

Sword and Spirit

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— Why Budo? —

Regardless of the times in which you live, or the circumstances of your life, success largely depends on things you can control:

- **Building a foundation of strong relationships in a community of mutual support and achievement.**
- **Forging a disciplined and positive mindset.**
- **Enhancing your physical health and capabilities.**

These are exactly the benefits membership in a dojo provides.

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The Silliness of the Equality Assumption

My, my, that is a provocative title; we think so.

Did its wording send us into an emotional tiff, even for a second?

Presumptuous folks who are easily motivated by a lack of insight could quickly make assumptions about our topic today. So, before we define what we are even talking about, please quiet the room a bit, and allow me to convey the fullness of the message—to illustrate the type of equality that we are discussing and reassure those that may assume we are talking about civil liberties, inalienable rights, or any other catchphrases that are so important today. Not being dismissive, but rather trying to point out that the word equality can be examined more deeply than we often do.

Let's start with these questions, first: Are there different classes of people, and should there be? Is this appropriate for modern dojo culture? Can the art of living life be a motivating factor? Can inequality inspire us?

We are speaking of inequalities of self. We are not speaking of classes based on ethnicity, cultural background, gender, or any of the other things that would twist our emotions into a wall of resistance before we even begin.

The Concept of Equality—an Introduction to Systemic Mediocrity

Our topic of discussion should lead to the unsettling truth that we are not all equal. There. We covered that. Now that we have gotten that out of the way, let us continue. I similarly submit and assert that the dojo and Dojo Culture will prove this fact. Empirical proofs and subtle, elusive changes can lead to great personal benefit. It will be shown to us, day in and day out, at the dojo. We may experience the sweetest and most beneficial journey, but the path will also provide many frustrations, challenges, and plateaus.

The empirical evidence will be right in our face, but this is not to sound dark, as it truly is a beautiful experience and the connections that we are making in the dojo will (or should) greatly enhance our lives.



Where Can Equality be Found in the Dojo Experience?

Each member is equal in terms of their potential to have perceived value and worth to others and themselves. Each person is equal because they deserve the opportunity to flourish by their own merits, attitude, and output. Suppose we are honest and note life itself is either sink or swim. In that case, we must be honest enough to note that equality stops and starts in terms of our aptitudes, attitudes, connections with others, and our internal emotional intelligence.

As there will definitely be discernible differences in these aptitudes and attributes, then we will realize early on that there will be *soto-deshi* (outer-circle students) and *uchi-deshi* (inner-circle students). The differences between these two types of experience do not always get chalked up to technical excellence or being the preferred Superstar of the dojo. Such attitudes are quite counterproductive and even destructive to the overall path if proper Dojo Culture is to be honestly and honorably maintained.

Now for the Big Pill for You to Swallow—Drink Lots of Water...

The unsettling truth to many of us is that there are great differences and variances in many things such as aptitude, attitude, motivation, community presence, stability, mental outlook, intent towards others, and levels of compassion, gregariousness, empathy, and the willingness to stay out of the way of others. There is also a huge difference in how often we each mind our own business.

There are variances in bravery, and dare I say that this does matter, and history has shown us that. At each end of these spectrums, we remember the greatest of the brave and the greatest cowards in history. Within the boundaries of these two, most people will be quite forgettable by history. History does not note nor remember everyone equally or even accurately. There are so many aspects to life that show that equality, in a way, is just categorically false.

Another way to examine this is to admit that opinions matter and should not be denied without civil discourse and productive communication. However, not everyone's

facts are equal. If we understand critical thinking, debate, and argument, we know that all effects are not equal. The word “fact” itself means that there has been a strenuous process of discernment of the details and information on any given topic. A fact is a fact, not a hypothesis or theory.

Since much of the world relies on rumor, conjecture, or whispers from misconstrued ramblings, all communication is not equal. All communicators are not equal. I hope by now I've gotten my point across to you. We are not talking about equal civil rights or social rights; we are talking about the actual level of equality between people, ideas, and assertions.

So, before we ramble on incessantly and lose track or lose our audience, let us discuss equality in terms of social order, social acceptance, and social benefit.

We'll Limit Our Definition of Equality for this Discussion

Languages are quite tantalizing, as they can be so rich and complex. One word can evoke different thoughts depending on the context of its use. This discussion of equality is important when examined through the lens of Dojo Culture. Hierarchy is not inherently bad. If presented in a way that is both beneficial to the individual and the group, hierarchy can be quite admirable.

Any aspects leading to less than positive intent in the development of every member, or allowing one member to affect the group adversely, must be seen as inimical to the objectives and desired outcome of following the Way. Equal acceptance of all ideas, opinions, or motivations within the dojo is not an ideal. Some ideas, actions, or motivations will, quite simply put, be detrimental to the dojo, the group itself, and the individual members.

