

## *What is a Mudra?*

Every Kata in Shuri-Ryu karate begins and ends with a mudra. Each is a series of three symbolic hand gestures, and each one has a specific connotation. The opening mudra is called "Saishoyoi" (first, beginning, ready). This sets the hara, the lower abdomen where all energy originates, and matches the breath. These mudra are different for every Kata, representing different ideas and themes of the particular Kata. The ending mudra is always the same and always means the same thing.

At some point in our training, we realize that everything is subject to change. Techniques are modified to fit different situations, and we understand that we must personalize what we learn to have meaning in our daily lives. One way I've done that is to ask myself what the ending mudra means to me on an individual level. Here is what I found.

The first movement is the left hand covering the right fist at chest level. It means "karate is my secret." Traditionally, this reminds us that karate is not to be displayed in public, and must only be used in defense of our life, family or country.

We're so fortunate that this ancient art no longer has to be practiced in the dead of night under fear of the death penalty! In our modern society, everybody has a chance to learn what once was only available to a select few. Unfortunately, though, martial arts are being commercialized to the point of losing their original intent. Those of us who choose to honor the true meaning know that the last thing we want is to have to use our training in a real life situation. On a deeper level, my training is so much a part of who I am, such an intimate part of my whole being, that nobody else can (or should) really understand it. And it's there when I need it. On the physical level, of course - I know I can defend myself - but also in spirituality, confidence and empathy with others. Very simply, it's what I fall back on, and nobody else has to know about it to make it work for me.

The second movement requires the fingers of the two hands to form a triangle pointing upwards. This represents the sun and its rays, symbolizes "I bear no weapons," and promotes honorable and peaceful intentions.

Outwardly, the true martial artist appears unarmed. The literal translation of karate is "empty hand." But we all know looks can be deceiving. Who's to say that the karate-ka without a weapon in hand is any less armed than one who wields a sword? When we rely on our wits, our judgment and our level-headedness to get us through tough situations, I think we can truly claim to be armed. My most powerful weapon, my mind, is always with me.

The last movement brings the hands together in a praying position and signifies "I accept responsibility for my actions." Here we pray for forgiveness if we ever have to use karate against anyone.

I try to take this concept one step further, and I think it's probably the hardest to adhere to on a daily basis. Just like a stone tossed into a lake, the ripple effect of our actions influences people close to us. Even those who we think might not be touched

by what we do can be indirectly affected. All too often we hear "It's not my fault," or "I didn't do it." It's easier to blame others or have them take the consequences for us. It seems like such a basic concept, but we all must take responsibility for ourselves; to set a good example for others, and especially if we are to grow within the martial arts.

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