

Japan in America— Traditional Dojo Etiquette

by: Bill Hughes

It is the year 2000, and with centuries of history behind our training, we now stand on the threshold of a new century, and wonder what it was like to train back in “the old days”. With many years now past we must come to the realization that not all traditions have been rescued from the repetitive — yet changing — motions of time. These motions are like water over a rock: slowly but surely wearing away at the rock. Through this drawn out process, sediment from the rock is stripped. That same concept can be applied to martial arts today. There are many dojos to choose from today, it is difficult to realize which ones have been “watered down” in their foundations, and which ones haven’t. The original etiquette is often lost, and when you remove the etiquette from your learning you lose a very important, authentic piece of Japanese history and lifestyle. You may also lose much of what makes martial arts training “character building”.

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Sometimes the concept of “etiquette” is difficult for Westerners to comprehend. Since we were not trained since birth for “structure and order”, what truly is etiquette may come as either a shock or an impossibility it seems, for some. Some students may find it difficult to adapt to the Dojo’s rules, but there is one thing that you can never go wrong with: watching the higher ranks.

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Martial Arts is, to the Japanese, the foundation of their culture; it is what governed them for so many centuries during the feudal era into modern day Japan. Etiquette in a Dojo starts from the moment you walk in to the school. Here is what we do in our dojo: you take your shoes off and put them neatly in the shoe rack provided (there are no dirty feet ever allowed in the dojo). The dojo is considered a training hall but in the traditional way — Japanese martial artists treat them as a shrine. Upon entering the dojo floor where the tatame (rice mats) are, you bow with your head straight but looking at a 45° angle to the floor. If the tatame are not pushed against the dojo wall, you bow again to enter on the mats in the same fashion you did just a moment ago.

All the students line up from highest rank to lowest rank (highest rank at the front left corner) and then bow into the dojo and to the shrine at the front of the dojo as a group. The teacher calls out for each rank and each rank kneels down into seiza (kneeling) each time the instructor verbally signals to them. There is a brief pause for the students to clear their mind of all outside influences and thoughts; you are here to train, not to think about who is taking your dog to the vet after class. The teacher shouts out a command to break the meditation and then all recite the Dojo Kun (creed). The head instructor stands and shouts commands to get the class to stand. Another command is called out for the students to bow to each other, the front row turns and bows to the back row. If there is a middle row they stay where they are. Then all students turn back to the front of the class and the assistant teacher calls out a command to the head instructor stating they are not worthy of instruction, but if he is so inclined they will gratefully pay attention (this will differ from dojo to dojo). All the students bow to the head instructor and they start class.

Everyone will pair up with a partner to work with. You don't pick a partner to work with unless you are of rank to make a choice of who you want to work with. Highest rank gets to pick whom they work with first, and it is just done very subtly, unlike how American children pick each other for a game of dodge ball. Selecting your practice partner goes quickly and then class begins. After the partners are paired the highest rank again has seniority. The higher ranks face the shrine while the lower ranks face the back wall of the Dojo. Again this helps keep uniformity in everything.

By following these small rituals time and time again, the students live and breathe structure and order. Without order, the Japanese have no context as to who initiates what and when; it is all spelled out for them.

These are the basic fundamentals of proper Japanese Dojo Etiquette. They are in no way, shape or form a complete set, as that would be a small book. It is my hope that you will learn something from reading this article:

Good Luck and I wish you all the best in your training.

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