

The Etiquette & Customs For Sword Appreciation & Viewing

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Bexley, Kent
June 2012

If you practice any of the sword related martial arts, such as Kendo or Iai-do, then from the very first day, before you even pick up the wooden practice sword, you will be made aware of reigi. This has been defined as covering such areas as “courtesy, decorum, etiquette, civility, propriety and discipline”. Such things are reflected in how one conducts oneself in the dojo, how one relates to both higher and lower grades and is the thing that prevents these martial ways from becoming uncivilised and brutal. A fundamental precept of reigi in this context is respect for the sword, even in its imitated form of a bokuto or wooden substitute which is customarily wiped with a clean cloth, before and after use. They are placed on the dojo floor with respect and care, avoiding noise or clatter and they should never be placed on the hakama (traditional clothing) as this is considered a blatant breach of etiquette. There are correct ways of bowing when entering or leaving the dojo and carrying a sword. These practices are sometimes a surprise to the novice who might view the activities as purely sport, but they are of great importance from both a cultural and safety point of view.



Formal Rei at Iai-do shia.

Reigi was a natural and accepted thing in old Japan and one's behaviour when handling swords was of great importance as the consequences of inappropriate actions might have serious consequences. Today in Japan, there are occasions when swords are viewed by large numbers of people at the same time, such as at a To-ken Taikai or sword convention. Often these days, events such as these, are attended by significant numbers of non-Japanese and their sword handling abilities need to be faultless. At the NBTHK convention in Tokyo for instance, there may be up to 200 swords to view and as these are all important swords, no hint of a breach in etiquette is permissible. All swords are laid on tables with the nakago nearest the edge and the monouchi (upper 1/3rd of the blade) resting on a makura or small pillow. They are already prepared for viewing so there is no disassembling required in this situation. As one approaches the sword, very good manners require a small rei or bow in the direction of the blade, thereby acknowledging and respecting its age and beauty.

The sword must then be picked up in one smooth action and supported on the cloth provided (the fukusa) whilst being studied. When lifting this naked blade, care should be taken that the kissaki (point) does not dip and touch the table itself. In other words the sword needs to be almost scooped up so that the kissaki immediately rises rather than falls. It goes without saying that the blade should not be pivoted on the kissaki. When clear of the table the methods and rules for examination are as described below. When replacing the sword back on the makura, similar care should be taken. As the viewing is finished the sword is replaced on the makura, a step back from the table should be taken and the rei or bow is repeated before moving on to the next sword. It is worth mentioning here that at this particular sword viewing opportunity, as there are many delegates attending, a timer is in action. This makes a rather annoying sound and indicates that your one minute per sword is up and it is time to move on. Any delay in so doing has a domino effect down the line, so is best avoided.

Of course, common sense as well as correct etiquette dictates that the blade should be kept facing forward and not swung around risking a clash. The blade should never be touched or allowed contact with the skin as natural acid will cause rust. Neither should a naked blade be rested on clothing, such as a sleeve for instance. There must be no talking whilst handling the blade as this may spray the blade with spit and cause damage. Cameras or shoulder bags should not be worn as there is a chance that they could swing into a sword and cause damage. Although observed more in the breach than usual practice, a sober suite or jacket and tie are considered respectful and appropriate attire. The arrangement of swords on tables in this manner is a very easy and convenient way to view swords and many kantei or sword identification sessions, are conducted in a similar manner. Alternatively, they may be laid out on the tatami mats on the floor. It may sometimes be rather difficult for the average westerner to adopt and maintain the seiza or kneeling position, more natural to our Japanese colleagues.

In modern days a light source is usually available when studying a blade. This enables the hamon (hardened edge) and jihada (pattern of the body of the blade) to be seen clearly and in detail but often involves a certain amount of twisting and turning in order to obtain the best angle between light and blade. Great care must be taken in this situation and a good grip must be kept on the nakago, whilst the other hand supports the blade with a fukusa. Often this viewing will entail several people studying several blades between them, at the same table, either standing or in a kneeling position. I would re-emphasise that it is then of the utmost importance that all blades are kept facing to the front and not waved around. A clash of swords would be an unforgivable breach of etiquette and probably result in the perpetrator catching the next aeroplane home. It is difficult to imagine how one would ever be invited to return under such circumstances. In all other respects, group viewing should follow the same rules as previously described.

