

Kiotsuke, attention; *Seiza*, sit; *Mokuso*, meditate; *Rei*, bow; *Yoi*, ready position

Ritualized Pattern or Training?

Marvin Labbate

Traditional Okinawan karate is replete with a deep set of traditions passed down from its original masters. Several martial art styles originated in Okinawa with much of the terminology and customs having roots in Japanese culture. When we step into the *dojo*, we are observing Okinawan martial arts traditions and customs. Dressed in a uniform, *gi*, students line up, *shugo*, in a ready position, *yoi*, come to attention, *kiotsuke*, sit, *seiza*, meditate, *mokuso*, and bow, *rei*. This ritualized pattern is performed at the beginning, during, and at the end of each class, but what does it mean? Is this merely a learned ritual or is it an integral part of our training? The following article will help answer this question. Each element of the ritualized pattern will be discussed to provide a clear understanding of its original intent.

The Ritualized Pattern at the Start of Class

The *dojo*, literally translated, means way place. It is the place to learn the way. An explanation of the way is a topic deserving of its own paper, but for our *dojo* it is the development of mind, body, and spirit through the study of traditional Okinawan Goju Ryu karate-do. The *dojo* reflects the philosophy of our past and present masters who are peaceful, loving, spiritual people. The environment of the *dojo* is extremely influential on the spiritual and focused mindset of the students. We do not want to walk into a chaotic environment that is distracting and adds to the anxiety of our day. The *dojo*

should be serene, stark, and clean. The *dojo* is our sanctuary for learning and developing our total being.

The white *gi* which was adopted from Judo, founded by Jigoro Kano, is a symbol of purity, perfection, and equality. Students and instructors should dress in clean, crisp *gis*. Changing into a clean *gi* is a physical, outward expression of the mental, spiritual, and physical development we are striving for through our karate training. We are shedding our “old” clothes and cleansing ourselves of anxieties and events that can distract us during training. Putting on a clean *gi* is rejuvenating and helps prepare us for training.

The pre-class period at the *dojo* is a time for talking to fellow students, stretching, and mentally unwinding. There is a Chinese proverb which says, “Empty your cup before you fill it.” We can’t come to class with a full cup. We must leave our egos outside the *dojo* and put our day behind us if we are to approach our training and each other with humility, openness, and willingness to learn. It is very difficult to teach and to learn if we have inflated egos, are close-minded, or are distracted by life outside of the *dojo*.

At the start of class, students are instructed to *shugo*, which translates as “to gather round” but is used to mean line up. *Shugo*, as well the other elements of the ritualized pattern, can be broken down into physical and mental components. Physically, the students are simply lining up in rows. It is the transition from the free flowing pre-class time to the structured class time. After the students have properly lined up, they immediately stand in a ready position, *yoi*. The students are standing with their feet firmly planted in a parallel stance, *heiko dachi*, their eyes looking forward, and hands clenched by their sides (fig.1a). Lining up in a ready position sends the mental signal to the students that class is beginning and it is time to prepare. When the students are lining

up, they are mentally aware of and adhering to the tradition of lining up by rank, designated by belt color. The ranking system, also developed by Jigoro Kano, was adopted with the systemization of karate. The higher ranking students line up in the front of the class, followed by intermediate and beginner students. A student's position in the line places responsibilities on him or her. For example, a student in the middle of the group must show the proper respect and etiquette to the senior students, be responsible for his own training, and be an example to the junior students who are watching. Maintaining neat, orderly lines throughout class enhances the non-chaotic, concise atmosphere of the dojo. The instructor then tells the students to come to attention, *kiotsuke* (fig. 1b.). *Kiotsuke*, when broken down, literally means "take your *Ki*, or energy, and bring your full attention to the training and the present moment" (Opdam, 2007). Physically, the students are in a *masubi dachi* with heels together, toes pointing out at a 45° angle, and their hands are open by their sides. The back is straight, the chin is pulled in and the eyes are focused straight ahead toward the *shomen* wall (the wall of honor within a *dojo*). This phase of class is extremely important because the physical posture just described is conducive to listening, focusing, and committing students' full attention to the instructor. The students are engaged at a heightened level of awareness, bringing mind and body to attention.

