

# Sword and Spirit

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## — Benefits of 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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## An Evening at JMAC

“*Inveniam viam aut faciam,*” is a Latin phrase that has been variously attributed to such figures as Hannibal and Hercules, and employed as a motto by luminaries like Lord Chancellor Francis Bacon and famed polar explorer Admiral Robert Peary. It can be translated as, “I shall find a way or make one,” and while such sentiments trip glibly off many tongues, it is worth considering for a moment of the implications of such a pronouncement.

Depending on the field of endeavor, the consequences of attempting to break a new trail can range from difficult, daunting, and disappointing, to disastrous, devastating, and in some cases, downright deadly. Outward Bound instructors, for example, know that diverging from established pathways in such treacherous environments as the high Arctic or the low desert can be fatal. And while the stakes are not always so great, the resolve of any pioneer who dares to strike out for new territories when established pathways prove impassable is to be admired.

Such resolution—in abundance—was the takeaway from recent visit to Nicklaus Suino’s Michigan dojo. Widely recognized as one of the foremost Western experts in judo, Muso Jikiden Eishin-ryu Iaido and Nihon Jujutsu, Suino Sensei runs the Japanese Martial Arts Center (JMAC) in Ann Arbor. But he doesn’t just run it; he built it. Allow me to elaborate:

Early on in his martial training, Suino, an American, sold all his belongings and moved to Yokohama, Japan, in order to learn in what he describes as, “the homeland of *bushido*.” Here, then, was the first of many examples of forging a path forward as few others have dared to. While residing in this martial Mecca, he immersed himself in the study of *iaido*, *jujutsu*, *judo*, and *kyudo*, earning high rank and many accolades along the way.

Upon returning to the United States in 1992, Suino looked for a school that would continue to supply him with a similar level of training intensity and, finding none, decided to make his own. This is not to suggest that he physically built the structure in which the JMAC is headquartered (although installing the massive, fully-sprung floor was his idea). But the traditional atmosphere and classical ethos that permeates the portion of the professional



complex that houses his institute is irrefutably attributable to its headmaster.

With due respect to *Field of Dreams*, however, creating a thriving dojo is not as simple as, “*If you build it, they will come;*” at least not in the virtual era. Early on in this process, Suino Sensei learned that search engine optimization (SEO) was a key ingredient to any modern start-up business. And in what should now be a familiar pattern, when he was unable to find someone capable of handling this aspect of the JMAC’s publicity initiative, Suino added this skill to his ever-expanding portfolio. As he puts it: “*Half of success is showing up. Half is working hard. And the third half is finding a way to track your progress.*”

JMAC has a very welcoming environment, but there is a palpable intensity that lets visitors know right away that serious business is being conducted here. And in case any doubt remains, the whistling of long blades slicing the through the air serves as a periodic, spine-chilling reminder. In addition to the aforementioned sprung floor, the expansive space includes an office area, additional training and observation locations, and treasure trove of books and periodicals housed in a case that runs the length of one entire wall. The décor is predictably traditional (that is, simple yet elegant), but unlike the museum-esque quality of some “show” dojo, this is clearly an operational facility—reference binders and white boards filled with working notes speak to this important consideration.

Suino Sensei is a gracious host, taking time out of the evening’s busy schedule to answer a variety of questions before jumping on the mat (two mats in fact) to lead classes: The first, an empty-hand session focusing on rolling and ground-grappling, and the second, all blade-work. On the jujutsu mat, Suino Sensei performs the exercises right along with his students, rather than simply calling out techniques. His approach exemplifies a concept that he had just discussed with the interviewer a moment ago: The way in which a good instructor must often allow the student to “win” as part of the learning process. If the junior struggles to succeed in any way, it can be demoralizing and counterproductive, but many seniors miss this point in the process of demonstrating their superior skills. This class is clearly exhausting, but the



***The author visited JMAC to interview Suino Sensei in September 2023.***

atmosphere remains relaxed, cooperative, and even light-hearted at times. Here, the dues are paid by sweaty *keikogi* tops and flushed faces.

