

Sword and Spirit

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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 a dojo provides.

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Momentum

While warming up prior to a recent aikijutsu practice, Mr. Butz and I were discussing something—I don't remember exactly what—but he mentioned "momentum" in the context of the dojo collectively and training individually. Ever since that evening, the concept of momentum has been stuck in my mind. I've thought about individual members of the dojo and instances in which their iron-clad intent to move forward, or the dissolution of their intent, made all the difference in the length of their martial arts careers. And I've thought as well about the ongoing story of our dojo, how it's survived one black swan event after another. Some events were just random bad luck while others were essentially attacks, evidently made with the hope of taking us down. The dojo is now in its 30th year of operation. Still here. And growing. With momentum.

Most people are familiar with Newton's First Law of Motion: A body continues in its state of rest, or in uniform motion in a straight line, unless acted upon by a force. In the context of our discussion here, the "force" affecting motion could be mental (as in the case of intent to progress in training, or quit) or physical (as illustrated by various waza in each of the three arts practiced at our dojo).

When new members join the dojo, one thing always said to them is this: "We don't know your life story or what all you might have been through. But we can predict that starting training here will be one of the most difficult things—if not *the* most difficult thing—you've ever attempted. It will take about three months to learn enough to know for certain whether or not this training is for you. Make a commitment to yourself that you will get through a minimum of three months, no matter what." The persons that made such a commitment to themselves and persevered most often continued training, long-term. Some are now *yudansha* (black-belts) and assistant instructors. Their intent fueled their momentum, and their momentum carried them through the challenge of acclimating to the training.

Others, instead of making a way, made an excuse, and their lack of intent stopped them in their tracks. My personal favorite of such quitting excuses is, "It's hard." To which we usually reply, "What part of 'the most difficult thing' did you not understand?"



To be fair, there is a third grouping that can emerge during that three-month period: The individuals that discover a legitimately limiting factor, such as a physical impairment that proves to be too troublesome, those that experience a major change to work schedules, or the individuals that discover they simply do not enjoy the training, at all, and it's not going to get better. In the latter case fair enough; it's not for everyone.

For those that acclimate successfully and enjoy the training, even when it's not particularly enjoyable, training becomes as much something you are as something you do.

It's this aspect of "something you are" that has translated to senior members of the dojo doing whatever it takes to survive hard times. Prior to retirement, I had a full

time career in federal civil service, so I've never been in the least dependent on the dojo for income, and I personally have done whatever it takes to prop-up the dojo, as well. Because we are so deeply conscious of what we have all gained through the experience of training together, regardless of the particular art, we don't allow anything to act on our forward motion in a detrimental way. Our momentum has always carried us through to better times.

One of the key aspects of training in *budo* (the "martial Ways") that makes the endeavor far more than simply learning how to fight is that the *waza* (techniques) of personal combat can be metaphors for principles and practices applicable across a wide range of situations in life. Following are a few examples.

Aikijutsu: Shomen-uchi Sutemi-nage

Sutemi means "sacrifice," and usually refers to techniques in which *nage* (the person throwing) drops to the mat to propel the throw. In this example, *nage* lowers her hands to "lure" an attack toward her head. As *uke* (the person receiving the technique) fully commits to his strike, *nage* drops, tripping *uke*. If *uke* waits as long as possible to move, *nage* will instinctively follow the target with his eyes, literally sucking him into the technique.

In application against an actual, physical assault, *nage* would also aim her dropping body slightly forward, ideally landing a knee on top of *uke*'s lead foot, simultaneously pinning him and cutting his legs out from under him—making this a potentially crippling or even lethal technique, depending on how the enemy falls. Metaphorically, "If an enemy is rushing toward his own destruction, just get out of his way."