Still in *kiotsuke*, the students and instructor do a standing bow, *rei*, bending from the waist and keeping their backs straight. This bow is a common courtesy to show respect to our fellow man. It is a general greeting and a show of good manners likened to the western custom of shaking hands and saying hello. After bowing, everyone returns to *kiotsuke*. The students are then instructed to sit, *seiza*, which was once the respectful,

formal way of sitting adopted by the warrior class in Japan. The instructor and students lower themselves to their left knee then their right to a kneeling position seated back on their heels (fig.1c). Their backs are straight, chins pulled in, their tongues are on the hard upper palette and their hands are resting on their legs. The instructor will then say *mokuso* which can be thought of as the mental component of *seiza*. When the instructor says *mokuso*, the students close their eyes and begin to meditate or “clear ones’ mind”, breathing in deeply through the nose, drawing in energy and moving this energy to their physical center, *tanden* (fig.1d.). Alternatively, students may choose to reflect on their training by asking themselves some of the following questions. What corrections did I receive last class? Have I tried to incorporate these corrections into my training? Have I improved? Do I need to focus on the same corrections again? Students may choose to use this time to reflect on their spiritual development or to pray. Dai Sensei Yagi Meitoku, 10th Dan Goju-ryu Meibu-kan had many *Dojo-kun* or beliefs which he taught his students as part of their spiritual training. One of the many is, *Oku myo zai ren shin*, which means, the secret techniques come from having a good heart, or train your spirit to be a good person. (Yagi, et. al, 1998). A student may want to reflect on his or her responsibilities as a karate-ka. Does he set a good example to other students? Does he live by the principles of the dojo and treat family, neighbors, co-workers, and strangers with respect and humility? Just as putting on a clean white *gi* is an act of outward cleansing, *mukoso* is an act of inner cleansing. Students can also choose to reflect on or pray for any particular need they may have on that day.

For the class instructor, this can be a time to reflect on the class they are about to teach and how they can best communicate with the students. When I am teaching class, I

pray to God as my form of reflection. I pray for my students. I pray that I can teach them techniques in the most effective yet safe way so that no one is injured. In viewing myself as a servant, I pray that the students will benefit from training, be it physically, mentally or spiritually. I use this time to reflect on my character. Am I a good role model? Do I demonstrate a good moral character through my teaching? Am I teaching to be a blessing to my students or am I teaching to satisfy my ego? Many of us may not have the self-discipline to spiritually “work out” on our own, so this can be the perfect time to reshape our inner being through meditation and reflection.

Several aspects of *mukosu*, which when considered together, can be overwhelming to a student. One does not have to reflect on every aspect of his mental, physical, and spiritual development every class. What one reflects on specifically may change with the day. What is important then is to find and reflect on weaknesses you are feeling at a given moment and ask yourself what you need to do to improve and strengthen your inner self. A minimum of three to five minutes, of meditation is crucial in preparing for training and should not be skimmed over. By the time the instructor says *mukoso yame*, stop meditating, each student should have a clear connection between mind and body. Students and the instructor are now fully engaged in a learning mindset, ready to continue with their physical training.

The final element of the ritualized pattern goes back to the bow, *rei*, but with different physical and mental components. *Rei* is done from *seiza*. Facing the *shomen* wall, the instructor says *shomen ni rei*, which means bow to the wall of honor. Both the instructor and students bow by bringing their left then right hand together on the floor directly in front of them (fig. 1e) then lower their heads to their hands (fig. 1f).

The simple physical act of bowing encompasses a wealth of meaning. Bowing to the *shomen* wall is a sign of respect, not worship, for past and current masters. Mentally, we are acknowledging the traditions, wisdom, and insight the masters have passed on to us. Traditional karate can be likened to our parents, grandparents, and great grandparents who have shared traditions, family history, and wisdom with successive generations. This natural family model is the basis for the karate family that has developed over many, many years. The early karate masters believed in the family unit and considered their karate students as family and as the means for passing on coveted knowledge to future generations. Traditional Okinawan karate has survived the centuries because our past masters believed in its value and were committed to sharing karate in its entirety.

