

What is "rei" ? (礼)

We often say that Kendo begins and ends with "rei".

Several years ago, I had an opportunity to speak with Takashi Ezaki sensei, one of the founding members and an instructor at the Kendo Club at the University of Michigan. A few weeks before he left to return to Japan, we were discussing our motivations for doing Kendo. Ezaki-sensei made a remark that has stayed with me since. He said,

"Kendo in America is very interesting. Sometimes in Japan I find Kendo a little boring. But in America it is fascinating to hear Americans try to teach things like "rei", which we don't teach in Japan because its already widely understood."

I also have found doing Kendo in the Midwest a fascinating experience, mainly because in California, Kendo is still very much a Japanese or Japanese-American hobby. Here I have often found that I am in a unique position of understanding as both a person of Japanese ancestry and American upbringing. Also as someone who has done various different martial arts for the last 12 years, I am beginning to understand some of the complexities which result when two or more cultures collide.

I feel that there a major source of misunderstanding with the concept of "rei" (礼), and I hope that I may have a moment to share my own imperfect personal understanding. To highlight my evolving understanding of "rei", I'd like to share two experiences I've had when I visited Japan.

Several years ago in college, I was staying at a small hotel in Japan with my parents. In the morning I stepped out of my room go to breakfast. I happened to see the bellhop of the hotel, a young man close to my age sweeping the hallway. Out of habit, I gave what I would call the "American Good Morning Nod". It is the same nod we give when we step into the elevator in the morning on the way to work, or the one we give when someone holds the door open to the our usual coffee house. I have never given it much thought, its just the polite thing to do.

What happened next shocked me. The bellhop immediately stopped what he was doing, neatly put away his broom onto his cart, and crossed the hallway. Without speaking, he stopped precisely at the correct distance, clicked his heels together to a perfect 45 degree angle loudly enough that the sound echoed, and bowed crisply and deeply to a full 35 degrees. I froze in a moment of social panic, wondering what I had done to elicit this action. As he had not moved from the 35 degree angle, I sloppily did a "rei" and released him from the bow. Without a word, he went back to his cart and resumed his sweeping, and I fled to breakfast. To this day I have never felt so inexplicably alien or clumsy in a foreign country than at that moment.

The second experience with "rei" was also during this trip. I always try to get the window seat on a plane ride, as I have always been fascinated by flying ever since I was a child. I especially enjoy looking out the window as we're taking off, watching the landscape rush by. This time was no different, and I looked out to Japan for the last time before going back to America. From my window, I saw a curious sight. The two ground crew in charge of guiding the plane away from the causeway were bowing precisely in "rei" as the plane started to speed up to take its place in the takeoff queue. Sometimes now when I take a plane trip in America, I look around to see if the ground crew here are bowing. Of course there aren't any, but I always look.

For a long time after this, I chuckled to myself thinking, "Japanese people 'rei' at everything", and indulging in a feeling of cultural superiority, secure in my American ideals of democracy and equality.

As I have continued studying martial arts and Kendo, I have come to realize that this feeling is incorrect and my understanding of "rei" has been flawed. I am only beginning to understand "rei" and its part in Kendo.

1. The misunderstandings from translation.

"Rei" (礼) is often translated into English as "courtesy" or "respect". This is an imprecise translation. "Rei" (礼) is an umbrella term encompassing both "reiho" 礼法【れいほう】 and "reigi" 礼儀【れいぎ】. "Reiho" is a term that expresses the rules or abstraction of courtesy and respect, while "reigi" specifically means the techniques or actions of showing courtesy or respect.

The reason why I believe that this is an imprecise translation is that in our American culture, we have no tradition of "showing respect". When we use the word "respect", we as Americans often say "I respect you" or "You have earned my respect". There is an implicit understanding that "respect" is an internal, personal, and private valuation given to a person after a particular event or occurrence. As Americans, we value respect highly, guard it jealously, and seldom give it. Indeed there is almost no greater compliment in our culture than to say "You have earned my respect".

Thus given Kendo's concepts of "reiho" and "reigi", we are confronted with an inherently alien concept. To most of us, the idea of giving respect to someone immediately has no value or meaning. Furthermore, the idea of "showing respect" is also difficult to understand, because in our culture we don't express "respect" through our actions as in "reigi", even though we understand the concept of "reiho".

