

Aikidosphere

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Aikido - Etiquette and Transmission

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Editor's Note: We are extremely happy to present the third installment of Tamura Sensei's book Aikido - Etiquette and Transmission. This work, which has been available only in French is here presented first time in English. We are grateful to Tamura Sensei for his permission to produce this version.

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Chapter 4 : Etiquette and Discipline

In Japan we say the alpha and omega of budo are in rei. The fighting spirits intensify if they are let loose when practicing.

To run a group without it self-destructing, rules have been found necessary. Etiquette and discipline are probably born from this need. They allow these rules to work smoothly. Fighting without ethical rules falls within the animal world, not budo. Bugei (war techniques) and bujutsu are but the means for war. Rei is simply translated by salvation.

But the notions of politeness, courtesy, hierarchy, respect and gratitude are included in rei. Reigi (etiquette) is the expression of mutual respect in society. It can also be understood as the way to know one's position with respect to the other.

Thus we can say it is the means to become aware of one's position.

The character for rei has two elements: shimesu and yutaka.

Shimesu: the divine spirit that has come down to inhabit the altar.

Yutaka: the mountain and the sacrificial wooden vase containing the food: two cobs of rice, the container overflowing with food, abundance. United, these two elements suggest an altar, well filled with food offerings, in front of which one waits for the coming down of the divine for a celebration.

Gi: man and order. Refers to that which is orderly and constitutes a model. Reigi is thus originally what governs celebration of the sacred. This meaning probably spread to human relations when the ceremony governing the hierarchical relations between men has been instituted.

O-Sensei never ceased to repeat: "Aikido exists so that plants, trees, birds, mammals, fish, insects down to the last fly have their proper place."

Each being that knows its proper place, knows itself. To know oneself is to know the mission assigned to oneself by the heavens. To fulfill the heavens' mission is to conform to the order of the universe, wherein there is no space for hesitation nor for opposition. It is true peace. Let Man use this cosmic order as a model for the structure of human society and let him make it the principle of his each and every action. This is what is called reigi-zaho. By abiding by this rule, Man can rise. There is a natural hierarchy in the family: grandfather, grandmother, father, mother, children, grandchildren. Military organization requires rank hierarchy to function properly: general, colonel, commander, etc.

It is the same for churches: Pope, patriarch, cardinal, bishop. And of course, it is the same for Budo: master, disciple, sempai, kohai, dohai, senior students, beginners, older and younger. All of those relations apply concurrently. Proper etiquette means to find a proper balance, case by case. To preserve order, one must observe politeness towards the master, correct attitude towards the sempais, proper etiquette towards kohais and dohais.

The observance of those rules is, I believe, the equilibrium and survival condition of the societies we just talked about. We mentioned earlier the

intensification of the aggressive and fighting spirits through the practice of bujutsu (let us not forget that these instincts themselves are devoid of any morality: they exist and are necessary for survival, period). However if those instincts escape proper control, every act becomes violent and we thus start picking on the weak or despising them. Or, conversely, we crawl in front of the strongest while hating them at the same time.

When actions are directed by etiquette, a space is created which allows one to easily control emotions. Etiquette controls the "I" and channels the energy in a positive way instead of letting the animal instincts run loose.

In religion, emotions are naturally brought under control by constant repetition of rituals transmitted from generation to generation. A religious feeling thus blossoms. Not only is the believer sensitive to this but also the observer. A movement executed according to a rigorous etiquette reinforces the spirit's stability and brings aggressiveness under control. This establishes calmness. It is the same with what happens in the dojo. The practitioner as well as the observer is aware of the naturally flowing efficiency. At the same time, they are filled with the atmosphere brought by tradition. Thus we must practice without holding back in order to bring under control the emotions less desirable in budo: fear, panic, contempt for others, inflated ego. That way we can make progress with our bodies and our minds. Those who have survived after being on the frontier between life and death not only had good technique; more important, they had a clear-headed judgment of the situation, made possible by the calmness, serenity and cold-bloodedness that inhabits them. This allows one to act with the necessary determination. This attitude and the acts of bravado of the braggart and his emotional over-excitement are exactly at opposite extremes. To make progress, to become truly "strong" depends much more on developing this calmness and internal determination than in acquiring a technique.

Insofar as we are human, shouldn't we wish to live in a world which cherishes its children? Some have wanted to throw away this etiquette like old furniture. It is nevertheless part of the common heritage of humanity. What would you say if, in order to build a society based on mutual respect, we brought this etiquette forward again?

Take for example the simple act of putting away your shoes. It teaches us to classify and put things in order and makes us feel the satisfaction resulting from this as well as the importance of this state of mind. To accomplish an action with care is simultaneously to prepare favorable conditions to accomplish the next action, and also to practice budo.

The world of rei does not only aim to give personal satisfaction. The satisfaction others feel is also a part of it. The development of an esthetic conscience creates the need to put away even the shoes of others if they are not in their proper place.

If the gratitude towards a kohai is expressed by this one thought: "Thank you for allowing me to have practiced well today," the kohai will be happy. If we thank the sempai for his or her teaching, he or she will be happy. Like all things, etiquette must be elaborated in oneself; this means the spirit must fill every gesture. Having to say, "Respect me because I am your sempai" or "Put me on a pedestal because I am your master" is grotesque. Respect towards the sempai must not be provoked, the kohai must naturally want to respect the sempai. In turn, the sempai takes care of the kohai because the kohai occupies his/her own place and deserves to be taken care of. The spirit of gratitude, respect and gratefulness is naturally felt by the other when it fills the etiquette.

