

# SMAA JOURNAL



Shudokan Martial Arts Association • PO Box 6022, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-6022  
<http://smaa-hq.com/> • [shudokan@smaa-hq.com](mailto:shudokan@smaa-hq.com) • 1-734-645-6441

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

### 2019 SMAA DUES

Membership fees are due on January 1, 2019. Please be sure to pay your SMAA dues on time. You can either send a check to our headquarters or pay online at <http://www.smaa-hq.com/payments.php>. We accept Visa, MasterCard, and PayPal. This is a quick and safe way to make your annual SMAA membership payment.

We appreciate our members paying dues promptly. It makes life easier for the SMAA staff of volunteers, and it is representative of the type of self-discipline we are cultivating through the study of traditional Japanese martial arts.

### DONATIONS & TAX DEDUCTIONS

The SMAA is a federally tax-exempt, nonprofit corporation. As such, your donations to our association are tax deductible. Send your donations, in the form of a check or money order (made out to SMAA), to our headquarters in Michigan. We'll send you a letter back acknowledging your contribution, which you can then use for tax purposes. We hope you'll support the SMAA in our goal to preserve and promote traditional budo and koryu bujutsu.

### E-MAIL

Please make sure we have your correct e-mail address. Without this address, we can't e-mail you the *SMAA Journal*.

### OBJECTIVES OF THE SMAA

1. To promote and aid in the growth of Japan's traditional arts and ways.
2. To assist the public in achieving spiritual growth and physical development through budo/bujutsu.
3. To further friendship and understanding between Asian and Western martial artists.
4. To establish goodwill and harmony among martial artists of various systems.
5. To offer Western martial artists access to legitimate budo/bujutsu organizations and teachers in Japan.
6. To give practitioners of authentic budo/bujutsu recognition for their years of devotion to these arts.

### BOARD OF DIRECTORS

- Karl Scott Sensei
- Nicklaus Suino Sensei
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修道館武道会

Do you have a new e-mail address? Have you sent it to [hedavey@aol.com](mailto:hedavey@aol.com)? If not, we also won't be able to send you SMAA publications, so please be sure to let us know if your e-mail address changes.

## SMAA PATCHES

The SMAA HQ is selling official SMAA patches for your gi. They're great looking patches that embody the spirit and honor instilled in members of our group. They won't fade or bleed when you bleach them, and yet we've been able to keep the cost down. Each patch is basically a 3 ½ inch circle featuring our logo below:



Our patches were produced using state of the art digitizing and ultra-modern technology to create an accurate and attractive embroidered emblem. They feature tight stitches, sharp detail, clean lettering, and top quality craftsmanship. There's no jagged stitching, but we've still got plenty of stitches so that the background doesn't show through.

*The patch should be worn on the left side of your gi jacket near your heart. SMAA policy mandates only one patch per uniform to maintain the sense of dignity associated with traditional budo.*

These new patches are a great way to show your respect and enthusiasm for our group; we hope all of our members will order at least one. *And the best part is the patches are only \$5.00 (US) each!* (E-mail [shudokan@smaa-hq.com](mailto:shudokan@smaa-hq.com) about special shipping for international orders.)

To order, go to the "Payments" section of [www.smaa-hq.com](http://www.smaa-hq.com) or send a check or money order made out to "SMAA" to:

**SMAA HQ**  
**PO Box 6022**  
**Ann Arbor, MI 48106-6022**  
**USA**

## FACEBOOK PAGE



Have you been to the SMAA Facebook page? If not, you're missing out on the latest SMAA news, features, videos, photos, and information. It's easy and safe to join Facebook, and all you need to do is click the "Like" button to become a follower of our Facebook page. This is the fastest way to get SMAA news and updates, and we hope you'll drop by <http://www.facebook.com/ShudokanMartialArtsAssociation> and check it out. Once you're on Facebook, we hope you'll share our page with your friends and help us promote the SMAA.

## SMAA ONLINE PAYMENTS

Did you know you can pay for your annual dues at our website using PayPal or a major credit card? You can, and you can also pay for gi patches and promotions in the same way. This is a much faster, and in some ways more secure, means of sending money to our headquarters. We hope more of our members will make use of this feature. Just drop by <http://smaa-hq.com/payments.php> for more information.

