

Who Cleans Your Dojo

by: George Kirby

Who cleans your dojo? Who cleans your mats? Is it the students? Is it a custodian? Or is it something you've never thought about?

Cleaning the dojo is an important function in martial arts training. Yes, "cleanliness" is next to "holiness" in some mindsets. Most parents also wish their kids would be neater and cleaner, but that's something that will hopefully straighten itself out (pardon the pun) in adulthood. It could also be said that cleaning the dojo helps students to learn to follow directions and do menial tasks to build their character.

If you think that any of these reasons are justification for cleaning the dojo you've misplaced your obi. "Who cleans the dojo" is not just about cleanliness but it is about character as well. Many students and sensei believe that menial tasks should be left to the lower ranked students; it's part of their initiation into the martial arts. After all, upper ranks also have more important things to do such as teach, organize activities, remember more techniques, learn how to be authoritative — all the important things in life.

"Who cleans the dojo?" is about character and impression. It is the recognition that the cleanliness of the dojo (and the proper learning of your art) is the responsibility of everyone in the dojo. It is the recognition that if anything seems out of place or needs cleaning it should be cleaned by the person who discovers the problem.

Yes, there are times when an upper rank may tell a lower rank to "clean up his mess". However, it would make a more positive impression if you helped the lower ranked student resolve the problem rather than just chastising him/her. By helping others we help our-

selves. This builds self-respect, respect for others and character. This, in and of itself, is part of “Who cleans the dojo?”

“Who cleans my dojo?” I have my classes in the community service room of a local retail business. It’s a large room. Unfortunately not all of the other groups who use it leave it clean or neat. Every week I usually have to put tables and chairs away and sweep the floor. Yes! Me! A 9th dan! If students arrive early they help me clean up the dojo without even asking. Then we put our mats out. I always thank them for their help because I do appreciate it. We all clean up the room after the class, leaving it cleaner than when we found it.

Customers have walked into the store and thought I was the custodian. I don’t do this in my gi, so I can see their misunderstanding. I do try to help them though. It’s just the decent thing to do. This really surprises new students when they show up the first night of class to see the sensei doing what they perceive to be a “menial” task. However, it also breaks down barriers because it shows that in my dojo everyone is responsible for keeping the dojo clean and no one considers it a task below them.

On rare occasion we even have “The Ancient Tao Ceremony” in which everyone who walks into the dojo is given a towel (that’s where “tao” is misleading) and the mat is cleaned with a light cleaner/disinfectant. Everyone does this. Yes! Even me! A 9th dan!

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