

SPECIAL DOJO SECTION!

The Traditional Dojo Revisited: *The Sacred and the Profane.*

by Rev. Kensho Furuya

I suppose that I deal with the same problems as every other martial arts instructor: rent, soliciting more students, paying bills. When I hear people discussing their *dojo*, the conversation always seems to turn to the problems of business. I don't deny this, because it is the reality of maintaining a successful school today. Even the great teacher must pay his landlord, the Department of Water and Power and the telephone company every month.

No one can deny that a good dojo is conveniently located, has an easily visible sign, lots of walk-by traffic, safe parking, attractive interior, a lounge for the students, a place to buy supplies, etc. Some schools seem to be better equipped than Club Med or the fanciest health spa. I gave up long ago expecting prospective students to ask about my qualifications as a teacher, or how many classes there are a week. It no longer surprises me when they ask if I have a sauna, chrome-plated free weights or uniforms in a variety of colors. What a contrast to the "traditional" dojo of long ago!

The dojo was built by Kensho Furuya himself in 1984 according to the style of a traditional dojo in Japan of about the 17th century. This dojo is considered unique of its kind outside of Japan where the traditional style dojo is rapidly disappearing and being replaced by the modern gym.

Photos courtesy of Rev. Kensho Furuya

Coming to Terms

Today, we use the term “dojo” to refer to any martial arts school. More rarely, we use the term *juku*, which connotes a smaller, private, more intensive school, or *keiko-ba* which simply refers to a practice area. To be more informal and up-to-date, we might use the term *kyoshitsu*, which has the nuance of a single, tiny room where one receives instruction.

A high school or a university is not referred to as a dojo. A language or driving school can not be a dojo. But where one studies the tea ceremony, flower arrangement or classical dance, where people study under a master to learn a traditional craft or art form such as carpentry or poetry, where priests perform a sacred Buddhist ceremony, or a meditation hall where one prays—all may be designated a dojo.

In Zen, there is a famous saying, “Your mind is your dojo.” Another well-known saying is, “The world is your dojo.” A dojo implies a place where one investigates the spiritual and sacred, as well as physical or technical training.

Dojo Origins

Dojo is an old word from the Chinese language. It comprises two Chinese characters meaning “way,” and “place” respectively. Literally, it is where one practices the “Way.”

In very early Chinese history, the dojo was a sacred altar where minister and diviners calculated the “Way of Heaven.” In ancient China, the emperor, bearing the “Mandate of Heaven,” was required to follow “Heaven’s Will” in all matters of state. Therefore, he employed imperial diviners to study the heavens by watching the stars and reading the patterns of cracks on deer bones and tortoise shells thrown into a sacred fire. Some consider this to be one origin of the Chinese pictographs or characters. This sacred area was

Entrance way to the dojo passing through a tiny garden and gateway. The sign reads “Bansetsu-an” or “Retreat of the Untalented One.”



called the dojo, or *dao-chang* in Chinese.

Dojo of the Yamabushi

In the eighth and ninth centuries, mountain ascetics or *yamabushi*—literally “mountain warriors”—practiced an eclectic form of esoteric Buddhism in the sacred mountains such as Mt. Haguro and Mt. Gassan in Japan, as they still do to this very day.

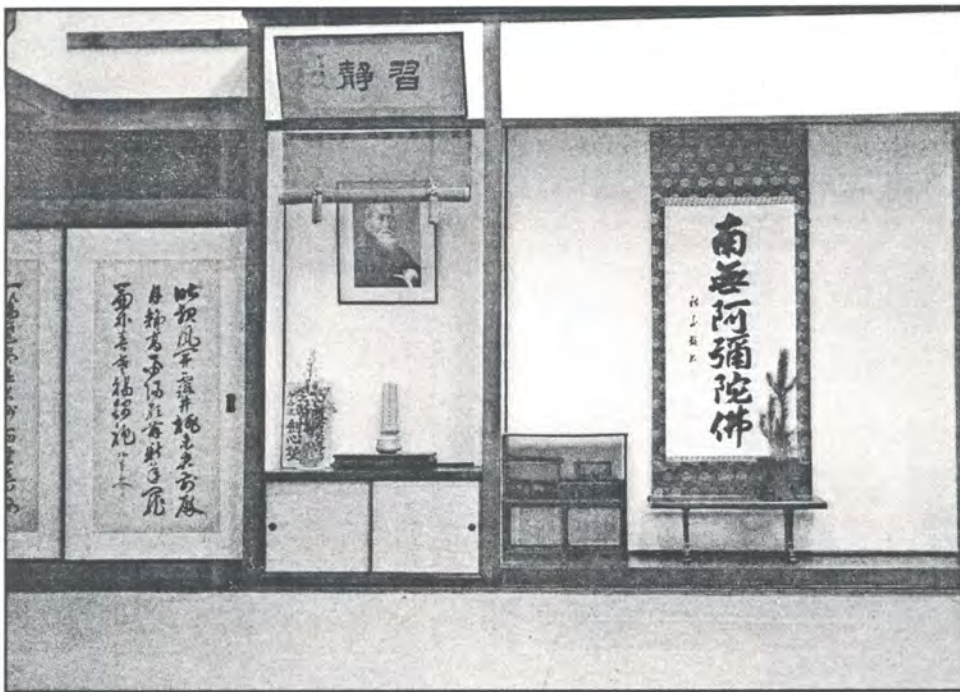
Their patriarch was En-no-Gyoja, of whom we know very little, but it is said he came to Japan from China in the eighth century, bringing many mysterious rituals which he practiced deep in the mountains. According to legend, he lived several hundred years, mastering the art of life over death, and achieving the power to levitate and to be in several places at once—an art known as *kawarimi-jutsu* or the art of transmigration.