The Frustrating Fact of the Matter, and What Society is Not Facing Right Now

There will be those that are more stable as productive members of the dojo, as training partners, and as potential assets to the community at large. The dojo can act as a microcosm to examine our wider communities, as the student body and leadership of said dojo comes from sources outside of the insular, Dojo Culture experience.



The various protocols, regulations, principles, techniques, strategies, and even the admonitions and chastisements in the dojo are part of forging the external and internal self. There will be those that attempt to join the dojo whose aptitudes will show that perhaps they would be best suited to another environment. It is categorically false that everyone fits into the properly austere, challenging, but delightfully frustrating experience of Dojo Culture.

The dojo is supposed to be delightfully unsettling, but in beneficial ways. There should be no emotional abuse! That should never be part of the process, and never let an unhealthy, narcissistic leader tell you otherwise.

We must not assume that the dojo environment is for everyone, lest we forget that much of society lacks confidence, coping mechanisms, and efficiency processes. Like the dojo, our communities are filled with people who are great at what they do and those who, frankly, stink up the joint when they enter the room.

Now, if this is shocking to us, then perhaps we have not been paying attention. I believe that we are each given blessings and gifts that we may utilize, much like a mechanic uses their tools. We must learn to tinker around inside and self-assess and make corrections.

Some are willing and able to do the work. Some struggle to do so, but keep trying. Some shrug, and say to heck with the world.

The topic of equality, when discussed honestly, can hurt people's feelings—because it is a false construct as it is being taught in society presently. We have equal, inalienable rights, but...there are levels to living, varying levels of attributes, differences in motivation, and differing reactions to stimuli, whether positive or truly horrific.

The Stark Reality of the nature of things can sometimes be unsettling and disturbing to the idealist who wants to push an agenda that is just not true. Too many are working from assumptions that are categorically wrong, and that is why we are seeing what we are seeing in the world. Equality is a tough subject for most if we discuss it honestly, depending on how we are wired, and considering variances in personal potential and aptitude. Aptitude is not a very popular topic right now, but it is easy to crush the other side of the debate.



Looking at how we truly are, in terms of our history and other factors, the question of equality starts to look silly. That being said, it is important to note that we all deserve equal courtesy.

Respect—now there is another whole topic on which I could write a book. Respect, and what makes a culture, dojo, business, and especially an individual respectable is something that I could write volumes about, and I'm not talking about value judgments or prejudicial presumptuousness. Courtesy and respect are both valuable topics, but if they are confused, then mediocrity can spring its damaging energy.

Reigi Saho is a Great Introduction to Both Courtesy and Respect, and May Provide a Few Insights

We often confuse the right to courtesy for the right to respect. Respect is for the respectable. Courtesy can be shared with all, and it is good for us. Courtesy is a form of self-defense, a cushion, a rejection of discourtesy itself.

Learning to reject discourtesy is a type of intelligence. We can be defined partially by what we will allow others



to do to us. We will also be defined by how we treat others.

In between those two factors, there is a whole lot of nothing. If we are successful, but treat people like trash, then we are a low-quality person. High productivity with low moral character should not be our goal. Unfortunately, we often put these types of people on pedestals.

So, as we see, we slipped in another topic and way for us to take a look at equality.

***Kagami no Genri*—A Workable Definition**

The realities of hierarchy, aptitude, motivation, assertiveness, compassion, helpfulness, discipline and preparedness to face reality are all taught, discerned, rejected, accepted, developed, or processed in the dojo, just as they are in society and life in general. *Kagami no Genri* or *The Principle of the Mirror* teaches us that studying individual and group efforts comes down to both nature and nurture. Both these aspects of the self will rear their heads during *keiko* (training) and other, social interactions at the dojo.

When we take a look at the dojo experience, it's not all that different from everyday life. It seems to be sequestered and insular but, believe me, the lessons contained therein, if we have our mirror and understand how to transmit the principles, teachings, and frustrations of the dojo to our everyday lives, we will be better off for it.

We must not in our personal lives cast aside the truth that is in our face: We must develop ourselves personally, to the best of our abilities, not to crush or make others feel bad, but rather to be more productive members of the group. Remember, people need people, but also people need to understand that there are levels to life and not everyone is playing the game equally, with the same level of zeal. And the final thing that I have to tell you, is that results will vary.

Our Internal Inequalities, Within the Discussion of Love of Self

Even without the ugliness of racism, systemic oppression, poverty, and other human realities that we would like to wish away, it follows that we are not all equal, and that somewhere in our individual stories, we

could have done better, more often, less often, with more aptitude, with less laziness, and the results would have been different.

