

The Significance of Bowing (Rei) in Japanese Martial Arts

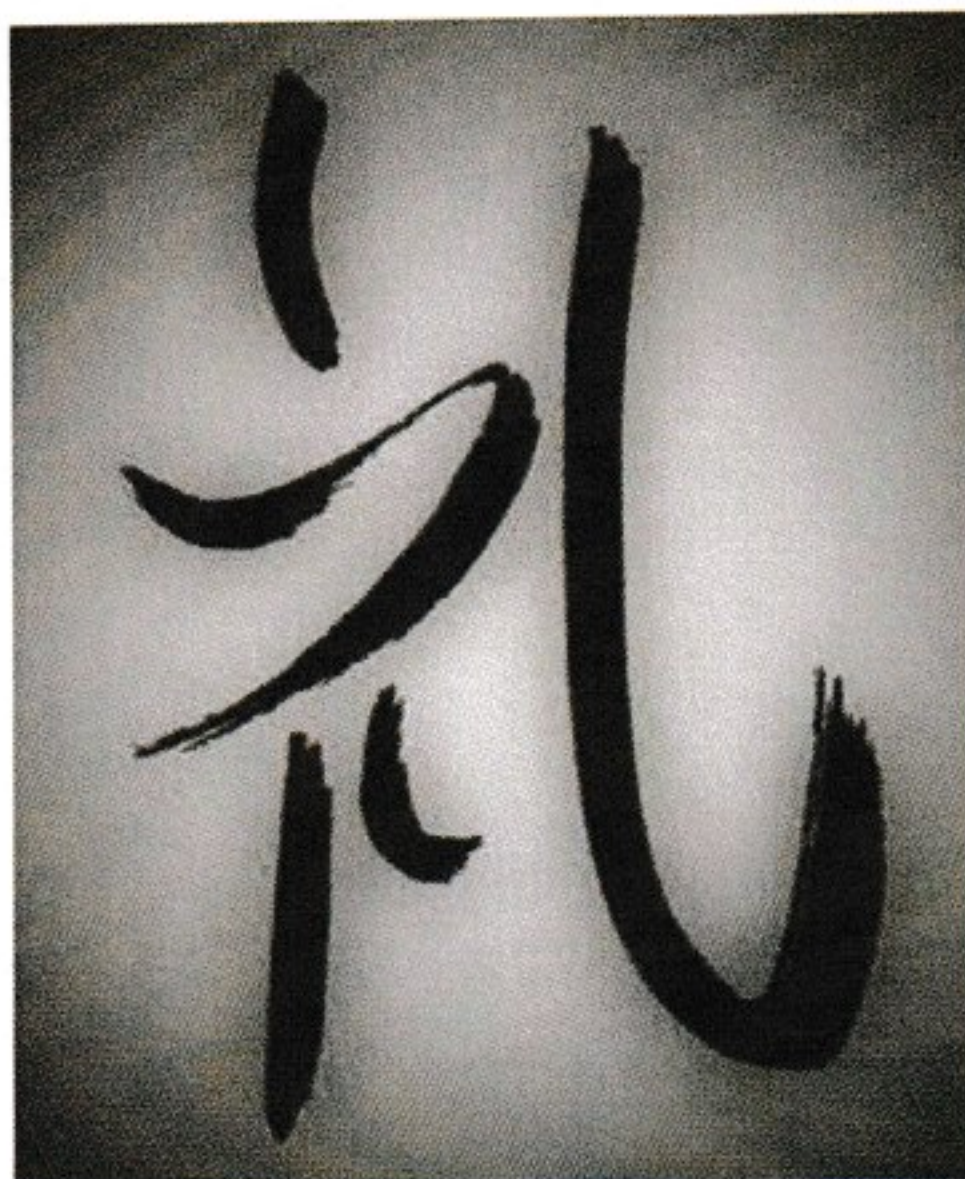


Fig 1. Kanji for Rei

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1. Introduction

In Japanese martial arts, bowing (*rei*) (礼), is one of the most visible practices, yet it is often misunderstood. To an outside observer, it may look like a simple sign of politeness. Inside the dojo, however, bowing serves a deeper purpose. It communicates respect, humility, ethical intent, and readiness to learn. Bowing marks transitions, shapes relationships, and reinforces the idea that martial arts are about personal development—not just physical skill or combat.

