



Handling, Etiquette, & Care of the Japanese Sword

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Traditionally the Japanese sword has been considered a most important treasure by the Japanese people. The etiquette regarding the handling of swords was very strict. Some Bushi (*samurai*) hung mosquito nets and they cleaned swords under the netting. This was found to be the only dust-free place. Also the Bushi would hold a piece of paper in his mouth, not only in cleaning but in looking at swords as well. The thought was that this kept one's breath and moisture off of the blade.

A certain amount of respect is due a sword as an object of art and of history regardless of the viewer's heritage. However, swords must also be treated with utmost precaution to avoid injury to both the handler or to anyone close by. The sword blade must be protected from rust. Also the sword's saya (scabbard) and fittings must be protected from scratches and other damage.

I. Etiquette for the Japanese Sword

In feudal Japan, bumping the sword's saya while passing one another or stepping over a sword while it was placed on the floor would be cause enough to start a fight. As admirers of the Japanese sword some elements of sword etiquette should be adopted to facilitate the safe and courteous handling of these respected objects.

1. One problem that did not exist in old Japan was the transportation of swords by automobile. If, during an accident, a fishing rod can pierce a car seat, think of what a sword blade can do! Always pack swords perpendicular to the normal line of travel.
2. Permission to examine a sword is always requested from the owner first.
3. Since some lacquer work is precious, the saya is held only with a gloved hand, a cloth or rice paper. Only the tsuka (hilt) is touched with the bare hand. A good habit to get into is to always carry some form of protection for saya handling whenever you may have opportunities to view swords.
4. Upon receiving the sword, you should show your respect by bowing to it. Remember, swords are more than pieces of metal and have a religious significance attached by some people. Whether or not you subscribe to this belief, you should honor the feelings of the sword owner and the efforts of the swordmaker. After properly receiving the sword, the first items to be admired are the *koshirae* (sword furniture or fittings) or the calligraphy on the *shira* saya (plain wooden scabbards and hilts), if any is there.
5. Permission should be asked again in order to withdraw the blade from the saya. If permission is granted, the saya should be held in the middle with the *ha* (cutting edge) upwards in the left hand. The blade is then slowly unsheathed by riding the *mune* (blade back) on the saya, taking care not to let the polished surfaces come into contact with any part of the saya. Whether drawing out a tachi or katana, one must hold the cutting edge up and grasp the saya from underneath in the left hand in a forward holding position. Then, hold the hilt from above with the right hand.
6. When handing a sword to someone you should continually keep the *ha* toward yourself.
7. When handing the sword to someone else, it is always held with the *kissaki* (point) upward and the *ha* toward the first holder with one hand close to the *fuchi* (front pommel) and the other supporting the *kashira* (rear pommel). This leaves enough room on the tsuka (hilt) for the other person to securely grasp the sword. You, the first holder, should also wiggle/jiggle the sword slightly as an indication that you, the first holder, are about to release your grasp. Upon receiving the sword, the new holder/viewer immediately turns the *ha* toward their body.
8. Definite precautions should be taken to prevent breathing on the polished surfaces of the blade.

- The blade may be held in either hand after the saya is carefully put down. If the sword has a *fuduka* (sword bag), the saya should remain in it and the top of the bag end is folded over. This will protect the lacquered saya or a nice *shira* saya. Since the scabbard is rather tightly fit at the koiguchi (opening) where the habaki (collar) is fit, the initial pull must be very carefully made so that only the *habaki's* length gets drawn out.. Giving a sudden powerful pull may not only impair the opening of the saya but also might result in an uncontrollable jerk leading to injury. Holding the blade still, pull it entirely out of the saya very slowly making certain the cutting edge never faces down or sideways.
9. When you are examining a blade, you may support it with a piece of cloth or rice paper. Under no circumstances is the blade ever to be touched with bare hands or fingers. The acidic natural oils can cause rusting of the blade. Some people advocate the wearing of white gloves when handling a blade. This is a good practice.
 10. Courtesy dictates that derogatory comments are not to be made, and *keizu* (defects, if any) are not pointed out unless the owner specifically asks the viewer to discuss the *keizu* in the blade. When a blade is placed back in the *saya* (scabbard), its case must be held by the left hand and the hilt by the right hand as in the pulling-out process. The tip of the sharp edge facing up must first rest gently on the opening of the saya. Again, holding the blade still, slide the blade along the channel into the saya. When the *habaki* (collar) reaches the opening of the case, a firm push is necessary to completely seat the blade in the saya. As before, the cutting edge must not face down or sideways.
 11. When returning a sword from viewing, you must always keep the cutting edge toward yourself with the *kissaki* (point) upward. The *tsuka* (hilt) is presented so that it is easy for the receiver to grasp.

