

Ritual

A discussion of ritual in the practice of T'ai Chi Ch'uan.

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First Published March 2004

"There is wisdom in all traditions; every ritual has its power."

- *Kung-Fu: The Legend Continues*

"Ritual" can be a loaded word. Many imbue the word with theological meaning and equate any actions it describes with the practice of a formalized belief system. Sometimes this can cause challenges for those of us in the martial arts. We bow. We burn incense. We wear "special" clothing. Exploring these rituals, and others, may help us connect to the deeper meaning of what we do and discover how we might discuss our practice with those who might voice concern.

The Bow

When we bow in the kwoon (place of study), the bow is not about supplication, it is an acknowledgment of respect. This is true whether the bow is to one another, the portrait of our genealogy's founder, or to the training area. This acknowledgment is a salute.

The bow to one another signals the beginning or the ending of a lesson or a shared moment. It frames the actions we take and honors assistance received and assistance extended.

The bow to the founder of a particular genealogy, Master Yang Chein-Hou for Water Tiger School or Master Ueshiba at an Aikido dojo, is simply a way in which we express our appreciation and respect for their achievement in creating the art we practice. We know that they are not deities.

We also bow to the "place of learning." For most studios, this probably takes place as one enters or leaves at the main door and / or before one crosses the studio's training area. Regardless of the where these bows to the "place of learning" occur, we are again simply expressing our thanks and respect for the learning cultivated there.

What we must keep in mind in all instances is that each bow has intent. We do not bow for the sake of bowing. If the honor, respect, and appreciation do not exist in the mind and the heart of the individual, the action is hollow and meaningless.

The Shrine

In *T'ai Chi as a Path of Wisdom* (Boston: Shambhala, 2001, 244) Linda Myoki Lehrhaupt writes:

... shrines have important functions. They create a space that supports intensity and focus. They are repositories for the energy generated there through practice and concentration. In a sense our training space is also a shrine to ourselves, where we celebrate our basic capacity to awaken physically and mentally.

The shrine at the Water Tiger kwoon includes a portrait of Master Yang, a place to burn incense,* a tiger figurine, and a small Chinese pouch. These items help us to recognize our history and celebrate the potential we cultivate through our activities. The portrait, and the tiger probably do not require explanation, but, for the curious, the Chinese pouch was a gift specific to the Water Tiger shrine by a past student and close friend of mine. It is important to note that both Ms. Lehrhaupt and I use the word "shrine" and not "altar." Although both words carry within their many definitions a certain amount of theological meaning, "shrine" has become a little less theologically weighted in contemporary society and is often utilized instead of "monument" or "place of commemoration."



We bow to Master Yang Chein-Hou to express appreciation and respect.

The reason we burn incense is to bring what Ms. Lehrhaupt calls "supporting the intensity and focus" deeper into our experience. The shrine, and other decorative elements, establishes itself in the visual sense, the playing of music establishes itself in the auditory sense, and the incense establishes itself in the olfactory sense. Each sense we stimulate aids in allowing us to shake off the world and enjoy our time in exploration. In regard to music, however, we need to remember that some people feel the use of music while training should be avoided so that it does not become a crutch for rhythm, pace, focus, and relaxation.

It is intriguing to note that some individuals create shrines for the space in which they train at home. I am one of them. There are those that may not have a specific room they can devote solely to training, so they create portable shrines. I am not necessarily recommending anyone make his or her own shrine; however, it is something to consider

The Clothes

Though the *Kwoon Rules and Etiquette* of Water Tiger School do not include any mention of specific clothing, many studios do insist on uniform requirements of various degrees. Some individuals argue that this is merely a way in which to add to the coffers of the instructor. Although this may be true in some instances, it is not always the case. Regardless of motive, uniforms do add to the visual environment of the learning experience. As does any uniform, military or other, a studio uniform also helps to establish a community and, in most cases, clarify the structure of that community. In other words, uniforms and belt-ranking systems help to make plain the hierarchy of the studio. Even if a specific "uniform" is not required, the ritual of changing clothes from those of everyday life also symbolizes a shedding of the outside world and outside experience into a preparation for doing something special.

Be it through clothing, burning incense, or bowing, we bring certain rituals into our training to assist us in making the time we spend cultivating our art focused. It is through focus and concentration that we are able to gain greater insight into our abilities and deeper understanding of the postures, martial applications, Qi cultivation, etc., of T'ai Chi Ch'uan, or any martial art. Although our time in practice is special and full of meaning, it is not worship. Although we can only hope others will respect our rituals and traditions, we must be understanding of theirs.

* Since the original publication of this article, Water Tiger School has ceased burning incense during its classes at the studio. When we were renting space from Suffolk Aikikai, we were asked to accommodate students in their program who reported health issues with the lingering smoke and scent.

Credits:

Linda Myoki Lehrhaupt, *T'ai Chi as a Path of Wisdom* (Boston: Shambhala, 2001).

