Sword and Spirit

The eNewsletter of Itten Dojo — September 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...

The Traditional Ways

A petite woman kneels on spotlessly clean, Japanese-style mats, in a room that seems a curious combination of gymnasium and church. Several feet across from her, a similarly seated, burly male waits. Carefully and formally, without ever taking their eyes from one another, they bow. No sooner is the bow completed than the man lunges forward, striking with a powerful punch directed toward the woman's solar plexus. Calmly, as though she has all the time in the world, the woman pivots in place and the punch blasts past, catching no more than the fabric of her uniform jacket. But her hands are waiting. She drapes one hand across her "attacker's" wrist, the other across his elbow and, with a deft application of technique rather than force, the woman folds the man's arm into a "Z" shape, focusing excruciatingly painful pressure on his wrist. With an involuntary gasp, the man slaps his thigh with his free hand, signaling that he's had quite enough for today, thank you, and the woman releases her hold. Warily, they resume their original positions and bow again, closing the exchange, but a palpable tingling, an electric echo of the technique, hangs in the air.

If this description seems unlike your established notion of martial arts, it should, because in this era of strip mall karate studios for children and brutal, mixed martial arts championships, the practice of the classical martial ways of Japan is quite rare. At Itten Dojo, located in Mechanicsburg near the intersection of West Simpson Street and Trindle Road, classical martial arts are practiced and preserved for the benefit of current and future generations. Viewed by some as anachronistic, the traditional arts in fact offer modern adults a compelling alternative to the latest fitness fad or self-improvement regimen, an alternative that has remained fresh and viable, in many cases, for literally hundreds of years.

The classical Japanese martial arts are distinguished by the fact they were originally developed by and for a military caste, the samurai, for use either on the battlefield or in dueling. During the era known as the *Sengoku Jidai*, the Age of the Country at War (1482–1573), a state of perpetual civil conflict existed in Japan, with the constant warfare providing strong impetus to the creation and refinement of weapons, tactics, and strategy. Japan was unified under a military government in 1603, and peace—with a few, early exceptions—was enforced by the Tokugawa

family until the restoration of the Emperor in 1868. Conditions during the Tokugawa era were conducive to exhaustive research and codification in martial systems. Arts that were systematized prior to the disestablishment of the samurai in 1876 are referred to as *koryu*, or "old traditions," to separate them from modern, often sport-oriented arts such as judo and karate.

Ryu, the organization of martial arts into structures resembling the branches and tributaries of a river system, are a characteristically Japanese response to the challenge of ensuring the accurate transmission of both techniques and underlying principles and philosophy across generations of practitioners. The ryu is a flow, with individual members shaping themselves to embody the ryu in its physical and spiritual aspects and pass it intact to those who come after. The primary vehicle for the transmission of the ryu is its *kata*, or prearranged forms.

Kata are the distilled essence of combat, in which victory or defeat comes down to the unfailingly correct manifestation of the ryu. Within kata, modern adults can enter a world totally apart from everyday experience, and wherein lie the almost addictive attraction and superlative benefits inherent in practice of budo.

In our lives today, we experience all too few opportunities to push the envelope, to extend ourselves past our personal zones of comfort in a way that is, paradoxically, pregnant with potential psychic and physical risk and yet in actuality remarkably safe. Why, you ask, would you *want* to extend yourself in this fashion? Because it is only in such moments that we are truly, boundlessly alive.

The laboratory in which these experiments in self-expansion are conducted is the *dojo*, the "place of the Way." A dojo is sacred ground, in a manner of speaking, not because of any religious connotation to the practice of traditional martial arts, but because the intensity of shared purpose extending over generations of practitioners creates a distinct aura that can be sensed even by those with no experience (or even interest) in kobudo. This aura infuses the practice, simultaneously invigorating and inspiring those who are open to it.

Students entering a dojo for practice cross a bridge between outside and inside worlds, readying themselves by means of a series of courtesies and ceremonies for undistracted immersion in their training. They may bow when stepping through the threshold to the dojo or they may sit quietly for a few moments at the edge of the training area; they will almost certainly participate in a brief ceremony opening the practice, during which the students symbolically recognize and link themselves to the founder and precedent members of the ryu, and focus themselves for the task at hand.

