

JAPANESE SWORD CARE AND ETIQUETTE

From NBTHK American Branch <https://nbthk-ab2.org/sword-characteristics/>

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.

EVERYDAY 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. manners and ca

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).

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.



Reassembling the Sword:

Slide the habaki onto the tang and replace the tsuba and washers in their original order.

Hold the handle vertical and lower the nakago of the sword into the handle. Maintain the sword in the vertical position and tap on the bottom of the handle with the heel of your free hand. A few taps should be sufficient to firmly seat the nakago in the handle. Replace the mekugi through the hole in the handle.



Replacing the blade in the scabbard is a reverse of the removal process. With the scabbard held in your left hand, far end slightly lowered, lay the back of the sword tip in the mouth of the scabbard, edge to the ceiling. As you gently slide the blade in, raise the far end of the scabbard until you feel it to be in the right plane. Continue until the habaki seats in the mouth of the scabbard.

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: always 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 1st 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.

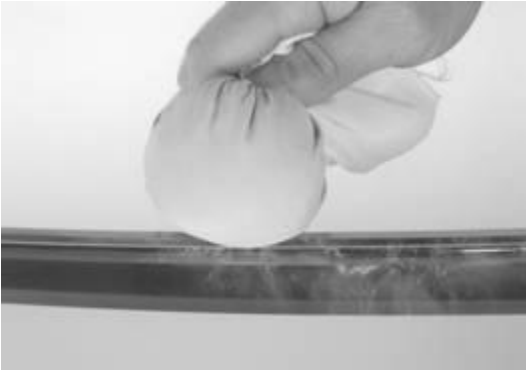


Place 2 or 3 drops of the oil on a clean piece of tissue. Remove all the mounts from the sword. With the paper folded over the back of the blade, starting an inch above the nakago, gently wipe up the blade to the tip. You don't want to start at the top of the nakago because doing so risks dragging rust 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.



***NOTE: The use of uchiko has recently become controversial. Many contemporary experts now recommend using fine microfiber cloth, used to polish lenses, in lieu of uchiko / tissue. The use of 95% or stronger Isopropyl Alcohol or Ethanol (NOT Rubbing Alcohol!) to replace the uchiko, in conjunction with the microfiber cloth, should suffice to remove any oil/dirt.**

