

Sword and Spirit

The eNewsletter of Itten Dojo

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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...

You Can Do This And Why You Should

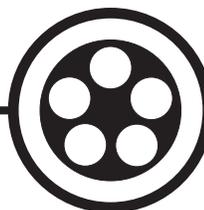
When we post photographs, videos, or essays on Facebook, we see that the greatest interest and response always comes from men and women in their mid-30s to mid-40s. Some of these Facebook friends of Itten Dojo might already be practicing martial artists, but I'm willing to bet that most — probably like you — are not. Sure, you might have taken a karate class as a kid, and you still enjoy seeing demonstrations of the skill and grace embodied in the arts, but you think it's not something someone at your age can still take on.

Nonsense.

Although there are many options for training in this area, ranging from karate and kung fu to BJJ, the arts practiced at Itten Dojo — aikijutsu and kenjutsu — are particularly well suited to you and absolutely within your capabilities. Both arts place great emphasis on natural patterns of movement that will be very easy on your body, and both arts also offer a gradual and carefully guided process for you to get in shape (or back in shape) and achieve optimal health and wellness. You will also develop a range of physical and cognitive skills optimally applicable to self-defense, as has been proven time and again by fellow students of these arts, in various circumstances against assailants that in some cases were no more than mere annoyances while in other instances armed attackers with lethal intent.

More importantly, both arts offer far greater benefits than simply health, wellness, and self-defense. Aikijutsu and kenjutsu are tremendously challenging on both physical and intellectual levels, and the process of dealing with and overcoming those challenges will enhance you in significant, predictable ways. With time, you will become more mentally focused, more emotionally balanced, more physically coordinated, and more spiritually calm. These attributes will improve every aspect of your life.

Continued on next page



But there's another benefit of training you might not be aware of. According to author James Clear, who writes extensively about self-improvement methodologies based on the latest scientific research:

“Human beings love challenges, but only if they are within the optimal zone of difficulty... Tasks like these, science has found, are the most likely to keep us motivated in the long term. Tasks that are significantly below your current abilities are boring. Tasks that are significantly beyond your current abilities are discouraging. But tasks that are right on the border of success and failure are incredibly motivating to our human brains. We want nothing more than to master a skill just beyond our current horizon. We can call this phenomenon The Goldilocks Rule.”

Here's the most significant factor, again from Clear:

“Working on challenges of an optimal level of difficulty has been found to not only be motivating, but also to be a major source of happiness. As psychologist Gilbert Brim put it, ‘One of the important sources of human happiness is working on tasks at a suitable level of difficulty, neither too hard nor too easy.’”

Training in aikijutsu or kenjutsu is a near-perfect vehicle to realize these benefits, and both arts can provide a lifetime of fun and challenge.

• **Itto Tenshin-ryu Kenjutsu**

Kenjutsu, or Japanese swordsmanship, is an incredibly deep and challenging art. Because there are really a limited variety of cuts that can be employed, practically, against an opponent, swordsmanship has always been a matter of spirit, movement, and strategy. Even in the era of great battles, when the sword was of secondary importance to the bow and spear, Japanese warriors recognized that training with the sword was an exceptional means to grasp the essence of combat and gain deep insights to life.

In our training, we study the use of the long sword and the short, “companion” sword. The majority of our formal practice time is devoted to two-person, combative exercises (*kumitachi*) with *bokken* (wooden swords). Many people

assume wooden swords are used for the safety of students, but this notion is mistaken. Bokken are used in training situations where swords can clash, because it's much less expensive to replace a wooden sword than a steel sword. Being hit by a bokken can be more dangerous than being cut, due to the nature of the injury. The practice of swordsmanship carries a very different feel than that of other martial arts, because there are very clear consequences to mistakes or inattention. To train safely, everyone must be 100% focused and intent. The resulting intensity produces positive changes in the student at a quicker rate than is typically accomplished in unarmed martial arts.

