

MR. STONE AND OUR SENIOR STUDENTS SHARE THEIR THOUGHTS ON BECOMING MARTIAL ARTISTS.



On the wall of the dojo is a plaque that states **“Thoughts become Words, Words become Actions, Actions become Character, and Character is Everything”**. During the past few months, our senior students and I have shared our thoughts and words about the philosophy of martial arts training in the NSKA newsletters. I have felt that this information was so beneficial for developing students & supporting parents, that it was worth repeating and creating a special edition. As martial artists, we should always seek to develop our mind, body, and spirit, whether we are 47 year old black belts, or 7 year old white belts. In this special edition, we have included not only the words, but examples of the actions of what it means to be a martial artist. Becoming a martial artist is not a destination point, or a belt you wear, but a choice we make everyday. It is a way of life. ~ Mr. Stone

Building Relationships and the Dojo Community

Relationships are the corner stone to life. Whether it is with your family, friends, co-workers, or strangers that you pass, relationships play a significant role in our lives. The same is true for within the Dojo. A wise man once said “You are in karate for yourself (our own self-development), **but** not by ourselves. Those around us can impact our development in a positive way, through encouragement, assistance with challenges, and support. The foundation of relationships in the Dojo is built between the student and the sensei (Mr. Stone). The Sensei is the first person you connect with and who becomes your mentor while developing through the ranks. Respect and trust is the glue for the relationship. We can also build very strong relationships with friends in a dojo, we feel comfortable working with them, we know each others limits, our conversations are comfortable before class and there is an open dialog for correcting and commenting between each other. However though...this can form very tight clicks, we will have a tendency not to go out of our way to work with those of different ranks, and get the chance to form the necessary bond or trust with others. This can hurt the overall community of the Dojo. When we are not able to form a bond between other students a ripple effect occurs within our Dojo community. It is human nature to be timid to work with those who we are not familiar with, whether it is a white belt going to a black belt or visa versa, and if a relationship has not been formed then there will be a greater amount of hesitancy. This hesitancy can cause us to work with fewer people, thus continuing in a spiral and not giving us a chance to work on our relationships. The more relationships we develop, the more positive impact we can have. Especially when it comes to encouraging others, and giving and receiving corrections. A relationship is key when giving a comment, because you have to mold it to the person who is receiving it. The person giving the suggestion needs to be comfortable giving the comment, while the person receiving needs to be assured the correction is coming from someone they trust and respect personally, not just because they're told they should. Mr. Stone gives the seniors great responsibility in aiding those of a lower rank in their martial arts practice. It is not easy to find the right words to encourage students in a way that helps them continue on the right path. Knowing a student and understanding the journey certainly makes it easier. It is up to both the senior students to go and talk to those of a lower rank and get to know them, as well as it is of the lower ranked students to seek out the seniors and ask for their help. This can be “out of the comfort zone” for many people, but it is important. One of the best things about the martial arts is that it requires us to step out of your comfort zone in a safe and controlled environment.

When building a relationship in a dojo, it is not all about friendship but more about caring and respect. Most senior students do not know about each other's personal lives, but do know about each others preferences and overall mental and physical health. All it takes to start building these relationships are a few simple steps, such as introducing yourself to students that you don't know, starting up a conversation before or after class, and making it a point to go work with those you normally don't at least once per class. Those small steps over time can lead to strong bonds and help build a supportive martial arts community.

Being supportive when giving comments is important. Offering a comment to a student, by saying “May I make a suggestion?” is more respectable than rattling off corrections on techniques. Even if you have a relationship with the student it is respectful not to force a correction or comment on anyone. If you are uncomfortable giving corrections or just starting out you can follow Mr. Stone's golden rule of giving corrections, Praise Correct Praise (PCP). Start off by finding the good in the students exercise, for it is human nature to find the negative much easier then the positive. Then after giving your suggestion make sure to reiterate the positive or comment on another positive attribute. Regardless of the method we use in giving comments, there should always be at least twice as many positive comments, than there are corrections. View Mr. Stone's Dojo as a community, it is important to develop relationships so no one in the community feels awkward, and most importantly that we can be counted on for help when a neighbor needs a hand.

Modesty, Courtesy, Integrity, Gratitude, Self Control, Compassion, Perseverance, Indomitable Spirit

COMMON DOJO MISCONCEPTIONS AND REALITIES

You only have to watch a sport to gather its' meaning or purpose, but when you study art, understanding only comes from experiencing it and seeing its' impact on those around. While there are many misconceptions about studying the martial arts, the ultimate aim is not about victory or defeat, but in the development of character for its students.

