

**THE AMERICAN BRANCH  
OF THE  
NIPPON BIJUTSU TOKEN HOZON KYOKAI**



## **JAPANESE SWORD CARE AND ETIQUETTE**

Japanese swords are rightfully famous for their awesome cutting power; they are also easily damaged. The fine polish of the sword, especially, is very fragile. It is our responsibility as temporary owners of these artistic and historic artifacts to see that they pass onto future generations of collectors. Towards that end the NBTHK American Branch presents this primer on sword care and etiquette.

### **SWORD CARE TOOLS**



A small brass hammer, mekugi nuki, is used to remove the pin (mekugi) from the sword's handle. Choji oil, specially made for swords, is used to protect the sword from rust. Uchiko is a fine powder contained in an inner wrapper of paper and an outer wrapper of silk, used to clean oil from the sword. The paper and silk serve as a filter to allow only the finest uchiko particles onto the blade. There are different grades of uchiko; only the best should be used on blades in polish and the uchiko ball used on blades in polish shouldn't be used on blades with any rust. Nugui gami (sword paper) is used to wipe uchiko and oil from the blade. This should be thoroughly crumpled

before use to remove any coarse fibers. Clean, unscented, white facial tissue that hasn't been made from recycled fibers can be used in place of the nugui gami.

### **EVERY DAY SWORD CARE**

When a sword isn't being viewed it should be enclosed in a sword bag, which will prevent the blade from coming loose in or falling out of the scabbard. Japanese swords are best stored horizontal and in a dry environment (not a damp basement).

When carrying a mounted sword, whether in Samurai mounts or plain wooden mounts (shira-saya) always keep the handle higher than the scabbard. At all times, when the sword is mounted, it must have the pin (mekugi) through the hole in the handle and tang of the sword. Without the mekugi the blade can move inside the scabbard and become chipped or scratched.

Never touch the polished portion of the blade; the slightly corrosive sweat of your fingers can etch fingerprints onto the blade's surface. Never touch the polished part of the sword to your clothing. To do so is considered bad manners and can damage the polish.

### Unsheathing the Sword:

Grasp the scabbard (saya) near its mouth from below with your left hand. Grasp the handle (tsuka) from above with your right hand. With the sword held horizontally and pointing away from you, edge facing the ceiling, gently withdraw the blade from the scabbard. Edge to the ceiling allows the blade to ride on its back (mune) and lessens the chance of scratching the polish or chipping the edge. Don't stop part way to examine the blade, as this also can damage the edge. When the blade is almost completely withdrawn, lower the far end of the scabbard a bit and finish.



### Removing the Handle:

First the pin (mekugi) must be removed. Determine which end of the mekugi is smaller and gently push on this end with the mekugi hammer. Mekugi are easily lost so keep track of where it is when out of the handle. Hold the bottom of the handle in your left fist, with the blade angled up past your right shoulder and the edge pointing away from you. Strike the top of your left fist with your right fist, gently at first blow and with added force on subsequent blows until the sword comes loose in the handle. Once loose, a few gentle taps on your fist should advance the blade enough for you to get your fingers on the tang (nakago) and lift the sword from the handle. If the sword isn't loose don't try to force it; a few more taps on your fist are in order. Force applied at the habaki can damage the habaki or chip the beginning of the sword's edge (hamachi).



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One note of caution: tanto and short wakizashi can have small nakagos. Be very gentle with the first blow on your fist, or the blade might go flying.

Once free of the handle you can slide the tsuba and washers (seppa) off the tang. To remove the habaki grasp it by its sides and pull down gently.

## Examining the Sword:



With the nakago in one hand you can rest the upper portion of the sword on a soft, clean cloth or sword paper in your other hand. As you examine the sword, be aware of your surroundings. You don't want to bump into a lamp or person, or put the blade into the ceiling.

Slide the habaki onto the tang the tsuba and washers in their original the handle vertical and lower the nakago into the handle. Maintain the sword in position and tap on the bottom of the the heal of your free hand. A few taps sufficient to firmly seat the nakago in

Replacing the blade in the reverse of the removal process. With the in your left hand, far end slightly the back of the sword tip in the mouth of edge to the ceiling. As you gently slide raise the far end of the scabbard until be in the right plane. Continue until the in the mouth of the scabbard.

## Reassembling the Sword:



and replace the handle. Hold of the sword the vertical handle with should be the handle. the handle. scabbard is a scabbard held lowered, lay the scabbard, the blade in, you feel it to habaki seats

## Passing a Sword from Person to Person:

If the sword is in its mounts the passer holds the sword horizontal with the edge facing himself, one hand at the end of the handle and the other towards the other end of the scabbard. The receiver places one hand on the handle and the other on the scabbard, and acknowledges control before the pass is made. If the blade is bare or mounted in the handle only, the passer grasps the blade either at the top of the handle or the top of the nakago (but below the polish). The blade should be vertical and the edge should face the passer. The receiver grasps the nakago or handle below the passer's hand, acknowledges control, and takes the sword.



Note: at all times during the pass the edge of the sword faces the person passing. It is considered bad manners to pass a sword with the edge facing the recipient.

### **Oiling the Sword:**

When the sword isn't being viewed it should be protected with a very fine coat of Choji oil. The 1<sup>st</sup> few months after a sword is polished, due to latent water from the polishing process, is a time when the oil coat is especially important.