## *THE BEST OF THE SMAA JOURNAL CD-ROM*

To celebrate its 15th anniversary in 2009, the SMAA created a special CD-ROM that contained a sampling of some of the best stories and articles to appear in the *SMAA Journal* since 1994. We mailed this free of charge to everyone in the SMAA as a way of showing our appreciation to our members.

Although our anniversary has past, it's still not too late to get a copy of this CD-ROM, which is packed with hard to find information about budo and koryu bujutsu. For \$8.95, plus \$3.00 shipping and handling (\$5.00 outside the USA), we'll send you *The Best of the SMAA Journal*.

Send your check or money order to the SMAA HQ. Supplies are limited to the number of CDs remaining.

### SMAA YOUTUBE CHANNEL

修道館武道会

Shudokan Martial Arts Association

Want to see some great videos of SMAA teachers, officials, and members? Now you can by visiting our YouTube channel. We're Shudokan1994, because 1994 is the year the SMAA was founded.

To see video of SMAA teachers and members, go to:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gg5Nika6Ge0&list=PLS11\\_XCH8RkI868tRKZ0fdJFSeFGyNZ0o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gg5Nika6Ge0&list=PLS11_XCH8RkI868tRKZ0fdJFSeFGyNZ0o)

To see video of the amazing experts that trained leading SMAA officials and teachers, go to:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zcE7zBhv9Hs&list=PLS11\\_XCH8RkIV8liNZoXI93WI79BLe1NZ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zcE7zBhv9Hs&list=PLS11_XCH8RkIV8liNZoXI93WI79BLe1NZ)

### WAYNE MUROMOTO AND DAVE LOWRY NEWS

Wayne Muromoto and Dave Lowry, both SMAA Senior Advisors, joined several koryu martial arts experts in St. Louis for the 2018 Japanese Festival. This event takes place every Labor Day weekend at the Missouri Botanical Gardens. The three-day Japanese Festival presents taiko drumming, bon

odori festival dancing, martial arts, candlelight walks in the Japanese Garden and more.

Bitchuden Takeuchi Ryu, Toda-ha Buko Ryu, Yagyu Shinkage Ryu, Shinto Muso Ryu, Hontai Yoshin Ryu, and other ancient martial arts were demonstrated at the largest festival celebrating Japanese culture in the United States. While Mr. Lowry lives in the St. Louis area, Mr. Muromoto traveled from his home in Hawaii to demonstrate Bitchuden Takeuchi Ryu.

### MARTIN SENSEI NEWS

If you're interested in the Japanese samurai sword, you'll want to check out Paul Martin Sensei's latest column at [www.japan-forward.com](http://www.japan-forward.com) (Sankei newspaper) entitled "Help Bring Home the Sanchomo, a National Treasure Sword of Japan." Just go to: [http://japan-forward.com/help-bring-home-the-sanchomo-a-national-treasure-sword-of-japan/?fbclid=IwAR3SJ3zGIM8qdvzGxo4IGilCA-suVgn\\_48JG-DQaNSB6GsiqT\\_wlVpaWj-SQ](http://japan-forward.com/help-bring-home-the-sanchomo-a-national-treasure-sword-of-japan/?fbclid=IwAR3SJ3zGIM8qdvzGxo4IGilCA-suVgn_48JG-DQaNSB6GsiqT_wlVpaWj-SQ).

Martin Sensei is a former British Museum curator, and a Hyogiin (Trustee) for the Nihonto Bunka Shinko Kyokai. He is also an appointed Bunka Meister (Master of Culture: Japanese Swords) by the Japonisme Shinko Kai (Honganji). He has trained extensively in kendo and iaido, and he's an SMAA Senior Advisor living in Japan.



*Martin Sensei*

## EVANS SENSEI NEWS



*Evans Sensei*

In the autumn of 2018, John Evans Sensei and his students at Battodo Fudokan London traveled to Japan. They visited the village of Dorogawa, Omine mountain, Nara Prefecture. Aside from practicing Japanese swordsmanship, everyone was able to engage in suigyo and takigyo, ritualized forms of mind-body training using water and waterfalls respectively. Ryusenji Temple also conducted a fire ceremony to dedicate the participants' swords and spiritual practice.

Battodo Fudokan London is lead by Evans Sensei, seventh dan, a direct student of Nakamura Taisaburo Sensei, tenth dan. Classes are offered in Nakamura Ryu swordsmanship and Kurikara Ryu

heiho, a comprehensive system of external and internal training that breaks down obstacles in mind and body that inhibit natural and spontaneous wielding of the sword. Evans Sensei is a member of the SMAA Board of Advisors.