In the days of yore when swords were worn by samurai, the etiquette of the sword was far more wide-ranging and important than today. The correct way to wear the daisho was soon learned by the young samurai. It was necessary that it be worn comfortably in the obi or sash, with the cutting edge uppermost. The correct wearing was very important as this had a direct influence on the techniques available. It might have to be comfortable for long periods of time, walking standing, or sitting. In addition, the position of the daito (long sword) needed to accommodate the shoto (short sword) which was also thrust through the obi but at the centre of the body and inside of the daito. The precise angle at which they were worn was very important as neither of these swords should be able to interfere with the drawing of the other, if the wearer were confronted by an emergency. At the same time, the correct position helped avoid a clash of scabbards, known as saya-atte, or scabbard hitting. This meant that if two saya collided, instant retribution would follow as the sword had been struck and this was perceived as tantamount to striking the owner. A technique was devised

whereby as soon as the saya touched, the sword would be drawn and an attacking cut would be made (nukitsuki) all in the one action. Saya-atte might even be deliberately caused so that a nere-do-well might have the opportunity of testing both his sword's cutting potential and his own technical ability, all in the one swift incident. To avoid accidental saya-atte, it was considered best when walking out, to walk to the left of a path or road and allow an approaching walker to pass on one's right hand side, away from the saya. It is even thought that this legacy may be why the Japanese are one of the few nations in the world to drive on the left hand side of the road.

It was quite easy to give the wrong impression and so great care was taken to neither offer nor invite provocation. This was done by the practise of a rigid code of etiquette in any given circumstances. It was usual, for instance, when visiting, especially a person of higher rank, to leave one's long sword at the entrance to the house. It would be taken, very deferentially, by a servant or a page who handled it with a silk cloth and then placed it on a sword rack ready for collection on departure. The visitor would be allowed to keep his short sword, which he would be careful to keep in a position in which he could easily draw it if surprised or attacked. Even with the sole comfort of the short sword, care was taken to keep the left hand away from the tsuba, as a thumb pushing the tsuba forward, thus loosening the blade in the saya, might be seen as the first preparatory move in drawing the sword.

The display of non-aggressive intentions was even more important if the long sword accompanied one to a meeting or social engagement. Here it would be removed from the obi or belt as one made oneself comfortable and knelt in seiza on the tatami mats or wooden floor. Incidentally, the seiza position of kneeling, with legs folded under the buttocks and toes flat, was considered as a totally "dead" position as it was almost impossible to mount a quick attack from there without first coming up onto your toes.

The sword should ideally be removed with the left hand, passed over to the right hand and placed on the mat on the right hand side of the owner. Here it was relatively difficult to pick up and draw quickly, whilst if placed on the left hand side, the opposite is true. It was seen, therefore, as highly suspicious if the sword were placed on the left, especially with the cutting edge of the blade away from the owner. From this position it was very easy to grasp the saya with the left hand whilst reaching across and drawing the blade with the right hand. The significance of where the sword was placed meant that the owner was either relaxed and expecting or offering no trouble (if on the right) or wary and maybe ready to fight (if on the left). Whatever the case, the mood of the meeting was quite obvious to all.

Today, in a modern Kendo Dojo, the members always kneel in seiza both when formally starting and finishing the session, with their shinai to their left, in imitation of a state of zanshin (preparedness and awareness). Also Kendo and lai dojo, the practitioners and teachers start and finish a session with a formal bow with everyone kneeling in a prescribed order. All should know their position in this line, which is in ascending order of rank or status, the lowest being at the end nearest the door. Apart from easily seeing one's Gohai / Sempai (or relative superiority) situation, in the case of an attack on the dojo, the lowest grades would provide themselves as delaying cannon-fodder and sacrificial lambs, whilst the higher ranks had time to prepare themselves for defence. This no doubt provided a great incentive to advance in the art and progress down the line towards relative safety. Even today, it is customary in an lai dojo to begin and end a practice with a bow to one's own sword (known as to-rei).