There is a spiritual aspect of bowing to the *shomen* wall as well. Each *dojo* has a unique *shomen* wall usually containing some element of spirituality. At my *dojo*, there is a cross representing Christianity on the *shomen* wall. If I have been praying, I am humbling myself and bowing to the Lord when I bow to the *shomen* wall. Bowing to the *shomen* wall is a private exercise and the intent of the individual's bow depends on their faith, their beliefs and their mindset. *Rei* is also a sign of respect for the *dojo*. It is an outward expression of an inward responsibility. Students and instructors alike are responsible for maintaining an environment conducive to learning by reflecting on their surroundings. Does the *dojo* reflect the traditions and philosophy of Okinawan karate? Is the *dojo* clean, tidy, stark, and serene? Paying attention to such details trains us to be visually aware of our surroundings, which will carry over to our everyday life. Adherence to the rules of the *dojo* is an effective, yet subtle, way to cultivate responsibility and self-discipline both inside and outside of the *dojo*.

After the instructor and students have bowed to the *shomen* wall, the instructor turns to face the students, and the highest ranking students says *rei*. The instructor and students bow to each other saying *onegai shimasu*, meaning “please teach me” (fig.1g). Learning is a mutual process for the instructor and the students. The instructor enters training humble, empty, willing to learn through teaching, and showing the utmost respect to his or her students. The students bow to the instructor as a sign of respect. As we get to know our instructors, we gain a sincere respect for their knowledge, insight of the art and their overall character. In this regard when the students bow to the instructor and he to them, it is at a deeper, more personal level. Everyone now stands up and goes back to *yoi*. The students are now physically, mentally, and spiritually prepared to train.

Students are frequently brought back to *yoi* between drills and exercises. This is a time to reconnect the body and mind through focus and deep breathing. When students get tired they are often easily distracted, making it important to draw them back to a learning mindset and to refocus on the lesson.

Figure 1.



Figure 1

Ritualized pattern at the start of class. 1a. students line up, *shugo*, in a ready position, *yoi*; 1b. come to attention, *kiotsuke*; 1c. sit, *seiza*; 1d. meditate, *mukosu*; 1e. bring hands together; 1f. bow to the shomen wall, *shomen ni rei*; 1g. students and instructor bow to each other, *rei*.

The Ritualized Pattern as it Applies to Solo Training

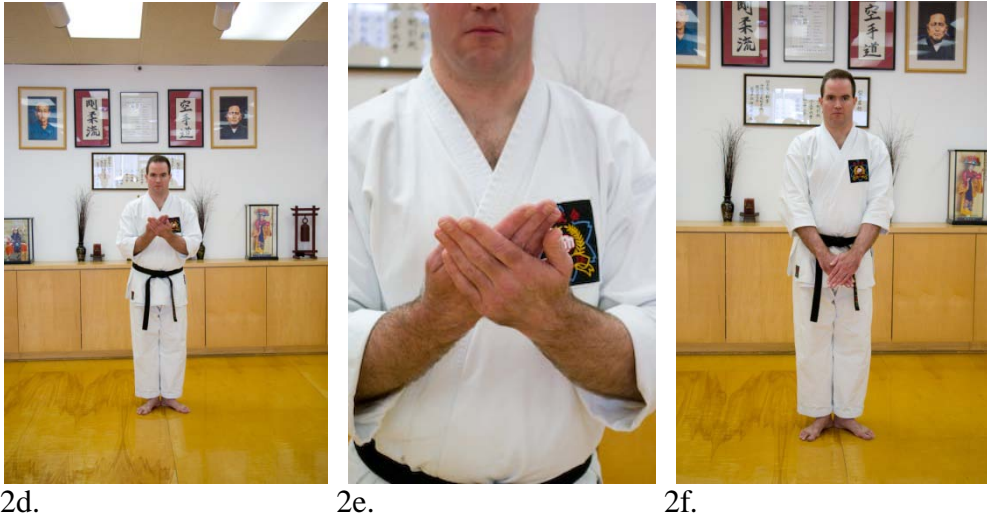
The next segment of class is the lesson the instructor has planned, which may focus on solo training, partner training, or both. Before the lesson begins, the instructor and students will perform a ritualized pattern that differs somewhat from the one done at the beginning of class. It is, however, made up of the same elements, *yoi*, *kiotsuke*, *rei*, *mukosu*, and back to *yoi*. It is essential that this routine be incorporated into your karate training, whether you are practicing alone or as an individual in a group. Performing this routine at the start and conclusion of kata, drills, or partner drills helps establish the mindset of learning. Training at the dojo is done in the context of learning, often through self-discovery, and developing mentally, physically and spiritually.