This thesis argues that bowing in Japanese martial arts is a living tradition rooted in Japanese social customs, samurai ethics, and Zen Buddhist thought. Through repeated physical practice, *rei* helps cultivate mindfulness, moral awareness, and personal growth, even as martial arts are practiced across different cultures.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Bowing in Japanese Culture

Bowing (*ojigi*) plays a central role in Japanese nonverbal communication. It is used to show respect, gratitude, apology, and social awareness. Unlike spoken greetings, bowing involves the entire body, which reinforces sincerity and presence. Its roots can be traced back to early Buddhist rituals introduced between the fifth and eighth centuries, later becoming part of everyday social life.

Japanese culture places strong emphasis on harmony (*wa*) and awareness of social roles. The depth, timing, and duration of a bow all carry meaning. These variations help maintain respect, balance relationships, and reinforce a sense of shared responsibility within society.

2.2 Samurai Ethics and Bushidō

The samurai class strongly influenced Japanese martial traditions through the ethical code of *Bushidō*. Within this framework, *rei* was not simply a formal gesture—it represented moral character. Bowing expressed humility, self-control, and peaceful intent, even in situations involving conflict. These values continue to shape modern martial arts practice.

2.3 Zen Buddhism and Mindfulness

Zen Buddhism influenced Japanese martial arts by emphasizing direct experience, presence, and awareness.

Shoshin Nagamine understood Zen and *rei* as inseparable foundations of true karate-dō. For him, Zen was not an abstract philosophy but a practical discipline that returns the practitioner to a calm, pure, and undisturbed mind, free from fear and ego. Karate existed precisely to cultivate this mental state through the body.

Rei, is the visible manifestation of Zen in action, not merely formal etiquette. When Zen and *rei* are fully present, aggression dissolves before violence is

required—what Nagamine described as the true meaning of “defeat without fight.”

Shoshin Nagamine valued this principle so deeply that he intended to write an entire book on Ken Zen Ichijō (“Karate and Zen are One”), a concept that represents a unified path in which mind, body, and behavior function together to preserve peace rather than produce conflict.

Without *rei*, karate loses its purpose; with it, karate becomes a path of peace rather than conflict.

Bowing supports these ideas by creating intentional pauses before and after action. In the dojo, bowing also helps practitioners mentally shift from everyday life into focused training, encouraging attention and cooperation.

In other words,

- Calm before action
- Respect before technique
- Self-control before power

2.4 The Uniqueness of Japanese Culture as the Foundation of Rei

Japanese culture values form, harmony, and intention. Concepts such as *shikata* (the correct or ethical way of doing things) and *kata* (structured form) guide behavior across many areas of life. Bowing functions within this system as a meaningful action that carries values through physical form rather than explanation.

Within the dojo, these rituals create a structured environment where humility, respect, and ethical awareness are learned through practice rather than words.

3. Methodology

This thesis uses a qualitative, interpretive approach. It draws on historical and philosophical literature, observation of dojo etiquette, comparisons between Karate, Judo, Kendo, and Sumo, and first-person experience as a practitioner. Meaning, interpretation, and lived experience are treated as valid and important sources of knowledge within martial arts study.

4. Results and Findings

4.1 Dojo Etiquette and Ritual Structure

In traditional dojos, bowing occurs at specific moments: entering and leaving the dojo, beginning and ending class, before and after kata, and when engaging a partner. Formal ceremonies often include:

