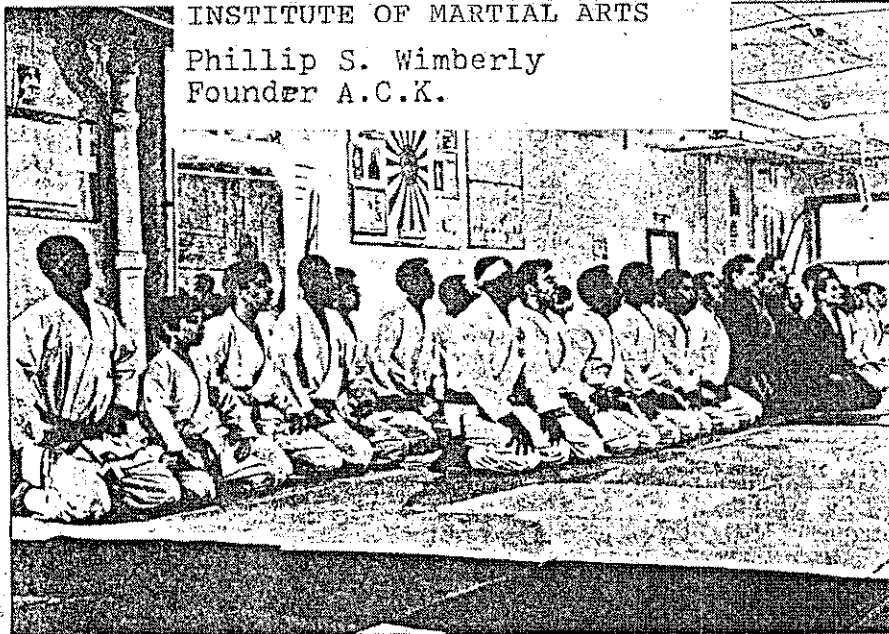


Japanese Traditions

ENTERING THE DOJO What Price Are You Willing To Pay?

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It takes more than a flash of the cash and sporadic attendance to succeed in traditional dojo. The students above are considered extremely worthy and dedicated by their instructor.

What does it mean to join a *dojo* (training hall) today in the traditional sense, and what was it like to enter the dojo of a *ryu* (system) during the feudal era? The similarities and differences of these ways are an accurate reflection of the similarities and differences between the classical *bujutsu* (military arts) and their successors, the *budo* (military way) of our century.

To nontraditionalists, there might not be anything special about joining a dojo. From their point of view you just walk in and make your wishes known to whoever is in charge. Flash your MasterCard, sign a liability waiver and you're a member of the club. However, this is a long way from the manner in which things are done in a strictly traditional dojo and it's light years away from the way the feudal warrior entered a dojo in old Japan.

Understand first that the idea of the dojo or *ryu* as a business began very recently. The *ryu* was anciently seen as a combination of an extended family, an intense

and lengthy apprenticeship program, and often as a semireligious order.

There were exceptions, but the average *ryu* was relatively small. Whether it was supported by a feudal lord or maintained privately, money was rarely a consideration for the top instructors of the style. A select group of faithful students or a benefactor were all that was necessary. When the head instructor was retained by his lord, a stipend supported him, the same way all the lord's other samurai were kept. Otherwise, the headmaster depended on gifts and offerings from his disciples. Either way, few instructors relied upon their teaching for their livelihood.

Early *ryu* had little use for large numbers of students, expensive fees for training, or for professional instructors. How, then, did the prospective disciple enter the *ryu's* dojo? Mainly by persistence. Initially, the applicant had to approach the dojo with letters of introduction and recommendation from someone known and respected by the masters of

the *ryu*. This was generally followed by a check into the applicant's background.

Records were plentiful in old Japan and background checks weren't very difficult. During the long Tokugawa regime, a thorough and far-reaching network of intelligence agents was maintained by the government, and laws made sure no one traveled outside his native province without identification papers.

Furthermore, for those of the warrior class, last name and home fief established a lot about character and personal history. One reason for this check was to insure that the applicant was of good character, but another equally important consideration was to protect against the possibility of a rival *ryu* member from slipping into an "enemy" school to steal their secret techniques.

Once his background was ascertained, the applicant took the *keppan* (blood oath), which was a written loyalty oath, signed or sealed with the applicant's blood. The average classical warrior often had a small scar on one of his fingers, or inside his arm, from his encounter with the *keppan*. Practically unnoticeable, it reminded him of the great honor it was to be a part of his *ryu*.

Even after he became an official member of the *ryu*, the aspiring warrior's application was still not complete. He was eligible only for a trial period, usually referred to as *te hodaki* (unleashing of hands). It was a probation that could be severe, one where the beginner was ordered to perform all sorts of domestic chores—chopping wood, preparing meals, washing uniforms; the kind of scenario that's popular in martial arts movies to establish the tenacity of the film's future hero. It was a test to see how much he'd tolerate. It ascertained how badly he wanted to learn. If the beginner performed his assigned tasks with patience and dignity he was soon accepted into the beginning ranks of the *ryu*. He became a *monjin* (a person at the gate of the *ryu's* teachings).

Ancient students felt like they belonged, a feeling that carries over into present-day Japan, where the individual is judged (and often judges himself) according to the groups to which he belongs.

The members of the *ryu* very much have the feeling of *nakama* (within the interior space) with others of their school or style. They have shared similar training, totally unique to those outside it



Rigorous training, such as running stairs, closely resembles the karate training of early ryu.

They have a common understanding of the ryu. It's much like a family.

It's obvious, then, that joining a ryu meant more than just attending lessons and learning skills. Even today, when a Japanese craftsman wishes to convey the scope of his training, he sometimes uses the expression, "I shared the mat with So-and-So Sensei." To share the mat or sit on the mat with a high-ranked sensei has a particular significance. It means the secrets and skills of his art have been passed directly down to the speaker. He is the inheritor of the master's particular way of doing the craft.

A lot of the budo customs have changed over the years, but they haven't really been lost. True, there are no longer any keppan oaths, and only a few schools practice anything like the period of probation. But serious budoka respect the same bonds of belonging that their ancestors did. Today's budoka feels (or should feel) that he's part of a very special group, that he springs from a distinct and honorable lineage.

Students of the JKA train in front of a

portrait of Gichin Funakoshi, and they should derive deep satisfaction knowing their teacher, or their teacher's teacher, actually practiced karate under this great man.

Students of another karate style who visit a JKA dojo are lucky. And students from the JKA who train in another system are equally fortunate.

But should they claim they are actually a part of the dojo they visit? If they are willing to put on a white belt, forget their allegiance to their original sensei and accept their adoptive style wholeheartedly, the answer is yes. Otherwise, the visiting student who attempts to present himself as a real member diminishes both himself and his teachers.

The entrance the modern-day budoka makes to his ryu or dojo may be simpler than it was in the old days, but it has just as much meaning and commitment. And if it is taken lightly or abused, if the student fails to understand the implications of his passage to the door of the dojo, he can never expect to proceed successfully beyond it.