II. Precautions to be taken in handling the Nihonto; How to draw a sword out of the scabbard and put it back

1. All swords, whether encased in *shira* saya or *koshibirae* (formal mountings), need to be kept in their sword bags. The *kojiri* (head of the scabbard) must go into the bag first to avoid the possibility of an accidental fall of the blade into the bag while you are holding the saya.
2. To carry a sword, the saya (scabbard) must be held with the right hand. The *tsuka* (hilt) must be held higher than the blade and saya. This measure will prevent dangerous accidents.
3. Whenever one draws a mounted sword out of its bag or scabbard, make sure the position of the *tsuka* (hilt) does not go lower than the saya.
4. In Japan the registration card should either be tied to the saya or sewn onto the sword bag. The sword owner in Japan has a legal obligation to keep a sword and its registration card together.

III. Method of Maintenance

The major purpose of sword care is to ensure that the steel surface does not oxidize or rust. Therefore, it is necessary to thoroughly remove the stale oil and replace it entirely with new oil. To properly care for a sword, specialized tools are needed and a proscribed series of steps should be followed.

A. Tools

1. **Mekugi-nuki:** A tool to remove the mekugi (bamboo peg) holding the blade in the hilt. It is usually made of brass or bamboo.
2. **Uchiko:** The most finely ground claystone powder (between 30 - 35 grams and about 8000 grits, with powdered deer horn for bulk), used for cleaning the blade surface. The uchiko is first, wrapped in Japanese hand-made paper called Yshino-gami, and then rewrapped by cotton or silk cloth, it comes through the wrapping materials when patted on the blade surface.
3. **Nuguigami:** High quality thick Japanese paper. It must be thoroughly wrinkled to soften and remove coarse and dusty particles and is used for wiping the blade surface. There are two reasons for the wiping function; one for preliminary removal of old oil; and two for removal of the powder. When using flannel, the fabric must be washed, destarched in water, and then dried.
4. **Abura:** A rust preventive oil called choji a chamomile-like flower oil much like clove oil.
5. **Abura-nuguishi:** Paper used to spread oil over the blade surface. A piece of wiping paper or flannel will do.

B. Method of Sword Care

1. Place the mounted blade on a secure area and push the peg out in preparation for removing the hilt.
2. Pull the blade out of the saya.
3. To remove the hilt, hold the hilt at the *kashia* end with the left hand so that the *mune* is resting in the palm of your hand. Keep the blade in a slightly angled upright position. Use the right fist to hit the left wrist lightly a few times. When the nakago (tang) becomes slightly loosened in the hilt, repeat until the nakago comes out of the hilt by itself. When there is enough room to grasp the tang, the blade may be pulled out of the hilt with the right hand. Be careful not to hit the left wrist too hard with the right hand as there is a danger that blades with short tangs like tanto might bounce out of the hilt entirely. Therefore, the initial impact must be light, just to check how tightly the tang is fixed in the hilt. Then, the force of subsequent blows must be adjusted accordingly. When the blade is taken out of the hilt, the peg removed from the hilt should be replaced in the tsuka to avoid accidental loss.
4. If the blade is mounted in a full *koshirae*, other attachments such as tsuba (sword hand guard) and *seppa* (spacers) on both sides of the tsuba in addition to the habaki (collar) must be removed. When the habaki is fit too tightly to remove, it can be loosened by hitting it lightly with a wooden hammer on the *mune* (back) of the habaki after covering the habaki with a cloth for protection.
5. The wiping process requires two pieces of paper. The initial one removes the old oil and dust, which is called preliminary cleaning. First place the cleaning paper on the *mune* (back) and fold it into halves toward the *ha* (edge). Then, hold the paper covered blade from above the back so that the thumb and the forefinger grip each side of the cutting section from above the paper. Hardly any force is needed to wipe the blade upward, one way, starting from the base. When the cleaning paper reaches the point, be particularly careful in wiping lightly. No pressure or friction must be put on the point. When expertise is attained, the wiping action can also be both ways, up and down. Lack of experience could cause the cutting of paper or even fingers and thus it must be strictly avoided.
6. In case the oil cannot be removed with ease, cotton or gauze soaked in benzene (finger nail polish remover) or pure alcohol (like Everclear) may be used in the same wiping manner as described above.
7. The powdering starts from the base toward the tip on the obverse in a light, uniform patting motion to cover the blade surface. Then turn the blade over and start patting from the point downward toward the base.
8. Then, use the other sheet of paper to wipe the powder off the blade surface in the same manner as described in (5) in this section. If oil remains, some more powdering and wiping is necessary.
9. When the surface is thoroughly clean, check for the presence of rust, flaws and other damages. Then without putting back the tsuka, habaki and other attachments, the blade alone must be placed back in the *saya*. It should be noted that the two kinds of wiping paper used in this process must not be interchanged and should have distinct purposes preliminary and final.
10. The re-oiling with a piece of paper, or destarched flannel, folded in size 3cm x 6cm and soaked in fresh oil completes a round of sword care. When the paper is ready, the sword is to be drawn out of the saya again. After placing it in the left hand, put the oiling paper on the *mune* (back) to do the same movement as described in the wiping process. To make sure the blade surface is thoroughly covered with oil, repeat the same procedure a few times. Just as in the wiping, the handling of the sword as well as the oiling paper must be most carefully done. The paper should contain the right amount of oil so that no excess oil will over flow and harm the inside of the saya. The oil must be spread thinly and evenly.
11. It is a good idea to apply a very small amount of oil to the surface of the nakago (tang) with the fingers and then wipe it off. This might be done once a year. However an excessive amount of oil must also be avoided here. The black iron oxide (rust) needs to stay black. It is used to determine the age of the blade.
12. Put the habaki back and encase the blade tentatively in the saya. Remove the peg from the hilt, draw the blade out of the saya, hold it in the right hand in an almost upright position, pick up the hilt with the left hand, and put the tang back in the hilt. Keep holding the blade in the hilt lightly with the palm of the right hand so that the tang settles firmly in the hilt. When the tang is fixed in its perfect position, replace the peg. Pass the blade to the right hand, pick up the saya and slide the blade into it observing the manner described in Section II. Needless to say, the other parts like *seppa* and tsuba

