

Giri – Debt of Gratitude (義理)

The meaning of “*giri*” is very hard to translate in English, but the general definition is “obligation” or “debt of gratitude.” But, there are other subtle meanings that do not fit within these general definitions. Even though some of Japan’s social customs are changing due to western influences, and the younger generation challenging their own traditional social customs, the concept of “obligation” is still strong in Japan. It is the concept of “*giri*” that insures that you do not forget any obligations. “*Giri*” can be seen in various social relationships:

1. Parent/children
2. Teacher/student
3. Friends
4. Work (corporate/employee)
5. Organization/Federation
6. Gift-giving exchanges to colleges or associates
7. Community – where you live or where you are from
8. Indebtedness – as in borrowing money or goods

In these relationships one is not asked to act on any obligations. For the most part it something that one should act beforehand, should the need arises. It is also bad form to remind people of their “*giri*”. If one has “*giri*” that person will never forget their obligation. One cannot just turn off “*giri*” whenever they feel like it. They either have “*giri*” or they don’t. And they must suppress their human emotions ([ninjō](#) - 人情)

This custom can be found in traditional Japanese martial arts, such as in teacher/student relationships and [senpai/kōhai](#) relationships. These days, here in the West, many consider martial arts as a commercial product. They pay for their training and expect to get their money’s worth. After a while, when they get tired of the product, they go to another school and “purchase another product.” This is not how martial arts were taught in the past. These arts were passed down from father to son (or teacher to student). It is the teachers/parents obligation to teach all that they know. And it is the student’s obligation to learn as much as they can so that the arts flows ([ryū](#) - 流) to the next generation. Here are some “*giri*” used in the martial arts:

1. Showing up to class on time and regularly
2. Respectful towards their teacher and seniors.
3. Following the dojo and organizational rules
4. Not joining or training with another teacher/organization within the same art
5. Practicing with all one’s effort