These yamabushi meditated, fasted,

stood under waterfalls, walked across burning coals, and were said to achieve mystical powers. Their rituals were practiced in secret, sacred sites throughout the mountains—near trees, unusual rock formations, waterfalls, and in caves—and these places were called “dojo.”

The “Rei-i-ki” or “Records of Stories of the Miraculous,” written about the 11th century, records a story about a warrior who descended the mountain but missed the ferry which had begun across the river. He demanded that the boatman return to shore, but the boatman argued that he should wait until his return trip. This angered the impatient yamabushi, who performed some magical incantations and drew the boat back to the shore through his powers.

Ushiwaka-maru—later known as Minamoto Yoshitsune, the great warrior-general—is said to have learned the se-



Shomen: focal point of the dojo and seat of honor where a photo of the late Morihei Ueshiba O-Sensei, the founder of aikido, is housed. Inside the *tokonoma* is the Founder's Memorial Tablet. Above the photo are the characters "Shu-sei," or "Practice Serenity." The photo was taken during the 1994 New Year and the seasonal scroll reads, "Namu Amida Butsu" or "Hail to Amida Buddha."

cret arts of swordsmanship deep in the sacred mountains of Kurama outside of Kyoto, from yamabushi who were actually *tengu* or mountain goblins in disguise. The Japanized Chinese pronunciation is "Gikei," and there is a legend that Yoshitsune did not die at the hands of his brother, Yoritomo, but escaped to the mainland and was later known as "Genghis" Khan. However, this is a recent, unsubstantiated theory based only on the fact that "Gikei" and "Genghis" sound similar, and that they both lived about the same period.

Physical and Spiritual

It is difficult to say who coined the term "dojo," but it seems the most likely term possible for a martial arts school. "Dojo" doesn't only mean a place for physical training, such as a gymnasium, but is a sacred place of profound spiritual training as well. According to

tradition, the first Japanese schools of swordsmanship and martial arts in general began at the Kashima and Katori shrines. Both are ancient Shinto shrines in Japan, and this also gives a nuance of the religious.

View of the practice area showing the exterior of a traditional three tatami room built inside the dojo. This room functions as a space for Zen meditation and the practice of the tea ceremony. All of the doors and furniture in the dojo are antiques more than one hundred years old, brought over from Japan especially for the construction of this school. The wooden placard on the right is by Furuya Sensei's Zen master.



Of course, for the most part, a dojo is four walls, a roof which doesn't leak in the rain and a good training area. While Miyamoto Musashi's dojo was the mountains and streams, Kano Jigoro, the founder of judo, first opened his school in the main prayer hall of a Buddhist temple. Ueshiba Morihei, the founder of *aikido*, began some of his early training in the back garden of a navy admiral's home. Funakoshi Gichin started teaching karate in Japan in a university gymnasium. Traditionally, however, there were many important elements of the dojo which are relatively forgotten today.

Mon: The Entrance Gate

In ancient times, the gate in front of the school was given utmost importance. It was by seeing the gate that one could tell the level, rank and size of the dojo.

In Japan between the 17th and 19th centuries, government law regulated the size of the dojo's gate—determined by the status and rank of the teacher.

