

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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Loaded Guns

There was an unfortunate incident during a recent practice of our judo study group. The study group leader had people doing an exercise in trading throws, what was supposed to be an easy exchange of fundamental techniques. A very new member of the dojo, someone that supposedly had a grand total of eight months training in two other martial arts schools and the experience of two MMA matches, somewhere, did something stupid. After having already been told twice during that same practice to “Take it easy,” Mr. MMA attempted a throw he’d apparently (sort of) picked up elsewhere, something he shouldn’t have been doing in the first place, and then blew it. His training partner in the exercise was MaKenzie, a young woman that has essentially become the public face in our dojo of jujutsu and judo training for women—she suffered a broken bone in her foot and possible damage to her knee. She’s now wearing a large boot (see photo at left) and is out of training for at least a month assuming that physical therapy won’t be necessary. This was actually strike three for Mr. MMA, counting previous but much less egregious incidents, so he’s no longer part of the dojo. But that doesn’t really do anything for MaKenzie.

It should be obvious that training in martial arts has an element of risk. The training really wouldn’t have much practical value if that were not the case. The overwhelming majority of training injuries are minor: scrapes, brush burns, strained muscles, maybe an occasional broken toe. Accidents can happen that result in something more, accidents that are nobody’s fault. My most serious injury in training, just a couple years ago, was a torn meniscus in my left knee that required surgery. I know who I was training with and what we were doing at the time. It certainly wasn’t anything frisky and neither of us did anything wrong, so the injury was probably just age-related wear-and-tear. But those incidents are especially rare, as are incidents in which someone does something wrong that results in their own injury. The safety protocols in place for a proper, well-run dojo mitigate a substantial portion of the inherent risks of training.

Our safety record overall is very good. In the 30+ years of operation of the dojo, there have only been a handful of injuries that required any



significant medical treatment, let alone any kind of surgical intervention. In almost every case, those injuries were the direct result of someone doing something stupid and the other person was hurt. For example:

- At an aikijutsu practice, a green-belt working with a first-night student decided that he should demonstrate why keeping a leg locked was a bad idea. As I was yelling “Stop!” the green-belt yanked down on the new student’s shoulders and sprained the new student’s knee. That new student never came back.

- Outside of a regular class, when I was not there, an assistant instructor devised an exercise that was just plain dumb by any measure and that resulted in a female black-belt getting her nose broken.

- During a seminar we hosted in memory of Okabayashi Shogen Sensei, myself and two other instructors each taught for an hour. Rod Uhler Sensei was training with a black-belt student of the third instructor. This fellow was big and enough of a loose cannon on the mat that I had already, and very loudly, reprimanded him when he was paired with me. Big Guy wasn’t able to make the technique at a particular point work, so in trying to help Big Guy figure things out, Uhler Sensei deliberately put himself in an especially vulnerable position. Big Guy still couldn’t do the technique so, in frustration and just to be able to “win,” Big Guy kicked Uhler Sensei’s leg out from under him, resulting in a complete tear of the ACL. Uhler Sensei had to have major surgery to replace his ACL with a donor ligament from a cadaver, and missed about a year of training for recovery and rehabilitation.

It’s critically important that instructors and students understand that signed release forms hold no power in instances of stupidity. We were extremely lucky that the new student in the first example did not require surgery and in consequence decide to sue the dojo. In the third example, I argued that Uhler Sensei should sue Big Guy, but Uhler Sensei did not feel that to be appropriate.

Unless someone is specifically training for law enforcement or war, martial arts practice is supposed to be engaging and life-enhancing rather than primarily dangerous and stress-inducing. Again, to have practical value, training for everyone needs to have at least a little of bit of that. But only men and women with their lives

routinely on the line need the really high-intensity training cadence that is especially risky. The thing is, almost *all* martial arts techniques were originally designed to cripple or kill.

In modern practice for other than military and law enforcement, the techniques have been “declawed” to make training safer for the general public. The claws, however, have only been retracted, not removed, and are still present just beneath the surface. It’s for this reason we often demonstrate the crippling/killing version of an old technique so that students know what NOT to do. (Also, what to do if faced with a legitimately lethal threat.) Training in martial arts shares much in common with training with loaded firearms—despite inherent risks training is safe so long as everyone recognizes the potential consequences and acts accordingly.



Uchi Tenkai Nage (Inside Turning Throw—also called Shiho-nage in other styles of jujutsu and aikido) is practiced safely when tori, the person throwing, keeps the fingers of uke, the person being thrown, on uke’s shoulder. Tori steps forward and takes uke to the mat. If instead tori forms uke’s arm into a “Z” shape and steps back instead of forward, uke’s shoulder and elbow can be dislocated. This is a good example of claws retracted/claws extended.



There are many things that impress me about Nicklaus Suino Sensei's approach to training at his Japanese Martial Arts Center in Ann Arbor, Michigan. But one thing really caught my attention the first time I experienced it. Prior to the start of a jujutsu or judo class, Suino Sensei will often ask the students, "Who's responsible for your training partner's safety?" The students respond, "I am."

Sensei will ask again, louder, "Who is?" The students perk up with, "I am!"

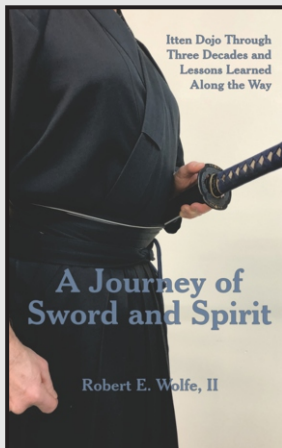
A third time, Suino Sensei demands, "Who is responsible for your training partner's safety?" The students shout, "I AM!"

The point is well made, and I think that this is yet another JMAC procedure we need to implement here at Itten Dojo. 🌀

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*.

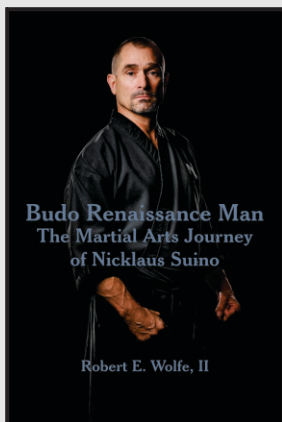


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ŌKAMI
Publications