- Lining up by rank
- Kneeling in Seiza (Zarei) *as shown below*

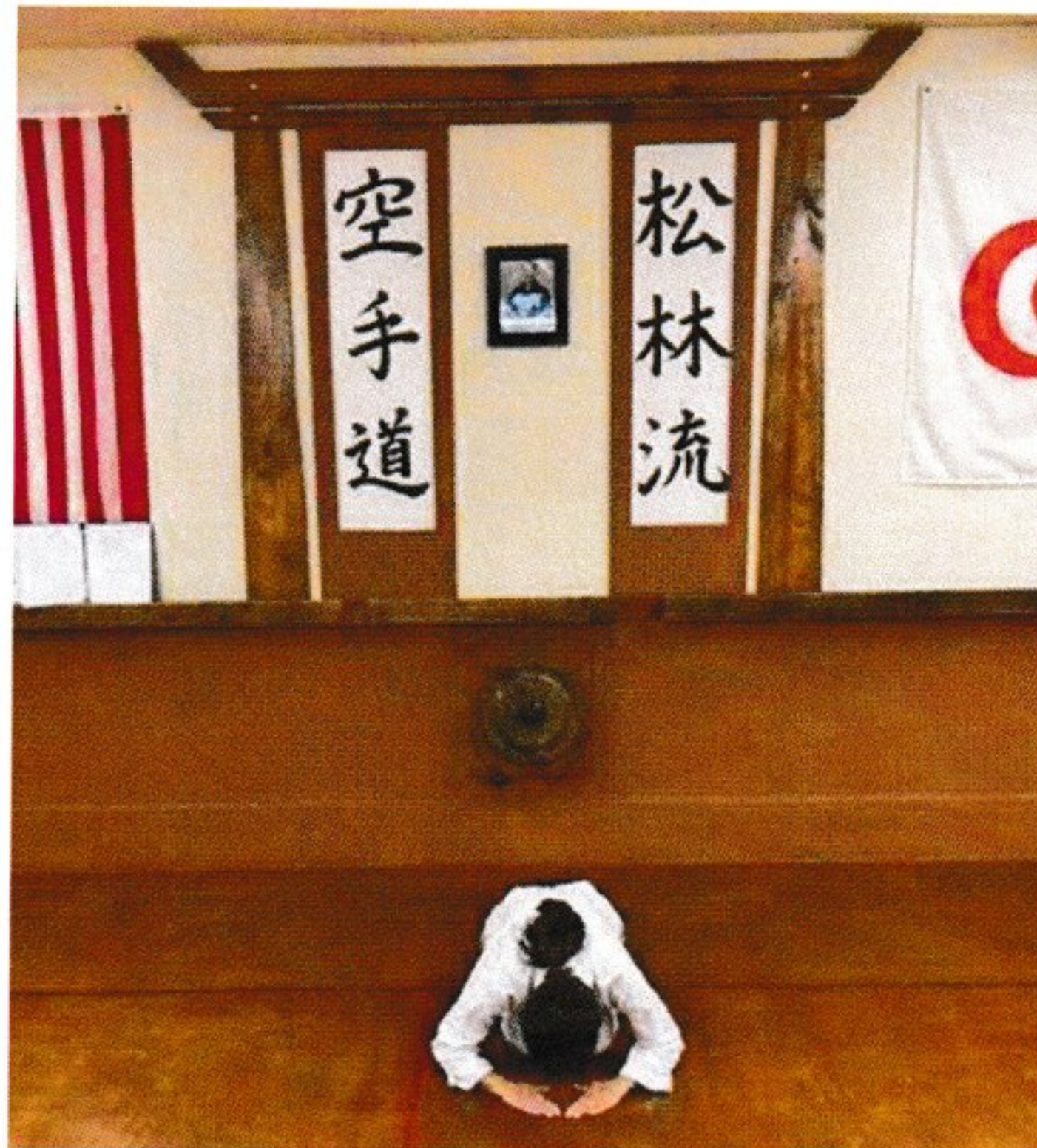


Fig 2. Zarei (Seated Bow)

- Meditation (*mokuso*)
- Bows to the *shomen* (front of the dojo) and instructor (*sensei*)
- Bows in standing position (*Ritsurei*): Commonly used upon entering/exiting the dojo or when facing a partner.

Men typically keep their hands at their sides, stand with their slightly apart and lower the bow as shown in the picture below.



Fig 3. Ritsurei (Men Standing Bow) – Front



Fig 4. Ritsurei (Men Standing Bow) – Side

Women stand with their heels are together and toes are apart (V-shape) and often clasp their hands in front of their thighs.



