

INTERNAL WUSHU ARTS NEWSLETTER

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UNIFORMS AND RITUALS

Once in a while I'm asked why we don't open the class formally or have fancy uniforms, belts or a ranking system. Most other martial arts have simple to elaborate opening ceremonies for their classes. These ceremonies are mostly methods to show respect to the instructor, founder, students, or to get the students to focus. Why don't we have any?

OPENING RITUALS

Bowing and formal openings have many reasons and applications, some very useful others simply for the ego of the instructor. For some schools, styles and clubs it depends upon the country the art came from, areas the art has been influenced by, and the tradition the art springs from.

Japanese arts, for instance, all begin with some type of 'bow in' and opening preparation. In some cases this is due to the militaristic nature of the art in order to show/teach respect and discipline to the group. Things look so much nicer when everyone looks as if they're members of a school of fish, all moving in synchronized movements. The Zen or 'internal' influenced arts use the preparation to empty and focus the mind much the same way we use the opening of our forms. This is a small meditation used to center, empty and relax before continuing on with the class. This way you leave your daily problems outside the school and have a clear mind to learn and study. It helps create the greatest potential for learning. Another reason for this is to remind the class to pay respect to the founder, origins and specific teachings/ philosophy of the art. Remembering the creative genius, the reason and process of the arts' development is a very important part of training.

In Chinese martial arts the openings aren't as elaborate. The internal arts usually don't have any opening, whereas the Shaolin styles do. In the external styles there are various hand/fist greetings used as a trademark of a style. A basic greeting is the left open hand covering the right fist, this is one adapted by the internal arts when greeting other martial artists, usually not another member of the same club. This hand position represents studying both the fighting and higher aspects of the art, not only the fighting skills but cultivating the spirit as well. Internal stylists sometimes use just a prayer hand position. Internal stylists tend to be very informal, Taoist in their approach to the art so there is usually a smile or slight bow, if anything.

In the internal arts a slight bow of the head is used similar to Aikido. This is a slight 'Thank you' or 'hello' to your partner or the instructor. Large and formal ceremonies in the internal arts, from what I've seen, are usually for the instructor's benefit, not a part of the art or practice. The internal arts are to lead you to an understanding of yourself, not to become one of the 'special' group, lodge, club, or

belief. It's important that the class reflects how we want daily life to be. We try to incorporate everything we study in class and practice into our daily lives. If it's not useful for that, then it's not worth spending time working on. It's important that we don't segment and separate what the art is from our daily activities. The purpose of the internal arts is to improve the quality of our daily life, in addition to understanding the process of life.

RESPECT

Though the bows and strict behavior seem to show respect, you can't force someone to respect you. Respect can only be earned of course. Forcing someone to bow or go through a special ritual may outwardly seem like respect is being paid but true respect comes from the heart, not forms or rituals. What makes me happy is when I walk into the room and see members practicing and studying instead of waiting around for class to start. Asking questions, refinements and sharing information with me or other class members are also great signs of respect. A bow or any other gesture can't come closer to making me feel happier than watching mindful practice and sharing of the art.

UNIFORMS

Uniforms seem to make things look neat, clean, orderly and impressive. You don't need to have a special uniform in order to become good at the arts though. Uniforms can, however, make it appear that your forms are better than they actually are. People watching get distracted by the 'Bells and Whistles' instead of seeing what's really going on. What's considered the classic kung fu uniform is what the average Chinese citizen wore in the old days. It was everyday clothing! Perhaps in a hundred years from now the classical uniform in this country will be a suit and tie.

WHAT'S REALLY IMPORTANT

Are you comfortable and relaxed in what you are wearing? Does it help your practice? Is it suitable for a workout?

We have our club shirt to give a sense of belonging and unity to the group (and as advertisement). You're not required to wear one, or even own one. (they're \$12) A uniform or practice outfit can help set the mood for your practice, or put you in a practice mode. It's a little message to yourself, "This is time to practice." It may have the effect to help you feel official or more disciplined. It can also help cut down on laundry! Again, what's important is that you are comfortable as you practice, not that you look the part. If you practice for performance then your focus is on WUSHU and not the internal aspect of the art. Rituals and forms are the 'Bells and whistles'. In my opinion, the louder the more elaborate the farther we move from our purpose of practice.

Body structure and alignment is as important in the internal arts as being relaxed and centered is. Actually, physical centering is due to having correct body structure. Also, you can't relax without correct body alignment. These guidelines for the internal arts are one of the major differences between the internal and external styles. Five circles, curves or bows are necessary in all our postures, forms, and meditations for our practice to be correct. They keep our practice correct regardless of the level or focus of our practice.

The one curve is the torso and spinal column. If this curve is not there then the body is segmented and can only access localized strength. The chi and jin can't circulate along the major meridians up the spine for health or applications. Tuck the hips! Round the lower back! Bend the knees! Hollow the chest! Round the thighs . . . These all refer to keeping the torso curve correct.

The lower back must be rounded. What that means is actually we don't want it curved. Put your hand on your lower back, then try to 'round it out' so you don't have it curved. As you try this you'll have to loosen and bend your knees, round the thighs. . . in order to get the proper position. On the other hand don't tilt your pelvis and tuck your hips to the point your stomach tenses, this is too far. The second you 'round' the lower back all your weight sinks into the legs and into the ground. Your thighs feel it! If your knees feel it you're rocking your weight too far forward. Finally, you begin to root when you're standing properly and your upper body is balanced and relaxed, floating comfortably on the hips and legs. This is a two way road: First, it grounds and centers you, next it permits the energy and power to circulate easily up the back.

From a beginning point of view this serves to properly train the legs. it stretches and strengthens them in order to develop a base and power. If you feel the weight and pressure sinking into the legs you also have the road open for the power of your legs and the ground to be transmitted into your arms and hand for strength and applications. All you need next is proper coordination and timing.

In tuishou this curve permits you to ground and root, absorbing your partner's push, instead of letting it go through you. This also permits you to re-bound your partners attack.

As far as the energy connection goes, you are opening the Ming-men, an energy gate in the lower back so the chi can flow freely up the spine. The Ming men is considered level with the navel and is one of the most important gates to open in chi kung and meditation. (it's part of the beginning) Opening this

gate helps in healing and developing power for applications: FAJIN

There are two primary pathways of energy: Yang channel up the back, Yin channel down the front. they forms a circuit between the legs and at the top of your head. When the torso curve is correct your back is rounded and chest is relaxed and empty. It's like your back is a cobra's hood (slightly). All postures and forms conform to this curve so be mindful when you practice.

A symbolic way of saying this is: FIRE ABOVE WATER. The waist, hips and legs are like a huge lake, the waist sinking into the ground. The spinal column is like a flame flickering upward softly. There are many ways to imagine this and many descriptions. Try to find one that makes sense to you if the above don't.

"When the lower vertebrae are plumb erect the spirit and vitality can reach the head top" Tai Chi classics