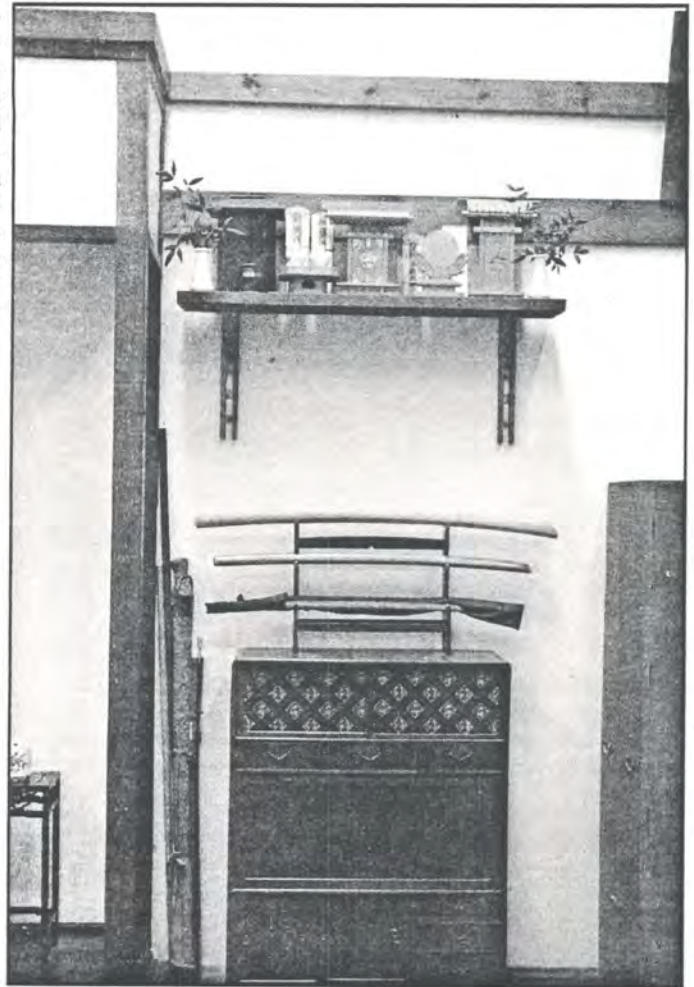
The term for becoming a student in a dojo is *nyumon*, which literally means “entering the gate.” Today, instructors wonder how to drag students off the street to sign up. In olden times, when a student came to study, the normal response was, “Go away,” no matter how poor the dojo. This is a tradition from the Buddhist temples to test the aspiring student's sincerity and earnestness. Some students waited for days outside the school before being admitted. Traditionally the wait is three days, but there are stories of students waiting for several years outside the school. In the Buddhist temple, the aspiring student waits outside the gate, and when he is finally admitted, he is allowed into a small room where he must wait in seated meditation from one to two weeks. This is the second test of the new student's sincerity. However, in modern times, a senior student comes in every day to acquaint the new student with the temple's rules, regulations and rituals.

The gate or entrance of the dojo must be kept immaculately clean at all times. This is the student's first job in the morning. If the front gate is in bad repair or does not represent the grandeur or level of the dojo temple, this saying applies: “If the gate is unkempt, move on; the discipline is no good here.”

In Japan, as a young kid, I was walking with my teacher when we passed by a nice old house with a big stone monument by the front entrance saying that this was the traditional residence of many generations of a famous sword school.

“Let's go in, I want to have a look,” I said. My teacher laughed, saying, “A punk like you shouldn't even think about entering such an exalted place.”

The *kamidana* or “dojo shrine” houses protective tablets from various temples and shrines in Japan mainly related to martial arts. Offerings of rice grain, salt and water are offered daily to the dojo's protecting deities. Below are Furuya Sensei's personal weapons for training.



Kamban: The Sign

Today, the dojo sign is purely a business consideration. In olden days, the sign indicated the teacher's status. Some signs were imposing, as if to make the student think twice before he entered. One common sign depicted a rice bowl and sickle. This has a secret meaning of “Do you dare enter? We don't care!” It is read as: “kama” (sickle) and “wan” (rice bowl) or *kamawan*—“We dare you!” in colloquial Japanese.

The sign board is the soul of the dojo. In Japanese, the term *kin-kamban* or “sign board of pure gold” means a good reputation. *Dojo-yaburi* means “dojo breaking,” an ancient form of party crashing practiced when outsiders come in a defeat the students and teacher. A sign of victory (very rude, indeed) is to take the defeated school's sign board and break it in front of

everyone, or take it home and keep it. All students are obligated to protect the dojo's sign as a symbol of its reputation.

Entering, one first sees the rules of the dojo. A common sign reads “*Shoko kyakka*” or “Watch your step!” This is not in the same category as a sign reading “Wet floor, watch your step,” or “No smoking.” It comes from the very famous Zen teaching about a sword teacher long ago who used to hide behind the entrance of his dojo, observing his students as they arrived for class. If the students appeared careless or unaware, he would smack them hard on the head with his bamboo sword. (I often wonder how quickly his students caught on to his trick!)