## OTSUKA SOKE NEWS

In November 2018, Otsuka Yasuyuki Soke left Japan to teach seminars in the Czech Republic and Romania. Both events were well attended and featured instruction in the use of shuriken (throwing darts or spikes) as well as the kusari fundo, a weighted chain.

Meifu Shinkage Ryu was founded by Someya Chikatoshi Soke. Aside from studying Tenshin Shoden Katori Shinto Ryu, Someya Soke was a shuriken researcher, having investigated various techniques and types of blades used in other shuriken schools. Some of his research looked at how to make shuriken fly for longer distances without becoming unstable. He determined that the length of the shuriken was related to a steady flight. Therefore, Someya Soke constructed shuriken of different lengths, and he recorded how they flew, their stability, as well as the distance they traveled.



**AI 3-lea Meifu Shinkage Ryu Romania Taikai**

Shuriken & Fundo Kusari Jutsu  
24-25 Noiembrie 2018

*Otsuka Soke*



*Bo-shuriken*

Through his research, he determined that certain lengths and widths were very effective. This information assisted him in constructing bo-shuriken as they are used in Meifu Shinkage Ryu today.

Otsuka Soke is the present headmaster of the Meifu Shinkage Ryu, a school that focuses on the above mentioned weapons. One of the most senior teachers of traditional Japanese martial arts in the world, Otsuka Soke is also one of several SMAA Senior Advisors in Japan.

## KOSSLOW SENSEI NEWS

In October 2018, several of Tom Kosslow Sensei's students from the Newnan Karate Center competed in the Bushnill Classic Tournament in Alabama. They won a variety of medals in both kata and kumite completion.

The Newnan Karate Center in Georgia teaches the traditional Japanese art of Wado Ryu karate-do.

Wado means the "way to harmony." The dojo teaches karate-do "the same way it has been taught in Japan for many years."

"We teach the etiquette and formalities that are found in traditional styles. We focus not only on the physical aspects, but we also strive to build and strengthen character. We teach students to focus on the six core traits: courage, courtesy, humility, integrity, self control, and self defense."

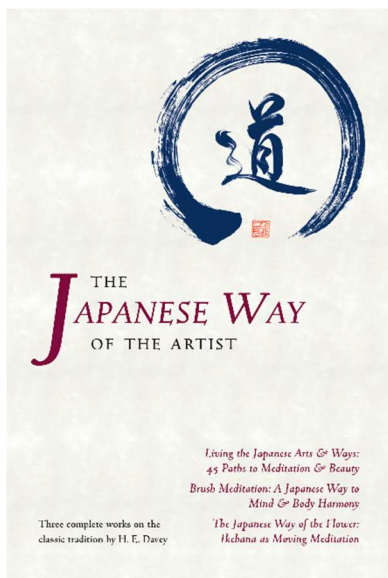
The Newnan Karate Center is part of the Wado International Karate-Do Federation (WIKF) with over 40 member countries. It is lead by Kosslow Sensei, seventh dan and a direct student of the legendary Suzuki Tatsuo Sensei. Kosslow Sensei is a member of the elite SMAA Board of Advisors.



*Kosslow Sensei*

## AN EXCERPT FROM THE JAPANESE WAY OF THE ARTIST

By H. E. Davey



As students of the Ways practice kata, they discover that stillness is as important as activity, not doing is equal to doing, and the moment following an action actually determines the success of the action itself, as well as the success of any following actions. This moment is called zanshin.

Zan means “lingering,” “remaining,” and suggests continuation, while shin is simply “mind.” Zanshin can be seen in a sumi-e painter’s continuing movement of the brush even after it has left the paper. It can be witnessed in a martial artist’s freezing of movement after the execution of a final stroke of the sword or jujutsu throw—allowing the action to follow-through and the movement of ki energy to continue after the technique has been executed. But this pause is pregnant with potential . . . waiting to see if another action will occur or be needed.

Whether in fine art, martial art, or Kabuki drama, zanshin is present. It is a watchful stillness, a stillness that is gestating action. It is not the stillness of the graveyard but of the cat poised motionless before it pounces. There is in zanshin a

unity of calm and action manifested in the form of physical presence.