With the move to the adjacent hall and the taking up of arms, the mood changes somewhat. Now wearing *hakama* rather than *keikogi* pants (or perhaps over them), each practitioner has an *iaito*—a practice version of a *katana*—in hand. For those who know, the presence of such an implement has a sobering effect on those around it. There is an understanding among the swordsmen and swordswomen that the *iaito* represents a deadly weapon and should be treated as such.

The atmosphere in the dojo is intense and the movements of the participants, strictly controlled. Much of the actual practice involves maneuvering in and from a seated position, standing footwork, and formal methods of drawing and re-sheathing of the sword, but when the cuts come—and they do come—they seem to split the air like a rudder through water. It has the tendency to make a believer out of you (if you weren’t already one to begin with).



No matter how staunchly traditional a martial art may be, one unavoidable evolutionary imperative which must be navigated is the burgeoning and labyrinthine canon of criminal and civil laws governing the use—and teaching—of various methods of self-defense. Like certain other, forward-thinking teachers, Suino Sensei includes aspects of conflict avoidance and rules-of-engagement in his lessons, and, as a licensed attorney, he is in a position to know (are you spotting the theme here?).

With respect to judo/jujutsu for example, it is inescapable that the legality of choke-holds has become a hotly contested matter in law enforcement circles in recent years; a development with which all well-informed instructors of these arts must be familiar. There is also a difference between the kind of relatively harmless bar-room brawling that takes place in taverns across the country on any given Friday night, and being the victim of an earnest attack by a violent criminal; a context in which no quarter is asked or given. Recognizing the difference and responding accordingly is an essential aspect of any realistic self-defense training.

When asked to compare the Eastern and Western martial experiences, Suino Sensei first points out that the Japanese culture permeates all aspects of life there—as one would expect—and that this includes a deeply-rooted sense of discipline and propriety that is perhaps unique to that nation. In addition, it should come as no surprise that the quality of instruction available in the place that gave birth to these martial arts is second-to-none. After gaining entry to various schools the hard way; that is, through a combination of persistence in getting through the door in the first place, and toughness in fighting (literally) all comers for the right to remain once inside, the young American found what he was had been searching for, and remained in Japan for many years.

There is a tendency among some Westerners who discover the allure of the Eastern martial arts to abandon their own culture entirely in favor of that of the nation from which their chosen art originated. The results of such a wholesale exchange can range from the sublime to the ridiculous. This is not the case with Suino Sensei. While his deep respect and tremendous dedication to the Japanese martial tradition is immediately apparent, he is

not blind to areas where Western culture may offer an advantage. For example, he notes that the intricate and all-encompassing culture of expectations and obligations in the East can become burdensome over time, and adds that there are some attributes of Western martial practice are extremely beneficial, such as creativity (which implies a willingness to depart from the well-worn path on occasion, and tracks perfectly with our theme of finding a way or making one). If there is no avenue for creativity, there is no room for improvement.

The late, great *kung fu* master Leo Fong used to remind his students: “*Don’t confuse the gift with the box it comes in.*” By this, he meant that the essence of a technique must not be lost by worrying about such secondary considerations such as which finger moves first. But there is another end of this spectrum to be considered, and Suino Sensei expresses it this way: “*When I returned to the United States, I found some dojo that were okay to train at as far as technique goes, but nothing that captured the culture. That’s why I opened my own.*” Neither of these lessons is intended to convey the impression that the only thing that matters is either raw technique or institutional atmosphere—rather, each satisfies a different need.

