

# 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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## *A Deeper Exploration of the Martial Arts...*

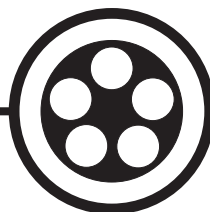
# What's the Point?

The knees are some of the most critical, and also most vulnerable, joints in the human body. Protecting the knees in routine training is a primary requirement for long-term participation in martial arts. Equally important, the things a student should do to protect his or her knees can be a gateway to learning how to optimize the power and effectiveness of a wide variety of techniques, regardless of the art being practiced. Let's start with the key principle: Keeping the foot and the knee in alignment.

I had 20+ years of training and a sandan in karate, with a little judo and European fencing while in college, before I had the opportunity to begin training in kenjutsu. One of the first things I was taught was how to walk properly. My sensei, Bill Knight, illustrated how most people tend to walk, with feet splayed outwards and essentially falling forward with each step. Because the knee points forward while the foot is angled to the outside, every step places strain on the knee. Maybe just a little, but enough that the twist can produce damage over time.

Instead, Knight Sensei taught me to keep the inside edge of the foot tracking straight forward, in the line of travel, moved by rotation of the hips (*koshi-mawari*) rather than by extension of the leg. This process keeps the respective knees and feet in alignment, eliminating strain on the knees, and facilitates a state of readiness by enhancing posture and the ability to change direction very quickly and smoothly. Practicing this new way of walking became for me an all-the-time focus of attention, until the method became an integrated and unconscious matter. (In my full-time career, I work in buildings with straight, central hallways that are anywhere from 300 to 600 feet in length, and I frequently spot-check myself for proper walking technique when traversing the hallways. Going from one office to another becomes training.)

Skill in *ukemi* ("receiving body"—the techniques of landing safely when thrown or falling), and developing correct alignments within the body are the two most valuable, physical benefits of proper training in budo.



Okabayashi Shogen, a direct student of Takeda Tokimune and founder of the Hakuho-ryu, took the study of proper body alignment to a new level by looking deeply at the past. Okabayashi Sensei rediscovered that the *bushi* (warriors) were trained from the time of their first steps to walk in a very distinctive manner, with the points of the hips and shoulders always in a frame defined by a single plane, and they maintained that alignment incessantly. Persons familiar with *kuzushi*, the process of breaking an opponent's posture, will immediately recognize the significance of maintaining the hips/shoulders frame—twisting that frame in the opponent is one of the critical components of inducing a state of *kuzushi* and weakness. And yet many modern proponents of martial arts twist their own frames when attempting to apply techniques.

Within the Hakuho-ryu, proper alignment and movement are taught through a fundamental exercise called *Bushi-no-hokoho*, “warrior’s method of walking.” Resting the hands on the thighs, each step glides forward as though the body is a swinging door hanging from hinges on the points of the shoulders and hips. Interestingly, the same rolling, heel-to-toe foot placement seen in *Bushi-no-*

*hokoho* is used in the aikijutsu *Tachi-no-kata* (sword form) *Ki-musubi* (spirits-tied).

In its basic form, *Bushi-no-hokoho* looks robotic, but that appearance is deceiving, because the method facilitates completely coordinated transitions between standing and seated movement (*shikō*) and instant application of technique. Moving this way can also be hidden, such that one’s gait appears utterly normal to a western observer...and yet absolutely is not. (As I mentioned, this is an all-the-time study. And, not to be a jerk, but some things I’m only going to suggest in this essay and not detail. If you want more information, please consider joining Itten Dojo.)

There are a number of modern “authorities” that poo-poo Okabayashi Sensei’s insight, but beyond the immediately obvious effectiveness (and effect on technique) of the method, two further pieces of evidence influenced me. There’s an old Japanese saying that, if I remember correctly, goes something like “*Kata de kaze o kite aruku*,” which means, “To walk with shoulders cutting the wind,” i.e., very determined, like a samurai. The other bit of evidence is an anecdote.



