

Sword and Spirit

The eNewsletter of Itten Dojo

August 2017



— Why Budo? —

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

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

These are exactly the things membership in a dojo provides.

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Life Hacks from the Martial Arts...

Giri

The Burden of Obligation

Sweat streamed down my face, into my eyes. My glasses slipped down my nose, the strap that held them to my head barely enough to combat the onslaught.

The tendons and muscles along my shins were burning. My muscles were sore and heavy. Every time my body hit the mat, part of me said, “Stay down here. Just stop moving. You know you want to.”

I had been at the *dojo* for about a month, and the honeymoon was most definitely over. My *ukemi* (receiving technique) had improved enough that I could do a slow front-roll. I could tie my belt. I knew where to line up. I was always at the *dojo* the minute the doors opened so that I could get as much training as possible. I was meeting expectations.

So the expectations increased.

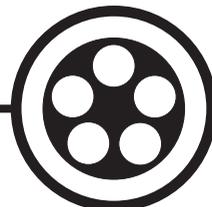
Before I had joined the *dojo*, I had never done a regular workout. Push-ups and crunches were foreign to me. I couldn’t keep up with the group. And that was okay in my first week.

But I was a month in, still training. So it was time to get with the program.

No one ever said anything to me, or told me to step it up. I just knew that I had to do more. I would dread the opening of class, the conditioning set followed by the group *ukemi* practice. My legs would burn, my lungs would struggle to breathe air that was suddenly liquid with heat and humidity. I longed for a rest. I longed for a drink of water. I longed to lie on the mat after a technique just long enough to catch my breath.

When I threw them during practice, my seniors just got up and let me throw them again. It was the rhythm of things. They would teach me: a pointer here, a subtle hand-shift there. My technique was improving because these men and women kept getting up and helping me get better.

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So I hauled myself off of the floor again, *judogi* heavy with sweat, short of breath, full at times of fear, at times of weariness.

I didn't want to. But I owed it to these people to get up, and to attack again, and to be thrown again.

No one ever needed to tell me that.

Fast-forward 15 years...

Just a day before, the room had been a middle school basketball court. But today it was a *dojo*.

This was the *Taikai*, the annual gathering of our *ryu*. We come together to train hard, party hard, and part ways with the regret and sorrow that can only come from intense and challenging activity done in the company of your brethren and in service of something larger than yourself.

The morning session was physically demanding, a series of exercises that focused on *shikko*, the Japanese method of knee-walking. We moved around the mats, shins and thighs burning with the exertion.

The most junior student in the room was to my left. He had only been training for a matter of weeks, and I could feel his suffering without needing to see the rictus on his face or hear the hiss of his in-drawn breath.

He was ready to quit.

I grabbed him as the room split into pairs to do the next exercise. It wasn't a matter of encouragement, of supportive, kind language. It was a matter of pulling his spirit up. In between drills, I would bodily lift him to his feet and drag him along as I ran back to our place in line, push him down to a kneeling position as we received instruction. I would pull him up and drag him to the next drill.

He didn't quit. He wanted to. It was written on every part of his face, on every line of his body. But he didn't.

I nodded at him, said "Good job," and watched as he ran off to scribble a few quick notes before the next session.

I had seen what he was made of. So had he.

He was strong the rest of the day.

Giri, or the "burden of obligation," is the debt you incur as you follow the path of budo. It takes time before the student realizes the full impact of this.

You start in the budo with red in your ledger; you owe *giri* to the men and women who have been working for decades to preserve the art, to give you a place to train, to get good enough to teach you. You owe them a debt that you literally cannot ever repay.

Giri doesn't flow one way. When your juniors meet expectations, when they ask you to teach them, when they show up and work hard, they have placed you in debt to them. Their care and education are your responsibility now. You must give them your best. I owe my juniors a debt that is every bit as significant as that I owe my Sensei. They struggle in the trenches with me, doing their part without question or hesitation. I have to be the best model I can be for them, be able to answer their questions, be the example they deserve.

I remember being promoted to a green belt. It is the first formal promotion ceremony in my *dojo*, marking the first significant step on your journey through budo. Sensei called me up in front of the whole class and presented me with the new belt. As I bowed and took it from him, he whispered to me, "Thank you for doing what was expected of you."

We say these words to a newly promoted student as a reminder. No one gets here on their own. Everything I have that is of value to me in the budo is a gift, given to me without expectation of recompense. Everything I do, I do with an eye to this fact — that I must carry this debt, and that I must be worthy of it, and that I owe everyone, senior and junior, to be the best that I can be in all areas of life.

I shoulder my burden, and bear up under it for another day. ☸

— by John Butz

