

Sword and Spirit

The Journal of Itten Dojo

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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 an authentic dojo provides.

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Kyudo Comes to PA

When it was announced that the 2025 *Kokusai Budoin* (International Martial Arts Federation) Americas Seminar hosted at JMAC would feature some sessions devoted to *kyudo*, the art of Japanese archery, I was very excited. Although my budo library already contained multiple volumes addressing kyudo, I'd never even witnessed the art, let alone had a chance to try it.

The roots of kyudo lie in the archery traditions of ancient Japan. From the Yayoi period onward, the bow served practical needs in hunting and warfare while also holding a place in Shinto ceremonial life. Continental influences were absorbed and transformed by the distinctive Japanese longbow—the asymmetric *yumi*—which demanded unique posture and technique. With the rise of the samurai class at the close of the Heian period, systematic training in *kyujutsu* (the martial art of archery) took shape. The twelfth century saw the establishment of the first formal school, the Henmi-ryu, followed by influential lineages such as the Ogasawara-ryu, which emphasized court etiquette and mounted archery (*yabusame*) and exists to this day, and the Heki-ryu, whose many branches refined methods prized for battlefield precision and armor penetrating power.

During the extended peace of the Edo period, Japanese archery gradually shifted in character. What had been primarily *kyujutsu*—a combat skill—evolved into *kyudo*, the Way of the Bow, a discipline oriented toward personal cultivation, mental clarity, and harmony of mind, body, and spirit. Schools continued to transmit refined technique alongside ritual awareness and ethical formation, drawing on both Shinto and Buddhist currents. In the Meiji era, as Japan modernized, instructors such as Honda Toshizane synthesized elements from warrior and ceremonial traditions, creating hybrid approaches that preserved core principles while adapting to new educational and cultural contexts. The official renaming of the art from *kyujutsu* to *kyudo* in 1919 reflected this broader transformation from technical proficiency to a path of self-mastery.

In the twentieth century, kyudo was revitalized as a *gendai budo* following the disruptions of the postwar era. The All Nippon Kyudo Federation



standardized practice through the eight stages of shooting (*hassetsu*), target distances, and form, ensuring consistent transmission while making the art accessible beyond traditional lineages. These elements are also preserved within the *Dai Nippon Kyudo Kai*, the organization to which we now belong (www.dainipponkyudokai.org/).

Now more widely practiced—although still very difficult to find—the heart of kyudo remains the pursuit of unified awareness at the moment of release. Technical mastery serves a deeper aim: the cultivation of presence, sincerity, and the lingering spirit of complete action known as *zanshin*. In this way, kyudo continues to offer a living discipline that forges character and clarity, standing alongside other classical Japanese arts as a means of realizing the full potential of body and mind in every moment.

When it came time for kyudo at the IMAF seminar, dozens of interested participants congregated in the JMAC Annex, where two improvised *makiwara* (short-range targets) had been erected. After a brief description of what we would be seeing, Sabastian Velilla Sensei and his wife, Chelsey, demonstrated what I now know to be *tachi*, the sequence of group shooting normally done with three, four, or five archers. As they executed the careful, precise movements of the *hassetsu*, I thought, “Hmm. That’s kind of boring.”

And then I tried it. Oh. My. Gosh.



My first shot, at the IMAF Americas Seminar at JMAC.

When I was earning my private pilot’s license, learning to land an aircraft (a process that is as much art as science) was the most difficult challenge I’d ever encountered. I quickly discovered that trying to execute the *hassetsu* at even the most superficial and clueless level imaginable is at least as difficult as landing an aircraft. I was immediately hooked. This is an aspect of my character: If I try an unfamiliar martial art but can pretty much hold my own, I’m not interested. After all, I figure if I can do it with no experience, there can’t be that much there. It’s when I run into something overwhelming, something that hits me square in the face with my own inability, that’s when I’m immediately fascinated. It’s the things I can’t do (yet) that hold the greatest appeal.

By the time we left the IMAF seminar, Alan Starner, Freddy Lebron, and I had spoken with Velilla Sensei and Mrs. Velilla and put in motion the plans for an introductory seminar at Itten Dojo.

That first visit happened the weekend of May 15–17, 2026. A total of 16 students participated, including three members of JMAC. Friday evening, we learned how to set up our *yumi*, tying the upper *tsuruwa* (loop) on the *tsuru* (bow string), stringing the *yumi*, and applying the *nakajikake*, a reinforcing layer of hemp wrapped around the *tsuru* in the area the arrow (*ya*) will be nocked. Most of the day Saturday and the morning of Sunday were deep dive into the fundamentals of kyudo. Extensive video notes were taken, on which we now rely.



Setting up our new yumi, Friday evening of our intro.