There are also correct ways of placing a sword on a katana-kake or sword rack. If the sword is a traditional katana, wakizashi or a daisho, it should be placed on the rack with the cutting edges uppermost, the katana at the top and the wakizashi on the bottom, imitating the manner in which they are worn. A further refinement might be that the kurikata (retaining knob on the saya) should be visible, in other words that the omote side or front of the sword is showing and the tsuka (handle) is to the left hand side. Once again, it is surprisingly difficult to pick up a sword so arranged and draw it immediately without, changing hands and slowing the action down. To my mind, the swords happen to be also better presented in this way. To display the swords with the ura showing was also acceptable, but as they could be drawn from this position in an instant, it was seen as a far more aggressive position and for this reason, favoured by many warriors. When swords are “at rest” on the katana-kake, often the sageo, which is the retaining cord, is left on the sword. Usually these are tied in a decorative knot to enhance the appearance of the display. There are many different arrangements which are variously called Daimyo-musubi (Lord’s knot), Ronin-musubi (ronin’s knot) and Cho-musubi (butterfly knot) and the like. Although very complicated looking knots, in all instances they may be undone in one pull of a free end, so they are not preventing fast use of the sword. Indeed, it would be possible to tell the state of any house or castle’s martial preparedness, simply by seeing how the swords were displayed on their racks.



Daisho on a katana-kake in “relaxed” position.



Daisho on katana-kake in “alert” position.



The sword knot known as Cho-musubi or butterfly knot.



**Another knot known as the Ronin-musubi or master less samurai knot.
(Such knots would only be tied on swords that were on katana kake (sword racks)).**

A tachi or slung sword ideally has a differently designed rack from that made for katana. A tachi-kake or tachi stand has a shaped base and a vertical stem with a slot to accept the saya. Tachi should be placed on these racks with the end of the handle, the kabuto-gane, resting on a small indentation on the base. It will then stand vertically with the butt-end of the saya free in the air. Should it be necessary to place a tachi on a conventional katana-kake, then it should be placed with the cutting edge down, in the opposite manner to a katana. Once again, this is the position in which the sword would be worn. Ideally, a tachi on a rack would be placed next to the owner's armour, as when he wore the armour, the tachi was the correct sword to wear. A beautifully made and lacquered sword rack will enhance the display of a sword "at rest" but it is incredible how un-natural a sword looks when placed incorrectly on the rack or stand.



An ito-maki-tachi placed correctly on a tachi-rack.

Although it was a breach of etiquette to request a look at another's sword, there would have been occasions when a fully mounted sword was passed between two persons, possibly for inspection, study or appreciation. This would usually be accomplished whilst in seiza; the formal kneeling position on the tatami. After a short bow to the sword, the giver would remove it from the rack, clean it and pass it across, usually in a horizontal plane, with both hands fully outstretched. The cutting edge would be towards him and the tsuka to his left. The right hand would be near to the end of the saya and the left would be palm uppermost near the tsuba with the thumb on the mimi or rim of the tsuba ensuring the blade did not inadvertently slip from its saya. The recipient would grip inside of the giver's hand on the saya and take over the position by the tsuba. He would immediately turn the cutting edge towards himself, give a slight bow of respect and proceed to examine the piece. In the days of yore, this might be accompanied by a bow from the giver and if the rank of the receiver was exalted, or the sword was known to be especially important, the bow would place the sword at head level. An indication of good manners and respect for another's property, especially should exceptional lacquer work be evident on the saya, a silk fukusa would be used to handle the sword. This may be supplied by the host, but it is advisable to carry one's own and be fully prepared.

After observing the correct procedures as described above, finally the sword, complete with mounts, is safely in the viewer's hands and he may be permitted to study it. He should make himself aware of whether or not the mekugi (peg) is inserted in the tsuka, rather than find out by accident when the blade falls out of the tsuka! A close examination of the fittings and the lacquer work would precede the drawing of the blade. Today a sword with fine fittings should be examined whilst wearing white cotton gloves if possible, but with a fukusa as described above, if not. The sweat from hands may cause discoloration or even rust and this is obviously to be avoided. To draw the blade, the saya should be gripped in the left hand held slightly lower than the tsuka, but with the cutting edge uppermost and drawn in one smooth action. Under no circumstances should a blade be only drawn out a few inches and be inspected as this is considered as the height of bad manners. Inspection should only take place the sword is fully withdrawn from the saya. The saya should be placed safely aside, beside you on the tatami with the koiguchi (scabbard mouth) to your rear, if that is your situation, or back on the rack or table, depending on the circumstances. It is good form to cover the

end of the saya with a cloth, or the flap of the sword bag if one is present, whilst you are examining the blade, in order to prevent any dirt or grit entering the saya and causing damage to the blade after it is replaced.