of fully mounted swords must also be returned to their respective places before the hilt is put on the tang, noting that the *seppa* and tsuba normally only go on one way.

13. The methods for handling and caring for other forms of blades such as yari (spears) and naginata (halberds) are the same. Yari must be handled especially carefully; otherwise injury may occur. Also, the ken (a daggers of double edged type) are very dangerous.

Sword care tools must be kept perfectly clean, for dust stuck on the wiping cloth or oiling paper could cause scratches on the steel surface. Protecting these surfaces which have been most finely polished through the graded processes involving more than ten kinds of claystones of different fineness and hardness is critical.

V. How to preserve the Nihonto

The most important aspects of preserving blades regardless of condition are to protect them from developing rust and scratches. The precautions required for keeping the Nipponito in good condition are the following:

1. Despite regular care and oiling, a blade may develop rust in places. Generally when rusting takes place where the saya touches the blade, it must be taken to and repaired by a saya-shi (scabbard specialist). Or when the saya is very old, its interior may well be contaminated with rust and dirt, thus causing the steel to rust. In such case, a new saya must replace the old one at once.
2. Since the formal mounting functions as an outfit for dressing up, a blade needs to have a plain wooden saya and hilt called a *shira-saya* which would be, as it were, casual wear for a blade. It is much preferred to rest a blade in its casual outfit so that when the blade surface starts to rust the wooden saya can readily be cleaned inside by splitting it open into vertical halves, which are simply fastened together with rice glue.
3. If a blade should start to rust, no inexperienced repairs such as rubbing the rust off with a spatula or coin's edge or fine sand paper would improve the condition; rather it is likely to aggravate it and necessitate extra work in smoothing the damaged area. It must be taken to a polishing specialist at once just like a sick person would need to go to see a medical specialist.
4. Since a blade is particularly vulnerable to rusting soon after polishing, cleaning and oiling should be done preferably every ten days for about six months.
5. Later when the polished blade surface condition is more stable, clean it regularly, at least every six months.
6. In preserving swords, it is improper to keep them in a leaning position because it would cause the oil to go down along the blade surface and make a pool at the *keissaki* (point). It is necessary to keep them in a dry place, laid down with the *ha* (edge) up. It would be ideal to keep them in drawers made of paulownia wood. Use of camphor balls or naphthalene to protect the chest from borers should be avoided. It would cause rust on the steel.
7. Although dry conditions are preferable for swords, the wooden containers or mountings require moisture.

Therefore, the place for preserving swords must be very carefully selected.