Even when considering the other translation, "courtesy" or "showing courtesy", we tend to miss the larger meaning. Although we Americans are not considered particularly rude, we have only a few traditions of showing courtesy. We may say "Thank you", and "Your welcome". On occasion we may hold open the door for someone.

In Japanese culture, the concept of "rei" as "showing courtesy" is much larger, and essentially permeates through many different actions. This is a source of much misunderstanding, because many beginning students of Kendo inadvertently cause much offense because they are unaware that so many things fall under "reigi".

2. "Reiho" and "Reigi"

Most beginners are taught "rei" as only "reigi", the techniques to outwardly show courtesy and respect. "Reigi" taught in this manner is limited to a precise number of techniques specific to Kendo. For example, we bow 15 degrees when we face an opponent, not breaking eye contact. We bow 30 degrees when bowing to a judge, while breaking contact. The list is extensive and is an integral part of the Kendo experience. However, there is a significant danger in thinking that "reigi" is only limited to these techniques.

While speaking to many of my friends who are from the Midwest, I get the impression that they believe that "reigi" is the "ceremonial" and "ritualistic" parts of Kendo. Often I feel that there is an exotic appeal to "reigi", since it is something we in our American culture do not practice. By equating "reigi" as "ritualistic" and "ceremonial", I feel that we define "reigi" as actions without meaning. I also get the strong impression that we make the mistake of

thinking that all of "rei" is encapsulated within the limited techniques used in Kendo.

I would like to take the position that the "reigi" are not simply the ceremonial aspects limited to Kendo, but apply to a wide range of courteous action that are directly tied in with the abstract concept of "reiho". A few examples are showing up on time and being prepared for practice, showing focus and determination in all actions, applying oneself wholeheartedly to learning, and being an active participant in Kendo to the best of your ability. Seemingly small actions, such as being quick with putting on the bogu, introducing yourself to a beginner are good examples of "reigi", as these actions express the abstract concept of "reiho".

3. "Reiho" and "Giri" (義理【ぎり】)

To reach a better understanding of "reiho" or the idea of courtesy within the context of Kendo training, I need to introduce the concept of "giri" (義理【ぎり】). "Giri" in English can mean "social obligation", "duty", "a sense of duty", "honor" or a "debt of gratitude". A sense of duty and a debt of gratitude is at the heart of courtesy in Kendo. "Giri" is the reason why the concept of courtesy or "reiho" exists in Kendo, and why so much importance is placed on expressing that respect and gratitude.

In a simple example, the expression "*yoroshiku onegai shimasu*" spoken at the beginning of each practice match is an expression of gratitude. The statement means that you are aware that you are imposing on your partner, and you are expressing a debt of gratitude to your partner for this opportunity. It is not simply "good luck" or "thank you".

In a more complex example, "giri" changes as we become more proficient in Kendo. As a beginner, it is our particular role and obligation to approach training with an open mind, be able to take instruction, and approach it with focus and determination. In addition, as beginners we must be acutely aware that we are imposing on our seniors, and that there is a debt of gratitude for their efforts and their time.

This sense of "giri" is largely a foreign concept in American society. For example, we feel no sense of obligation to arrive at most of our classes in college on time or to leave early. We pay for college and we pay for instruction, so we as the consumer feel entitled to our product in whatever form we choose to take it. If we leave early, it's our money. This is not the case in Kendo, as a student in Kendo is not a consumer.

Perhaps it is better to conceptualize our training not as a product to be acquired, but rather skill and knowledge entrusted to us, which is to be passed on. By doing so, we are not merely consumers but part of a larger tradition enriching the sport and art we are a part of.

Thus, as we progress our obligation or "giri" starts to include the mentorship of people less knowledgeable than ourselves. It is at this point that our obligation isn't simply to teach someone, but to set a good example to follow and then if necessary to teach them correctly.

4. Rei, Giri and the Senpai-Kouhai (先輩後輩【せんぱいこうはい】) system.

The last concept that needs to be covered in a discussion of "rei" is the idea of the "senpai-kouhai" system. This is often translated in English as a "Senior-Junior" system, but because key concepts within "giri" and "rei" are not fully understood, we Americans (and some Japanese) come to believe that this simply refers to an authority structure of the seniors ordering the juniors around. This often leads to abuse and hazing.

