

Sword and Spirit

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— Why Budo? —

Regardless of the times you live in, or the circumstances of your life, success largely depends on things you actually can control:

- Building strong relationships in a community of achievement.
- Forging a disciplined and positive mindset.
- Enhancing your physical health and capabilities.

These are exactly the things membership in a dojo provides.

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Life Hacks from the Martial Arts...

What You Bring and What You Surrender

It was the Big Day. My friend and I had called the dojo, spoken to the sensei, made an appointment to watch a class. We had been sent a package of information, giving specific instructions as to what was expected of us. We were dressed for a job interview — or at least the college-kid version of dressing for a job interview. We found the building and walked up to the second floor.

Stepping into the dojo felt like stepping into another world. You could feel that the rules were different here. Sensei introduced himself. We sat and watched class. Once the class ended, Sensei began the interview.

Over the intervening years, I have listened to Sensei interview dozens of potential members of the dojo; I have even done it myself on occasion. Though the questions asked vary somewhat, there is one we always pose. I remember being asked it myself, all those years ago.

His demeanor serious, Sensei locked his gaze onto mine: “Why do you want to do this?”

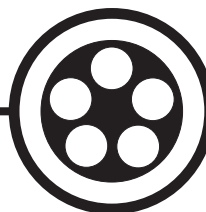
I am sure I babbled a bit, trying to justify my existence to this man, trying to convince him that allowing me to train would benefit his dojo and the arts he studied. I knew as soon as I started watching the class that I wanted to join. I knew I would do anything to be given the opportunity to train. I remember struggling to say something that would prove to this man that I was worthy.

Sensei allowed us to join, though I am certain it was our obvious enthusiasm rather than our verbal dexterity that convinced him.

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Forging a *katana* is a very work-intensive process. Japan is a mineral-poor land. Unlike Europe, where iron can be mined from the earth, the Japanese had to use iron found in sand. These iron sands would be refined into *tamahagane*, the steel from which swords are forged.

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The form and artistry of the katana results from the necessity of refining poor quality metals into strong, flexible steel. The tamahagane is heated, hammered, folded, over and over, to refine it. Every step of the forging process is designed to maximize the potential of the materials by removing everything that is unnecessary. Along the way, an object of great beauty is formed.

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The dojo is like a forge. The traditional martial arts are predicated on the idea that the practitioner changes for the art. The art doesn't change. In the dojo, with the ryu as the anvil and the art as the hammer, we are forged into something stronger.

Budo should enrich life. It shouldn't replace it. While the study of budo is a transformative experience, the goal is to refine the self, becoming more capable, more driven, more focused. Like the iron sands that become *tamahagane*, you already contain everything that is required to be transformed.

I have written before about how there is no moral aspect to the mastery of martial arts. In fact, the ideal warrior is one who is at odds with society. Society teaches us from a young age not to yell and not to hit. The warrior learns to disable their societal programming, so they can deploy violence as appropriate.

If you sacrifice the fundamental aspects of your personality on the altar of budo, you run the risk of being consumed by this aspect of martial study. Budo is the study of power and its applications. Power is addictive. Applying your abilities against another person is physically pleasurable, in the same way that winning a foot race, sinking a three-point shot, or scoring the game-winning touchdown can be pleasurable.

And yet, training in budo requires sacrifice. The *budoka* must maintain *shoshin* (the beginner's mind) and *nyunanshin* (pliable mind). The dojo is not a place for individuals. This is a difficult concept for Westerners. Our culture tells us that our individuality is sacrosanct and inviolate. But the process of refinement requires heat and pressure. Submission to the demands of the budo provides

that heat and pressure. Dedicated, consistent practice is the hammer that shapes the student of budo.

One of the reasons I have stayed on the path I chose those many years ago is that, when I look at my teacher and my seniors, I see what they have gained by submitting to the demands of the ryu. They are focused, determined, powerful, intense, and disciplined. They can lead, and they can follow orders. They act without hesitation, often without concern for their own needs. They put the good of the group ahead of the good of the individual. When they are seated in the same room, it is obvious to even a casual observer that they are cut from the same cloth.

And yet they are all very different men, with their own deeply held beliefs. They have full and complete lives — careers they excel at and families they care for. They have sacrificed, and in doing so they have become more than they were.

Submission to the demands of the group and to the external standard of the ryu is a core martial value. You model the behavior of your seniors. When you are given an order, you follow it. It is a conscious choice to give up your individuality in order to serve something larger than you, and to become something more than you were.

This is yet another of the many contradictions of budo: *omote* and *ura*, the obvious and the hidden. Through submission, one finds strength.

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Forging a sword is a process with a beginning and ending, but forging the practitioner of budo is an endless struggle. As we pass through the world, we acquire impurities — distractions that keep us away from the dojo, obstacles thrown up by work and life, the siren song of leisure activities. The budoka makes the difficult choice to submit, to continue refining both technique and spirit through diligent practice.

Perfection is unattainable, but striving for perfection is transformative. It is a process that only ends when the practitioner leaves the budo.

I am all too aware of my own failings. I return to the dojo, to forge myself anew once again. ☸

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