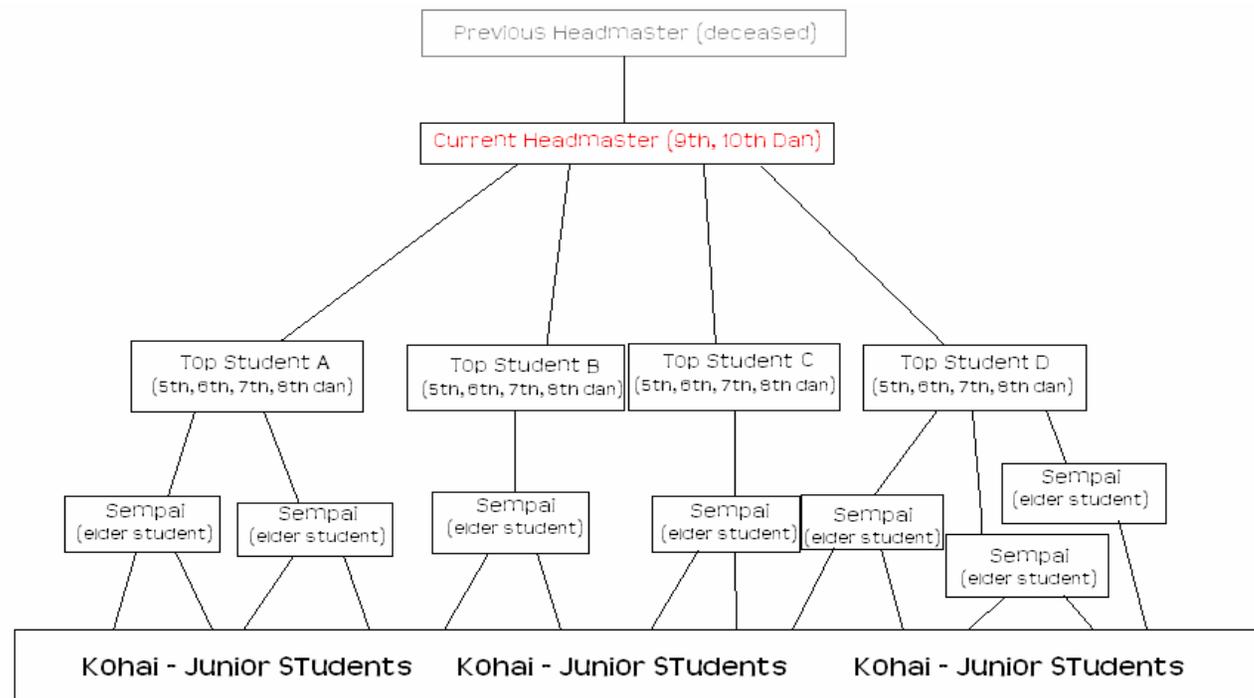
Lowry believes that it is from Kawaishi's efforts that colored belts were born and grew in popularity. Furthermore, he believes that stories related to the color of the belt darkening through effort and training (white to green to brown to black), or that each color has deep cultural and philosophical significance is actually untrue.

As happens in the martial arts, people who aren't sure of the reasoning behind something are often tempted to make up a reason, either to better explain themselves or to avoid seeming like they don't know something.

A Look at Traditional Hierarchy

Now that we know what the ranks mean and how they came about, we should look at how organizations are generally set up.

As time goes by, more and more styles pop up and branch out. This can create a seemingly large mess of lineages and instructors. However, in most reputable schools, there is a very clear-cut hierarchy of where the instructors came from and who is underneath them. Let's use an example and trace the hierarchy of XYZ Ryu:



I know, hierarchy is a little complicated.

While this graphic is definitely limited, it should give you an idea of how things break down.

In XYZ Ryu, the previous headmaster passed away and left the style to the current headmaster.

The current headmaster has four senior students who he/she has elevated to the ranks of 5th-8th dan after many years of training. Both the headmaster and the top students are likely to have dojo of their own, but that is not a certainty. Many top students prefer to help instruct at the headmaster's dojo, and conversely, many headmasters hand off their dojo to a top student.

Below each of the top students are their senior students, or students of the headmaster that command lesser rank. These people generally have 1st-5th dan rankings.

Below that are the juniors. These are the students that have kyu ranking (colored belts) or lower dan ranking than other senior students in the dojo.