Shomen: The Head of the Dojo

Inside the dojo, the focal point is the *shomen*. This is where the teacher or

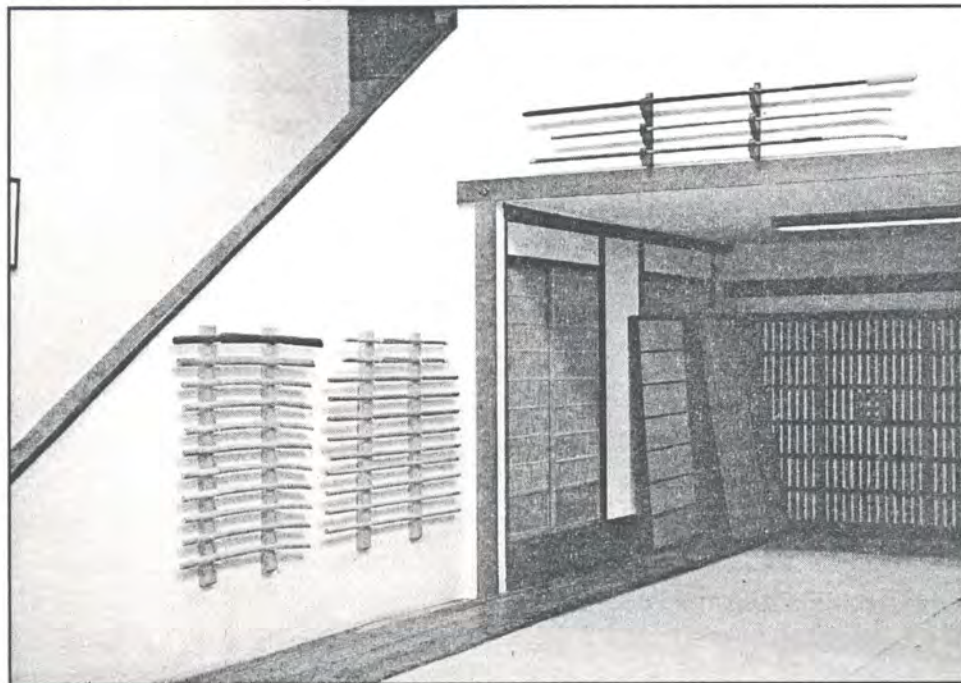


Another view of the dojo showing the practice area. The darker doors in the corner (center of photo) are the entrance to the *mizuya* where the utensils for the tea ceremony are prepared. This room also keeps the equipment for cleaning the dojo which is done daily before the practice as an important part of the student's training.

master sits, and where the scrolls bearing the names of the patron saints or guardian deities of martial arts are displayed. Traditionally, the names are of the first school (deities) of martial arts, Katori Dai-myojin and Kashima Dai-myojin. Often, another deity is displayed, Hachiman Dai-bosatsu, the patron mar-

tial saint of the Minamoto Clan (Yoshitsune's family). Even the most modern dojo in Japan today will place the *kami-dana* or shrine of the dojo here. This is a small wooden Shinto shrine with the name of a local deity or protecting god inside. It is decorated with offerings of traditional water, salt and rice grains.

Weapons racks holding *bokken* (wooden swords), *jo* (long staff) and *yari* (spears) for training.



On important occasions, *sake* rice wine and sweet rice cakes are offered. It is often decorated with sasaki tree branches and the sacred mirror—one of the three symbols of Shinto mythology: the sacred sword, jewel, and mirror. It is the place of honor in the dojo.

Links to the Past

You could fill books with the special architecture of the dojo and its traditions and history. In a way, studying how dojo have changed in appearance and meaning throughout the ages indicates how the martial arts have changed as well. As up-to-date as we have become, the martial arts are how we strengthen ourselves physically and mentally, to step forward

in our daily lives. But it also links us strongly to the past and reminds us that we should be grateful for our ancient teachers' wisdom. Every day we should remind ourselves that when we enter the dojo and bow our heads, we have entered into a tradition, thousands of years old. Yet whether we enjoy a rich dojo or a humble one, the true dojo is inside our hearts and outside in the world before us.

About the author: The Reverend Kensho Furuya, fifth dan in aikido and sixth Kyoshi in iaido Japanese swordsmanship, is Resident Chief Instructor of the Aikido Center of Los Angeles and the Los Angeles headquarters of the All Japan Battodo Swordsmanship Federation in Japan. His dojo is considered one of the most traditional and beautiful in the United States. ■