Two opponents, both armed with wooden swords simulating a Japanese katana, face each other across the width of the dojo. They bow and draw their weapons, assuming a middle-level guard. Uchitachi, the "striking sword," steps forward with his left foot and positions his sword in a vertical alignment by his right shoulder, ready to cut. Shitachi, the "receiving sword," remains in guard. As uchitachi begins to advance, shitachi matches the

movement, closing the distance and attempting to sense the timing of the coming attack. At the moment the swordsmen come into range of each other, uchitachi launches a powerful cut angling down from right to left, with the intention of knocking shitachi's sword out of guard and slicing into shitachi's right arm at the wrist. Recognizing the intent, shitachi slides back a bit and lowers his hands, evading the cut, and immediately raises his sword, threatening a thrust to uchitachi's abdomen. Uchitachi, off-balance from his fully committed (and missed) attack, has no choice but to throw himself forward on an angle to the outside, chambering his sword on his left and cutting again for shitachi's midsection. Shitachi blocks the cut with his sword and, as uchitachi raises his sword above his head for a last-ditch attempt to prevail, shitachi cuts uchitachi's wrist, decisively ending the engagement. The swordsmen resume a matching, middle-level guard, then lower their swords and carefully return to their starting positions.

Because kata are choreographed, participants are able to increase speed, intensity, and power as proficiency grows, until the level of interaction trends toward that of actual combat, while still controlling the level of risk. In the midst of an intense kata, however, it's easy to forget you're really relatively safe: adrenalin pumps, heart rates soar, and there may even be flashes of fear. Within this framework of judiciously regulated stress, students of budo address specific objectives in each kata and in the process reinvent themselves in predictable ways. Dealing with *maai* (interval) teaches discernment; learning to appreciate *hyoshi* and *choshi* (timing and rhythm) develops fluidity and responsiveness; maintaining awareness of *hasuji* (targeting or trajectory) builds greater focus; and conscious crafting of *kurai* (mental and physical stance or preparedness) leads to the invaluable creation of a strong and imperturbable spirit.

The experience of training also mimics the experience of combat, in perhaps a small way, in the nature of the relationships that are formed within a dojo. The shared intensity, frustration, striving, enthusiasm, and pain forge a bond that is surpassed only by the camaraderie of military, law enforcement, and emergency response units, or others who routinely risk life and limb together.

Moreover, there is an intimacy in the dojo quite unlike the more or less comfortable interactions we permit at the workplace, the club, or at school. Members of a dojo come to know one another very deeply. Strengths, weaknesses, hopes, fears, virtues, and vices—all are revealed eventually in the course of training. That the revealing of one's inner self may not have been anticipated, or even willing, doesn't matter so much as the fact the sharing becomes for all members of the dojo the normal state of affairs.

A number of men and women are scattered around the floor, some kneeling and some standing, but all armed with swords. Simultaneously turning attention inward while remaining constantly aware of the positions of others, they individually practice imaginary combats, drawing their swords, executing single cuts or a series of attacks and defenses, then returning their blades to their scabbards, all with no sound save the exquisite hiss of blades slicing the air. The movements are precise, elegant, powerful, and very real. Any lapse in focus—physical or mental—can result in significant damage to equipment or self.

In the practice of solo kata can be seen the ultimate function of budo: the ceaseless polishing of the self. There are no trophies for successful competition, no comparisons to others at all, in fact, just a continual, internalized measuring against an idealized yardstick applicable to none but oneself. How far one goes, ultimately, isn't really important; what matters is that one goes farther than the day before.

All budo training, in a sense, is individual, even when participating in a group class. Still, even though the focus is on the efforts of the individual, the role of the ego in training is somewhat de-emphasized. Some writers carry this too far, claiming that the goal of training is a Zen-like erasure of the ego (despite the fact practice of Zen was never widespread among the samurai). Perhaps it would be more appropriate to say that tempering the ego is a reasonable outcome of budo training. The objective is development of an individual possessing the will and spirit to assert himself in the service of what is correct and proper, and one who refrains from defining correct and proper in terms merely of his own self-interest.