In traditional martial arts, terminology is often relative. A 5th dan can be a kohai (junior) to a senior 7th dan. Conversely, a 2nd kyu brown belt can be a sempai (senior) to a 9th kyu white belt.

Some schools reserve the sempai/kohai titles to students under black belt – using the term Sensei for anyone above.

Learning how to be a junior is a critical skill.

As a beginner, hierarchy is easy. Everyone is senior to you. No problem. But as you move up in rank it is important to recognize who has been around longer than you and who commands higher rank.

When dealing with someone of the same rank, it is often courteous to defer respect to the student who has been training longer. If both students have been training the same amount of time, age can be used instead (with respect going to the elder).

How to Behave as a Junior

We are all juniors. No matter who you are or where you are, there is someone senior to you. That being the case, it is important to know how to act.

As a raw beginner, a lot of your initial instincts will help you behave properly. You're going to be a little scared, quiet, and introverted. This is good because nobody likes an obnoxious beginner...

I'm being facetious of course, but it is true that you don't want to come into a dojo making all kinds of racket and stirring the pot. Your goal should be to learn the dynamic of the dojo and fit in comfortably so that everyone can learn as much as possible during class time.

When addressing a senior, your behavior will often be dictated by the formality of the event and your familiarity with that person.

You may think you're really clever, but you might just be a smart*. Keep it under control.**

In everyday training, much of the courtesy due to seniors is taken care of by the beginning and ending reishiki. This is where you'll have a chance to bow and use formality.

During class it is appropriate to maintain a level of respect that is both noticeable, but not affected. By that I mean you needn't bow and scrape every time a senior walks by, but you *should* always use a respectful tone when speaking to them (and anything else common sense suggests would be polite).

HUMOR AND GETTING FRIENDLY

Humor is actually a tricky concept in the dojo. Depending on your particular school, there is likely to be varying levels of humor involved in class. Some teachers are very strict, others are very light-hearted.

As a junior, there is a strong possibility that you are going to get ribbed from time to time. It's a way for martial artists to "initiate" new members and make them feel like part of the group. Unfortunately, sometimes juniors get the idea that they are going to start ribbing back. After all, if you take a joke that means you can dish it back out, right?

This is an instance where hierarchy isn't exactly fair. As a junior you basically have to take jokes without hitting back. Furthermore, you can't make fun of a senior whenever the mood strikes you. Sarcasm, snarkiness, and "baditude" should always be checked at the door.

It is better to give than to receive...unless the other person doesn't want anything.

Although you never have to tolerate hazing, you should be prepared for the possibility of your ego getting deflated from time to time. It's a learning experience.

A similar notion is how friendly you can get with a senior student. Even if you become great friends, it is important to mind your boundaries. It's your responsibility to make sure the senior doesn't have to put you back in your place, because if he/she does, you both lose face.

ADVICE AND CORRECTION

You're going to be getting a lot of advice and correction as a junior. Sometimes very valuable, other times not (maybe even downright wrong). This is another occasion where you have to try and preserve face for both you and the senior.

If receiving incorrect advice, either accept it and store it away for later when you can check with another ranking member, or politely place the burden of mistake on yourself and demonstrate how you thought the technique was done. Either the senior will recognize the correct way and change their tune, explain why what you are doing is also ok, or stick to their original theory that you were incorrect. In all three instances neither practitioner is backed into a corner.

It is critical that you do not offer unwanted advice to seniors. From time to time you may see them practicing something, and you may be

inspired to start conversation. This is fine (I even recommend it). However, do not watch a senior's material and present to them a list of ways they can make it better. You may be awesome and they may stink, but it is still not your place to provide correction when it isn't asked for.

There are clever ways around this problem. Simply suggest to them that you saw another instructor perform the technique a certain way, and then begin a conversation on why the other method might be valuable/not valuable.

Always maintain yourself as the learner unless expressly being asked for advice or counsel.

How to Behave as a Senior

As tricky as being a junior can be, being a senior is even more intricate. The higher in rank you get the more responsibility you have to behave properly and set a good example for your kohai.

The senior-junior relationship is a constant give and take. To be an effective senior, you have to realize when it is appropriate to guide students and when to let them explore on their own. Furthermore, you have to make the decisions to provide tough love when kohai are either waffling in their commitment or beginning to stray off of the right path.