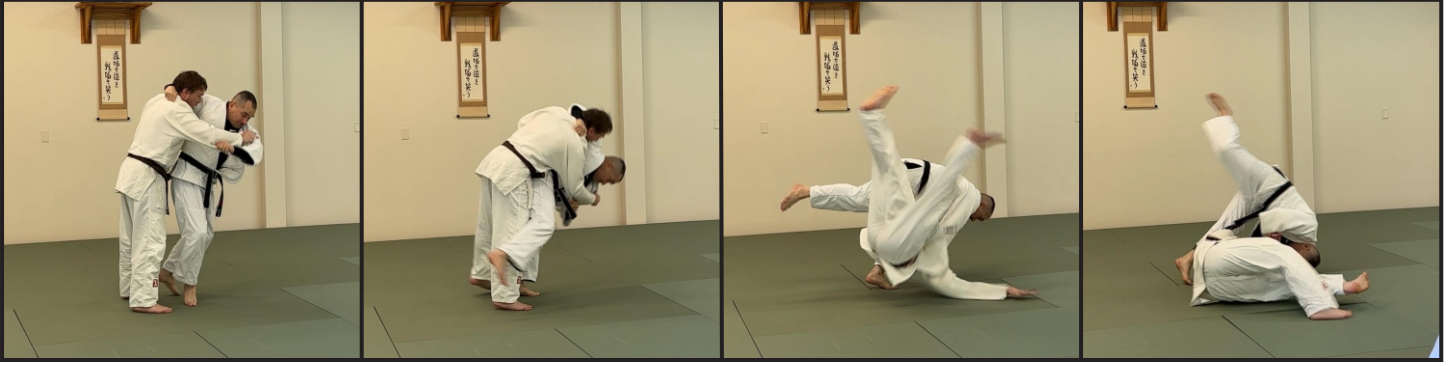
As the discussion progressed, Suino Sensei had a fascinating take on certain specifics of training:

- **Ukemi:** While *ukemi* are commonly taught as defensive or escaping techniques, there are certain situations—such as in *tomoenage* or *maki-komi*—where some or all of the roll or fall can be used offensively. To this, Suino Sensei added *harai goshi*: “*I didn’t become good at that technique until I started throwing myself into a forward fall—that’s what opened the door for me.*”

- **Atemi:** Known for packing a powerful punch, Suino Sensei has published entire works on the importance of what he calls “the flywheel” method of striking. In the process of elaborating on this, he explains: “*There’s nothing new under the sun, this actually comes from San Quan Dao—China’s Three Fist Way—in which the hips are spun around a vertical axis (like a flywheel) to generate tremendous power using the entire body.*”

- **Ken Gaku:** As much as there is no substitute for crossing hands/blades with a partner, much can be learned





*At Itten Dojo, Suino Sensei demonstrates entering a forward roll to add power to his harai-goshi.*

through observation and visualization. As Suino Sensei tells it: “*Sato Sensei encouraged us to watch the other students, emulate what they did well, and avoid doing what they did poorly. As simple as that may sound, it’s a pretty good recipe for success.*” Replay those success stories in the mind, and you have the ability to train anywhere, anytime.

• **Zanshin:** In his youth, Suino Sensei survived a near-fatal encounter in which his eyesight—and perhaps his life—were only saved by the instinctive reaction of raising his guard micro-seconds before impact. He credits this traumatic event with, “*increasing my situational awareness a thousandfold.*”

Most serious Western martial artists have at least toyed with the idea of pulling up stakes and heading East in pursuit of their passion, but few have actually done so. For the vast majority, that level of commitment is an impossibility, or at least an insurmountable impracticality. But our theme today is “find a way or make one,” and in that regard, Nicklaus Suino has brought valuable “gifts” in authentic “packaging” most of the way here.

For U.S.-based readers, JMAC—and affiliated American dojo such as Itten Dojo—are a much more manageable commute than the overnight flight to Yokohama... 🌐

**Peter Hobart has been a devoted student of the martial arts since his father—a Golden Gloves Champion—first introduced him to the sweet science as a child. Since then, he has lived in many different states and countries, and in each place, he has sought out, and been fortunate to find, some of the world’s finest teachers. His connection with Itten Dojo began as a commuting student in the early 1990s, flourished following a move to Central Pennsylvania (which he tells his wife had nothing to do with the location of the dojo), and continues in a variety of ways to this day. He currently lives in Northern Virginia, works for the government, and manages to write, train, and teach on the side just enough to ensure that it hurts every time!**

