

Tradition and Etiquette

Definition: A tradition is a custom that is memorized and passed down from generation to generation, originally without the need for a writing system.

Whether cultural or organizational, a tradition may include one or all of the following: dance or specialized movements, ceremonial clothing, ritual, tests or challenges, and a code of conduct. Like many martial arts, Tang Soo Do was born from tradition and includes all of these. We practice stylized movements (hyung, one-steps), wear specialized clothing (dobok), salute our flag, meditate and bow to seniors (ritual), participate in rank grading and tournaments (tests / challenges), and behave in a prescribed way with our peers and seniors (code of conduct).

Unfortunately, modern societies are changing quickly, constantly striving for the new and improved, making it much more difficult to keep a tradition alive. There are still some cultures that continue to "live" their traditions every day, but very few. Most try to walk both lines - the modern way and the old way, and it's a tough balancing act. One side will always tend to dominate (usually the modern) at the expense of the other.

As students of Tang Soo Do, we also walk both lines - living our normal lives with one set of rules and then switching gears to enter the martial arts culture with a completely different mindset and customs. Many adults, especially beginners will quit training after a short time. They may be put off by the formalities of bowing and responding with "Yes Sir / Ma'am" because it makes them feel subservient and uncomfortable, or they may have underestimated the time and dedication required to properly learn the art in a traditional environment, as opposed to getting the quick results promised with many new non-traditional, reality-based systems.

In the end, time will always be a factor in determining the effectiveness or value of any given thing. Traditional martial arts have stood the test of time for a reason. They are effective in the real world and they also have a positive, beneficial effect on other areas of our lives. That's a winning combination. The question will continue to be, is the tradition and formality what one really wants or needs and is it worth the time and effort?

Everyone will have to answer that for themselves, but for those that consider traditional training of little value or useless, I would say this - The Boy / Girl Scouts are different than just going camping on weekends with a friend of the family and learning how to pitch a tent. Graduating from a Police Academy is different than completing a two week course on police tactics and the use of firearms. And finally, what it takes to earn the right to be called a Navy SEAL or a U.S. Marine pretty much needs no explanation. ***The greatest value of tradition, I believe, is in what you become, rather than what you get,*** and that is a very important distinction shaped by time, quality of training, curriculum, organizational structure, protocol and of course the participant's attitude towards it all.

It is no surprise then that many martial arts schools and organizations have within their manuals a formal set of rules and guidelines to help practitioners understand what is proper and important to the preservation of martial arts tradition.

The Dojang

The significance of the dojang is that it is a place of learning and self-sacrifice. It is also a temporary refuge from the distractions, pressures and responsibilities of daily life. Viewing it in this way is critical to making our time there more productive and meaningful. By seeing the dojang as a special place, we elevate our training to a higher level to meet that perception. It is not a gym where one goes to socialize, work up a sweat and then leave. It is a place where we transform ourselves into something more substantial.

That is why upon entering or leaving the dojang we always face the flags and salute as a sign of respect, and of course, shoes are never worn when on the dojang floor. While waiting for a class to begin, students should strive to maintain a feeling of calm and tranquility in the room. Loud conversation and horsing around only serves to bring the outside world in with you and should be avoided. It is also disrespectful to others who may want a few moments of silence to mentally prepare for the class.

Students should also show respect for the school by taking responsibility for its care and appearance. A school is a student's second home and should be treated accordingly. Cleaning the mirrors, organizing the training gear, sweeping the floor and so on are other ways of demonstrating the humility that is part of our development as martial artists. The instructor should never have to ask for students' help on this matter, and seniors should lead the way as an example to juniors.

The Beginning of Class

The protocol for the start and end of class may differ slightly among schools, but generally it operates this way.

If there is a Dan member in the room, Gups should bow to them upon entering. The same holds true for Dans entering when senior Dans are present. If there are many Dans of different ranks in the room, there can be an excessive amount of bowing, so a minimum rank rule may be in place to limit this. Ask your instructor if in doubt.

The instructor is usually the last to enter the room and the first to leave. When he/she enters, the senior student or Dan will call everyone to attention and bow to the instructor. Students should then quickly line up according to rank with your immediate senior to your right. (Never walk slowly as it is disrespectful and shows a lack of discipline.) The senior at the head of the line will give commands, in Korean, to face the flag, salute the flag by placing right hand over heart, return hand to side, close eyes and meditate, open eyes, turn to face the instructor and then bow again. If a student is late getting to class, they should never enter the training floor once the class has begun. Rather, they must wait at the doorway until recognized by the instructor and then quickly go to the end of the line. They may only take their normal place in line when directed to do so by the instructor.