Zanshin can also be observed in a Western context. The follow-through in a bowler’s arm movement after the ball has been released and the continued movement of ki down the lane that takes the ball into the pins are examples. The follow-through in a batter’s or golfer’s swing is another. In all such examples, the instant following the action is as important as the action itself; it is where motion and stillness, doing and not doing merge into oneness.

It is interesting to note that we often fail in an action just at the moment before its completion, when we think we’ve got it, we have made it. In this instant of broken concentration, our awareness lapses, we fall out of the present moment, and we break our mind-body coordination.

Something I once witnessed at a judo tournament can serve as an example. In judo, a decisive throw garners a full point and thus victory. An imperfect throw, on the other hand, is worth a half point and means that the action continues. At this particular competition, I watched a teenager forcefully throw his opponent, which produced an accompanying roar from the spectators. Perhaps in the din he misheard the referee’s assessment of the throw—or maybe he was just positive that he’d won; for whatever reason, he turned, raised his arms overhead, and acknowledged the crowd. Aside from displaying bad manners in traditional budo, the gesture was a very bad idea. The referee had declared the throw a half point, so the action had not yet stopped. The opponent rose from the mat, grabbed the “victor” in a stranglehold, and, falling backward, proceeded to squeeze his neck until he submitted (or fell unconscious; I can’t remember which). As the crowd quieted down, I heard an elderly sensei from Japan sitting nearby comment, “Serves him right! Bad manners and no zanshin.”

On a related note, my own judo sensei explained that a judoka, or “judo practitioner,” doesn’t begin things lightly: if he does start on a certain path, the judoka continues—to death, if need be—despite any obstacles, even if an alternate route must be discovered. And if the judoka dies on the path, his body will always fall in the direction he was going in. Zanshin indeed!

The power of zanshin is eloquently expressed in the arts of Japanese dance and drama. There is a momentary interlude following a gesture or movement during which the full impact, beauty, and drama is able to penetrate the hearts of the audience. The action isn’t brought to a standstill, rather its effect is released to linger and reach deep into the witnesses of the performance. Imagine a massive temple bell, struck strongly. An immense,

resonant note fades, but something remains, leaving the air charged with an almost electric sensation . . .

Zanshin is not only the sustained concentration following an action but also an unbroken awareness of the moment and an indomitable spirit; it is the hallmark of all of the Ways, from aikido to shodo to odori dance.

**About the Author:** H. E. Davey, eighth dan, is a founding member of the SMAA and the Co-director of the SMAA Jujutsu Division. For more than 50 years he has studied Japanese martial arts, including judo, aikido, and especially traditional jujutsu. *The Japanese Way of the Artist* is available internationally on Amazon and at a local bookstore near you.

## TRADITIONS IN A TRADITIONAL ART

*By Wayne Muromoto*

One of the characteristics of traditional martial systems, in particular the koryu of Japan, is the emphasis on traditions. That would be almost without saying. After all, koryu means “old style,” so quite naturally the older martial systems retain not only martial techniques from the past, but surrounding traditions, concepts and mental concepts from the past.

Depending on how you look at it, that’s either a very big plus or a very large negative. An aficionado of modern eclectic martial practices might look at all the surrounding traditions as useless relics of a dead past, of little practical use for modern applications. Lest I sound harsh in my depiction of such an attitude, I can understand it, if your main purpose in studying martial arts were for ringed sports competition or pure self-defense. It can also put a damper on enrolling new students if you tell them to give up the form-hugging Spandex tights, surrounding mirrors, and New Age mumbo-jumbo

in lieu of the boring discipline of white keiko gi (“practice uniform”) and the silence of a dojo without a sound system blaring out the latest Euro-techno pop music.

Most martial arts “studios” in America run somewhere in between the two extremes of strict traditionalism and Spandex and tights modernized fight club (or exercise spa). For such studios, I would like to offer a nudge in the direction of tradition. Or, at the very least, give them something to consider, which might set them apart and offer something different from every other studio that offers cardio kickboxing, kiddie ninja classes, MMA, karate, and “jujitsu” classes around the clock.

For me, what attracted me to the koryu was the entire package, wrapped around tradition. I had gone through several more modern systems, such as judo, karate-do and aikido, with side trips to other systems of Japanese and Chinese origins.

