

Titles

by Wayne Muromoto
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What do you call your teacher? Well, besides "hey, you," for the most part, teachers of Japanese arts are generically called sensei. In general terms, sensei can be roughly translated as "teacher." The literal meaning is "one who was born before;" i.e., someone older to you. Therefore, in terms of a martial art, he is the one with the more experience who can guide you along the path.

Note here that teacher is not synonymous with "saint," "prophet," "religious savior" or "divine being." Paying proper respects to one's teacher is only right. Treating your teacher of martial arts like a cult leader who has all the answers to what's messed up in your life is just bizarre.

In proper usage, the term sensei is used after the person's last name, for example, Smith sensei. This is the Japanese way of giving titles in conversation. Thus, you wouldn't say Sensei Smith, although this is a Western way (as in Mr. Smith, or Sgt. Rock, or Commander Data). Whatever dan ("black belt level") rank the person has, if he is your club's teacher, he is a sensei.

Sensei is used in modern Japan to refer to teachers in educational institutions, in classical arts and crafts, in taiko drum clubs, paper airplane clubs, medical doctors, professors, martial arts, dance, music.. .in short, all manner of teaching-learning environments. Although the literal term does signify that the person has some kind of age and maturity, there is no set age marker as to who can be called a sensei. A young person in his/her twenties teaching kindergarten can be called a sensei, as can a 90-year old master of archery.

(This vagueness of age as a marker of who is a sensei should be particularly emphasized. I once received a letter from an American martial arts supplier who refused to put an ad in my magazine because he firmly believed that no one below his age level should have the right to be called sensei. I showed my stupidity, he claimed, by allowing a friend who was already teaching and running his own club a "sensei" because he was under that person's requisite 50 years of age. He buttressed his opinion by what he considered his incredible grasp of Japanese culture, although his Japanese language and cultural abilities rarely went beyond his dojo doors. Rather than buckle under to a potential advertiser, I sent him a note saying that we weren't going to give up our own values just to try to get him as a paying advertiser. So much for trying to make money from this thing.)

Some systems also grant the titles of renshi, kyoshi and hanshi. These are derived from kyudo and academic degrees, and may be defined as a sort of assistant professor, full professor, and tenured big-cheese professor. These are special teaching titles, like a Ph.D., and are usually not used in addressing someone in the usual dojo conversation. Thus, someone with a kyoshi rank is usually simply referred to, for example, as Smith sensei, no matter his teaching license level or belt rank, unless you are discussing that teacher in a biographical paper, introduction, or so on. In most cases, such teaching titles are only given once the person is past the godan (fifth degree) level. They are usually bestowed in terms of teaching ability and experience. Thus, you could write about someone, listing his credentials as Joe Blow, hanshi, godan, as you would address someone in a formal text as Mr. Joe Blow, Ph.D. in Economics. But it would be awkward to address him as such in a dojo conversation. Simply Blow sensei is fine enough.

Recently, some Western martial arts people have grown tired of the sensei term and have tried to make up more exotic labels for themselves, calling themselves Dai-sensei, soke-dai, and so on. This betrays, in many cases, a lack of understanding of the Japanese language (and therefore calls into question these people's authenticity). Actually, soke-dai, soke-dairi, or shihandai doesn't mean

"heap-big grandmaster." Soke does refer to a master instructor of a hereditary (and often family-inherited) school.

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But in this case, the word dai in Japanese is not the character for "big," but "in place of." Thus, a shihandai or soke-dai or soke-dairi means "someone who teaches in temporary place of" the main instructor, for certain reasons, such as the incapacity of the soke due to injuries or illnesses, etc.

No one is called Dai-whatever to refer to their "bigness" or "highness." In only one case, aikido's founder Ueshiba Morihei, was called O-sensei. This long O-actually meant "big," or "main" sensei, as opposed to the run-of-the-mill sensei under him. I suppose if someone thought they were on the same level as Ueshiba, with over 50 years' worth of intense martial arts training, he could make people in his club call him anything he wanted, including O-sensei, like Ueshiba, but I'd be hard pressed to keep from laughing if anyone in the United States, in this era, were to venture into that territory.

Classical martial arts schools, or the koryu, may have terms that are unique to their schools that do, indeed, refer to levels of expertise. In my own school, the Bitchu-den Takeuch-ryu, our head instructor, the inheritor of the tradition, is referred to as kancho, or "leader (-cho) of the hall (kan)." This term has been also used in other arts and crafts schools. Although our system is a koryu, it makes use of the modern dan-kyu ranking system, but augments it with other terms to denote levels of mastery of more advanced methods. But in large part, = teachers are usually simply referred to as sensei.