A kata is a formalized sequence of martial self-defense moves performed like a dance or shadow boxing, often done solo. At the start of kata training, the students are in a *yoi* position while respectfully waiting for instructions (fig. 2a). When the instructor announces *kiotsuke*, the students physically move to an attention stance, as previously described (fig. 2b). Mentally, each student is focused, actively listening and visually aware. Next the instructor and class do a standing bow, saying "*onegai shimasu*," please teach me (fig.2c). Similar to the bow at the beginning of class, the students perform this bow as an act of respect for the instructor, but it also holds a deeper meaning. Both the instructor and the students are acknowledging a level of seriousness for their karate training. The students engage their mind and body in a serious introspective mindset to analyze principles, movement and self-defense applications. Before performing the kata,

the students center their energy, *mokuso*, in a standing position. The students bring both hands up to approximately chest level with fingers pointing up and breathe in deeply through the nose, gathering their energy (fig. 2d). The palm of the left hand is placed on the back of the right hand so that the knuckle of the right middle finger presses against the pressure point, *laogong*, located between the second and third metatarsal bones of the left palm (fig.2e) (Montaique, Simpson, 1998). While exhaling and with the hands maintaining contact, the hands are rotated so that the fingers point downward. At the same time, the hands are moved down to the center of the body, *tanden* (fig. 2f). The rotation of the knuckle against the *laogong* point of the palm activates an energy channel. Air, breath, and mind move to the center, and from this point forward, our mind and movement remain at our center. The final component of the ritualized pattern for solo training is what I refer to as a heightened *yoi*, an “I’m ready” position of confidence.

Figure 2.





2d.

2e.

2f.

Figure 2.

The start of solo training during class.

While the foundation of training rests in respect and courtesy, the practice of harmonizing mind, body, and breath is also critical to training. Learning to harmonize each element follows the same process as learning a kata. As a novice, we learn gross motor movements and concentrate on memorizing the routine. As we advance in our training, we start thinking about the Sanchin principles of structure and movement and begin to incorporate them into our kata training (Labbate, 1999). Likewise, the ritualized pattern advances to a higher level in which static meditation transitions to moving meditation. Breathing and centering remain the same, but we now harmonize our breathing with movement.

Upon completion of the kata, the students repeat *mokuso* to gather and center their energy, calm down and re-establish the mind-body connection through deep breathing. They bring their hands to their sides, do a standing bow, say “*doomo arigato gozaimasu*,” which means thank you and is an outward expression of gratitude for the lessons learned and what they have discovered about their kata. A student’s level of mental endurance will dictate the number of repetitions of a kata that can be done during a training session.

Performing a kata or any drill at one hundred percent effort is mentally tiring, but mental endurance will develop with consistent training, just as with physical endurance.

The Ritualized Pattern and Partner Training

The physical, mental, and spiritual aspects of solo training also apply to partner training with an added layer of complexity as a result of working with another person. Training with a partner is advanced and takes on new principles on all three levels. Partners line up facing each other in the *yoi* position and perform the same ritualized pattern of *kiotsuke*, *rei*, *mukosu*, *yoi*, before starting the drill (fig. 3a). This is the point when partners make eye contact with each other. Eye contact is critical in partner training because it is the initial way to create and fully engage in a connection between partners. After coming to attention, each partner is alert and focused on the other person (fig. 3b). This is a time to “size up” your partner. How do your height, weight and reach compare? What kind of adjustments might you have to make to compensate for physical differences? What is your partner’s skill level? These are all important observations to consider.