Technically and sportively, they all had something to offer, given their strengths and limitations. What I found, however, beguiling in the koryu were the traditions. I had developed a reasonable dexterity in athleticism in those arts, and a certain amount of knowledge concerning the self-defense aspects. I enjoyed the training and conditioning. Yet, what I found more compelling was the deepness of the traditions in the koryu. That's just me, so if you still enjoy a modern budo form, hey, that's great. Whatever rocks your boat.

And, over the years, I've come to a relaxed conclusion that traditions can be found within oneself, if you look hard enough, and within your own respect for the lessons of the past. Within different koryu groups, too, there are different levels of adherence to tradition. By the word "tradition," I mean not only the forms, the practice and the regime, but also the surrounding events, ceremonies and rituals.

I've practiced with a koryu group that really didn't stand much on tradition outside a very, very traditional practice environment. You practice, you go home. That's about all that was demanded of you. It was indicative, perhaps, of the attitude of the main teacher. In addition, it seems the more a koryu becomes modernized, forming organizations, board of directors, and governing agencies, etc., the less it becomes like a familial, clannish and coherent cadre. So idiosyncratic traditions are cast by the wayside.

It has been my very good luck, however, to have ended up in a couple of groups that have kept surrounding traditions alive. What I find is that by keeping such traditions vibrant, they help to create a sense of group unity that enhances the training and the longevity of student participation.

At this time of the year, my thoughts turn to the traditions of the Japanese New Year, celebrated in general by Japanese society and also in particular by

traditional koryu dojo. Perhaps some of the traditions can be celebrated and become part of your own dojo?

In Japan, New Year is one of the biggest holiday festivals of the year. The end of the old and start of a new life is not just cause for celebration and partying, but also for self-reflection, family get-togethers, and treks to temples and shrines for blessings.

A koryu dojo will close its doors to allow its members time to attend to family, work, and friends' parties. The bonenkai is a characteristic of Japanese organizations. It's usually a dinner or luncheon party where you get together, ostensibly to remember the past year and wish each other luck, prosperity, and happiness for the coming year. You can have bonenkai for work, for a club, and for, yes, your dojo. And why not have a bonenkai, as it will fit right into the party atmosphere anyway that we Americans have for the New Year?

Other traditions from Japanese culture may be more esoteric, but they can be fun, and can also lend a sense of how even modern traditions, like aikido, can be embedded as part of Japanese cultural practices that can be shared and nurtured outside of Japan. For example, on New Year's Eve, traditional families would visit a Buddhist temple to pray, and to wash away the ills and troubles of the old year. When I lived in Japan, friends and I visited Daitokuji Temple in Kyoto at midnight, and it was as busy and crowded as a Tokyo subway. Visitors crowded the sub-temples of the sprawling religious complex to receive blessings from Buddhist priests chanting sutra. We climbed up a rickety ladder to get a chance at ringing a temple bell, the sound of the bell and our offered prayers were supposed to wash away the 108 ills of our body and mind that had accumulated over the past year. The ringing of the bells on the last night of the year is called Joya no Kane.



Early New Year's morning meant a visit to a Shinto shrine, called Hatsumode. We went to Kamigamo shrine in northern Kyoto and then braved the crowds at Yasaka shrine in the downtown district. Again, as in our visit to Daitokuji, the crowds were as tight as sardines in a can with visitors seeking blessings for the New Year. We washed our hands and rinsed our mouths with water drawn from a spring, to symbolize purifying our inner and outer selves. Then we entered the inner shrine area and cast coins into an offering box to ring the bells and receive our blessings (again) for the New Year.

There are other family and folk traditions that are also observed by traditional families and institutions. At the entrance to a house or business, a kadomatsu is placed. This is a decoration made of aodake ("green bamboo," to signify resilience), matsu ("pine," for evergreen or long life), and branches of cherry (sakura, for beauty). Together, this triad creates the triad of sho-chiku-bai ("pine-bamboo-cherry") that is a sign of auspiciousness of the highest order. As far as folk tradition researchers can discern, the kadomatsu arose from folk beliefs that the pine and bamboo arranged near the entranceway was meant to channel the New Year's spirit to enter the house and bless the household members. Different prefectures and villages in Japan had their own versions of the kadomatsu (literally, "gate-pine"), so if you can't make it out of green bamboo or can't find a nice pine branch, that's quite alright. Traditions change from era to era, geographic location to location.

