

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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The Frog in a Well

My all-time favorite Japanese proverb:

井の中の蛙大海を知らず”

I no naka no kawazu, taikai wo shirazu

The frog in a well knows nothing of the great sea.

Supposedly brushed by a 13-year-old Miyamoto Musashi over top of the inscription on the *kanban* (dojo signboard) of a local kenjutsu instructor, resulting in the confrontation during which Musashi killed his first opponent. The signboard had declared that Arima-ryu, the style created by the instructor, exceeded anything previously seen in the world. Evidently, the style fell a bit short of that mark.

Having confidence in the art you're studying, or confidence in the quality of what you know, is one thing. But that confidence has to be balanced by recognition that there is always more to learn, more to know, and that no matter where you are in your budo journey, there will always be those that already have more of what you want. Thankfully! Imagine how sad it would be to know all there is, to have nothing more toward which to strive? Or, worse, knowing there is more but having no one that could assist you on your journey?

Ralph Lindquist, the Isshinryu karate instructor under whom the Wolfes and Starners originally trained, had a saying: “The next stage after ripe is rotten.” It was his admonition to avoid any notion of having arrived at the summit of one's training, an admonition that complements very nicely the warning to avoid being that frog in a well.

Both the Japanese proverb and Lindquist Sensei's saying were called to mind recently, as I reflected on things I've experienced over the past several years, and am experiencing now.

Almost two years ago, in consequence of the desire of the members of our then two, separate kenjutsu-kai to merge and focus on mainline Ono-ha Ito-ryu, we found ourselves on the outside of the kenjutsu/aikijutsu organization to which we had belonged and faced with the necessity of completely reinventing our dojo.



While trying to determine the best course, several of us wanted to maintain a practice of iaido (solo forms with the Japanese katana) in addition to kenjutsu. I wasn't sure how to do that, until Jevin Orcutt suggested I talk to Nicklaus Suino Sensei about it—I had been acquainted with Suino Sensei for decades and just a year previously he and several of the senior members of his Japanese Martial Arts Center had visited our dojo for a weekend of training, just for fun.

When I mentioned this plan to another now former instructor, his response was, "You already know everything you need to know about iaido. Just teach what you know."

The problem with that, in addition to the comment being the epitome of "frog in a well" thinking, is I've never been content to just settle. For anything. Especially with regard to training, I want the best available, not just for myself, but for the members of Itten Dojo. That attitude is what led to the founding of Itten Dojo in the first place.

Fortunately, Suino Sensei responded positively to my inquiring whether he would consider working with us, and we very quickly had a way forward. Although originally intended as just a supplemental study, iaido within our dojo took off, to the extent the iaido-kai is currently the largest component within the dojo. Even more importantly, iaido has been a very constant reminder of just how much I don't know. Not a week goes by without some significant insight gained through this training, whether it be during training in-person with Suino Sensei—we'll be doing that again in April—during an online training session, reading one of his books or articles, or reviewing one of his instructional videos. I've trained a very long time in various schools of Japanese swordsmanship, but I've never learned as much about the art, as quickly, as I'm learning now.

Interestingly, Suino Sensei is himself a student of several other arts. Relatively recently, he returned to the



formal study of karate under the guidance of a superb (and surprisingly young) Japanese sensei. Likewise, Salahuddin Muhammad Sensei, another close friend and advisor to our dojo, while continuing to experiment and develop the line of aikijujutsu he inherited, trains as a student of kenjutsu under his sensei in Japan. And his sensei has a sensei...

These gentlemen exemplify the exact opposite of "frog in a well" thinking. Instead of resting on their laurels and "just teaching what they know," they're actively stepping past the boundaries of familiarity and training as students themselves, a process that inevitably brings fresh insights likely to enrich their own lives and invigorate the lessons they provide their own students.

If you're not currently training, but are seeking instruction, I would make a suggestion. When visiting a potential dojo, rather than asking about the ranks or the competition history of the head instructor, ask who they currently train with. That might well be a far better measure of the environment and quality of the school. ☺

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*.