The normal method for removing the tsuka, from either a mounted sword or one in shira-saya (plain storage mounts) is after first removing the mekugi or peg with a mekugi-nuki, hold the tsuka near its base in the left hand with the blade at a slight angle, say 20 to 30 degrees from the vertical, with the inclination across your front side and the cutting edge uppermost. With a tight left hand grip, strike the top of your left hand smartly with your clenched right fist, on the little finger side rather than with the knuckles. The shock of the strike transmits through your left hand, through the tsuka and usually loosens the hold of the tsuka on the nakago, allowing the blade to be easily removed from the tsuka. After two or three attempts at this, apart from the sometimes not inconsiderable pain of this self flagellation, it probably means that the blade is unlikely to be freed in this manner. I have occasionally found myself in this position where, on asking permission to remove the mekugi, it has not easily tapped out, or if it does, the tsuka proves stubborn. In this situation, not wishing to be responsible for causing any damage, either to my left hand or the sword, I have invariably asked the owner to remove it for me. If he, who is familiar with the sword, also has difficulty, it is best to leave it in tact. It makes sense that if you are expecting a visitor to view your swords, to check the swords in advance to avoid this complication.

An alternative method of passing a sword from one person to another, might involve passing the sword, without its saya but retaining its tsuka. In this case, the giver would hold the end of the tsuka firmly at the end nearest the Kashira with the blade held vertically in his left hand, again most definitely keeping the cutting edge towards himself. The danger and possible aggressive intent in doing it otherwise, will be readily understood. This time the receiver will accept the sword by grasping above the giver's hand with his left hand and nodding to acknowledge that he has a firm grip, possibly acknowledging this verbally also. It will be noted that in this latter procedure both parties always have their right hands free! As soon as he has a firm grip, the receiver will turn the cutting edge towards himself.

Most properly, a silk handkerchief should be placed in one's mouth to prevent spittle fouling the blade and speech should be avoided when a naked blade is present for the same reason. As previously stated, a blade should only be withdrawn in its entirety from the saya and great care should be taken that it is not waved around and pointed at anyone else. The handle should only be removed to inspect any inscriptions with the express permission of the owner. The blade may be examined in detail, but should not be handled other than with a fukusa or some other suitable soft fabric. If the tsuka is removed, it is permissible to handle the nakago, whilst supporting the rest of the blade with a fukusa. It is usual to leave the habaki (collar) in place whilst examining an otherwise bare blade and it is considered correct manners to first examine the omote or front side of the sword. There have been occasions, outside of Japan, when I have been told to wear cotton gloves whilst only examining a blade. I personally prefer not to do this as I think it creates the possibility of the blade slipping through your fingers.

To pass a fully stripped blade, the nakago must be gripped in the same manner as the tsuka on a mounted blade. The sword will be passed vertically to the receiver in exactly the same manner as described when the sword retains its tsuka. However, in this circumstance, it is advisable that the free right hand be placed under the nakago-jiri for extra support. When replacing the sword into the saya, the back of the kissaki (point) is rested on the inner part of the koi-guchi (mouth of the scabbard) and the blade is then replaced in the exact opposite method to that described for drawing it. This applies in all circumstances.

The over-riding consideration is that the person handling the blade, at all times, and is at the mercy of the blade should he mishandle it. This was, and remains the etiquette involved in handling a Japanese sword. It emphasises great respect for the sword, personal safety and a high degree of zanshin or awareness. Although today we may not fear an attack, the other components still remain and should always be practised, showing respect also for the samurai owners of the past, whose swords we are privileged to examine and enjoy.

I am aware that on various visits to closely study good swords in Japan, both accompanied by others and on my own, sword handling etiquette and ability has been closely scrutinised by our Japanese hosts and sensei. Often in this situation exalted sword personalities, such as museum curators or NBTHK officials, will be watching closely and have been known to comment on the “manners” of the guests. It certainly does not go unnoticed and is a direct reflection on oneself and one’s teacher, whether good or bad. I am sure that for foreigners in Japan, there is less tolerance than for the native Japanese and we must be more scrupulous in our sword handling than are they. I hope that you will see that the etiquette of handling the Japanese sword is based on safety and good manners and that it leads to greater enjoyment and appreciation when things are conducted in the proper manner.