

Ritual, Reverence, and Respect

In my semi-private classes, we informally bow in and out (*ritsu-rei*: standing bow), but every once in a while, we kneel and I ask the *sempai* (senior student) to give formal commands so that students do not forget the rituals that usually accompany a traditional martial art. In some dojo, as in some churches, the ritual is extensive, the meditation prolonged, and the session stricter.

No one can deny that a service for Orthodox Judaism or Orthodox Catholicism is more ritualistic than a service for Congregational Protestantism. In the stricter services, the experience of the ritual is more important than any pulpit homily. Conversely, the less ritualistic the service, the more the minister's sermon takes precedence.

Similarly, in traditional martial arts, a ritualistic beginning suggests that the students are there to experience the art, to emulate it, and *to let the art itself incidentally develop them in the process*. In less formal schools, the *direct development of student skills* is the primary object of the class. The traditional training is merely a tool to that end.

The more practical-minded the teachings of a school, the less patient its members are with ritual. The more ritualistic a school, the less patient its members are with those schools that get down and dirty without an overt nod to reverence, usually expressed in ritual. They see, in students from practical martial arts schools, a lack of character born of lack of respect, itself born of a lack of ritual.

By staying true to their specific trajectories, both extremes miss a point they may share. Practicality does not want to be distracted by impractical ritual, but it probably does not want to produce irreverent tough-guy students, either. Ritualism does not want to rush into technique without setting a reverential tone in the class, but it does not want to produce effete dilettantes, either.

I remember being a child in a Christian Doctrine class, dutifully going through all the required rituals. The few disrespectful wise-crackers that sat in the back perfunctorily repeated the rituals so that they would not be excommunicated from the pews and thus sent home having to explain themselves to their parental units. But they never ceased from being irreverent wise-crackers. I also remember a couple of them, filled with bravado from having gotten away with being disrespectful wise-crackers, pushing their luck by verbally bullying the quieter, more respectful guys, who never seem to get into fights, but if pushed, would finish it with authority and then go about their business. We need not discuss the specifics of the denouement. Suffice to say that their quiet reverence was as deceptive as was the wise-crackers' bravado.

Ritual, in my humble opinion, can easily become a substitute for a healthy respect for a safety that respects the power of the martial techniques. A little indulgence in ritual (and the adaptation of rituals that encourage safe training) reminds one to respect not only who they are, but also what they can do.

Conversely, a ritualistic practice that never addresses practical concerns is always in danger of falling into a fantasy efficacy. One's ritualistic respect for potential power and one's shirking the mantle of irreverent wise-cracker does not automatically make one martially effective.

Ritual is one way to promote a reverent atmosphere, but it does not itself produce respect. Being an effective martial artist can produce respect from others, but does not itself give one a reverence for the process, or respect for one's own abilities, for other students, or even for those irreverent wise-crackers, who, just to push their luck, will occasionally get in your face.

Be as tough as you want, but don't neglect some aspect of respectful ritual. In everyday life, at least as it relates to budo training, there are few uglier things than two irreverent pseudo-martial artists pretending to be the baddest dude in the valley because no one ever taught them to bow or meditate for longer than it took to step into their gi pants.