Your students may be laughing, but that doesn't mean you're hilarious.

HUMOR AND GETTING FRIENDLY

Now that you're in a position of power, you can really let those newbie punks have it, right?

Not quite.

Although the seniors of a dojo do get a lot more freedom to joke around and dictate the mood of the class, it is important not to let that authority go to your head. One of the quickest ways to lose students is to create a hazing environment where students feel a sense of dread every time they come to class.

Always keep joking and humor as light-hearted and good-natured as possible. Students are unique individuals and they will all react differently to your demeanor. It's important to be in-tune with their facial expressions and body language, picking up what makes them uncomfortable and avoiding it in the future.

As a senior, you also have the burden of not getting too friendly (especially during class time). Showing great favoritism to a particular student can dishearten others and even create a growing resentment toward the "favored one". Promote a sense of community in the dojo and avoid divisiveness.

Lastly, there are far too many cases of instructors 'being friendly' with a student in order to pursue an inappropriate romantic relationship. Don't be that teacher.

ADVICE AND CORRECTION

In a senior role, giving advice and correction is one of your primary duties. It pays to be good at it. Not every student reacts to criticism the same way, so pick up on that quickly. Some students get annoyed by sugar coating and like to get straight forward advice. Other students are using the dojo to slowly build their self-confidence and can be easily shattered by aggressive correction. It's a fine balance and something that demands a teacher's constant attention.

Sometimes ...very rarely (almost never)...you are going to be wrong. A senior, no matter how well practiced, is not perfect. Those who pretend to be are just putting on airs. If you find a mistake in yourself never be afraid to admit it. Or, if asked a question you don't know the answer to, just tell the student you'll find the correct answer rather than making something up.

MY BEST TIP – KEEP YOUR PATIENCE

I don't make a lot of assurances or flat out promises in this book, but let me make one right now – your patience is going to be tested. As a senior, you have no idea what's going to get thrown at you (both physically and mentally) each day.

No matter what happens, try to keep your patience. Never arrive at a snapping point.

* * *

We've come a long way, now let's go back to the beginning...

Keeping the Beginner's Mindset (For Advanced Students)

Earlier in the book we talked about [how to attain a beginner's mindset](#), which is a critical concept when starting a martial art. Unfortunately, over time that mindset can fade away as more and more knowledge, familiarity, and complacency creep into a practitioner's training.

The only thing as important as achieving a beginner's mindset is maintaining it, and one of the biggest hurdles in doing that is 'crossing the finish line'.

THE FINISH LINE CUNUNDRUM

Often throughout our early training we are striving for an end goal, and in most cases, the end goal is black belt. Black belt is seen as a level of mastery, a final plateau of understanding.

When a student reaches the 'final plateau', they often wipe their hands and announce – "DONE".

Worse yet, the student will try to hang around for another year or two waiting for the big martial arts secrets to be revealed to him/her because they now possess the grand backstage pass. When they fail to receive those secrets, they leave begrudgingly for another style that is 'better'.

Here is some inside information you might not want to hear.

THE REAL SECRET OF BLACK BELT

Do you want to know the real secret for prolonged success?

Hard, unnoticed, unrewarded work.

It's true. The days of receiving belt stripes, patches, and certificates are over. Promotions are going to be few and far between (so you might as well not even worry about them).

To succeed at black belt and keep a beginner's mind, you have to let go of all the external rewards you relied on to keep you motivated up until this point.

You also have to realize what a *basic* foundation your current knowledge really is.

SHU HA RI

One of the least understood and most underutilized concepts in the martial arts is Shuhari. By definition it means the following:

Shu: To Follow

Ha: To Transcend

Ri: To Break Away

守破離

Shuhari is not a plateau system, it is cyclical.

When we first start our training, we are all engrossed in "shu", the following and learning of the art. During shu, we try our best to properly mimic the mechanics, ideas, and concepts that our teachers show us. As we progress to higher levels of comprehension, we never stop following. There is always something new to be learned from both our instructors and the students beside us.

That being said, the advanced practitioner must also take the leap into "ha", or transcending. To transcend, you must learn the deeper nature of techniques – how they work, where they work, why they work. You must also begin to understand the true mindset of the creators of the kata/kihon/drill you are practicing.

During ha training, the goal is to transcend yourself – become wiser, stronger, and of better character.

