

## Shodō 101: a brush with calligraphy

It's a quiet, bright Sunday at Otto batake, and Sachi has just arrived armed with a bar of solid black ink, several sheets of blank paper, and a thick, pointy wooden brush. Monica and I help her to assemble the tools on the *tatami* floor, then seat ourselves opposite our teacher and await instruction. Today, we will be attempting *shodō*: the ancient eastern art of writing beautifully.

We watch as Sachi settles into a kneeling position, removes the ink bar from its box, drips a little water into a stone ink well, and proceeds to rub the ink bar against the stone until the ink has mingled with the water and formed a gleaming black liquid. After testing the consistency several times on some spare paper, she is ready to begin.



Monica has recently learnt the kanji character for music (a wonderfully logical and poetic combination of the characters for “sound” and “enjoy”), so we have decided to make that our first challenge. Loading up the bristles with an ample amount of ink, Sachi brings the brush down onto the blank page in a single deft, sweeping action to form a horizontal line. This is followed by more lines: some parallel; some perpendicular; all precise and purposefully committed to the paper. After recharging the brush several times and reaching the bottom of the page with a final flourish, the kanji is complete. Sachi leans back to view her work from a distance, and emits an uncertain “hmmph”. She’s not happy with the width of the first stroke, and one line was not crisp enough at the edge. To my ignorant western eye, the character is beautiful. To Sachi, it is a disaster.

Putting her own dissatisfaction to one side, Sachi hands the brush to Monica. Monica has been studying hard; she spent the best part of last night practising the brush stroke order for this kanji under the merciless tutelage of Sachi’s mother, Yumiko (“No no no! This line must go from *right* to *left*, see?!” One more time!”). Before she gets anywhere near the ink well, Sachi gently reminds her that she must sit correctly in the kneeled position, and that the brush must be held vertically, pointing straight down towards the page. If there’s one thing I have learned about being in Japan, it is that these details *matter*.



Thus readjusted, Monica gets to work and produces what I think is an impressive imitation of Sachi’s example; Yumiko’s Do It Ten Times Perfectly rule seems to have paid off. Sachi is somewhat more critical.

“HmMMM. These lines should not be quite parallel. And this part is too big – can you see that it is not balanced with the bit underneath? And this line must have more of a... *jump* at the end. Like this, See?”

We do see. We chuckle, and I switch places with Monica to take my turn.

My legs are tucked obediently under me. The ebony ink glistens in its stone well. The thick wooden brush is slotted through my fingers, its tip hovering over the blank page...

Unfortunately, what I manage to produce makes Monica’s work look like that of a grand master calligrapher. Quite appalling. Both she and Sachi giggle as I go back to a particularly scruffy-looking

line and attempt to fill in the bits the brush initially missed: wrong move. Apparently going over what you've already done is a massive no-no in calligraphy. Get it right first time, or don't bother at all.

After a bit more surreptitious tweaking, I feel the final result is not terrible exactly. I might not be inviting any Japanese friends to scrutinise it any time soon though, for fear they wouldn't be able to actually read it. In fact in terms of technique, my managing to sit correctly is probably the only element worthy of any praise.

Of course, given my clumsy, untrained hand and complete lack of experience, I was neither expecting nor aiming for calligraphic perfection. But I did thoroughly enjoy the sensation of absolute focus and poise that my brief brush with calligraphy brought me. It also helped me to further understand an aspect of the Japanese character which I have encountered both in my work as a teacher in Japan, and as a general observer. It is clear that there is a deep-seated desire for perfection here, one that compels my students to sit silently agonising over the structure and nuance of an English sentence, so that only the most honed of utterances will finally emerge from their mouths... Perhaps they feel they can no more go back and reformulate a phrase than they can retrace a badly-rendered brush-stroke. As a Japanese friend recently put it: "we Japanese are not interested in first drafts; we want final product only."

Whether you choose to read *shodō* as an example of Japanese perfection-seeking or not, there is no doubt that having a go at it is an excellent experience. And even if the product is not up to Japanese standards, it is at least a tangible memento with which to impress those not in the know back home. I'll settle for that!