In Hawaii, the early Japanese immigrants couldn't find green bamboo or the bountiful pine of their native country. My parents' generation therefore used the branches of the ironwood tree, since they resembled pine needles, and tied them with rope to the front porch of their wooden plantation houses. A few decades ago, a crafts education group that I was working with decided to revive the kadomatsu using the atypical three-bamboo style. Three pieces of bamboo of varying heights, cut at the top at an

angle, were lashed together with rope, then Norfolk pine (imported from the US mainland) were inserted at the base, along with noshi (cut white paper). An assembly process was developed so the kadomatsu could be sold en masse as a fundraiser for the group. It proved to be hugely successful as local Japanese-Americans, and then nearly every other ethnic group and all sorts of large and small businesses, latched on to this as a fun tradition for the New Year, regardless of ethnicity or religious background. Pretty soon, all sorts of groups were making kadomatsu as a fundraiser, including Boy Scout troupes, private Christian schools, and Christian churches. You never know where a tradition will take you.

Oddly, as the tradition grew self-styled kadomatsu "experts," originally trained by the original crafts group, emerged to teach people the "right" way to make a three-bamboo style kadomatsu. Friends from the group and I laugh at this development, because our own research led us to discover that there is no right way to make a kadomatsu; every location in Japan had their own symbolism, their own style.

So if you can't make your kadomatsu quite like what you see in examples online, that's quite alright. As long as you get the right symbolism, that's alright. After all, the original Japanese immigrants used branches from the ironwood tree, which isn't really a pine. That was all they had, so they altered tradition to fit their environment. You can place a kadomatsu on the side of your own dojo front entrance, if you have a permanent location. Or, if you are renting space, perhaps you can place it at the entrance or near the front kamidana ("deity shelf") at least for your first training of the New Year.

Back in my childhood, we had a large extended family, enough to have mochi-tsuki at my house. The entire Muromoto clan, its relatives, and any number of friends were invited to come to pound rice into mochi, or "rice cakes," to place in ozoni soup, to offer at the altar, and to stuff with sweet

bean jam as a New Year's sweet. Wooden mallets were used by the men of the household to pound the rice in a stone-and-cement mortar, and the women would shape the hot, glutinous rice into round shapes for the mochi. Alas, those years have passed, a lot of my father's generation have passed on, and my own cousins are far-flung all over the world, so the sheer manpower is no longer available. But families still pound mochi in Hawaii, if they can assemble enough family and friends, and if you have someone who can remember how to do it. (There's a trick to discerning when the glutinous rice is cooked long enough, and when the rice is pounded just right, and how to shape the mochi.) It can also be a tradition for a traditional dojo.

While most mochi are made into edible, palm-sized pieces, larger ones are made to be stacked, one on top of another, as an offering at the altar. This setting is called *kagami mochi*, or "mirror rice cakes," since the mochi are so large they resemble the old-style round Japanese mirrors or *kasane mochi* ("stacked rice cakes"). This is an offering to the gods (or God, if you are monotheistic), although after the gods have partaken of it, one can cut the big mochi apart and use the pieces for *ozoni* soup.

The *kasane mochi* is part of a larger decoration in the family *tokonoma* ("alcove"), or, in the case of a dojo, the *kamidana*. It can be as elaborate or as simple as you want the decoration to be. A citrus fruit would be placed on top of the two stacked *kasane mochi*, called a *daidai*. (This is a play on *dai-dai*, meaning "generations upon generations.") Not having this fruit, which is native to Japan, Japanese in Hawaii use a tangerine, or *mikan*, which is about the same size and flavor. Other decorations adorn this basic setup. For example, you can further decorate this arrangement with dried persimmons (a play on words for "joy"), woven yarn lobsters or shrimp (the bent back of the crustaceans signifying longevity), and so on. A tea sensei I know would decorate his alcove with a mound of raw rice, topped by three cut pieces of cylindrical charcoal, tied together, with a single pine branch sticking up



*A Japanese New Year decoration*

from the middle. This signified the importance of the hearth and kitchen in the tea house. Budo dojo may, perhaps, include some wooden *dogu* (martial arts equipment) in the decoration.

Before the old year's end, there is the *o-soji*, or "great cleaning." The New Year should be welcomed with a clean heart and clean room, so in dojo in Japan, great and small, members will clean up the training hall, wiping down the *tatami* mats, changing the paper screens, and so on.