Misconception: A student moves through the ranks with their friends similar to grades in a school.

Reality: As students increase in their rank they are less likely to test with the same people they started with. Karate is an individual sport, and there are no two individuals who are exactly the same. People will move through the ranks based on the instructor's evaluation of growth in their techniques; understanding of self; interaction with others; understanding of the martial arts; maturity to handle the responsibility of the next rank; individual effort class by class; and a number of other factors. Moving from one age group to another, or from one rank to another, has never been based on just the number of classes or the ability to memorize a kata's movements.

Example: Nathan Harker and John Guilmartin who are now both Yondans (4th degree black belts) have been friends since they were five years old. Although they started within two weeks of each other, they tested for their current ranks of Yondan two years apart. Throughout all the years, John and Nathan never lost respect for the other's martial art abilities and continue to support each other to this day.

Misconception: Students will receive the same level of attention from Mr. Stone as they progress.

Reality: When a student starts taking classes, Mr. Stone is the best person to ease them through the anxiety and challenges of being a new student in the martial arts, and to provide a foundation for what it is like in the dojo. But as a student advances, Mr. Stone's role as an active teacher lessens. Responsibilities then shift to the individual themselves and the other senior students to continue their growth as martial artists, and Mr. Stone takes more the role of a mentor guiding students through their personal development.

Example: Mr. Stone will frequently ask a group of students to work on "something" in the back of the class, while he continues to work with a group of students. He asks this of students for a few reasons; it provides an opportunity for junior students to get help from senior students, it provides time for students to recognize and work on their personal challenges; and it shows Mr. Stone a person's individual drive and dedication to their own learning. Shawn, a new brown belt in adult classes, is one of those students who is always working hard, whether asking others to work with him or working alone in the back. Mr. Stone appreciates Shawn's initiative to gladly work with high ranked students, because it shows Mr. Stone that it is more important for Shawn to be challenged, than to look good or socialize.

Misconception: Mr. Stone is only interested in hearing about a students challenges with karate.

Reality: Mr. Stone prefers to hear directly from students or parents about the challenges a student may be having at home, in school, with other kids (bullies), or any other situation that impacts the mental health or physical growth of a student. One of the keys to the success of NSKA, is the caring Mr. Stone has for his student's personal development outside the dojo, this ranges from taking a interest in academic achievement to checking on routine illnesses. The martial arts is about development of the whole person not just physical development. Also it is important for Mr. Stone to hear about any issues that impacts students and parents inside the dojo. Mr. Stone has worked hard to create and maintain a positive, supportive atmosphere for parents and students, therefore it is important to nip any negativity that impacts the dojo right away.

Example: Mr. Stone has addressed issues ranging from students having trouble with school, to people negatively commenting on the progress of students. In the martial arts, no parent or student has a right to comment negatively on another student's development. Our Student Creed states: "The Martial Arts Begins and Ends With Respect", and since the Martial Arts is a Way of Life, our creed must extend far beyond the floor of the dojo.

COMMON DOJO MISCONCEPTIONS AND REALITIES

Misconception: Where a student lines up is important.

Reality: Where you stand impacts only the carpet. The reality of it is that we line up by rank to indicate where junior students can look to for help. The rank you have become and the respect people give you is based on what you do in class. While we must live up to the expectations of our rank, we must remain true to the principles of a black belt. Modesty is the first virtue of a black belt, offering up a higher spot in line is virtuous. Thinking you own or deserve a spot is not.

Example: Many fourth degree black belts (Mr. Bruise, Mr. Guilmartin, Mr. Harker, Mr. McDonald, Mr. Searson, and others) who have held the high ranks for several years gladly offer the spot to their right to other students. The effort they put into class and the respect they earned, is the same whether they are in the first spot or the last spot.

Misconception: How you act with your friends outside the dojo is the same as how you act with friends inside the dojo.

Reality: The dojo is a place where respect for others comes in front of horseplay, goofing around, and other usual behavior with friends. When we walk into the dojo a cultural change needs to happen to show new students, people on the sidelines, and ourselves what martial arts training is all about. Inside a dojo, we demonstrate a level of respect for everyone regardless of age, rank, background or friendship. Everyone should get a respectful greeting whether they are 4 years old or 54 years old, **or** whether they are our closest friends or someone whom we do not like.