Place 2 or 3 drops of the oil on a clean piece of tissue. Remove all the mounts from the sword. With the paper folded over the back of the blade, starting an inch above the nakago, gently wipe up the blade to the tip. You don't want to start at the top of the nakago because doing so risks dragging rust particles from the nakago over the sword's polish. This last inch at the bottom of the sword is wiped downward to the nakago after the rest of the blade has been oiled.

At this point the polished part of the sword is coated in oil, probably too much. Take a clean piece of tissue or crumpled sword paper and gently wipe the oil off the sword. The tiny amount of oil that is left on the blade is sufficient to protect it. If too much oil is left on the sword it can collect inside the scabbard and create a gummy mess.

### **Cleaning Oil from the Sword:**

In order to clearly see the grain and temper of a Japanese sword, the oil must be removed. Begin by wiping with a clean tissue, from an inch above the nakago up to the point and then that last inch down to the nakago. Hold the blade in your left hand with the edge facing away from you and strike the back (mune) of the blade with the uchiko ball. Half dozen strikes with the ball over the length of the mune should be sufficient. Sometimes the uchiko ball can let loose coarse particles that could scratch the polish. If you strike the mune these particles will fly by the blade and only fine particles will settle.



With the sword paper or clean tissue wrapped around the back of the blade gently wipe as before, up to the point and down to the nakago. Be careful not to exert heavy pressure and never go back and forth over a particular spot; gentle, continuous strokes are called for.

Special care must be taken when applying uchiko to swords with carvings (hori-mono) on the blade. The powder can accumulate in the carving and if this is then picked up by the tissue and dragged over the polish, scratching can occur. Try to keep the uchiko away from carvings and take care not to wipe the carvings when wiping the blade. Any oil that collects in carvings can be cleaned by dabbing with tissue.

### **Repairing and Polishing Japanese Swords:**

This one is easy; don't do it. Sword polishing is an incredibly detailed craft that requires many years apprenticeship to become qualified in Japan. It isn't likely that a beginning collector or the guy at the gun show who watched a couple polishing videos will accomplish anything other than damage.

Be careful who you allow to polish your swords. There are many polishers in the West who claim to know what they're doing; only a handful have the proper training.

### **Care of Sword Mountings:**

Keep them clean, dry, and protected. Never try to clean sword mounts with anything the least bit abrasive. Repair is best left to those with proper training.

## **ETIQUETTE AT SWORD SHOWS**

Everything said above about sword etiquette applies when viewing swords at the shows in the West. Beyond that, here are a few other suggestions.

Ask permission before looking at the swords on a table.

Be careful not to bump into other people when looking at a sword. The shows are sometimes very crowded.

Never practice quick draws or sword swinging at a show (this should be a no-brainer, but you'd be surprised..).

### **ETIQUETTE AT SPECIAL DISPLAYS**

Of late the NBTHK American Branch has been presenting special displays at sword shows in the US. These have been great opportunities to hold and examine highly important swords in polish. Special care is required during these displays.

Before entering the room put away anything hanging over your shoulder: purse, camera, whatever. Loose bracelets or necklaces/gold chains should also be put away so as not to risk knocking against the swords. Inside the room you will find the swords resting on a long table, with waiting lines to look. Pick the shortest line to get the best shot at seeing everything.

Don't crowd the person looking at the sword. When you get to the head of the line you



will find the bare blade, point facing away from you, resting on a sword pillow on the table. At the side of the blade will be a piece of cloth folded over a piece of sword paper. Place this in the palm of your left hand and fold it open so the cloth touches your hand and the paper is on top. Grab the nakago below the polish with your right hand, pick up the sword, and lay the upper portion of the blade on the paper in your left hand. At all times you should have both hands involved in holding the blade.

If you want to change the position of the blade relative to your left hand lift it slightly and set it back down; don't slide the blade on the paper. Never touch the paper to the nakago of the sword. Keep the sword in front of you; no swinging from side to side. There will be no talking while looking at a sword. If you have a question, wait until you have set the sword down and stepped away before asking.

When your turn is up, lower the sword onto the sword pillow, letting the mune of the blade touch first, and then laying the blade over on its side with the cutting edge facing to the right, as you found it. Be sure the nakago isn't hanging over the edge of the table. Lay the cloth & paper back where you found them and refold with the cloth on the outside.

### **HOW TO SEE A JAPANESE SWORD**

There is much to appreciate in a well made Japanese sword, but much of it is hard to see if you don't know how to look. First acquaint yourself with care and etiquette, and then use the following suggestions to get the best view of your sword's shape and activity.

The first thing you should notice about a sword is its shape: is it wide or narrow and is the curvature strong or weak, low on the blade or high. Each period of Japanese sword manufacture had a distinct shape and being able to see and understand these shapes is important. Hold the sword at arm's length in your right hand with the back of the nakago (tang) vertical and

the edge facing to the left. In this position you will be able to see the curvature of the sword, how strong it is and where it is the strongest. Notice also the width of the blade, how much the sword narrows from the notches at the bottom (machi) to the point (kissaki), and the length of the kissaki.

Next you want to see the grain (hada) and temper line (hamon). This is best accomplished with a single point light source located a few feet in front of you and above your head. With the nakago in your right hand rest the upper portion of the blade on a clean cloth or sword paper in your left and point the blade towards the light. By moving the blade relative to the light reflected off its surface you will be able to see the crystal-line structure of the steel in all its variations. Can you name the sword's grain? Is the temper nioi or nie, and what other activity can you see and identify? The more you look the more you'll see, and the more you will understand.

Hope you find this useful and that you have learned something. Thank you for taking the time to read this.

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