The first practice of the New Year, after the brief New Year's hiatus, is also a special one. It's the first practice of the year, so it's usually time for a *kagami biraki* ceremony. The term means "mirror opening." In ancient Japan, on New Year's Eve, the mirrors were covered over due to superstitions about it being unlucky to see one's face at the turn of the year. You weren't supposed to gussy yourself up either and were supposed to spend the time in austere quietness praying. (Well, so much for THAT tradition, even in Japan!)

When the mirror was uncovered, it meant that the world is going back to business as usual. Hence, *kagami biraki* celebrates the passage of the New Year and the beginning of all things, including training. For a dojo, this could mean a short ritual

ceremony in front of the kamidana, and/or an embu (“demonstration”) by all the members, exhibiting their techniques to the gods or God as a kind of supplication. Or it could mean simply hatsugeiko, the “first training” of the year, in which you perform 100 sword cuts, or gyaku tsuki (“reverse punches”), or ukemi (“falls”), as a kind of ritual cleansing act. And food! And drink!

Along with the offering of kasane mochi at the altar, there is usually a bottle of very high quality Japanese rice wine, or sake. After the ceremony, the bottle can be opened and members can partake of the omiki (ritual rice wine) to celebrate the New Year. Herbs can be added to the sake, to make what is called otoso, a supposedly healthy concoction. (One year, a student tasked with the purchase of the sake picked up a sweet cherry liquor; for him, Japanese wine was Japanese wine, but be aware that there are many different kinds of “Japanese alcohol,” from sweetened liquors to shochu—what I call Japanese moonshine—to amazake, to a whole bunch of really weird, fermented drinks whose provenance I can only guess at. What you offer at the altar should be high quality Japanese rice wine.)

Over the New Year, besides the ozoni soup and mochi rice cakes, there are various other traditional foods served. New Year is a time for toshi koshi soba; “good luck for New Year buckwheat noodles.” After New Year’s Eve, there is a plethora of foodstuffs called, collectively osechi ryori, food that can be eaten cold, so that you don’t need to reheat them on the stove (from a tradition when the New Year was one of the few times that the women of the household didn’t need to work and cook all the time). Many of the osechi ryori dishes are sushi style, with vinegar rice, or pickled vegetables and fish.

One of the traditions in Kyoto includes giving a kasane mochi set to your teacher, especially if the teacher is in a traditional art, such as tea ceremony, flower arrangement, or flute (and, of course, koryu budo). This was a way of thanking the teacher, who

could use it for their altar, and then consume it afterwards. This tradition probably arose from a time when white polished rice was quite rare and expensive, and so giving rice as a gift was considered very respectful of one’s teacher. Maybe rice may not be that appropriate in the West, but a small thank you note or present to thank your teacher would be a nice tradition to start, don’t you think?

These are but some of the observances that take place during a traditional New Year’s holiday in Japan. Many of the rituals are practiced by the koryu dojo I am attached to in Kyoto, or by my family, or the tea ceremony group I belong to. Other events, rituals, and ceremonies are also observed throughout the year such as Setsubun, Dolls’ Day, Children’s Day, and so on. The private grounds surrounding the budo dojo I attend in Kyoto has several varieties of cherry trees, so when they bloom in the spring, it is a beautiful sight. This has given rise to a special spring embu outside the dojo, under the cherry trees, just in time for the cherry blossom viewing season. The embu is followed by an afternoon picnic beneath the trees with copious amounts of liquor, much friendship, laughter and fun, and a karaoke sing-along.

Traditions, after all, are not just about serious, deadpan, disciplined rituals. They are also about celebrations of shared training, of shared hardship, friendship and fun. Ritual and traditions are part of being human, to celebrate the steady passage of time, and to help give structure to an organization and the people in it.

Done with the wrong attitude and in the wrong way, of course rituals and traditions can be stiff and boring, meaningless and empty. Done with heart and soul, rituals and tradition give body and depth to a traditional dojo that non-traditional, business-like, “no-nonsense,” eclectic martial arts training centers can only envy but never duplicate.

**Shudokan Martial Arts  
Association**

PO Box 6022  
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-6022

**Phone:**

1-734-645-6441

**E-Mail:**

shudokan@smaa-hq.com

**About the Author:** An early supporter of the SMAA, Wayne Muromoto is a member of the SMAA Board of Advisors. He teaches Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu iaido and Bitchuden Takeuchi Ryu jujutsu at his Seifukan Dojo in Hawaii. Visit <http://www.seifukanhawaii.org> for more information.

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