The bright spot is that we can reinvent ourselves if we do not like who we are. This takes new knowledge and technology in terms of emotional intelligence, physical aptitude, and learning to deal with the trials and tribulations of human communication. Human connection and communication offer the potential for growth—or the opportunity to reject such growth (that is, in fact, a human right). We are not forced to excel. It can be a choice. It comes down to the little things. The dojo will offer many of these little things. We must pay attention, as most of the communication within the dojo and the lessons to be derived lie within the realm of nonverbal communication. We will have to deduce the subtleties in the lessons. Those easily distracted need not apply. That alone shows that not all efforts, interests, or aptitudes are equal.

If we will notice the little things, we will enhance our potential for growth. That is the exciting and redeeming value of the whole endeavor. We can walk out stronger and better prepared for life than the day we walked into the dojo. There is equality in that fact. There is an equal opportunity for everyone to either grow and become a better person, to remain where they are, or to utilize their newly acquired skills to become a more dangerous and morally corrupted individual. Because we are all not equal, the results will not be the same.

The dojo format and *kyōka* (curriculum) provides an equal basis for measuring your physical, emotional, and intellectual efforts. *Michi* is both a solo and group path and assessment. There is no overall equality across the board, not in the dojo or in life. So, results will vary, and not all odometers will have the same mileage at the end of this trip. If you understand Dojo Culture on this level, you will start taking the etiquette, processes, productive philosophies, and physical culture more seriously.

Before us is a mirror; examine it often for the cross-pollination of these benefits to your everyday life and do not see your time at the dojo as a weekend warrior pass. Otherwise, you will have missed the entire picture. Now get back to training, get back to trying your best, but forgive yourself on the bad days, and use that mirror to see



how the principles and teachings of this Dojo Culture can help us contemplate the other aspects of our lives.

The founders of our arts did not want a loose set of principles and philosophies that would be forgotten while focusing on just the physical benefits of the path. We will flesh-out this message in a series of essays, as it is rather compelling to examine the signposts along our path. To consult a barometer, if you will, or a cheat-sheet to discern connections between Dojo Culture and our overall lives.

Think About Your Efforts at the Dojo

Then examine your efforts at work, at home, in discussions, and even when enjoying a comfortable silence. The way we address all of these will be reflected in how we face the challenges, expectations, obligations, and the absolutely exciting times experienced in the dojo. All will be directly connected. Just like money does not fix your problems; it shows who you are. A person who is a mess in their everyday life that suddenly becomes financially stable will be a messed-up person with resources. On the other hand, if you are emotionally stable and disciplined, your finances will probably benefit you and the world.

Dojo Culture, money, hard times, good times, and everything in between may act as our mirror, but in the dojo, we can learn a set of processes to help us look into the mirror correctly, honestly, and thereby gain some insights.

This is not about your job, finances, gender, nationality, ethnicity or anything else. Your ability to look at your life and see how you think and how what you think makes you treat others and yourself will define whether you remain stuck where you are or enter onto a new brave path of self-assessment, finally getting out of your own way. Change begins within—use the mirror, and use the dojo experience, as it too often is perceived as just a place to punch and kick. But it truly can be a much more rewarding environment.

So, I will end with a workable definition for you, lest you walk away confused and we lose you as a result...

Kagami no Genri consists of principles defining a methodology for discernment and perceptive self-assessment, by reflecting and illuminating the experiences and teachings at the dojo in order to initiate a comparative analysis of your daily activities. In order to have a set of processes to gauge and diagnose the health of our decision-making, we apply Kagami no Genri.

Positive and negative affirmations affect us. This is a simple fact. Further, this fact is not reliant on our religion, ethnicity, gender, financial status, or own self-imposed limitations. In short, Kagami no Genri is what I call the ultimate expression of equality because everyone starts from the same beginning, the minute that they walk through the dojo door. There should be no Superstars, no Dojo Celebrities, and the fact that such misplaced, ego-elevation does happen in so many martial arts schools and dojo seems to point to a need for renewed study.

When we get to keiko, there is equality in the training because it does not matter if you had a good day or a bad day; the expectations and lessons will remain the same. Our manner of perceiving, processing stimulus, addressing our stress, and enhancing our common perceptiveness will define who we are as a martial artist and a person.

We need to stop telling ourselves that all ideas, opinions, and interpretations of facts are equal. Instead, we should give each other plenty of courtesy, assist each other where we can, and, just as importantly, know how to stay out of each other's way.

Now we bid you all a farewell, for we have our own keiko to observe today, but I sincerely hope that we will begin looking at the beautiful path that we are on in the fullness of its application. So, train seriously but do not take yourselves too seriously, and we will see you all on the other side of this article, hopefully in person at Itten Dojo one day. 🌀

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