A officer in the US Marines who is responsible for the martial arts training in our military has

a blog on the Internet and I would like to quote a recent post relevant to this discussion:

"If the instructor cadre that you train is arrogant, out of shape, and out of touch with what your unit's goals and missions are, then look in the mirror. Perhaps you are as well. Each Marine that an instructor trains may be the Marine that is beside him some night in a fight. Sure, there are Marines who pick it up faster than others; they are the fun ones to work with. But the mirror of an instructor is the overall capability of the unit that he trains. The Marines of that unit are, in reality, your shadow. Like your own shadow, they will do exactly as you do. If you want to "make 'em pay" – an MAIT saying I wish I never heard – then they will do the same. If you train them as you know they should be – fairly, ruggedly, and often – then they will take your lead.

A week later, I saw two MAIs [Martial Arts Instructors] conducting training here at Quantico. They were having trainees "build a house" during a drill. I went over to watch. I asked what they were doing, and I quickly realized that they had no idea who I was. One said, "Sir, we know our shit. We have been through a course." I nodded and asked if they could explain to me what the purpose of conditioning drills were. They replied, "Sir, it is designed to thrash 'em before we fight 'em." I asked if they ever participated. They answered, "Been there, done that. Now it's their turn." At this point, I introduced myself, got a mokuju from the stack, and asked to see some technique from the MAIs. Both replied that "as an instructor they could only train themselves away from students... instructors should never look bad." I stopped the drill and have both instructors on probation."¹

This example illustrates what I believe to be the common misunderstanding of the senpai-kouhai. To an extent, the ranking system that some martial arts systems use further confounds this issue. As Americans, we often translate the term "dan" to "black-belt rank". "Rank" has a strong association with the military, and indeed some arts have strengthened this link by adopting insignia strongly reminiscent of the military, or having the junior students call seniors "sir". Thus martial arts "rank" becomes closely tied in with the military culture of a "superior" and a "subordinate", where one does not normally question the orders of a superior officer. This then is passed on to the next generation of trainees as subordinates become the new superiors.

I believe that equating either rank or the "senpai-kouhai" system to a one-way street of obedience, where reiho serves to reinforce authority is a serious misunderstanding of rei and Kendo. We should see "dan" more as a "grade" in Kendo, establishing one's level of understanding and expertise. Seen this way, "senpai-kouhai" is more a "mentor-mentee" system which establishes a way of effective teaching. In this system, the senior kendoka is responsible for the training and conduct of their mentee.

This is an important part of "giri". The senior mentor has an obligation to pass on what they have learned effectively and to show their mentee the correct way. Conversely, the mentee has the equal obligation to learn and apply what they are taught. If a mentee is taught incorrectly, then it is a reflection of poor mentorship.

Likewise, when the time comes for the mentee to become the mentor, to refuse that responsibility is to refuse assuming one's obligation. We Americans with our imperfect understanding of Japanese humility think it is proper to beg off testing, or beg off wearing bogu saying "we are not ready".

I have come to understand that this is a deeply disappointing to our mentor. When we say to our mentor that we are not ready, we are in effect telling them that we consider ourselves a better judge of our ability than our mentors themselves, and that our mentor's efforts have not been enough to prepare us. When we refuse, we are shirking our duty and our share of the responsibility, and all of our mentor's efforts are wasted.

1. "Development and Realization for Martial Arts Instructors" Lieutenant Colonel George H. Bristol, USMC Director, MCMAP

This is why when we decide not to wear our bogu, or not compete, or not test, our seniors are quietly disappointed and let down.

5. The Heart of Rei

So at the heart of "rei" are several interconnected concepts. The expression of courtesy and respect that comprise "reigi" and the idea of courtesy or "reiho" in Kendo come from a sense of obligation and a debt of gratitude. It is neither an exotic or foreign idea in the final analysis. This sense of gratitude comes from understanding that we are lucky to find a group of passionate people to share our hobby, and that we have an opportunity to share our skills and grow in our knowledge of the activity we enjoy. We employ a system of mentorship based on this idea of mutual obligation, both between the mentor and the mentee, and it is through this concept of "rei" that keeps it tied together.