

THE JAPANESE ZEN TEACHING METHOD

by Wayne Roy

Since the introduction of martial arts into the West, the Zen teaching method has been a source of inspiration and intrigue for many people. Movies and television continue to feature stories of secret training practices and feats of endurance. In this article I hope to shed some light on the mysterious teaching practices of Japan.

Some time ago I was invited to attend a five-day training workshop on Kyudo (Archery), and the experience was a classic example of the Japanese way of teaching. The training involved very little explanation, but there was a strong emphasis on understanding the proper "feeling" of the experience. This typically Japanese approach to teaching requires students to have patience and endurance. The Kyudo practitioners didn't always know the reasons behind the ceremony and training practices, however the old ways are considered to be a source of great wisdom by the Japanese. And consequently, they are followed without question.

The daily training routine was based on Zen Buddhist Temple practices :

Wake-up at 7.30am, with breakfast at 8am (a late start for the westerners).

9:15 - 10:15 self practice *(no talking)

10:15 - 10:30 clean the dojo in preparation for the Master's arrival

10:30 - 11:30 the Master arrives, and gives personal instruction to every archer *(only one or two shots each).

11:30 - 12:00 clean the toilets and compound *(no talking).



12:00 noon lunch, and rest time

2:00 - 3:30 self practice *(no talking)

3:30 - 4:45 clean the toilets and compound *(no talking)

5:00 - 5:10 Buddhist chanting

5:10pm dinner, and rest time

7:00 - 8:30 the Master arrives and gives personal instruction to each archer *(only one or two shots each).

8:30 - 9:30 question time, and personal philosophical comment from the Master...which was brutally honest, and often reduced practitioners to tears.

9:30pm cup of tea and bed time, except for the people who had to pack the dojo equipment that night.

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Zen Teaching Method continues:

One day during a lunch break, one of the senior practitioners said to me that I should consider coming to Japan for their Summer or Winter Keiko (workshop). He went on to say "It's an amazing experience. The dojo is located at a Buddhist Temple. During the Summer, the weather is hot and sticky, and we get up at 4.30 in the morning. And in the Winter it's freezing cold."

Now anyone listening to that description might think that the man was crazy. But he wasn't. He understood the benefits of this old Japanese training method, and he was inviting me to benefit from it too. In fact, during our conversation he said to me that the Master still preferred the old style of workshop, when the training would go for ten days. That's ten days of very hot or very cold weather, getting up everyday before sunrise, cleaning the dojo, cleaning the toilets, sweeping fallen leaves, practicing without talking to anyone, then each night receiving comments from the Master that

Now you might think to the yourself "Why would anyone willingly go through an experience like that ?" Well not everyone does it willingly.

Some first-timers, especially foreigners with romantic ideas of training in a Japanese Temple, aren't emotionally prepared for such an experience at all. Some often leave after only one day of training.

What people don't realise is that the structure of an old-style Japanese workshop is meant to wear you down. It takes you out of your comfort zone, nothing is explained to you...you perform menial cleaning tasks... and you aren't free to talk to other practitioners anytime you like. This process leaves you only one place to go...inside yourself. You begin to question experience. You question the training, you question your attitudes, and you question the limits of your personality. In short, you come face to face with your strengths and weaknesses. And if you endure, then you might break through to a new level of consciousness. But there are no guarantees. Some people persevere year after year with Kyudo, but don't experience any significant breakthrough.



That's one of the unusual aspects of the oriental teaching method...it provides a Way of Enlightenment but not a detailed map of how to actually get there. This makes the journey a difficult one for Westerners and Japanese alike. It's a personal quest for enlightenment, and no-one can tell you exactly how to achieve it. The only advice you're given is: practice, practice, practice. This Japanese teaching method is based on the code of conduct of the oriental culture: do what you're told; believe what you're told; and don't question what you're told.

This code can be extremely frustrating for Western practitioners who are used to receiving information about what they're expected to do, and achieve. During the five-day workshop, one of the Zen Buddhist Priests gave a lecture on Zen meditation, and all of the Western practitioners were keen to know more about the technique.

He began by saying, First you sit like this (legs folded in a knot).

I put my hand up and politely asked. Why sir?

Zen Teaching Method continues:

He looked at me, paused, and said. I don't know, it's just the Japanese way.

Then I asked "But didn't this sitting technique originate in India?"

Well yes. But let's continue. After you sit properly, you hold your hands like this, with your right hand in your left palm.

