

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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701 W Simpson Street, Suite C
Mechanicsburg, PA 17055-3716
www.ittendojo.org

Life Hacks from the Martial Arts...

A Habit of Achievement

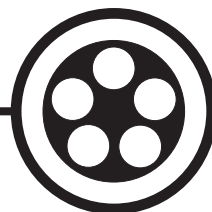
Habits are double-edged swords. A huge portion of our routine behaviors are governed by habits rather than conscious decisions — researchers at Duke University assess the portion to be about 40%¹ — and although we sometimes tend to focus on detrimental habits in need of correction, there can be many advantageous behaviors cultivated into habits. Even more importantly, a mindset of achievement can be developed by means of physical actions repeated until they become habit.

During admission interviews, many people cite “becoming more self-disciplined” as a major motivation in their joining the dojo. That’s certainly an excellent reason and an aspect of personal character that can be significantly enhanced through traditional budo. If I haven’t already mentioned it in the interview, a candidate raising the topic of self-discipline reminds me to define very clearly an initial challenge to be faced and the means to overcome it. What I’ll typically say is something along the lines of:

“I don’t know your life story or what you’ve already been through, but I know from experience that undertaking training in this art will very likely be one of the most difficult things you’ve ever attempted. If you’re serious about this, promise yourself right now that you will complete three months of training before deciding anything whatsoever about it. Three months is the minimum time required to have an informed opinion on the value of the training and what the art can do for you.”

Naturally, to get through the interview, everyone makes that commitment, and for our part we do everything we can to support the new member through the transition from neophyte to budoka. Most people fulfill the commitment made in the interview. A number, however, just weeks (or even a few classes) into the process, quit, and a lot of those people cite “It’s hard” as the reason.

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I always wonder what, exactly, they thought “one of the most difficult things” meant? Regardless, what might have been an opportunity to make discipline and achievement an integral component of character became instead a reinforcement of failure. And that is a dangerous habit to cultivate.

I’ve referenced James Clear (www.jamesclear.com) in previous essays, and much of his advice focuses on exactly this topic. One of his most important pieces of advice for building habits is to start small.

When someone in their admission interview declares, “I’ve decided to make martial arts my way of life,” we know for certain that person will last no more than three weeks. They’re proposing a lifetime commitment to an endeavor they know nothing whatsoever about. Even a three-month commitment is a lot, but as we’re reminded in the *Tao Te Ching*, “A journey of a thousand leagues begins with a single step.” New students that break what would otherwise be a potentially overwhelming commitment into smaller pieces are more likely to succeed. Instead of thinking, “three months,” think “the next practice.” Every practice attended becomes itself a victory, and the foundation of a habit of achievement.

Just being in the dojo counts as the first step. Working to learn the *waza* (techniques) and *heiho* (strategies) is the

subsequent journey. But even in that we encourage new members of the dojo to not worry about really trying to learn anything for the first three weeks or so. Instead, we want new members to just have fun, try to move, and get used to the environment of the dojo. Once we see a new member is starting to look comfortable in their new environment we begin to point out things that should be remembered and practiced. Persons that adapt to the process of training eventually reach a point at which missing a planned practice is uncomfortable.

The same process can be applied outside the dojo, to any desired habit one wishes to establish. Start small. Count and appreciate the little victories. Most importantly, know that with each successful repetition you are building not just a specific habit, but an overall habit of achievement that will serve you well in accomplishing whatever you set out to do. 🌀

¹ Habits: A Repeat Performance, by David T. Neal, Wendy Wood, and Jeffrey M. Quinn (web.archive.org/web/20110526144503/http://dornsife.usc.edu/wendywood/research/documents/Neal.Wood.Quinn.2006.pdf)



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*.