During Class

First and foremost, the instructor is there for you and should be given your undivided attention. Talking in class, especially when the instructor is speaking is not acceptable. If you have a question, raise your hand and be recognized before speaking. Bow first, then ask your question. When the instructor is finished responding, bow again to show thanks.

From time to time, students may be asked to sit while the instructor speaks or other students are demonstrating. The proper seated position is legs crossed in front and hands resting over knees. Never lean against a wall or sit in a lounging position. If a student has knee problems or difficulty holding the position, consult with your instructor as to what is acceptable to overcome the problem.

Other things to remember:

- When a Grand Master enters or leaves the DoJang the class is called to attention and the senior Dan has the class bow. When he or she enters or leaves the training floor the class is called to attention and the senior Dan has the class bow. A Grand Master is always addressed as Kwan Jang Nim.
- Dans are addressed using Sir / Ma'am, Mr./ Ms. followed by last name or by title such as Kyo Sa Nim, Sa Bom Nim or Kwan Jang Nim. They should never be addressed by their first name, even if they are friends or relatives.
- When moving around others who are in line or working together, always walk behind them, never in front of, or in between them.
- When moving away from instructors (or test examiners and tournament judges), always do so moving backwards (facing them), not by turning your back to them.
- Unless otherwise directed by the instructor, students should avoid "teaching" or "correcting" others in matters of technique. That is the instructor's responsibility, for two reasons - he/she is better equipped to assess a student's readiness to learn a new technique, and also to ensure that demonstration and application of techniques are consistent.
- Never argue with instructor or others in class. If there is disagreement, it should be taken up in private with the instructor after class.
- When adjusting your uniform, always turn to do so, then turn back to your original position.

The End of Class

The instructor will signal the end of class at which time all will line up as in the beginning. The procedure with respect to bowing, saluting flags, etc. performed at the beginning of class will be repeated at the end. Students should remain in line until instructor leaves. After the instructor leaves, Junior Dans usually turn to face the Senior Dans (Kodanja) in line and bow to them. After the Kodanja step out of line, Junior Dans will turn to face Gups and all will bow again. The class is officially over.

The Uniform

How we handle our uniform speaks loudly about how we view our training and ourselves. Like any ceremonial clothing, the uniform is an essential part of the tradition. Try to remember how you felt when you first put on a Do Bohk. It was unlike anything you've ever worn before. It made you feel special wearing it. So it stands to reason that it be given special treatment and respect in return.

Uniforms should always be clean and wrinkle-free, especially for tests and public performances. After class, even though a uniform may be soaked with perspiration, it should still be folded neatly before placing in your bag. (In traditional Aikido schools, students learn and are required to fold the Hakama and Do Bohk in a very specific way.) Tang Soo Do also has a method to fold the Do Bohk, although it is not taught in very many schools. (We will be adding a pictorial guide for this in the Reference section soon.) Children, especially, should also be taught that uniforms are for training only and not to be worn while playing in the yard, eating dinner or for Halloween. Even other adornments like bandanas, wrist sweat bands and T-shirts would not be allowed in some schools, with the exception of T-shirts for women, and then in white only.

Students must also learn to properly tie their belts well before their first rank test, preferably after the first few classes. The belt is an integral part of the uniform and therefore should always be tied correctly

The Instructor's Office

- Always knock before entering Instructor's office (even if the door is open).
- Bow before entering and when leaving.
- Never sit unless asked to do so.
- If you are an assistant instructor and have access to the office, never sit behind the instructor's desk unless permission is given, as this would be presumptuous of your position.

Outside The Dojang

When at tournaments or tests, all of the above still apply. Should you happen to encounter your instructor in a public place, the courtesy of a bow in greeting as well as use of the title is proper. As a martial artist, correct protocol is not limited to the training hall - it travels with you.

Personal Obligations

Perhaps the least talked about item in your training is the matter of personal discipline with regards to paperwork and fees. A martial arts school, in addition to providing consistent, quality instruction also has its own financial obligations and deadlines that must be met in a timely fashion if the school is to continue to operate. It is a student's responsibility to ensure that paperwork and fees are handled in the same timely manner. An instructor's love is to teach their students. Reminding them of their obligations is a task they generally do not enjoy, and it is a great show of respect on the student's part to free them from this.