

Sword and Spirit

The Journal of Itten Dojo

September 2025



— 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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JMAC at Itten #8

When I started to write this September edition of our journal, I hadn't realized that this month is an anniversary for Itten Dojo. Five years ago, on 26/27 September 2020, we made our official start of training in Muso Jikiden Eishin-ryu iaido with Nicklaus Suino Sensei of the Japanese Martial Arts Center in Ann Arbor, Michigan. I still have the PDF registration form from that visit, and I had to chuckle when I read how that seminar visit was introduced on the form:

"Suino Sensei has been a very good friend to our dojo, and is one of the most highly respected instructors of iaido in the West—he's agreed to help our dojo initiate a formal practice with him of Muso Jikiden Eishin-ryu iaido as a supplement to our training in aikijutsu and kenjutsu."

Little did I know that our iaido program would rapidly become the largest component of Itten Dojo, that Nihon Jujutsu would eventually replace aikijutsu, that kenjutsu would be eliminated, and that judo would enter the mix—all three budo under the direction of Suino Sensei. And when we incorporate a fourth budo, *kyudo* (the art of Japanese archery) in the spring of 2026, it will be in close coordination with the establishment of a kyudo program at JMAC.

Suino Sensei and several of the JMAC assistant instructors returned here on 12–14 September for our eighth seminar at Itten Dojo (ninth, if we count the first, just-for-fun visit in 2018). Assisting this time were Jon Spengler, Nick Miller, and Amber Cathy. We've trained with Suino Sensei at JMAC or elsewhere and/or attended events hosted by JMAC six other times so far this year, and a couple of us will be returning to JMAC for half a week of training in early December. I've completely lost count of how many times we've trained with Sensei, at JMAC or elsewhere, prior to 2025. As has recently been the case, training during our seminar this month included iaido, jujutsu, and judo, with rank testing conducted for iaido and jujutsu.

In the 33 years of its existence our dojo has undergone multiple transformations; some sought for, some endured. With the unprecedented





(in our experience) support of Suino Sensei and our JMAC *sempai* (seniors), the current transformation—of which we’re still in the relatively early stages—amounts to a total reinvention of the dojo, largely in the image of JMAC. The seminar visit this month will be remembered as a milestone in that process, especially for our immersion in Nihon Jujutsu. Our acquisition and accommodation of MJER iaido has been easier (although by no means easy)



than has been the case for jujutsu, even though we have relatively equivalent experience in previous arts related to both of our current studies.

Heritage martial arts are far more than mere collections of *waza* (techniques). Traditional, Japanese martial arts have specific *riai* (a fundamental, underlying theory), *reiho* or *reishiki* (methods or principles of ceremonial etiquette), and philosophical aspects that are not a matter of book-learning. These are things that a serious student of an art seeks to embody, gradually more so over time if the training is successful. Even though Suino Sensei’s approach to MJER iaido is by far the most comprehensive study of swordsmanship that I’ve ever experienced, acquiring skill and correcting misinterpretations or errors in execution has felt like a natural evolution.

The transition to Nihon Jujutsu has been more challenging, as this process has required rewiring some deeply ingrained habits, particularly with regard to *ukemi* (literally “receiving body,” the skills of getting down in one piece when thrown). Some of us tend to be too compliant when techniques are applied—staying ahead of the technique was a critically necessary survival skill in training scenarios we experienced in the past. Suino Sensei has told us that we need to be “more trusting” of *tori* (the person applying the technique), and a bit more resistant to allow *tori* to know that his or her execution of



the technique is valid and realistic. This is difficult, given the injuries inflicted on some of us in the past when we failed to stay sufficiently ahead of a technique, but we're making progress. (Note: This kind of disregard for the wellbeing of *uke*—the person receiving the technique—was *never* the practice at Itten Dojo. It was something we dealt with when training with certain others.)

We worked more on developing proper jujutsu/judo ukemi during this visit and also addressed a significant aspect of how *kata* (forms) should be presented. While, on the iaido side, we've tested previously in formal circumstances, our jujutsu tests heretofore have been "hybrid" affairs, part test and part instruction (this an accommodation due to limited in-person training sessions with Suino Sensei). This time was our first formal format for jujutsu testing, and the weak areas that manifested related to *reishiki* and *zanshin* ("remaining spirit," the attentiveness, intentionality, and connectivity at the end of or between techniques). Fortunately, the expectations for *reishiki* and *zanshin* closely mirror some of our previous experience—we just didn't know it—so integrating these aspects will also prove to be a natural evolution.



Overall, testing went very well, with all candidates for promotion achieving the ranks they were striving for.

Results for iaido included one person for 7-Kyu, three people for 6-Kyu, one person for 5-Kyu, one person for 4-Kyu, two people for 3-Kyu, one person for 2-Kyu, two people for 1-Kyu, and one person for 1-Dan (first degree




black-belt—congratulations to Freddy Lebron!).

On the jujutsu side, results included four people for 6-Kyu, two people for 5-Kyu, and one person for 4-Kyu.

The five years since our “official” start with JMAC have flown by, our dojo continues to grow in solid,

dedicated enrollment, and I am overwhelmingly grateful to Suino Sensei and our JMAC sempai for the opportunities they’ve opened to us.

As a former instructor recently said to me, “You finally have what you were looking for.” 



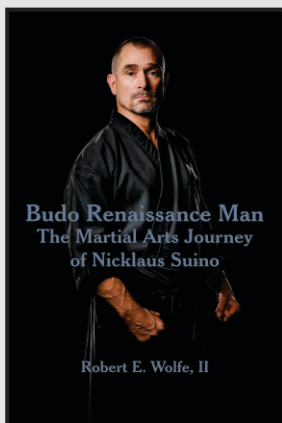
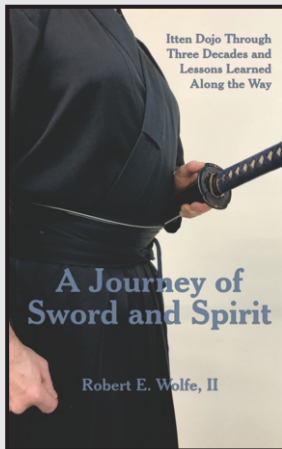
Robert Wolfe, chief instructor of Itten Dojo, began martial arts training in 1975 while attending Bucknell University, where he earned a degree in Japanese Studies. Mr. Wolfe has taught since 1985, and founded Itten Dojo in 1992. His articles on martial arts have been featured in publications such as *The Bujin*, *Budo Shinbun*, the *Journal of Asian Martial Arts*, *Bugeisha*, *Aikido Today Magazine*, *Inside Karate*, *Martial Arts Training*, and *Martial Arts Professional*. He is the author of two books: *A Journey of Sword and Spirit — Itten Dojo Through Three Decades and Lessons Learned Along the Way* and *Budo Renaissance Man — The Martial Arts Journey of Nicklaus Suino*.



Available from Amazon.com

A Journey of Sword and Spirit

“In an age that has largely lost touch with many of the traditional values that built the world we all currently inhabit, this work (and the dojo from which it sprang) serve as a welcome oasis of wisdom, strength, and serenity.”



Budo Renaissance Man

“For more than three decades, thousands of people have become more centered, happier, and more successful with Nicklaus Suino’s guidance. Suino has been called ‘one of the leading martial arts instructors in North America,’ but his influence radiates far beyond the dojo. This concise biography of Suino presents a profile of an inspirational leader whose accomplishments in martial arts were a springboard to success as an author, attorney, entrepreneur, life coach, husband, and father.”