The next component of the ritualized pattern is *rei* (fig. 3c). Unlike the other *reis*, the *rei* in partner training is unique and specific. Partners bow to each other to demonstrate mutual respect, modesty, humility, and harmony. When the students say “*onegai shimasu*” to each other, they are not just asking “please teach me” but more importantly “please trust that I will care for you.” There is a martial arts maxim which accurately describes the essence of partner training, *Jita Kyoie* which means mutual welfare and benefit (Watanabe et al, 1972). Partners are entering into a level of training with high regard for each other’s training and safety so that each will benefit. Partner training is

never one sided, even between beginner and advanced students. The higher skill level student takes on a mentoring role and will learn through teaching, whereas the lower skill level student will learn from one-on-one time with his or her partner. Neither student is a punching bag or a target for the other's ego. After bowing, the students remain in the *rei* position. The instructor announces the drill and says *mukoso*. The students perform *mukoso* as they would for kata training, drawing in and centering their energy and concentrating on connecting with their partner (fig.3d-3e). The mind-body connection between partners is much more complicated than the mind-body connection an individual develops within him or herself. There is a physical, mental, and spiritual awareness between partners that develops with repeated partner training.

We discussed the physical awareness partners have of each and went into a bit more detail discussing the spiritual aspects of partner training, now let us explore mental awareness. Mental awareness refers to a mutual understanding partners have of each others' emotional state and the affect partners have on each other. For example, failing to shed anxiety during *mukosu* can be distracting to the person you are working with. It is important to give one hundred percent of your attention and effort to your partner. It is also important to be able to sense your partner's mental and emotional state. Is he or she approaching this training with the same level of seriousness, intensity and humility as you? Is your partner nervous or anxious? Awareness and sensitivity to your partners' emotional and mental status is paramount in partner training. Ultimately, students will develop the sense of mental control needed for physical control.

Dialogue between partners during training drills is a unique aspect of partner training that is mutually beneficial. If partners perceive there is a disconnect between them, they

can stop, determine the reason, and then concentrate on re-establishing the connection. Partner training will expose each other's weaknesses. Through honest, humble dialogue, the students can help each other correct and understand techniques. This not only elevates each other's skill development but also aids in building a bond of trust between partners.

Figure 3.