Iaido: Oi-kaze

Oi-kaze means “Tailwind,” and has the sense of being pushed forward in a chase. The *waza* involves a rapid advance to a draw and horizontal cut, and then a strong, finishing, vertical cut. Most often in Eishin-ryu, the swordsman stands with knees flexed, even when between forms. *Oi-kaze* is unusual, in that the swordsman stands

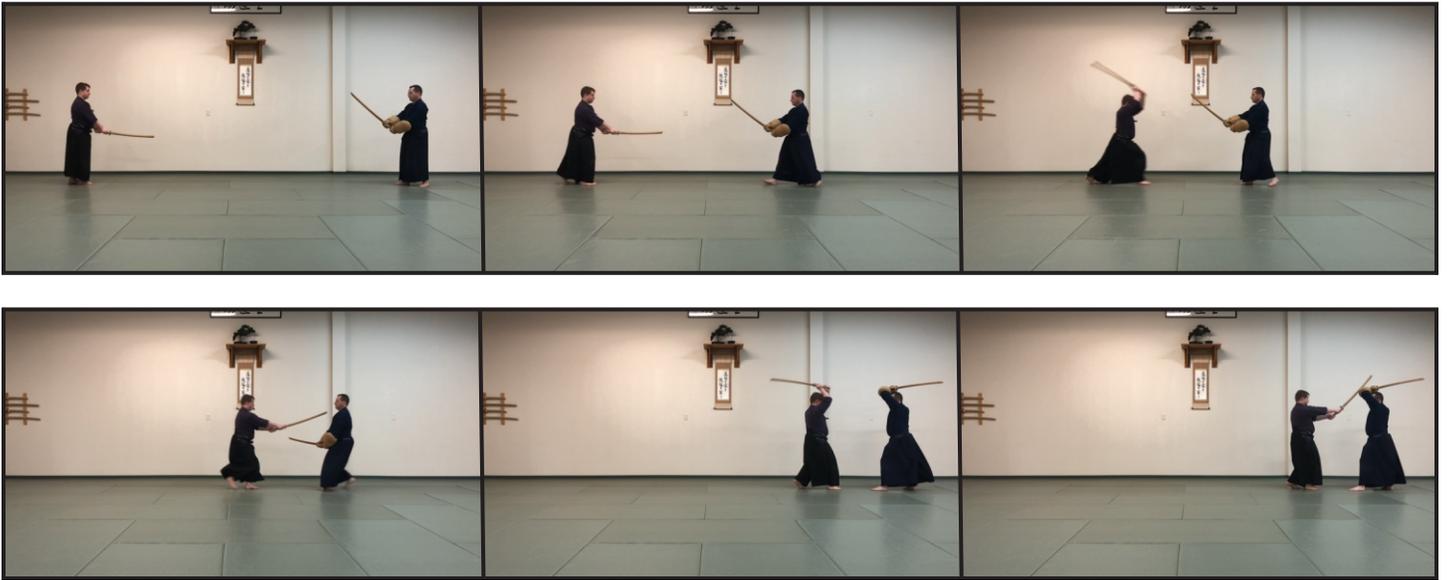
with legs straight, and then “releases” the knees to lower his center prior to starting the advance. This is an example of using gravity as an “outside force” to overcome the “body at rest.” Metaphorically, always exploit any circumstance that can enhance the chance of success without requiring additional effort.



Kenjutsu: Gedan no Uchi-otoshi

In this Ono-ha Itto-ryu waza, *uchikata* (the striking sword) advances in a middle-level guard while *shikata* (the responding sword) advances in a low-level guard. As the swordsmen come into striking distance, *shikata* shifts the point of his sword to threaten *uchikata*'s right wrist. In response, *uchikata* shifts his sword to cover his wrist, but thereby opens his center line, making him vulnerable to a strike to his head. *Shikata* lunges forward with a strong,

vertical cut, intending to split *uchikata* in two. *Uchikata* leans back, saving his head, but his sword is struck down and "killed." *Shikata* seizes this opportunity and drives forward—by virtue of the resolute momentum of his attack, *shikata* finally overcomes *uchikata* with a decisive, vertical cut. Metaphorically, be always prepared to shift instantly from stillness to action, or from one strategy to another as circumstances demand.



Momentum always plays a significant role in our lives. It's easy to understand that every seriously important decision we make sets the course for the future—hence the description, "momentous." But what about seemingly inconsequential choices that crop up on a daily basis? We don't necessarily know how substantial the ramifications of any choice or decision might ultimately be.

While most mistakes in life are largely (or even completely) recoverable, and most missteps correctable, some are not. Whether in terms of the decisions we make as individuals, or in terms of the associations we make as members of a dojo (or any other organization), we are best served by being very alert to the direction momentum is carrying us. 🌀

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 Bujin*, *Budo Shinbun*, the *Journal of Asian Martial Arts*, *Bugeisha*, *Aikido Today Magazine*, *Inside Karate*, *Martial Arts Training*, and *Martial Arts Professional*.