Our kyudo program is structured as a study group under the direction of Velilla Sensei. A study group is the designation for a program within a dojo when no one is yet ranked in an art. The dojo is not offering independent

instruction; rather, the dojo is the authorized representative of the fully qualified instructor guiding the training. Everyone in the study group works together to make progress between in-person sessions with the guiding instructor. In order to set our study group on a solid foundation, group leaders will be making visits to the Florida Budokan (<https://floridabudokan.org/>) to train with the Velillas. I will be there in July, Alan and Deb Starner in September, and Freddy Lebron later in 2026 or early 2027.

The first practice of our study group was held on Saturday, June 6. I was not able to be participate due to a family obligation in the DC area, so I will let the co-leaders provide their impressions.

Alan Starner

As we hung the backdrops and set up the targets for our first official kyudo class, I reflected on how Velilla Sensei had patiently guided us through the fundamentals during the recent seminar at our dojo. Those sessions had



given us a clear vision of what our regular study group practice could become. With this foundation, the five of us did our best to recall and recreate what we had learned.

We were joined by a visitor from Reading—she drove for more than an hour to participate. After bowing in as Velilla Sensei had instructed, we began by reviewing the basics together. We picked up our practice bands and *gomuyumi* (rubber bow) training tools, working as a group to reinforce the details each of us had retained. One person would remember a subtle point another had missed, creating a natural, supportive learning environment.

Once we had reviewed the foundations, for those that had them, we put on our *yugake*—the traditional gloves that protect and reinforce the hand during the draw. Not everyone having one, the gloves were shared throughout the class. We chose to have just one archer at a time, having that person approach the target while the rest observed. Using a printed guide to the *Shaho Hassetsu* (the Eight Stages of Shooting), we called out reminders as needed. This observational approach allowed everyone to learn not just from their own attempts, but from watching and analyzing each other's form.

The shot was taken, then the archer walked away as instructed, allowing the next archer to step forward. We watched closely, offering encouragement and respectful feedback when someone forgot a detail. The shared insights were helpful to all.

Then came our visitor's turn. Being her first time, we made sure that she was very comfortable with the process, with everyone coming alongside her as she prepared. As we all did during Sensei's seminar, she struggled with the glove and arrow but quickly adapted. She was taken through *hassetsu*, but then we removed the arrow to allow her to get a sense of the draw of the bow and the posture and positioning. A quick learner, we then kept the arrow in place. She released it into the target. We are all aware that the face and body should reflect quiet, calm focus with minimal expression as part of this discipline, but we couldn't help ourselves in celebrating with our visitor, as she hit the target.

We continued rotating through the hour-and-a-half session, sharing bows, arrows, and gloves. Everyone got



multiple shots. The energy was high, and collaboration was throughout. When the time came to pack up, all joined in to clean and stow the gear.

It was a very successful first morning, and I could tell that everyone was excited for next week.

Freddy Lebron

On June 6th at Itten Dojo, we held our first Kyudo Study Group class. Most of our time was spent reviewing the basic eight steps of shooting, which form the foundation of the art's one formal kata.

Because I am only starting and I know I have much reading, practice, and research ahead of me, I truly appreciated having others present who had also attended the seminar with Velilla Sensei. Together, we were able to help correct one another's mistakes and review what we remembered from the seminar. Additionally, because I had videos and photos from the seminar, we were able to look back and see where certain points needed review or correction.

With safety in mind, we began by practicing with elastic bands. After that, we decided to carefully give it a try with the bows. First, we reviewed the eight basic steps of the *hassetsu*:



Ashibumi—Setting the Feet. The archer steps into position on the shooting line. The feet are placed apart at an angle, approximately the length of the arrow, creating a strong and steady base.

Dozukuri—Setting the Body. The archer straightens the body and aligns everything properly. The shoulders, hips, and spine should feel balanced, upright, and connected to the target.

Yugamae — Preparing the Arrow. The archer places the arrow on the string, sets the grip, and calmly looks toward the target with a quiet and focused gaze.

Uchiokoshi—Raising the Bow. The archer lifts the bow smoothly and straight upward until the hands are just above the head.

Hikiwake—Drawing the Bow. The archer opens the bow using the back, shoulders, and arms together. It is not simply pulling the string back; it is an even expansion of the whole body.

Kai—Full Draw. The archer reaches full draw and holds it with strength, calmness, and focus. The body continues to expand while the mind remains still.

Hanare—Release. The arrow is released naturally. It should feel like the result of everything coming together, rather than a forced action.

Zanshin—Remaining Spirit. After the arrow leaves, the archer remains in position and maintains focus. The shot continues in spirit even after the release.