Example: Some students have worked with each other for 5 to 10 years and have become so close that they gather together for celebrations from birthdays to thanksgiving dinner. They will goof around together outside of the dojo and joking make fun of each other from head to toe, but the moment they walk into the dojo together, their friendship focuses on respect and positive support. Joe and Millie Dwyer, who are brother and sister in the adult classes continue to work together respectfully every class. The culture of a dojo is where everyone works to be their best, by being positive, supportive and respectfully. While it may be difficult for most of us to maintain this for every minute of the day, the minutes we spend in the dojo is the time when we should make the effort to practice leaving all the “outside world” including social competition, goofing around, negativity, & frustration behind.

Misconception: Only the most physically fit and naturally athletic students will go far in martial arts.

Reality: One of the many great things about the martial arts is that your physical ability does not strictly determine your success in karate. The amount of heart and determination that you put forth is the driving factor in your success in martial arts. The three conflicts that represent our style are Mind, Body and Spirit. It takes a union of the three to be a true martial artist. Those who rely on strict physical strength are missing out on the more important of the conflicts mind and spirit. Everyone’s physical ability is different and Mr. Stone is fully aware of this when he is making his corrections or looking at promoting a student.

Example: Take what many people believe to be the image of a physically fit person and compare it to what you see in the Dojo. Look at the senior students each one is physically fit in their own way. They are not all the same age, the same height, the same weight; some can run for miles, while others cannot, while some can lift heavy objects and others cannot. But they are the ones who have been studying for more than a decade and have been successful at Uechi-Ryu karate. Nathan Harker is a Yondan who has been successful in a lot of competition sparing against many different styles, is not the most physically fit competitor. He always says, “There are plenty of people faster, stronger, and of a higher rank than me, but all I have to do is out smart them.” His ability to use his mind and spirit leads to his success. Sensei Kanbun Uechi said that a true martial artist is one who never has to throw a punch, placing the emphasis on anything but the physical ability of his students. This emphasis on all the virtues of the martial arts still continues today in Uechi Ryu karate.

The Only Place Success Comes Before Work is in the Dictionary

– Quote by Vince Lombardi

Promotions have been part of the martial arts long before the time when Kanbun Uechi originally began teaching Pangainoon. The meaning of promotions has changed drastically through the years and can be interpreted differently in every Dojo. If we were lucky enough to have been a student of Master Kanbun Uechi, we would have most likely stayed at the same rank for many years before seeing a promotion. In the past, Uechi Ryu karate didn't have belts with stripes, and there were only three belts (white, green, and brown) before attaining the black belt rank of Shodan. Students would wait years to remove the white belt for a new rank, and the idea of waiting years to see a promotion never battered the indomitable spirit of these martial artists.

In recent times, it seems that in the pursuit of the next rank, some students forget that a new rank or promotion is not about a belt, but is a recognition of acceptance by our Sensei that we have reached a certain point in our development. **Black belts do not earn their rank, they become it.**

I am proud of the students and the efforts they have made to become black belts. Many of these students have been demonstrating an impressive level of “black belt excellence” for years. While they have been recognized informally by our senior students, the black belt test is the time when senior students and I formally accept and recognize students for having reached the point in their practice where they are ready to move to the next level. It is also a time for students to demonstrate what they have learned and who they have become as martial artists. Students should be proud of their progress and achievements, but a rank should never be the ultimate goal. Everyday is a learning experience, and everyday we have the opportunity to grow as martial artists. How much we grow, will always be up to us. Some of the more seasoned students will no doubt remember a beautiful piece of Japanese calligraphy stating “The Secret to Good Karate is Hard Work”. Black belts know the truth of this statement.

Throughout the years, I have seen people challenged by having to wait “a long time” for their next promotion. Some face that challenge head on and demonstrate perseverance, modesty and an indomitable spirit (black belt virtues) as they continue to practice and develop. Others do not, and their development stops. The key to success is how we view these extra months, or years between promotions. This time can really differentiate true martial artists from others. It is important to take this opportunity as a chance to gain that extra step in toning our skills before accepting more onto our plates.

In the time it takes to reach our next promotion we can either, further our development and understanding of Uechi-Ryu inside and out of the Dojo, or let frustration and negative thoughts set in. NSKA students should choose the higher path and when given this extra time to progress in our studies, take it as a gift and not a hindrance in our pursuit of black belt and the ranks that follow. It is important to remember that our development never ends regardless of our rank. Our recognition of our own personal growth and success should always be more important, than the recognition of others.

- Mr. Stone