

Sensei Says

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Etiquette, as my students like to quote from the flashcards, is "any special code of behavior or courtesy, proper manners, and politeness." The specific code of behavior one follows changes with the situation. Most dojos in America use a combination of Eastern and Western etiquette. This approach allows the instructor to satisfy the purpose traditional etiquette plays in martial arts training, while allowing the student to maintain a somewhat normal lifestyle in America. As an uchideshi (apprentice) under a Japanese teacher it made no difference that I was living in America. "The art does not change for you; you must change for the art," my teacher would say. You cannot learn the old ways unless you immerse yourself in them fully. In the next few issues I will share with you some of the etiquette expected of an uchideshi:

The student must always be ready to learn when the teacher is ready to teach. It was required that I be at the dojo every day before my teacher (usually 9 a.m.) and that I not leave before my teacher (usually between 10:00 and 11:00 p.m.). Furthermore, I had to be in my gi before he arrived, and I could not change out of my gi until given permission. All in all, this sounds like a simple rule to follow. But "the art does not change for you" and etiquette must be abided by in all situations. Etiquette in its purist form is complete selflessness. To put one's own comfort ahead of respect to the teacher is to be respectful only when it is to one's own benefit. It is easy to follow proper etiquette - the hard part is to always follow proper etiquette.

The winters are very cold in Montana and, of course, as an uchideshi it would not be proper to make my teacher go outside to brush the fresh snow off his car, scrape the ice off the windows, and get the car started. The teacher's car had to be warm when he was ready to leave. That was my job each winter night for six years. For some people living in Eugene it might be a surprise to learn that at -20° F it can take quite a while to get a car to start - and once it does start that you have to keep your foot on the accelerator until the engine is warm enough to continue running by itself. But, every night I was successful, and my teacher had a warm car waiting for him.

The student also has to carry anything to the car that the teacher is taking with him, open his door, and do whatever else is necessary to take care of him. Sometimes my teacher would get very talkative once he got into his warm car. Being outside the dojo environment, and in the fresh air, would make him relax a bit. The conversation might turn to more personal topics - there might even be a little bit of joking. When the conversation ended I would stand outside, bowing as he drove away. I stood at attention until he was out of sight. Then, I would go back in the dojo to finish the night's office work, do a little cleaning, and change out of my gi.

Oh, had you forgotten that I was still in my gi? I think the longest I stayed outside in my gi and bare feet was approximately 20 minutes at -20° F. As I said, it is easy to follow proper etiquette - the hard part is to always follow proper etiquette.

- Alan Best