Etiquette thus governs the mutual relations. Hierarchy naturally falls in place when etiquette is respected. Etiquette must be the expression of the heart's humanity. It's not enough to simply yield to the form. If respect doesn't inhabit the heart, the form will be an empty shell with no soul. We must respect the personality of the other. Actions in accord with the rules of etiquette breed a pure heart and a noble attitude. I tend to think this sense of compassion is simply linked to harmony and peace.

We must engrave this in our minds to transmit etiquette and discipline.

Executing A Bow

There is the standing bow and the seated bow, and the bow with or without a weapon. We shall study them in detail.

Standing bow without weapon

While standing and still position, look the person in the eyes, showing your respect. Bend forward slightly from the waist, then stand back straight. This bow is used, for example, when inviting or leaving a partner. (See figures 1 and 2)

This same bow is done a little more deeply when entering or exiting the dojo as well as when bowing to a sempai during practice. (figure 3)

In a still deeper bow, let the fingers slowly slide down to the knees. This very respectful bow is reserved for the god's altar, the flag or other symbols of the state as well as for especially noteworthy guests. (figure 4)

Standing bow with weapon

Hold the sword lightly, at the waist, with the left hand. The thumb is on the tsuba, the blade is turned upward. The handle is slightly towards the center. The tip of the sword is kept below the horizontal. The base of the thumb is resting on the hip bone.

From the resting position, the left arm leaves the hip and straightens itself naturally. The same bow is executed, whether with the sword or without. (figure 5)

Bowing to the altar

Walk up to the altar holding the sword at the hip. Switch the sword to the right side. The right hand holds the sword below the kurikata; the blade is now facing down. The left hand returns to the left thigh. Lean forward while maintaining the sword at a fixed angle. After standing back up straight, let the sword pass in front of the body and grab it with the left hand to bring it back to its initial position. (figure 6)

Bowing with a jo

(See figures 7 & 8)

Bowing with a sword

There are two correct forms. (figure 9)

- First form: switch the handle of the sword to the right, edge outwards.
- Second form: keep the handle on the left; in that case the edge is toward you.

Seated bows

Seiza

Seiza is a seated position peculiar to Japan. Spine straight, ki concentrated in the seika tanden, shoulders and rib cage relaxed, the hands are high on the thighs with neither fingers nor elbows apart. Leave a space of two fists between the knees (one for women). The big toes overlap. They say we feel like we are holding the sky with the head but it might be preferable to feel like we are suspended from the sky. (figures 10 to 13)

The eyes are naturally open. The jaw is closed but not tight, the tongue is on the palate. Breathing is calm, long and deep. Ki is distributed equally in all directions.

Sitting down and standing up (Suwarikata and Tachikata)

To sit in seiza: from a standing position, feet together, spread and slightly bend the knees. The right hand pushes the hakama folds to the sides (left, then right). (figure 14) Put the right knee down, then the left. (figure 15) Stretch out the feet and cross the big toes. The weight comes down on the heels and finally sit between the heels. (figure 16)

To stand up: from a seiza position, the hips rise and the toes take hold. (figure 17) The right foot comes forward at the level of the left foot. (figure 18) Rise up calmly without bending in every direction. The back foot comes forward at the level of the front foot. (figure 19)

Seated bow without a weapon

From a seiza position, lean forward, letting the hands slide down to the ground left hand first, then right. (figure 20) The thumbs and forefingers touch one another, forming a triangle. (figure 21) Lean forward deeply, keeping the elbows close to the knees. Raise back your torso, starting with the right hand. Like the standing bow, the depth of the bow varies. (figures 22 and 23)

This bow is for the altar, the kamiza and the katana. In that case, slide both hands simultaneously. (figure 24)

When bowing to a teacher or a person of higher rank, lean forward first and wait until this person is back up before rising. Be careful not to bow with the head and a curved back. Instead, lean the head and torso forward in one movement.

Seated bow with a weapon

In the beginning, the sword is held at the left hip of the practitioner seated in seiza. The sword is then brought forward to the front and center. The right hand holds the sword near the tsuba, by the back and from under, and brings it to the right side. Put it down one fist away from the thigh. (figures 25 to 31)

The exact position varies with different schools: blade inwards or outwards,ommel (kashira) or hilt (tsuba) aligned with the knee. The important thing is to choose one way and stick to it in order to execute these movements without hesitation.

Arrangement Of The Dojo

(See figures 32 and 33)

Hierarchy of the seats

Shinden (altar), gyokuza (imperial seat), tokonoma (elevated space), shihandai (seat of the shihan), raihinseki (seats of the honorary guests); these are against the kamiza.

The opposite seat is the shimoza.

In the cases where there is no special mark (for example tokonoma, shinden), the kamiza is opposite the entrance. The far end of the room or the house is one rank above the entrance. The left side, viewed from the kamiza, is the most honorary.

During demonstrations, the kamiza is the seat of the representative of the state, of the flag or of the presidency of the event. In Europe, a picture of O-Sensei adorns the kamiza and symbolizes the passing on of knowledge.

Certain dojos have a peculiar disposition which forces some inversions: gyaku-shiki.