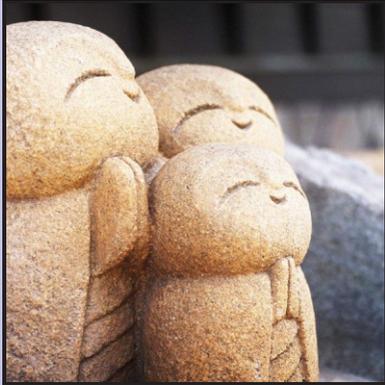


Sword and Spirit

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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The Power of Words

While researching the profile of Suino Sensei that will be the cover-feature article in the July 2023 issue of *Bugeisha*, I listened to a podcast from August 2022. The show was Jason Tracey's *Coffee and Grit* (@roar.nation). During this interview addressing personal development and entrepreneurship, Suino Sensei talked about the relationship between intentionality and happiness:

It's funny—the simplest thing, the “can-opener” for me to change from being miserable to being happy, was when someone asks you how you're doing, say, “Great!” It was salesmanship when I started, right? I'd go to the store and buy a bag of chips and a 7Up and the cashier would go, “How are you today?” And I would say, “I'm doing great!” and they would look up, shocked. Then I'd say, “How are you doing?” They would mumble something and then I'd ask, “What would make that better?”

All of a sudden, you're in a conversation or you're helping them and I would leave these silly interactions where I spent \$3.47 on a snack and I'd be like, “Well, I feel great.” Maybe, just maybe, either they thought I was nuts or they were different, too. But it's proof positive that you can be intentional about happiness. You don't have to wait for it to come to you. You choose it and then everything builds on that. Just how you reply—and it's not like, you know, like faking it till you make it—it's like creating something into existence. Our words are so powerful; what we say, how we react. When we go out into the world and we're energetic and we say we're great...first off, other people pop their heads up and notice.

I took this advice to heart and discovered an immediate improvement in my baseline level of happiness and positivity. Of course, I still have concerns and things I'm working on, but the effectiveness of Suino Sensei's approach has proven itself to me.

And this experience has made me think more deeply about and take even more seriously things Bailey Sensei has said regarding *kotodama*, the Japanese belief that words themselves can affect reality.

I'll let Bailey Sensei herself take it from here...



Japan has a spiritual culture that has been handed down from ancient times and is deeply rooted in the hearts of the Japanese people. We believe that “everything has a SPIRIT in the center.” For example, nature itself (such as the sea and mountains), specific animals (that have been deified), and sometimes things (such as tools that have been treated with care). And one aspect of this belief is the spiritual power that dwells inside words, called kotodama (言霊). The kanji 言 (*koto*) means “words,” and 霊 (*tama*) means “the spirit” or “soul.” Together, these kanji roughly translate as “spirit of the words” and refer to the belief that words contain spiritual power.

Basically, positive words hold positive power, while negative words hold negative power. These powers can influence one’s personal environment, the events that are occurring, and even one’s state of mind. Therefore, we should be careful with the words we use, because their power will come back to us. Furthermore, this mystical power lies not only in the words themselves, but also in the way and the intonation with which the words are said. Seemingly kind words said with a harmful intent will bear negative energy. It is also believed that calling someone’s name out loud can have an impact on that person.

Historically, it is thought that the belief in kotodama dates back to the Nara period (710–794). The term appears in a collection of poems titled *Manyōshū* (万葉集), in which the expression, “the land where kotodama brings bliss,” is used to describe Japan.

The roots of kotodama are found in *Shinto* (神道), the Japanese animistic religion. In Shinto, it is believed that not only people, but also animals and all objects, have a soul. In this context, it is not surprising that words are also thought to have a soul. In ancient times, spells and incantations to the *Kami* (神—Shinto divinities) were seen as bearing some divine power, especially if, when written, they were spelled a certain way. Shinto priests purposely avoided using words coming from the Chinese language, believing that kotodama power exists only in words originally found in the Japanese language.

Even in modern times, kotodama has been linked with the concept of a “pure” Japanese language, as opposed to the use of “loanwords” from other languages. This belief has political implications that were especially visible during

the Second World War. In our current era of globalization, kotodama is sometimes an argument used by people who feel the Japanese language and culture are threatened by Western influences.

Japanese culture stresses the importance of harmony between people, and the general rule is that conflict and negative talk should be avoided as much as possible (at least in public). However, there are certain situations in which the belief in kotodama is very visible.

The first instance is in Japanese weddings, during which guests should be careful to avoid any words that may imply a separation. For example, “to cut,” “to break,” “to split,” “to go back,” “to end,” etc. The term “opening” is even used to refer to the end of the wedding! In Japan, guests bring money as gifts for the newlyweds and must make sure that the sum they give is not a multiple of two, which may hint at the fact that numbers, just like words, also have power.