Students may be called several terms. As a student of martial arts, I often troubled over what term to use without sounding too inflated or self-serving. The following terms carry with them a sense of deep-rooted commitment to the arts, and at times I could not bring myself to think that I was that diligent a student. Instead, the Japanese language allows me to simply say "I do martial arts." However, when pressed, there are certain terms that could be used.

Deshi is a term that goes back to the old crafts training system, and infers a kind of apprenticeship. In Japanese, you can say "I am a deshi of Sato sensei" and the Japanese speaker will understand that you have an intimate and long-standing committed training regime with Sato sensei. Being an uchi-deshi is to actually live and train with the instructor's family, or to study in a way that allows you direct, one-to-one contact with the teacher both within and without the dojo, and you are also bound to perform duties beyond those in the dojo proper, like a family member.

Monjin is another term that has an even older, more classical connotation, and I would personally be wary of using it to refer to myself except in certain conversations. It literally means "someone who has entered the gates" of the training school, referring to a person who has passed the entrance and is firmly involved in intense training of a classical art, craft, or even a religious sect.

Seito means "student" in the modern sense, and can, perhaps, be used in the context of martial arts training. But more simply, I'd simply call myself, in English, a "student of martial arts," and forego all the exotic-sounding, but heavily laden Japanese terms.

Students who are older (in terms of training experience) are called your sempai; those students who went on before you. Students who are less experienced than you are your kohai, those who came after you, and those who started at roughly the same time are your dohai or dokyuusei. Although used often in Japan, I wouldn't use these terms much in a regular American dojo, because they have certain implications.

Being sempai in a Japanese training environment means that a person knowingly inherits a lot of responsibility for the training, health, welfare and education of those under him. While a kohai therefore must offer respects to the sempai, in return the sempai (ideally) takes on the kohai like a protective older brother shelters and teaches his younger brother the ways of the world. Dokyusei are expected to forge bonds of camaraderie that will weather any outside challenges or threats.

In these, and in many other Japanese terms and usages, I would offer a personal warning to any Westerner training in a traditional budo school. The terms are often laden with quite a bit of baggage that are often misunderstood or misinterpreted. Being sempai is not a privilege, but a responsibility. So if a martial arts school in America would like to institute the sempai-kohai relationship, it must be emphasized that the system was not meant to make bullies out of senior students, to act like "top dogs" due to their seniority. The more experienced students, in fact, in a sempai-kohai system, have to take more responsibility for each individual student who started after him/her. While a sempai may drive a kohai to train harder, the sempai may also have to offer words of support, guidance and even personal help to the kohai when it comes to enduring and surviving the dojo environment. Likewise, even if a kohai was so physically strong that he could beat up his sempai in randori or kumite, he would have to defer to them when it comes to decision-making or other things where knowledge of the dojo history and ways take precedence over technical and physical superiority. That's all a hard pill to swallow in our American culture of King-of-the-Hill Dog-Eat-Dog competition, but think of it this way. If you were in a combat unit and if you were a buck private, even if you were physically stronger and tougher than the sergeant or captain, you'd listen to them as your commanding officer because, hopefully, they had more awareness of what was going on and would be looking out for your butt. The dojo, however civilian and non-militaristic it presently is, is an extension of that kind of group dynamics.

In addition, the way a sensei is treated in Japan is based on deep-seated cultural traditions. Some of those traditions should be transferred to budo training in the West. Others, because they are so completely alien to Western educational ways, should be investigated and perhaps altered, even in a koryu system. But this experimentation, change and cross-cultural pollination is still ongoing. As much as we learn from the Asian cultures that birthed the martial arts, these cultures are also learning much that the West can offer. In both cases, the cultures are absorbing some of the best and (regrettably) some of the worst traits of each other.

It is up to us, as students and teachers, to try to understand both our own cultural roots, and to also try to invigorate our training with the best of Asian culture. To adopt bowing, for example, without really understanding its proper role and meaning is to simply replay ritual for ritual's sake, without any meaning or reason. On the other hand, to quickly discard bowing as "old-fashioned" is also too simplistic. The answer to such questions of usage of terminologies and customs are, of course, best left up to the individuals in the different martial arts. It is not my province to make any blanket judgments over ultimate terms and vocabularies short of what I have already outlined for any school other than my own.

About the author: **Wayne Muromoto** has a lifetime of involvement in the Japanese cultural arts. A resident of Honolulu, Hawaii, he graduated with a BA in Japanese literature and languages from Cornell University. He also received a MFA in Fine Arts, specializing in printmaking and painting, from the University of Hawaii. (Mr. Muromoto has extensively studied traditional Japanese paper making under Fujimori Yoichi Sensei in Tokushima, Shikoku, Japan.)

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