Fig 5. Ritsurei (Women Standing Bow) – Front

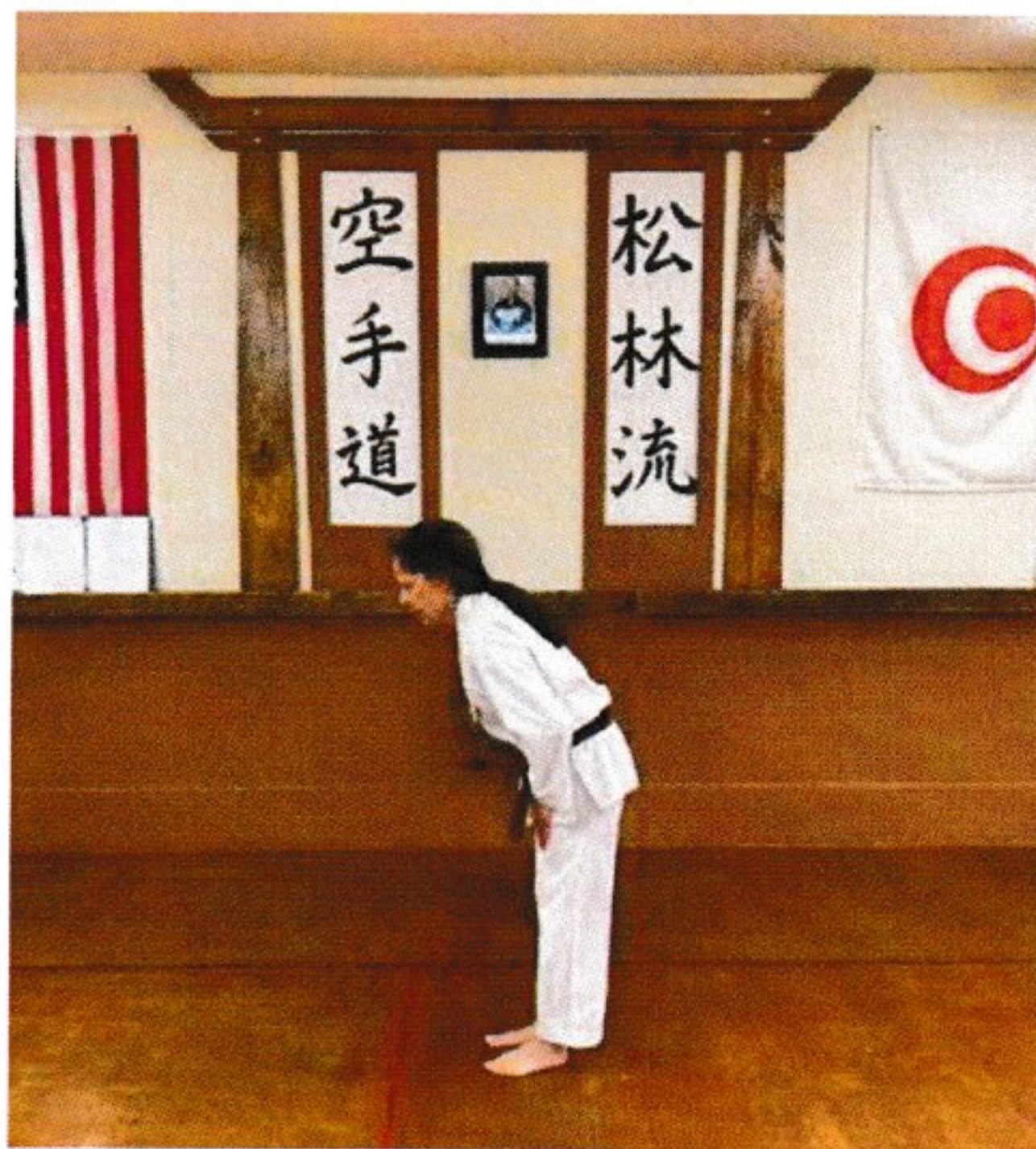


Fig 6. Ritsurei (Women Standing Bow) – Side

Commands such as *Shomen ni Rei*, *Sensei ni Rei*, *Otagai ni Rei* reinforce respect for lineage, tradition, and teaching authority.

The structured nature of dojo etiquette reflects the broader Japanese reliance on *kata* as a teaching method. Just as children in Japan learn how to bow from an early age, martial arts students learn that correct form reflects correct mindset. Precision in bowing is not about perfection, but about developing attentiveness, respect, and sincerity. In this way, dojo rituals pass on cultural values through repeated physical practice.

4.2 Variations Across Martial Arts

While the purpose of bowing is consistent, its expression varies across disciplines.



Karate: emphasizes standing and kneeling bows tied to *kata* and partner work, expressing both “respect” as well as “courtesy”.

Bowing in Karate is seen as the first step in self-cultivation. It focuses on humbling the ego—a critical component of the discipline—and shows gratitude for the teachings. It includes both *ritsurei* (standing) and *zareai* (seated) bows, typically with a strong emphasis on lowering the head to show trust.



Judo: highlights mutual respect and sportsmanship.

Bowing In Judo is essential for safe, intensive training. It serves as a, "thanks" for the partner's help in developing one's own skill and is used to create a "remaining mind", ensuring focus during, before, and after fighting.



Kendo: maintains highly formalized etiquette reflecting sword traditions.

Bowing in Kendo is deeply rooted in sword etiquette. The Zarei (seated bow) requires placing both hands on the floor simultaneously to signify that the practitioner has no intention of drawing their sword. It is heavily regulated, often starting and ending with 30-degree bows to the *shomen* (front) and 15-degree bows to the opponent.



Sumo: highlights respect, the ritual showing that wrestlers carry no weapons, and the spiritual cleansing of the ring.