Another situation for which there are taboo words is exams. Entrance exams are a significant part of every stage of education for Japanese students, and the matter is taken very seriously. In Japanese, failing an exam is literally said as, “falling at an exam,” so the words to avoid come from this lexical field: “to fall,” “to slip,” “to stumble,” etc.

Do words really have spiritual power, and can they affect events? I will let you answer this question according to your own personal beliefs. However, we cannot deny the power words can have on the people around us.

You will probably agree that negative talk, gossip, and hurtful words are less preferable than encouraging, kind



words, and constructive conversations. We are the first listeners of our own words. Maybe what we say influences us as much as the people we say these words to.

We live in an era in which we can express ourselves on the internet and be heard by an incredibly broad audience. One of my friends, who is a writer, recently told me about the responsibility she feels when writing her articles. Still, maybe such responsibility should be not only be the responsibility of writers and the media, but all citizens. The ancient concept of kotodama reminds us that, under anonymous cover or not, speech, comments, articles, podcasts, videos, and social media postings have power. We should all take responsibility for the words we put out into the world.

When specifically thinking about “What is good kotodama?” I always try to picture an “image of words.” If you could see the shape of words with your own eyes, what color and shape are the words that come out of your own mouth, or the words that come out of someone else’s mouth?

Of course, in reality, words are not visible to our eyes.

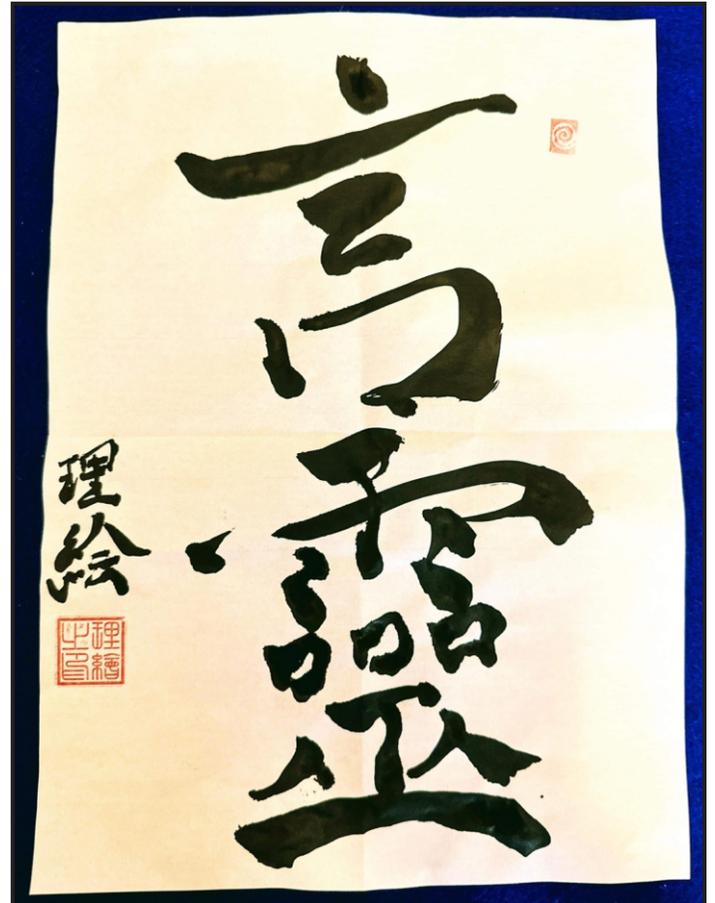
Even so, the influence of those words will surely leave some kind of feeling when reaching the heart of the other person.

- Is that feeling warm or cold?
- Is it soft and comfortable, or thorny and painful?
- Is it transparent or is it turbid?
- Is it shining or is it stagnant?

For me, if I create something, it should be beautiful, comfortable, and gentle; something I would love to share!

And if it’s such a pleasant thing, I’m sure you’ll want to share it with those close to you, too.

Hopefully, the number of people who can create “good spirits of words” will increase on a daily basis, and this world will become a wonderful place. 🌀



“Kotodama,” brushed by Bailey Sensei

Rie Hashimoto Bailey was raised in Sendai, Miyagi Prefecture, Japan, but has also lived in Spain, Italy, Washington State, and now Pennsylvania. She speaks Japanese, English, Spanish, and Italian, and is a professional international travel coordinator. Bailey Sensei is ranked 7th-dan in the Tonan school of shodo, is a Reiki master and teacher, and an alternative medicine practitioner.



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 with his senior student Alan Starner founded Itten Dojo in 1992. His articles on martial arts have been featured in numerous publications, including the *Journal of Asian Martial Arts* and *Bugeisha*.