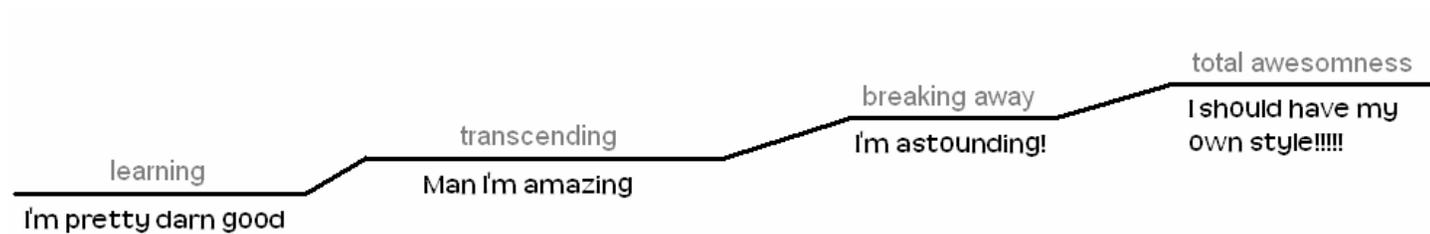
"Ri", to break away, is the final (but only *equally* important) stage. In order to break away, you must have such a depth of understanding that you can use core stylistic concepts to your exacting benefit. You then perfect techniques for your weight, body type, and physical capability.

Furthermore, ri training allows you to see the true value of other styles of martial arts, and how they incorporate into what you are doing.

THE PROBLEM WITH SHUHARI

People misinterpret shuhari, both unknowingly and willingly. As powerful as this concept can be for maintaining a beginner's mindset, it can also close the door on it forever.

When used cyclically, shuhari keeps you in a constant state of flux. Some days you are learning, other days you are transcending, other days you are breaking away. But, when used in a linear or plateau fashion, it only serves to constantly bolster misguided egos.



Martial art training does improve you much like these plateaus indicate – you will constantly get better and better. But, if your ego goes along for the ride, you'll never understand the deeper meanings of your art.

Learn, transcend, break away, and learn again. Continue to grow and come back for more.

Take time to enjoy and understand the culture of your art.

RESOURCES FOR THE ADVANCED PRACTITIONER

At the advanced level you're likely to have seen a whole bunch of kung fu movies, read a ton of magazine articles, and ingested a lot of pop culture martial arts. I know I have (and still do because it's fun).

Mixed in with all the tripe are some serious, extremely beneficial books and movies. Here is a list of things you might want to check out:

Books:

[The Book of Five Rings](#), Musashi Miyamoto

[The Bubishi](#), George Alexander

[My Journey with the GrandMaster](#), William Hayes

[The Art of War](#), Sun Tzu

[Autumn Lightning](#), Dave Lowry

[In the Dojo](#), Dave Lowry

Movies:

[The Seven Samurai](#), Akira Kurosawa

[The Chinese Connection](#), Bruce Lee

[The Karate Kid II](#), Ralph Macchio

[Sanjuro](#), Akira Kurosawa

[Japan's War](#), David Batty

Words of Wisdom

This is a special section. I'd like to present to you words of advice from skilled practitioners from around the world. These individuals represent the diversity of style and experience that comes from martial arts training.

When asked: "what is your best piece of advice for surviving long-term training", here is what they had to say:

- "Do your homework. Don't think that you'll be able to attend class two or three nights a week for an hour at a time and learn your art. Practice at home on your days off, even if only for a few minutes. You don't need to watch that episode of "Seinfeld" for the tenth time. Take a half hour and work on your basics. Do some calisthenics. Stretch. Practice your kata/hyungs/sets.

Every little bit helps. Your instructor will see the results and he will be very happy with you. There is nothing more disappointing to a teacher than a student who only practices on the nights he/she has class. Two of my taiji sifus used to teach at a park on Saturday mornings. They were both frustrated that out of the dozens of students, most of them never practiced during the week." – [Sean C Ledig](#), Eclectic Stylist

