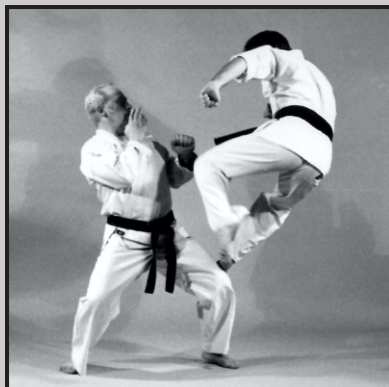


Sword and Spirit

The eNewsletter of Itten Dojo

January 2018



— 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...

“Fight, or Quit!”

Back in the old Isshinryu karate dojo in the early 80’s, we did a lot of heavy-contact sparring (several of the guys even went on to compete around the east coast in professional, full-contact kickboxing matches, some of which were covered by ESPN). In the dojo, we wore minimal protective gear and routinely sustained considerable damage, on the theory we “would rather take a beating here, than on the street.” (Hey, we were good fighters; nobody ever claimed we were particularly intelligent...)

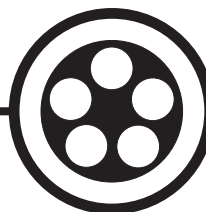
During one intense sparring session, A.J. Boyd was staggered by Dave Bretz’s straight right to his head. A.J. went down to hands and knees, trying to regain his wits, as our sensei, Ralph Lindquist, shouted, “Fight or quit, A.J.! Fight or quit!”

A.J. was game to continue the battle but, as he told me later, he just couldn’t decide which Dave of the three standing in front of him he should try to hit.

The above might be somewhat of an extreme example. At the same time, the incident illustrates a decision point all of us reach repeatedly in our lives, and many times in the microcosm of the dojo. The factors leading us to a decision point might be fear, fatigue, conflicting priorities, flagging will, injury, or illness. Regardless of the specifics, we’re forced to make the choice to step forward, or step back.

I was always amazed to see this paradigm play out in one particular aspect of dojo life: the karate *shodan* (first-degree black-belt) examination. If I look back at my time in karate, and count the number of students who reached the point of being qualified and ready to undertake the shodan exam, I find that half the people stepped forward and took the exam. The other half stepped back, and never did. In most of the latter cases, the people quit training completely, rather than take the test. I even saw two people start the exam, be mentally and spiritually defeated in the course of the ordeal, and quit training on the spot, sometimes after having invested as much as ten years to reach that point.

Continued on next page



Any time we step back, let alone quit altogether, I have to believe we emerge from the moment diminished in some critical way.

In the first instance I witnessed of someone accepting defeat, a black-belt candidate with more than a decade of training and years of experience and sacrifice running a branch dojo, quit his shodan exam only minutes from successful completion.

He didn't know how close he was, because Lindquist Sensei had a habit in these tests of telling candidates they were about halfway through, after more than an hour and a half of utterly grueling exertion, and asking them if they were willing to continue, when in fact the exams were almost finished.

This particular individual subsequently requested a second chance. He was required to put in several more months of training and I visited his dojo a number of times to help him prepare. It wasn't going to be easy, but the second time around should have been easier than the first, by virtue of knowing what to expect and being able to train accordingly. But that wasn't how it turned out.

The follow-up exam was held in a grim, unfinished, upper room of an old warehouse. The door to the room was heavy, and had both deadbolts and a sliding bar to secure it. At the appointed time, the black-belt candidate presented himself to the testing panel. The senior member of the panel asked the candidate, "Are you ready?"

The candidate shouted, "Yes, sir!" as though there were nothing in the world that could stop him.

Looking the candidate square in the eye, the test panel captain very quietly said, "Good. Lock the door."

And that fellow's knees buckled. Literally. That's the only time I've ever seen it happen — and he nearly fell. Within five minutes he quit the test, and karate, even though he was physically ready, even though nothing was going to happen to him that he hadn't already survived.

He was defeated by his own imagination.

None of us have an unblemished record in this regard, and we never know what circumstance will bring on the moment of decision.

More than 30 years ago, I very nearly quit flight instruction early in my training, thereby surrendering a lifelong dream to be a pilot, during an episode of vertigo induced by steep turns. Vertigo kills pilots, and this episode would likely have killed me had I been alone in the plane at the time. Vertigo feels like one's head and limbs are being pulled from one's torso, all in different directions, with a horrible, terrifying sickness radiating from one's gut, and is completely disorienting and disabling. Every cell in my body was screaming, "Nothing is worth this!"

The only thing that saved me from quitting was the recollection of the disappointment and, I'm a bit ashamed to admit, the disgust I'd felt just the weekend before watching the second of those shodan candidates fold up in the middle of his test and quit karate. At my flight lesson the very next day following the episode of vertigo, I asked specifically to practice steep turns and had no problems. I soloed shortly thereafter.

But there were other times, in other arenas, I did step back, although those instances preceded my own shodan exam and the incident in the airplane. Even if stepping back from a decision point has diminished us, God willing, we might have the chance later to make up the loss.

We don't have the luxury of knowing in advance which challenges might prove too much. The best we can do is train, facing in the dojo a multitude of small decision points and making the choice in each instance to step forward, hoping that the tempering of will so forged might provide the wherewithal to make the decisions in life that *really* matter.

Ultimately, it all comes down to fight, or quit. ☸

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*.