Bowing in sumo is an important way to show rei, which means respect, gratitude, and tradition. Before a match, wrestlers bow and use hand gestures to show respect and to prove they are not carrying weapons. After the match, both the winner and the loser bow to each other, and the referee makes sure this is done correctly. In professional sumo wrestling, there is also a special bowing ceremony at the end of each tournament day called the bow-twirling ceremony. This ceremony, known as Yumitori-shiki, is performed by a skilled wrestler and represents cleaning the ring, keeping away bad spirits, and honoring the matches of the day.

International dojos often adapt the physical form, teaching methods, or curriculum to suit local cultures while preserving the core values of discipline, respect, and self-improvement. A prominent example is the adaptation of traditional Okinawan/Japanese Karate into modern Western schools.

4.3 Pedagogical Function

For beginners, bowing often serves as their first introduction to martial arts values. Through consistent ritual practice, students gradually develop discipline, emotional control, and long-term commitment. Instructor explanation and modeling are essential to ensure that bowing retains meaning and does not become an empty habit.

4.4 Personal and Spiritual Experience

In my karate practice, one of the most important principles I have learned is *Rei*. The left radical in *Rei* means “deity,” while the right signifies “bounty.” In other words, *Rei* represents the spirit of giving thanks for bounty and the appreciation of good fortune. This idea shapes not only how I train in karate, but also how I approach learning and discipline.

I often reflect on what karate practice would be like without *Rei*. Without it, students would not learn the importance of listening carefully to the instructor or waiting their turn. These behaviors are essential parts of *Rei*. Practice would also be far more dangerous, because cooperation and consideration for others’ safety are central to maintaining a safe training environment. Without *Rei*, people could easily disrupt class or cause unnecessary injury.

The importance of bowing has become especially clear to me during periods of physical limitation, such as my shoulder injury. In these moments, bowing reinforces trust and care, allowing continued participation while honoring personal limits.

Many students, including myself, describe the dojo as a space set apart from everyday life—one defined by order, humility, and mutual care.

For me, bowing is also a moment of prayer. It is a quiet act that requires humility and reminds me that I do not practice alone, but with the help of the Lord, my instructors, and students. In that moment, I acknowledge that the Lord can guide and strengthen me, especially when I face challenges in training. As I bow during the *mokuso*, I make the sign of the cross, and I pray that no one is hurt during practice and that everyone is protected. I offer that moment to God, dedicating my training and my efforts to Him for His glory.

As I continue practicing karate, I have found that the habit of bowing has carried over into other areas of my life. I often catch myself bowing slightly and say “hai” when responding to questions at work or at church. This does not embarrass me; instead, it makes me feel attentive and respectful.

In Matsubayashi-ryū, there is a saying: “Karate begins and ends with Rei.” This principle reflects the understanding that respect and gratitude form both the foundation and the purpose of karate practice—an understanding I did not have before joining this martial art.

4.5 Bowing as an Expression of Cultural Identity

Bowing continuously reinforces Japanese cultural values by emphasizing intention, care, and respect in every interaction. It reflects the belief that how something is done matters just as much as what is done. In this way, bowing acts as both a cultural marker and an ethical practice.

5. Conclusion

Bowing in martial arts is more than a physical gesture—it's a personal and spiritual moment of intention. Each bow invites students to pause, let go of the outside world, and step onto the dojo with presence and purpose. It marks a quiet transition from distraction to awareness, from ego to openness.

Through bowing, students learn humility: a recognition that learning is a lifelong journey and that growth comes from respect—for the art, for others, and for oneself. It creates a shared sense of connection, reminding everyone that while each path is personal, no one walks it alone.

Rooted in centuries of tradition, bowing links today's students to something timeless and meaningful. It honors the past, grounds the present, and shapes character for the future. In that simple moment, students aren't just practicing martial arts—they're demonstrating respect, courtesy, cultivating mindfulness, gratitude, and inner discipline that carry far beyond the dojo.

Ultimately, bowing reflects the uniqueness of Japanese culture and its ability to transmit ethics through form (Shikata and Kata). It reminds us that martial arts are about becoming better people, not just better fighters. Rei frames how we enter, train and leave- not only the dojo, but our interactions with others.

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7. Appendices

Appendix A: Glossary of Japanese Terms

Rei (礼) / Ojigi: Bowing; embodied respect and etiquette

Kata: Formal pattern or structured way of doing things

Shikata: Correct/ethical way of doing things

Wa: Harmony

Appendix B: Sample Dojo Bowing Ceremony

Line up by rank

Seiza (kneeling)

Mokuso (meditation)

Shomen ni Rei (bow to the front)

Sensei ni Rei (bow to the instructor)

Otagai ni Rei (bow to each other" or "mutual bow)