

# Sensei Says

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Last issue I wrote about the personal hardships one might encounter in the process of abiding by correct etiquette. This time there is another side of etiquette that I want to address. That is the ability to avoid breaches in etiquette before they have the potential to arise.

A rule of etiquette that seems to transcend all cultural barriers is that when having a meal, you let the honored guest eat first. This is so basic a courtesy that I have never heard of a tradition that is otherwise. Martial arts etiquette is no exception.

I was once invited to attend a dinner with a high-ranking Karate master and many of his top students. The student sitting next to me made a grave mistake while ordering - one that I learned how to avoid years ago during my uchideshi years. What he did is quite normal when eating at a fine restaurant, and seemed to be in keeping with the festive occasion, yet it was an inescapable breach of etiquette waiting to happen. The dinner was in honor of his Sensei; the occasion was to show gratitude for what his Sensei had given to him not only on that day, but for the past years of training. It was a time to be on his best behavior, and to put his Sensei first. I'm sure you are wondering what could be such a terrible offense committed at the dinner table. Brace yourself...he ordered an hors d'oeuvre!

Okay, maybe that doesn't seem so bad. After all, it was on the menu. Let me explain.

Your manners should be of the highest level when you are with your Sensei. Etiquette is not just bowing and taking things with two hands. It is to always be thinking about others when you are with them, to put them above yourself so you can learn from them. The student looked at the menu to pick out what he wanted without a single thought of his teacher. Here is what the student should have done:

The Sensei should always be allowed to order first, thereby ensuring that his order is the first to be attended to by the cooks, and therefore (hopefully) the first to arrive. The student should pay attention to what the Sensei orders and make his/her order accordingly. The student must also think about the type of food ordered, the time involved in the preparation of the food, and how long it takes to eat the meal. The student's goal is to order a meal that will arrive at the table at the same time, or shortly after, the Sensei's meal. It is also important to not still be eating when the Sensei is ready to leave. (A very adept student will discreetly tell the waiter not to bring out anyone else's food until the Sensei is served.) Now are you beginning to see the problem? The Master didn't order an hors d'oeuvre.

So, what ever happened with the whole horrible order of hors d' oeuvres ordeal?

The appetizer arrived, and the Master insisted that the student eat. Of course, the student said he would wait for his teacher to eat. Then, as expected, the Master further insisted that it would be a waste to let the food get cold (now we're dealing with an issue of disrespect to the cook if the food is not eaten at the proper time). The final chapter of this drama always ends the same way - the student eats the food upon the teacher's stern orders, but can't enjoy it because he feels so guilty for eating while his teacher had no food. Any longtime martial artist has seen this situation played out so many times he can recite the script with the hilarity of a Monty Python skit.

To some, this type of etiquette advise may all seem silly, to others, it may seem so obvious that it seems silly to even mention it. That is the nature of etiquette. Once you

understand how to show respect and courtesy to others, it becomes as natural as breathing. Oh, that's right, sometimes I do have to remind my students to breathe.

- Alan Best