

The meaning of the term Sensei

When we practice Budo, we do so under the guidance of a person who is almost always addressed as Sensei.

There are many definitions of the meaning of Sensei, depending on the situation.

Among them I have heard that Sensei means "teacher in all aspects of life."

In conjunction with such strong definitions, the behaviour of non-Japanese towards their Sensei often is often extremely self-effacing and servile, with students tip-toeing around Sensei and always behaving in a subservient manner, while these Sensei may sometimes be tyrants both inside and out of the dojo.

This contrasts sharply with my experiences in training with Japanese instructors opposed to European instructors.

While Sensei should be accorded a measure of respect, it should never be given in a servile manner.

Students do a lot of things for Sensei, like getting him a cup of tea or making sure that his shoes are placed where he can slip them on easily at the door.

These are services performed out of a sense of gratitude, not servility, and whom they are performed for has a lot to do with what Sensei means in each case.

I am fortunate to be one of these Sensei, in several aspects in my life.

Sensei, as most martial artists are already aware, is written with the characters for "born" or "live" and "before." Put together, you get born before, or lived before.

Don't be confused then when you find a sensei that is significantly younger than you. The term "born before" doesn't just refer to age, it also would also read as "discovered before". In Japan of old when something that changed your life happened it was common to also change you name to recognise this, hence you were born again.

It then follows that someone who discovered Judo at the age of eight and went on to become a teacher at the age of 45 would be my sensei, even if I was significantly older than 45 myself.

There is nothing here, which indicates a need for excessive humility when dealing with a person with that title. So the question is, who warrants being called Sensei?

The answer is, anybody in a position of status significantly higher than you are. The key here is that it must be a person in a position of higher status.

What the actual person is like has little to do with the title. The title is related entirely to their relative social position.

Thus, lots of people are called Sensei. First, anyone who teaches is called Sensei. That includes pre-school teachers, and me, (as I teach my colleagues various areas of my profession) and also the local 19 year old giving skating boarding lessons.

That's why martial arts teachers are addressed as Sensei. They are teaching something.

Of course, there are lots of people besides teachers whose position calls for the use of Sensei as a form of address. Doctors are always addressed as Sensei. So are lawyers and politicians.

Japan is a rabidly hierarchical country. It is impossible to speak Japanese with any degree of politeness without constantly reinforcing people's position in the hierarchy. The way you conjugate verbs is based entirely on your status relative to the person you are talking with (or the BS you want to shovel if you're a politician).

Using titles like Sensei is just another aspect of this cultural obsession with status and rank. In Japanese society, people are only addressed by their names together with the word San when they don't have any significant title. In Japanese schools, all the teachers are Sensei, the principal is always "Kocho Sensei" or "Principal Teacher" and the assistant principal is always "Kyoto Sensei" or "Assistant Principal Teacher".

In the business world, if you are at the head of company, no matter how small, everyone who relates to you in the business world will address you as "Shacho" or "Company President." If you work for a large company, you may well be known as "Kanchō" or "Buchō", "Department Head" and "Section Head".

All of this is just to show that the term sensei has no special, mystical meaning attached to it in its home country. It is a term used to show appropriate respect to someone in a position of status higher than your own. The usage can cause some surprises.

I was very surprised to hear my Judo sensei, an eighty-year-old master, address me as sensei when delegating me to teach some new students. However, from this perspective it is also entirely appropriate.

Much of the training of new students was delegated to me, so my position was that of teacher, i.e. Sensei. My teachers only refer to me as Sensei when they are talking about me with a student whose status is significantly lower than mine in the dojo. The term reflects our relative status.

When my sensei address me without such an audience, I would be "San" or even "Kun," a term of familiarity when used with someone you like, who is significantly below you in relative status.

All this is merely to make the point that Sensei is a term of respect, not one of awe.

If we appreciate our teachers more than usual, we should show it by going out of our way to do little services for them that make their lives a little easier.

Scraping the floor and being subservient is not the way to show appreciation for your teacher. It just makes your teacher look like a petty tyrant, and you like a fool.