

Sempai / Kohai Relationship

Sempai/Kohai relationship translates superficially to the relationship between a Senior, that is to say a student with many years experience usually but anyone that has trained longer than oneself and his Junior, a new student or student of lesser experience than oneself and is predicated on the ideal of respect for oneself, respect for those above us and respect for those below us; the respect, the obligations, the responsibilities, and the rights that exist between the them. Of more importance is how that relationship is worked out, how it evolves and the mutual benefit derived there from. It is this relationship, which defines Kyokushin Karate and separates it from all other schools of karatedo. It is one of the foundations of Kyokushin Karate, which directs us to self-discipline and self-respect. Without this vital relation as the foundation and context for our training, Kyokushin becomes merely another school of karate.

This relationship requires us to move out of our isolation and selfish motivations to acknowledge that we have a responsibility to those that have had a hand in building up the positive things in our life. It also requires us to be aware of the needs of those less senior to us, in that they will not experience positive growth in their life without help and direction. This requires an openness on the part of both the sempai and the kohai; an openness about their life - needs and wants; strengths and weaknesses. This commitment to living openly requires the exercise of courage and a dedication to the truth and by doing so they become free from fear. The experience of living and training in this way gives rise to growth of wisdom. A life of wisdom must be a life of contemplation combined with action.

Wisdom, unlike knowledge, does not come from book learning but from years of application of the knowledge gained from living and learning. It is the continuous exercise of knowledge directed to the betterment of the world and the people around us that produces wisdom. It allows us to find value in people that may not meet the definition of a "winner" but obviously have a great deal to contribute because of their wisdom. They may be old or un-athletic, have annoying habits, be physically unattractive but because of their life - experience they have wisdom.

The sempai/kohai relationship is dedicated to the truth. What does a life dedicated to the truth mean? It means, first of all, a life of continuous and never-ending stringent self-examination. We can only know sempai/kohai relationships through our experience in them. Therefore, to know sempai/kohai, we must not only examine it but we must simultaneously examine ourselves. Second of all, to know truth we must be disciplined and to have such discipline we must be totally dedicated to

the truth. That is to say that we must always hold truth, as best we can determine it, to be more important than our own comfort. Conversely, we must always consider our personal discomfort relatively unimportant and indeed, welcome it in the service of the truth. Only a relative few continue until the moment of death exploring the mysteries of reality, ever enlarging and refining and redefining their understanding of the world, what is truth and what is reality.

This commitment to the truth requires us within the sempai/kohai relationship to confront and/or critique. To confront or critique is a form of exercising leadership. The exercise of leadership is nothing more and nothing less than an attempt to influence the course of events, human or otherwise, by one's actions in a consciously or unconsciously predetermined manner. When we confront or critique someone it is because we want to change the course of their life. It behoves us to approach this in a positive manner and with the best interests of the person involved. There are two ways to confront or critique another human being: with instinctive and spontaneous certainty that one is right, or with a belief that one is probably right arrived at through scrupulous self-doubting and self-examination. The first way is the way of arrogance; it is the most common way of parents, spouses, teachers and people generally in their day to day affairs; it is usually unsuccessful, producing more resentment than growth and other effects not intended. The second is the way of humility; it is not common, requiring as it does a genuine extension of oneself; it is more likely to be successful, and it is never destructive.

Kyokushin karate exists as budo, that is to say the Martial Way, and the essence of budo is sempai/kohai.

The essence of budo can be distilled into seven distinctive virtues:
Justice: The talent and skill of the bushi cannot be employed without a sense of justice. Dishonesty and deceit do not constitute justice, even when supporting loyalty.

Courage: Courage is the tempering influence upon the precept of justice, preventing cowardice from infiltrating that precept. It means an integration of moral and physical courage, not simply physical bravery or daring. Courage is based on serenity and is a product of experience.

Benevolence: This is the "feeling of distress". It is a composite of magnanimity, affection, love, pity and sympathy. Benevolence is seasoned with justice and tempered by right reason so as not to be taken as weakness.

Politeness: Courtesy is a prime source of courage, which in its highest form approaches "love". Courtesy disciplines the soul and brings a refined harmony of mind and body.

Veracity: Truthfulness can be considered a twin brother to justice. Lying is dishonourable and gives rise to the expression "bushi no ichi-gon", implying that written pledges are unnecessary because the word of a bushi is sufficient.

Honour: Honour involves more than one's reputation, it goes to the core of one's being and can be defined as the essence of one's existence.

Loyalty: The underlying philosophy of budo is loyalty to one's superiors. It lies in the idea of service and fealty to one's god/country/shihan/sempai/family/etc., as the case may be. There can be no transferring of allegiances without significant compromise to one's honour.

One cannot say that they train Kyokushin if these precepts are not part of their training and daily life. These characteristics must be an integral part of the Kyokushin karateka's being, just as their blood is necessary to maintain their life.

The practise of sempai/kohai is essentially the same as the practise of kihon, kumite, kata, or goshin jitsu. Without it, one is not really practising Kyokushin karate. So it is important to know who your sempai is and to act accordingly at all times.

Who is your sempai or kohai can be determined in three ways:

One can determine who is one - sempai initially by belt grade. However this is the most superficial expression of this relationship.

Of more importance is experience in training, length of training. Assuming of course that someone with 10 or 20 years training has taken that experience and built a 10 or 20 years experience from it and not merely 10 or 20 one-year experiences. A sequence of single year experiences that do not significantly interconnect or interact is of limited value in producing wisdom.

Of still more importance is life experience in determining who is sempai. I have learned many valuable things about karate from individuals that do not even train karate but have immense wisdom applicable to karate none the less. I have had white belt beginners come into my club whom I have considered my sempai in many ways. This is reflective of Oyama Sosai's belief that all people were his teacher, that there was something to learn from each person we come in contact with. Embracing this allows us to see other, even strangers in a different light before we have even been introduced. It requires that we hold other in high esteem, that we assume that they are in fact our sempai. This in turn creates an atmosphere of respect for communication and interaction from the beginning of the encounter with new people.

It is the connection to the wisdom of the sagas of martial traditions, through the historic ties to the beginning of the Budo and Bushido movement in Japan; not only to ShotoKan and Goju Karate but also to Judo, the Butokukai and Daito-ryu Aiki-jitsu, that Kyokushin Karate has build further on the foundation of Japanese Bushido which is steeped in respect. This tradition revolves around the sempai/kohai relationship and it has lineage and genealogy, which can be traced to the very beginnings of the samurai caste and Bushido.

Oyama Sosai and Kyokushin Karate has been the beneficiary of a long line of Japanese, Okinawan and Chinese effort in researching and training the un-armed self-defence traditions and it can be seen in the developmental genealogy of his exposure to karatedo, judo and daito-ryu aiki jitsu.

Conclusion: The sempai/kohai relationship permeates the foundation, the structure, the history and the daily activities of Kyokushin Karate. As can be seen in its Japanese roots, Kyokushin has a rich heritage and tradition in Budo. The sempai/kohai relationship is founded on the principles of Budo. These precepts have their roots in the wisdom of the martial sagas of Japan going back 1000 years and more. It is this history, this tradition that makes Kyokushin Karate what it is today, what makes it Budo karate! To fully understand and know Kyokushin Karate's sempai/kohai relationship, it is essential that a deep understanding of the influences of budo be developed by each student and instructor; that each sempai and kohai acknowledge the deep debt that is owed to those that passed this on for us to use.