

## **The Lesson of the Gi**

By Master William Scott Shamblin

The purpose of the karate uniform (gi) in Isshin-ryu Karate is very simple, yet very important. First, the gi allows you to move without restriction. Second, the gi allows for grabs and throws without worrying about tearing your clothes. Third, and most importantly, blocks and strikes will cause the gi to “snap.” This noise will allow you and your sensei to judge if you are getting proper speed, power and recoil in your techniques. A good karate technique will “snap.” A poor one will not. T-shirts do not provide this immediate feed-back. This is often over-looked, but should be recognized as an important training tool.

The purpose of the karate belt (obi) is also simple. To begin with, the obi is the way that rank is designated in the dojo. It is an outward symbol of progress that is often used as a useful motivational tool. Next, when tied properly, it gives a certain amount of “back support”, much like a weight lifting belt. Finally, in the beginning, the knot on the belt gives the new student a sense of where their center of gravity is. This allows the student to be aware of the concept of centering, and to actively practice controlling their center. In time however, the belt will not be necessary for this. The student will simply be able to feel their balance; moving and breathing accordingly. This is developed primarily through chart techniques and kata. It is refined through self-defense practice and kumite.

White gi or black gi? Really, it makes no difference as long as it is unencumbered by ego. Simply put, it doesn't matter as long as one does not place “looking good” over developing skill and cultivating an honest sense of humility. Some traditionalist claim that a white gi is a symbol of purity and integrity and a black gi is a symbol of rebellion. Many modernists choose to go in the opposite direction, with multicolored uniforms and logos that highlight individually over what is typically considered “traditional.” Many Isshin-ryu karate-ka fall somewhere in-between. It is always up to your sensei to determine what is appropriate in your dojo, and his or her determination is always law. Understand this though; the color of one's gi does not determine one's level of integrity, but it can reflect their approach to their martial art. This is neither right nor wrong, it

simply is. At the end of the day, it is always a person's actions that ultimately define them, not what they look like. This is the way of One Heart.

How about the question of, should we even wear a gi at all? Can you learn Isshin-ryu Karate without a gi? Of course you can. There is nothing magical about a gi. As previously mentioned, a gi in its most basic form is a tool. Often heard complaints from students are that gi are "hot." Some claim that kids look cute in a gi, and adults sometimes feel "awkward." There is some truth to those complaints. Add to the fact that popular M.M.A. training and competitions tend to disregard "traditional" uniforms of any kind in favor of T shirts, Speedos, gym shorts and the like. This seems more appealing to some.

Regardless, for many of us, there still remains something special about the karate-gi; something both unique and timeless. It speaks to something, not only of honor and tradition, but also of purpose. While it is true that on the surface a gi is merely a useful tool for training, at the same time, it can be said that a gi is also symbolic of something set apart from everything else in our lives.

The most important distinction may be this: whenever you put on your gi and cinch the knot in your belt, this should subconsciously trigger a change in mind-set. You are now focused on the study of Isshin-ryu Karate and Isshin-ryu Karate alone. The gi is a reminder that you have but one objective, and that is to become a better Isshin-ryu karate-ka today than you were yesterday – pure and simple. While you are in that gi and training, outside distractions and the cares of the day need to be pushed to the side. Ultimately, this mind-set should extend beyond the walls of your dojo.

Everyone ultimately finds his or her own path in Isshin-ryu Karate. As a result, we hope to learn meaningful life lessons along the way. Often, basic things in Isshinryu can teach us the most. For me, one important lesson that I have learned over the years is simply this: no matter what, never take my off my gi.