- “There is a Japanese proverb that tells us to wear the hat of the village we enter. I think it is the same for Dojo's. Be super humble, move slow, and watch what everyone else is doing around you. Maybe it is not necessary to be great at your art but at least understand there is a Budo Universe and it is worthy to strive to be a budoka. Remember, sometimes we perceive ‘correction’ as criticism. Don't take things personally and don't be easily offended.” – [Mike Pogue](#), [Batto Jitsu](#)
- “Don't wait for conditions to be perfect for you to train. If you do, you'll find that you'll be waiting a long time. Also, don't be afraid to practice without your teacher's supervision because you won't be doing it right. We all need corrections, no matter what the level. It's important to get the repetitions. If you want to get better, train more. If you're tired, rest.” – [Rick Matz](#), [Wu Style TaijiQuan](#)
- “Don't try to rush your progress. Too often students have their eyes on the black belt, and often end up injuring themselves or suffering from burnout. Trying to do too much too soon can lead to an injury that shortens your career. You have a lifetime to study martial arts--no need to rush.” – [William Joseph Hill](#), [Okinawa Kenpo Karate](#)
- “Don't let your ego get in the way of learning. It's really easy to decide “I understand that”, and stop paying attention to it. Usually, it's the basics that get taken for granted the most, and unfortunately it's the basics that are the most harmful to your technique if you don't really understand them.” – [Aaron Sher](#), [Suisha Ryu Kenjutsu](#)

- "Do what you love. Find what you love about an art and focus on it. It can be as simple as a single strike. If you can find nothing to love about it, keep searching. If you still cannot, find another art. As you grow, so will your love." – [Jesse Crouch](#), Eclectic Stylist

- "Nana Korobi Ya Oki" Fall down seven times, Get up Eight.

Many times in our journey we will fail or struggle to accomplish what is asked of us. It is at these times that we must push forward and "Get up"; we must rise again and keep trying. As a student of the martial arts, you have undoubtedly struggled with your journey, but you are not alone; I have struggled and will continue to do so, and so have your teachers and their teachers. This really is one of the big secrets of the great martial artists, they just don't give up. Every time they fall or fail, they rise again and keep trying." – [Robert Collins](#), Shorin Ryu Karate

- "The best advice I can think of for any martial artist: Relax! The tendency is to stress which will slow your mental and physical response to what you are learning. It's an easy trap to try to keep up with advanced students, or to get ahead of yourself. Take it easy.

I use the technique every time I am shown a kata of first watching the footwork, then the hips and how they moved, and finally, the hands. It gives me the opportunity to learn at my pace and to train myself to be in proper position in regards to kata. The same can be said for other aspects of dojo life." – [Douglas Proce](#), Ryukyu Kempo Karate Do

- “Our masters that we look up to so much, and respect so deeply all openly say that they're still on the martial path, and that they're not complacent with where they are. We should never feel as if we have achieved some sort of total success. There is always more to learn.” – [Branden Strickland](#), Okinawa Kenpo Karate Kobudo
- “My advice would be to take some time and think about why you are training in the first place. The longer we stay in the martial arts the more we tend to take it for granted and it therefore tends to feel like a bit of a chore at times - you turn up, train, repeat. Despondency can easily set in.

I found it really helps to keep reminding yourself of the benefits of training. What are all the good things you are getting out of it? How are they making your life in general better? How worse off would I be if I didn't train?

Try this: Visualize in great detail your life if you didn't train in the martial arts. What would you be doing, how would you feel all the time? Really picture your life without martial arts.

Now visualize your life when you are doing martial arts. Again, how do you feel, what impact does it have on your life and relationships? Really see it in great detail.

Now compare the two. Which one is more appealing? Hopefully the second one. Just keep all of this in mind when you are training and especially when you are feeling despondent or feel like giving up. remind yourself how much better off you are for training.” – [Neal Martin](#), Kempo Jujitsu

- “Make an informed decision. Explore your options and then settle with the style that is right for you (it may not always be the first dojo you walk into!). The right art is that which fulfils whatever goals you have in the martial arts, and the right dojo is the one that teaches you the art in the way that you feel you best learn it (whether that be carrot or stick is up to you!).” – [Rizwan Asad](#), *Ashihara Karate / Brazilian Jiu Jitsu*
- “While there is a lot of good advice here, allow me to offer a critical fighting tip that could help students achieve success. The most important fighting skill I have learned is **critical distance**. Learn and watch your critical distance, meaning the distance in which you or your opponent can successfully reach with a strike. If you are inside of the critical distance your only two (good) choices are to strike or move (boxers call this stick or move). If you are outside of the critical distance – you have time to pick a fighting strategy.” – [John Zimmer](#), *American Kenpo Karate*
- “Try to keep an open mind, both to the art and to yourself. The art you're learning must suit you, and you in turn must suit the art you're learning. Even if you find yourself learning the wrong things after 10 years, or learning things that you think clashes with your personality, your beliefs, be open to change. It's never too late.” – [Shang Lee](#), *Tai Chi*
- “You'll never achieve anything if you don't try. The human body and spirit can create an amazing synergy when they flow together in harmony. You may not come out of your training flipping around the place like someone in a wired-up kung-fu movie, but you'll achieve that same sense of accomplishment through hard work and dedication in your pursuit of finding The Way.” – [Sean Boden](#), *Gisoku Budo*