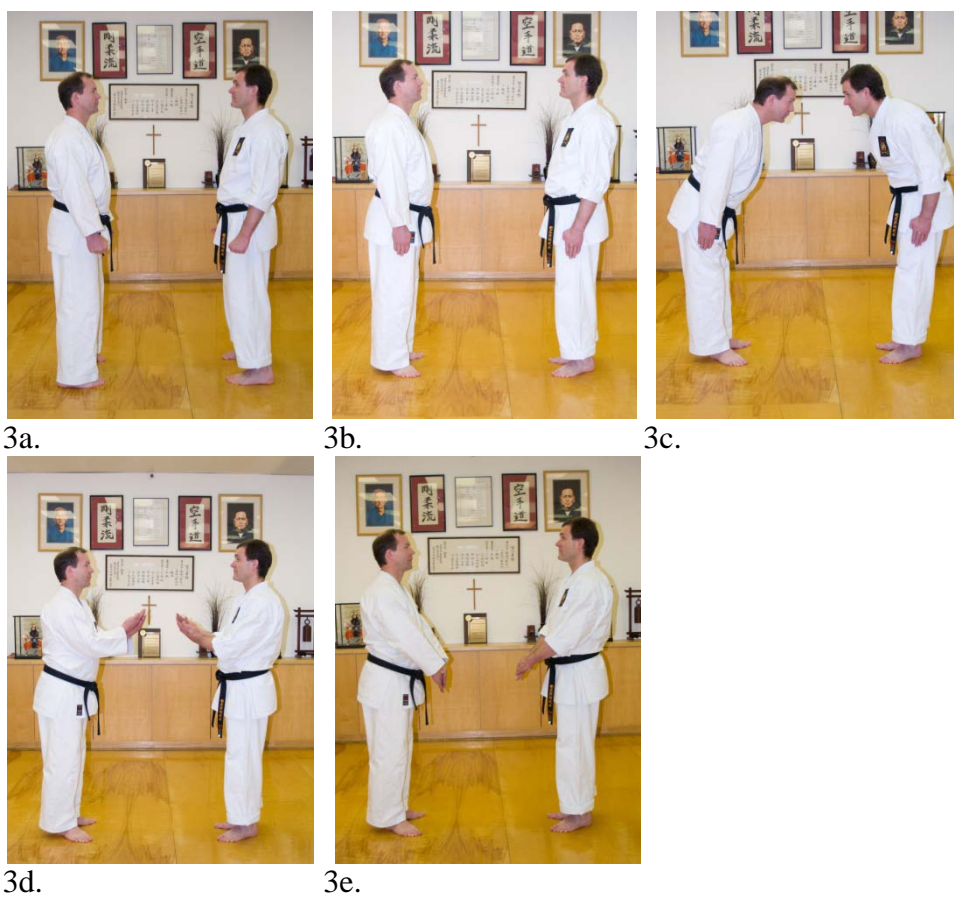


Figure 3.
Ritualized pattern for partner training.

During partner training and upon completion of the formal partner drills, the students come back to *yoi* to re-establish the mind-body connection as individuals and as partners.

When partner training ends, the students maintain eye contact, *kiotsuke*, then *rei*, saying “*doomo arigato gozaimasu.*” The students are offering a genuine “thank you” for the time spent with each other, the mutual benefits each received through this training, and for the positive impact the partners have on each other because of their humble, respectful attitude.

The Ritualized Pattern at the End of Class

At the end of class, the same ritualized pattern as that done at the beginning of class is performed. The students and instructor line up, *shugo*, in a ready position, *yoi*, move to the seated position, *seiza* and meditate, *mukoso*. Like the beginning of class, the students can use this time for meditation, reflection or prayer. When I am the class instructor, I pray that the students have benefited from the class and are leaving feeling better in some way, be it mentally or physically. Perhaps something a student had been struggling to understand or perform became clear and achievable. Students should reflect on the class they just participated in. Some questions they might ask themselves are: Did I remember the corrections from last class and try to improve? Did I receive any new corrections or new information to incorporate into my training? After meditation, the instructor and students bow to the *shomen* wall. Again, as at the beginning of class, they are honoring the past masters of Gojo-ryu. Additionally this bow serves as a reminder that as students and instructors we have the responsibility to pass down the knowledge that has been given to us. The price we pay for studying Goju-ryu karate is to share this knowledge in its original form and meaning. It is through the giving-receiving relationships of instructors to students and students to students that this knowledge is passed on. The instructor then faces the students. They bow to each other offering a mutual, genuine

thank you by saying “*doomo arigato gozaimasu*”. The students should be thanking the instructor for the time he or she has donated. The gift of time is priceless in and of itself and it is through this gift that the art of Goju-ryu is passed on from generation to generation. Students may not know and appreciate this at first but as they get to know the instructors *doomo arigato gozaimasu* will come to mean much more than thank you for the karate lesson. As the instructor, I am thanking the students for the knowledge I have gained through teaching and for allowing me to touch their hearts in some way. For as many people as I teach on any day, I have the responsibility to be pure of heart and to impact people in a positive way. Gichin Funakoshi wrote in the first of The Twenty Precepts, “Karate-do begins with courtesy and ends with *rei*.” Ultimately, we will learn that it is this higher level of thankfulness and gratitude which keeps us humble. Being humble drives us to constantly strive to learn and improve.

We have explored the origin and meaning of each component of the ritualized pattern and why it is performed at the beginning of class, during solo and partner training, and at the end of class. We’ve also explained that there are physical, mental, and spiritual aspects to each component which develop and deepen in meaning with practice. The ritual in and of itself is training, which, with a full understanding and continuous practice, will further enhance the student’s skill level. It is my hope that you now have a better understanding of the significance of the exercise that appears to be a simple ritual.

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