Practice of kata induces such development by means of a literal molding of the individual. The form of a kata is inviolable; there is only one correct pattern, an ideal toward which all must aspire. Regardless of the apparent practicality of a kata, regardless of whether or not a student understands at the moment exactly what is happening, the student is offered no choice other than to accommodate the prescribed form.

Footwork, breathing, tempo—all are defined and it is the student's job to reproduce the pattern as faithfully as possible. Not an easy task, especially for one raised in a culture placing considerable emphasis on uniqueness, creativity, and individual expression.

It may be counter-intuitive, but the strictures of kata are ultimately liberating. Over the long term, the student of kobudo internalizes the kata to such an extent that the line between pattern and person blurs, producing a flavor and spontaneity characteristic of the individual while true to the classical form. The ego finds appropriate expression of itself.

Although as recently as 20 years ago it was virtually impossible to find in this country authentic instructors of classical Japanese martial traditions, the situation has changed appreciably. A growing number of Americans have spent as long as several decades living and training in Japan, and are returning to attempt to transplant the old arts, while a variety of Japanese instructors now make regular visits here to teach in-depth seminars. The budo are not yet widespread, and in many cases must be sought out, but the fact is anyone willing to extend themselves in search of training is likely to be rewarded.

The types of arts that are available are also expanding, but can be grouped into the broad categories of armed and unarmed systems (although many older traditions, while emphasizing one or the other, may incorporate elements of both).

Armed arts cover a surprising number of weapons employed by the samurai. Kenjutsu, or swordsmanship, is often cited as the premier martial art of Japan. Training typically addresses use of both the long and short swords, in solo kata and paired practice with a partner. Because there are a limited number of ways, in mechanical terms, to cut an opponent, kenjutsu is primarily an art of movement and strategy and for that reason provides fascinating intellectual challenge in addition to vigorous exercise.

Closely related to swordsmanship is the art of jojutsu, or stick fighting. Jojutsu explores using a four-foot, wooden staff against an opponent armed with a Japanese sword—one of the most uneven matches imaginable. In response to the inherent disparity in lethality of the opposing weapons, exponents of jojutsu have, over the course of centuries, evolved an astonishing art predicated on exceptionally precise control of distancing and initiative.

Prior to the advent of firearms, archery dominated the medieval Japanese battlefield. Although there are still ryu preserving battlefield style archery, it would be more likely (though still far from easy) in this country to locate a teacher of *kyudo*, or the way of archery, a very formal, highly stylized, almost meditative practice of shooting the large, asymmetric Japanese bow.

Other armed arts that can be found in the United States include the use of weapons such as the *naginata*, essentially a

sword blade on a long shaft, the *kusarigama*, a sickle with a weighted chain attached to it, the *yari*, or spear, and the *bo*, a six-foot (or longer) staff.

Unarmed arts are predominantly different forms of *jujutsu*, a system of throwing and pinning an armed or unarmed opponent. Styles of jujutsu range from relatively simple systems of grappling to very sophisticated arts depending on subtle manipulations of balance and timing to control utterly an opponent. Some jujutsu systems may incorporate punching and kicking as techniques in themselves, while other systems may use strikes only to set up or enhance a throw.

Aikijujutsu, *aikijutsu*, and *aikido* are particularly elaborate forms of jujutsu, which place considerable emphasis on physical and psychological manipulation of the opponent.

Choosing an art is often a matter of settling for whatever budo is available within a reasonable commute, unless you have the good fortune to live in a region hosting a variety of Japanese martial traditions. Fortunately, persons living in south central Pennsylvania enjoy an uncommon spectrum of choices. In addition to Itten Dojo locally, students willing to drive elsewhere in the state or to Maryland, Virginia, New Jersey, or New York have even wider possibilities.

Undertaking to train in budo can be an adventure in itself, surpassed only by the experience of actually training. The challenges, triumphs, relationships, and personal growth to be realized in this area of endeavor can scarcely be imagined by those who have not had the opportunity to experience firsthand the incomparable world of classical Japanese martial arts.

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