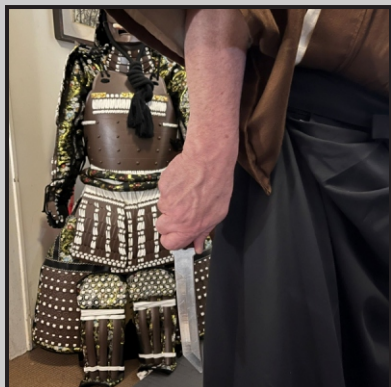


Sword and Spirit

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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Creating Dilemmas in Martial Arts: How to Build Thinkers, Not Just Robots

In the martial arts world, we often hear that pressure reveals character. But in training, *pressure with choice* reveals something even more powerful: *understanding*. One of the most effective tools I've used as a teacher and practitioner is the intentional creation of *dilemmas*—scenarios where every option available comes with a consequence.

Dilemmas force students out of autopilot. Dilemmas expose gaps in understanding, challenge assumptions, and—most importantly—develop strategic thinking. When combined with a structured methodology, dilemmas accelerate the growth of students faster than rote memorization ever could.

What Is a Dilemma in Martial Arts Training?

A training dilemma is a scenario in which the practitioner must choose between two or more actions, each with potential risks. It's not about choosing the "correct" technique—it's about navigating the *less costly* outcome in a situation with no easy answers.

In grappling, that might look like choosing between defending a joint lock while exposing your base to a sweep. In striking, it could be deciding whether to cover up and eat a body shot or risk slipping and getting caught with a hook. The power of this kind of training is that it mimics the unpredictability of real conflict.

I've seen students light up when they finally realize that they're not being tested on technique execution, but on *decision-making under duress*. That's when they begin to shift from being reactive to being responsive.



Why Methodology Beats Memorization

Far too many students—and instructors, for that matter—treat martial arts like a collection of isolated techniques. They memorize a wrist escape, a throw, a kick combo, but can't make any of it work when the rhythm breaks down.

That's because memorization has limits. You can't memorize your way through chaos.

What students need is *methodology*: a system of interconnected concepts that guides them through chaos. Methodology teaches students how to *think* through problems, not just perform rehearsed movements.

In our Universal Applied Martial Science (UAMS) curriculum, we don't teach “moves”—we teach *options*, *principles*, and *timing*. A student learns not just how to off-balance someone, but how to recognize when that moment exists and what the follow-up opportunities might be. That's methodology.

To draw a comparison: Memorizing techniques is like memorizing vocabulary words in a foreign language. Methodology is like understanding grammar and context—you gain the ability to *communicate*, not just repeat.

How Dilemmas Support Methodology

When students train with dilemmas, they're forced to access their understanding of principles, not just recall a move. A dilemma exposes whether the students grasp *why* a technique works and *when* it's appropriate—not just *how* to do it.

I remember training a student in clinch work who kept getting shut down when trying a standard hip throw. I put him in a situation where defending the throw left him open to knee strikes, and blocking the knees reopened the throw. The shift was immediate—he started *listening* to the energy, *feeling* his opponent's movement, and making smarter, faster choices. His learning curve jumped because the dilemma pushed him past memorization into intuition.

Creating Dilemmas in the Dojo

Here are practical ways you can integrate dilemmas into your training:



- **Option-Based Sparring:** Instead of unstructured free-sparring, give students limited tools—“You can only attack with two techniques, and your partner can only defend one of them.” This forces anticipation and creative thinking.

- **Decision Drills:** Set up a situation (like guard passing) in which the defender has to choose between defending a submission or maintaining position—each with consequences.

- **Reversal Scenarios:** Let students put *the instructor* in a dilemma and then discuss what they saw and why they chose that particular scenario. This builds both confidence and tactical understanding.





• **Restrictive Constraints:** Use rules like “one hand only” or “no grips” to create artificial limitations. These scenarios challenge students to innovate under pressure.

Turning Technique into Tactics

If you want to develop students that can thrive under pressure, not just perform under instruction, you have to move beyond collecting techniques. Instructors need to give students a system of thought, and then *stress-test* that system with dilemmas.

Remember: A martial artist who only knows *what* to do is limited. A martial artist who knows *why, when, and how* to adapt is dangerous.

Create dilemmas. Build thinkers. Teach students how to problem-solve, in motion. That’s how warriors are forged—not through rote drills, but through decision, pressure, and principle. 🌀

A Request from Castillo Sensei

My name is Edward Castillo. On October 20th, 2024, **I had a series of cardiac traumas, resulting in a hospitalization.** I am in need of assistance as I can’t work at this time and things have taken a downturn financially. **I am seeking assistance while recovering from this life-changing situation.** I am a martial arts instructor and have a limited capacity for any physical activities. As you know, the monthly bills mount and it becomes difficult to focus on recovery, with the other worries involved. I am working on making a full recovery and my particular health insurance does not cover my cardiac therapy. Thank you and any assistance is appreciated. All the best to you and yours.



**Donate via
GoFundMe**

Edward Castillo (Salahuddin Muhammad) is dojocho of the Takeshin Dojo and director of the Nihonden Aikibujutsu Senyokai. An overseas director (Nihon jujutsu division) for the Japanese Budo Association under his teacher, Asano Yasuhito Sensei, Castillo Sensei is the current head of Hontai Hakkei-ryu, and a student of Shinkage-ryu Hyoho (Asano-ha). He is retired from the fields of private client and executive protection, and has also worked in fugitive recovery.

