

SENSEI

By Del Saito Soke

THOUGHTS FOR THE SENSEI

All people have the spirit - it is just a matter of careful guidance. It is just like jade in the matrix - if you throw it away, it is just a rock, but if you cut and polish it, it is a gem.

- Gaoan

Good senseis walk a fine line. Many students entering your dojo will for the first time in their lives be in an environment governed by tradition, respect, formality, and discipline. These elements are fundamental to your dojo and must guide your actions. Yet, if the atmosphere is overly strict and rigid, you'll find this self-defeating. The key is in balance. Here are a few things all senseis can do to achieve that balance and also strengthen their ability to teach more capably, thoroughly, and accurately.

Just as parents guide and direct their children to ensure healthy growth, you must do the same with your students. To accomplish this, you must have the desire to teach and have the proper attitude at all times. Having these critical prerequisites, senseis will find themselves constantly striving to improve their own skills. Obviously, senseis pursuing their own growth will greatly enrich their students' abilities to grasp the intricacies of Karate. Students will notice the added energy and confidence in their teachers and will respond with a surge of positive, flowing energy. Training will be extremely rewarding when this occurs.

For students to grasp the underlying morality of Karate-Do, discipline, etiquette, and principles must be an integral part of the program. This is the delicate area where balance must be achieved. The sensei who comes across as a remote, cold drill sergeant running a regimented boot camp will fail. Many students, especially the younger ones, will quickly quit such a program and enroll in any of the numerous upbeat and entertaining exercise programs offered today. Do not overplay Eastern cultures and traditions. They tend to minimize wholesome communication when over emphasized. This results in misunderstandings.

It is especially important in the beginning and intermediate classes to create an environment that is firm yet sensible. Strive to make these training programs enjoyable. Remember, the beginning of any venture is usually the most tentative stage. Students at this level are more insecure and unsure of themselves. Although they may be learning techniques and Katas, they haven't had the time necessary to absorb the deeper meaning and purpose of Karate. You must be patient, kind, understanding, and, most of all, encouraging. Students respect teachers who bring these qualities to their teaching, and you'll find your students willing to accept firm guidance.

This is not to say that teachers should not strive to bring these same qualities to their advanced classes and students. Variation, stimulation, and enjoyment are keys to any good teaching program. But as your students increasingly advance and begin to grasp the broader picture and deeper significance of Karate-Do, the harder they will be willing to work and discipline themselves to arrive at each successive plateau. Nevertheless, students, no matter what the rank, are human beings first, and, as such, need encouragement, respect, and kindness.

Training with other senseis is an excellent method of improving your technical and teaching skills.

Training together in a special session once a month shouldn't be too difficult to arrange. By training together, teachers can share ideas, problems, or any pertinent matter necessary to strengthen themselves and their personal growth. This type of training also creates a sense of community that is vital to the organization.

Senseis who make no effort to train together are using the excuse that because they are actively teaching, they do not have to train. The end result of this is that students drop out when they discover their sensei's teaching lacks depth. Worse, injuries occur more frequently, especially when students become stronger and more developed. Teachers who do not train usually have to prove their abilities in an unprofessional manner to retain a semblance of respect from their students. Their own lack of control and confidence is readily seen by the students. When such teachers are threatened in sparring, what control they do have is lost and injuries result.

Good teachers do not cater to their stronger students just to improve their dojo's tournament records. Wise senseis understand the needs of all their students, including those who need delicate attention. The good senseis will give these students the extra encouragement and support they need. Talking to students on a one-to-one basis is an excellent way for teachers to learn the true personalities of their students and determine their inner needs. A good sensei always has a friendly ear to listen carefully. This individual contact also enables senseis to structure their classes in a manner which better meets the needs of the students.

A wise sensei also tests their students at times by taking views diametrically opposed to them just to see their reactions. When a question is asked by a student for an answer already given, the sensei may simply ignore the question when much could be said. Whatever the method, the true sensei always will work with each student's well being in mind.

Concentrating all the training and activities within the dojo is discouraged. Teachers must learn to expand the concept of activity to areas that include occasional beach training, hikes, picnics, campouts, or other outside activities. By having novel activities, students begin to realize that their teacher doesn't regard them as mere clients. They realize the teacher is extending his feelings and concern to them. As this occurs, students act in accord and show greater care and respect for their sensei. These activities also promote greater friendship among the students and lead to mutual support and encouragement. This spirit adds vitality to their Karate training.

Other methods of strengthening your teaching and making your classes more dynamic include the following:

1. Invite guest speakers to discuss or demonstrate such things as first aid, diet, nutrition, other martial art styles, or police science.
2. Have another teacher sit in on one of your classes and give you a critique on your teaching format.
3. Present demonstrations with your students at the various schools, clubs, and shopping centers in the area.
4. Use video equipment to more accurately show students their performances.
5. Have periodic, informal discussions with students.

6. Have your students write a research paper on any worthy topic and then share it with the other students.
7. To create greater values, friendship, and unity, have your students elect officers to initiate periodic meetings for the entire dojo membership.

At times, teachers will be confronted with students facing financial burdens who are unable to pay for classes. In such cases, it is necessary to consider the facts that have created the situation. If the student cannot pay for classes because he chose to purchase a new television or wardrobe, then he must be told to budget more wisely and to return to classes when he has the finances to pay for his instruction.

In some cases, teachers will find that a student wishes to train or to continue training but cannot pay for his instruction because of unexpected events or tragedies. I would suggest that the student be given some work to do at the dojo or at the teacher's home, or perhaps the student could perform some type of community service in return for his lessons.

Students will be extremely grateful for the understanding and for the opportunity to continue training. Their gratitude will be evident in their magnified spirit during training. The rewards will manifest themselves in many ways.