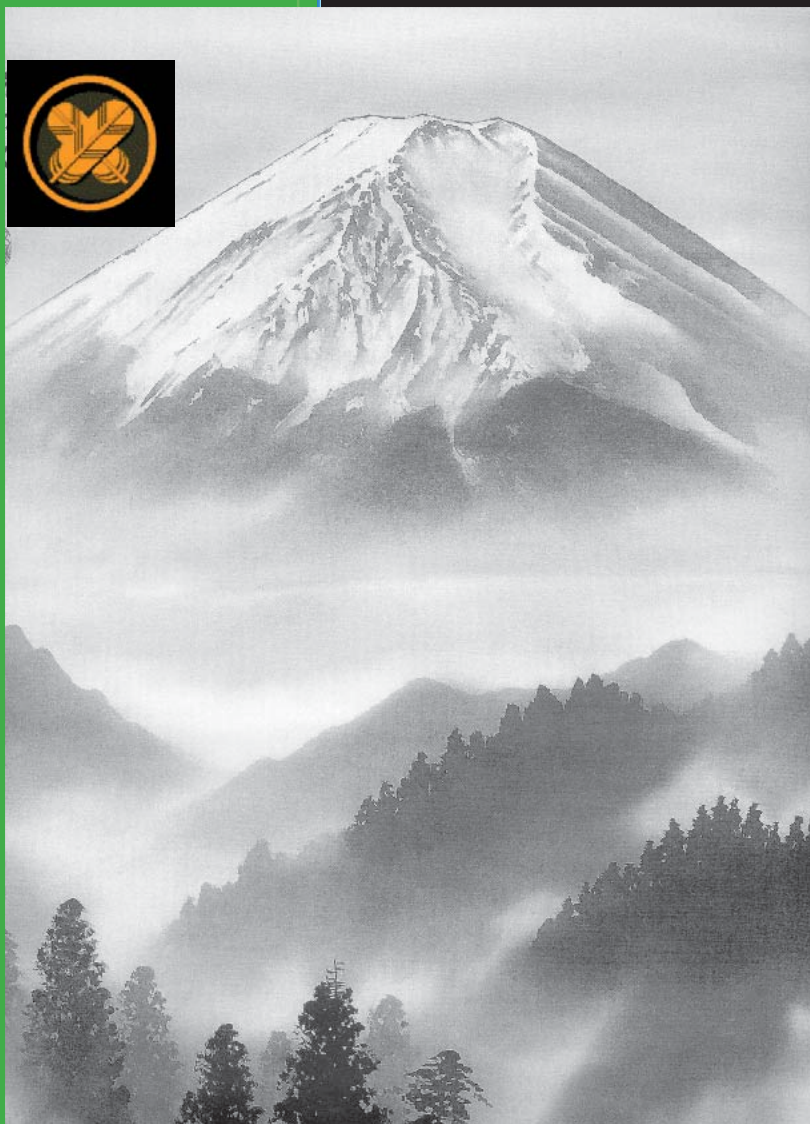
I put my hand up again and politely asked. Why? It's just the Japanese way, he said.

Then I asked Sir, why do we meditate in cold weather without anything on our head or feet? Surely it would be healthier to be protected from the cold."t's done. And it's only for twenty minutes, it won't hurt you. He patiently replied I don't know why. It's just the way. Now I want to point out to you that I wasn't trying to be difficult. That lecture was the only opportunity I would have to hear about the Zen Buddhist meditation technique, and I wanted as much insight as I could get. And it's interesting to note that once I started to ask questions, other Westerners also put their hands up and were told to be patient. I quickly learnt that the traditional Japanese teaching method relies on the students having patience and endurance, which coincidentally is the meaning of the Japanese character Nin in the words ninja and ninjutsu.

Personally, I didn't really expect the Priest to be able to answer all my questions. Why not? Because I had lived in Japan, and I understood that he had been trained in the traditional Japanese way which involves: doing what you're told; believing what you're told; and not questioning what you're told.

FEATURE ARTICLE

It is interesting to note that because of this cultural code, Japanese students think that if they're meant to know something, then the Sensei will tell them. If there is something that they're not told, then they consider that information to be unnecessary for them at this point in time. This is a strange concept for Westerners to accept. But it's also strange for a Japanese Teacher (or Priest) to be asked so many questions. They're not used to it, and can "lose face" (honour) when it becomes obvious that they don't know all the answers. When I lived with Nagato Sensei in Japan in 1980, I continually asked questions about ninjutsu training. He could answer many of



my questions, but there were some that he could not answer at all. And it's at that point that I was usually reprimanded, and told to be patient. I quickly learnt that the traditional Japanese teaching method relies on the students having patience and endurance, which coincidentally is the meaning of the Japanese character "Nin" in the words ninja and ninjutsu.