After practicing the eight steps to the best of our current ability and knowledge, we moved on to shooting with the *makiwara-ya*. With help from others in the group, we reviewed one of the seminar recap videos to better understand how to set the bow during the transition between *Ashibumi* and *Dozukuri*.

We had three archers shooting at a time, and even the newest member of Itten Dojo had the opportunity to shoot. She shared that she loved the experience and was very interested in learning more about Kyudo.

Coming from *Iaido*, I noticed a strong connection to something Wolfe Sensei and Suino Sensei often emphasize: If one part of the form is not correct, the rest of the movement will not feel natural or proper. I saw something very similar in Kyudo. Even while working

through the basics, it became clear when someone's posture, alignment, or balance was not quite right.

I hope this study group continues to develop and eventually grows into a full Kyudo class. Perhaps one day we may even have a dedicated Kyudo training area. The vision and curiosity are already there, and I am excited to see the progression and where we go from here.



Mike Travisano

Meditation author and teacher, Sharon Salzberg, once defined mindfulness as the difference between what's really going on and the stories I'm telling myself about it. If my story is peaceful and hopeful, then I will very likely feel peaceful and hopeful. If the story I tell myself is anxious, guilty, regretful, or frustrated, then I will very likely reap their emotional rewards.

It became very clear to me, even in our very first practice, that the "artless art" of Kyudo is an exceptional laboratory for experimenting with Ms. Salzberg's definition.

When the *ya* (arrow), yet again, fumbles from my fully drawn *yumi* (bow) to the floor for the umpteenth time, what story am I telling myself? How does that story impact my next action? Can I give myself permission to be 100% OK with whatever happens, recognizing that it is




this very clarity that will most powerfully influence whatever it is that I do or say next?

I think it would be fair for an observer who is unfamiliar with Kyudo to conclude that the most important moment in the art is the actual releasing of the arrow, but from even this first practice, it is quite clear that the most important moment is exactly whatever step I'm presently on (inside or outside of the dojo).

Conclusion

To the best of our knowledge, we are now the only dojo in Pennsylvania with a kyudo program. If you're interested in joining us or starting a study group elsewhere, please reach out—we can put you in touch with Velilla Sensei.

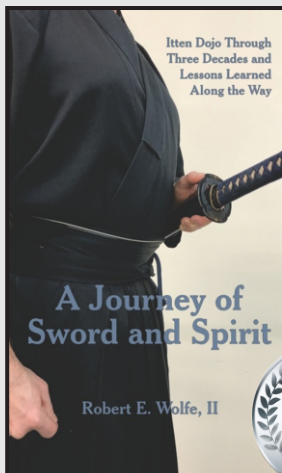
Our Kyudo Study Group meets on Saturdays from 1:00 to 2:30 p.m. For more information on the art and our study group, visit www.ittendojo.org/arts/kyudo. 



Robert Wolfe, chief instructor of Itten Dojo, began martial arts training in 1975 while attending Bucknell University, where he earned a degree in Japanese Studies. Mr. Wolfe has taught since 1985, and founded Itten Dojo in 1992. His articles on martial arts have been featured in publications such as the *Journal of Asian Martial Arts*, *Bugeisha*, *Aikido Today Magazine*, *Inside Karate*, *Martial Arts Training*, and *Martial Arts Professional*. He is the author of two books: *A Journey of Sword and Spirit — Itten Dojo Through Three Decades and Lessons Learned Along the Way* and *Budo Renaissance Man — The Martial Arts Journey of Nicklaus Suino*, and a 2025 inductee to the PA Karate Hall of Fame.



Available from Amazon.com



A Journey of Sword and Spirit

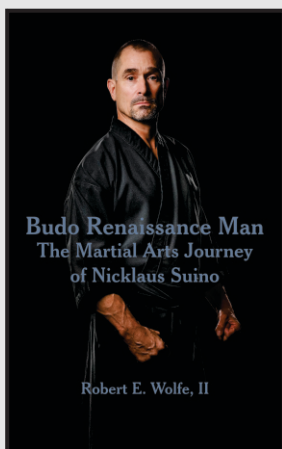
“In an age that has largely lost touch with many of the traditional values that built the world we all currently inhabit, this work (and the dojo from which it sprang) serve as a welcome oasis of wisdom, strength, and serenity.”



Winner of Second Place in the Fall 2025 BookFest® Awards, in the category of Nonfiction-Memoirs-Transformational



ŌKAMI
Publications



Budo Renaissance Man

“For more than three decades, thousands of people have become more centered, happier, and more successful with Nicklaus Suino’s guidance. Suino has been called ‘one of the leading martial arts instructors in North America,’ but his influence radiates far beyond the dojo. This concise biography of Suino presents a profile of an inspirational leader whose accomplishments in martial arts were a springboard to success as an author, attorney, entrepreneur, life coach, husband, and father.”