*At the second Itten Dojo, practicing Bushi-no-hokoho during a visit from Okabayashi Sensei.*



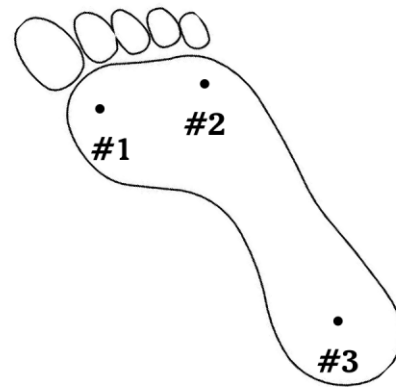
One winter, following a weekend seminar at our dojo with Okabayashi Sensei, a student made a quick trip to the local Walmart just as a snowstorm was building. On the way out of the store, the student was thinking about Bushi-no-hokoho and started to walk in that manner. He heard someone ask, “Going out to *fight* the storm?” The student turned to find the greeter, and elderly Japanese gentleman, smiling and giving him a knowing nod.

So much for the critics...

The principle of maintaining the frame of the hips and shoulders blends perfectly with an instruction I received from Lovret Sensei regarding the source and application of power in movement. (Full disclosure: The teaching went completely over my head at the time it was conveyed to me by Lovret Sensei. It was only years later, when reiterated by Savopoulos Sensei in the context of private instruction in iaido, that I began to make use of the principle. When I stumbled on my notes from the long-ago session with Lovret Sensei, detailing the principle in exactly the same words used by Savopoulos Sensei, I realized the amount of time I’d wasted.) This is the second topic I’m not going to detail; suffice it to say there are simple but counterintuitive methodologies that, when integrated to an unconscious level, drastically enhance the effectiveness of technique.



Even taken together, however, maintenance of the frame and correct sourcing of power are for naught if the interface with the ground, the feet, are not properly employed. At Itten Dojo, we analyze the foot/ground interface in terms of three points of contact and potential pivoting, that we name as follows:



Point #1 — The point on the inside ball of the foot, at the base of the big toe.

Point #2 — The point on the outside ball of the foot, at the base of the little toe.

Point #3 — The heel. Note that pivoting on the heel will *always* keep the foot and knee aligned, but might not be optimal given the specific technique to be applied.

In any movement, whether linear or turning, which point is utilized as the interface—at any given moment—will have a significant effect on posture, efficiency of locomotion, connection to and control of the opponent, and preservation of the knees. How you determine the proper point is for you to research and discover, but I will provide one example to help get you started, utilizing one of the *aiki-taiso*, the fundamental, solo exercises of aikijutsu: *Irimi* (“Entering body”).

In application, *irimi* usually entails a deep step forward and a subsequent turn, to end up behind and to the side (at the rear corner) of the opponent. I don’t often quote Ueshiba Morihei, the founder of modern aikido, in the



context of what we do in our practice of aikijutsu, but one of his sayings (as conveyed to us by Ellis Amdur) is hugely valuable: “There is no *tenkan* (turn) without *irimi*.” Turning is a moment of vulnerability, and if it’s done at the wrong moment or position relative to the opponent, there can be unfortunate consequences. We use this exercise as part of the *kihon* (fundamentals) and conditioning we do at the start of aikijutsu classes, and I always refer to it as *irimi/tenkan*:

1. From *sankakudai*, a triangle stance, slide the lead foot forward, on Point #1. Maintain the alignment of the foot as strictly straight forward, so as not to betray the fact a turn will be coming.

2. At the desired depth of step, allow the knee to continue slightly forward until it’s directly above Point #1, and transition body weight to Point #2.

3. Pivot to face the opposite direction. (How you generate the pivot should be a focus of your own research.)

This is simplest form of the exercise. In our more usual way of practicing *irimi/tenkan*, we first break inertia with a slight shift forward of the lead foot (on Point #1), then more deeply slide forward the rear foot and execute the *tenkan* as described above.

Whatever your primary art, research deeply these core components. Maintaining the correct frame, optimally sourcing movement and power, and properly exploiting the potentials provided by controlling exactly the foot/ground interface will radically alter the effectiveness of your techniques, whether those techniques be punching and kicking, cutting, or throwing and pinning. And you’ll be preserving your knees for a lifetime of training. ☺



**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*.**