- “The best advice that I can offer is persistence. There will be times when you will hit a wall and feel like you have gone as far as you can. Do not let you defeat you! It may hurt, it may not make sense, you may not be able to get your body to do what you need it to, but the more you try, the less it will hurt, the more sense it will make, and the more your body will respond to your commands.” – [Noah Legel](#), Judo, Karate/Kobudo, Iaido
- “Stay healthy. You will find that having a healthy body will increase your performance as a martial artist dramatically! Eat healthy, exercise, do conditioning exercises, sleep right, and avoid sodas =P. Health & martial arts go hand in hand; if you're not healthy, you're more prone to injuries.” – [Jayham Fernandez](#), Shorin Ryu Karate, Arnis/Escrima
- “A couple of years ago my passion for the martial arts started down a slippery slide. I was dissatisfied with the structure of the program I was teaching and I was plagued with doubts as to the effectiveness of my art as I aged. The real problem was that I was practicing a system like I have always practiced it - as a young man with little thinking. When I realized this and started my research into historical evolution, recent training trends, and developments in other styles, it awakened an intense curiosity and rekindled my lifelong passion.

My training and personal performance has since experienced huge gains. My advice is to look at the many layers that martial arts represents. Your time in the martial arts should strengthen your mind, body, and spirit. Don't let apathy stop you from breaking free.” – [Colin Wee](#), Traditional TaeKwonDo

- “Learn to train by yourself. It can be difficult. But real long-term survival in the martial arts requires knowing how to push *yourself* both in class and in your own independent sessions. At the end of the day, our seniors and instructors won’t always be there to do it for us. And, what better thing can our teachers teach us than how to teach ourselves?” – [Krista De Castella](#), [Goju Ryu Karate](#)
- “Injuries can stall or completely halt one’s progress. Many martial artists get injured and never come back to continue their training; but there are some things one can do while injured to keep one’s head in the game. First, just because you can’t physically train doesn’t mean you can’t go to the dojo. Just being there enables you to view things in an entirely new way. Second, mental training can be as valuable to understanding your art as physical and can open your mind to new concepts.” – [Black Belt Mama](#), [Okinawa Kenpo Karate Kobudo](#)
- “To me the most important things are these: going slowly and doing correctly. Like anything worth having, it takes time and effort to achieve real skill. It doesn’t come fast, and it shouldn’t – the body and mind must grow into the art. Cutting corners to somehow speed the process doesn’t work. A student must practice patiently and steadily and expect progress, but not be overly ambitious about achievement.

The training is more about the path than the destination – because the arts have no real destination (black belts or competition victories are merely milestones on the journey). If the student has patience, has commitment to learning, and wants continuous improvement, he/she will do well.” – [Brandon La Borde](#), [Ryu Kyu Kempo](#)

Conclusion

We are at the end of the ride I'm afraid, but I hope you enjoyed it!

As many topics as we've discussed here, there is still a world of knowledge to be uncovered in your training. It is my wish that you pursue your art for as long as possible and uncover the great many benefits of the martial way.

Continuing the Journey

I'd like to continue learning and sharing with you, and the best way to do that is through my blog:



Let's join up in the world of social networking!



Click [here](#) or on the picture above to visit the site, and subscribe to my articles [here](#). At [ikigaiway.com](#) I share posts about martial arts philosophy, technique, theory, current events, and more. I try to write in a fashion that appeals to practitioners of all styles and rank levels.

As I continue my own journey, I hope to publish more ebooks like this one on a variety of topics. It is also my wish that you send this ebook to others who could benefit from it, or link to it from your own webpage in order to help others grow in their art.

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