We also include solo practice of forms and test-cutting (*tameshigiri*) with live blades (*shinken*). In iai kata with a live blade, there is no margin for error. If a student is just a little bit off, the student will damage the *saya* (scabbard). A little more off, and the student will damage him or herself.

One of the most enjoyable aspects of training in Itto Tenshin-ryu is the fact the art incorporates a variety of traditional weapons, such as the *yari* (spear) and *naginata* (halberd), as well as an array of jujutsu techniques used to disarm an opponent or gain the upper hand when an opponent attempts to control or disarm the swordsman or swordswoman. The variety inherent in the training helps keep practice fresh, challenging, and engaging.

• **Yamate-ryu Aikijutsu**

Aikijutsu is an unarmed grappling art derived from Daito-ryu aikijujutsu and is closely related to Japanese swordsmanship. According to legend, aikijujutsu was created in the 12th century as a secret art of the Minamoto clan. Training in aikijujutsu was first opened to the general public by Takeda Sokaku in the early 20th century, and at that time the art became known as Daito-ryu. More than 30 varieties of aikijujutsu and aikido are taught today, embodying a wide range of technical and philosophical approaches to the art. Yamate-ryu aikijutsu, the style we practice, is a close derivative of the original Daito-ryu.

Although aikijutsu and aikido share a common heritage, there are distinctive differences in the arts. Modern aikido has been shaped to a large degree by the



esoteric religious beliefs of its founder, Ueshiba Morihei, an aspect that does not in any way apply to aikijutsu.

Within the Yamate-ryu, we believe philosophical insights are best engendered by honest sweat in the dojo. We are less concerned with “harmonizing” with an attack than we are with practicing against very strong grips and strikes and gaining absolute control of the opponent at first contact. While the manner of practice is strictly controlled for safety, students are from the start taught “applied” versions of the techniques for use in self-defense.

Aikijutsu is popular with law enforcement officers — since many of the techniques were invented to counter someone trying to grab a samurai’s wrist, to prevent him from drawing his sword, the applied versions work identically against someone trying to stop a police officer from using his sidearm, or against someone trying to wrestle the weapon away.

Aikijutsu is also an excellent art for women, because of its emphasis on form rather than power. In fact, several of the highest-ranking instructors of the art are female, and at our dojo women often comprise about one-third to one-half of the number of people attending an average class at Itten Dojo.

The practice of aikijutsu is suitable for persons of almost any age, and we accept students as young as 14 for the regular class, although most persons range in age from early 20s to mid-50s. We have a separate class, utilizing an age-appropriate curriculum, for children aged 11 to 14.

Adults can undertake training at nearly any point in their lives and continue practice as long as they wish. The art is adaptable to varying physical abilities — there are more than enough dynamic throws and landings to hold the interest of the friskiest and most daring youngsters, while versions of many of the same techniques can be practiced with soft rolls instead of break-falls, and are well within the abilities of more mature students.

Aikijutsu provides a moderate to intense, total-body workout. Although we may slow down at times to work something in fine detail, most of each practice is conducted well into the aerobic range. The nature of the training develops strength (especially in the legs), endurance, balance, flexibility, coordination, and grace.

Philosophically, many students find appeal in the fact aikijutsu offers a wide range of responses to a physical assault. Although the ability to fight is probably the least important benefit of martial arts training, some people are more comfortable with an art that allows the possibility an opponent can be pinned and controlled without serious injury, in contrast to the case in an art such as karate — even after twenty years of training in karate, I never really found a way to *gently* punch and kick someone into submission...

Do you want more out of life? Do you want to be happier, feel more fulfilled?

We invite you to visit Itten Dojo! ☸

Robert Wolfe, the chief instructor at Itten Dojo, began martial arts training in 1975, has taught since 1985, and holds senior ranks in Itto Tenshin-ryu kenjutsu, Yamate-ryu aikijutsu, and Isshinryu karate. He has published articles addressing martial arts in magazines and journals.

