

Sword and Spirit

The eJournal of Itten Dojo

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— Why Budo? —

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

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

These are exactly the benefits membership in a dojo provides.

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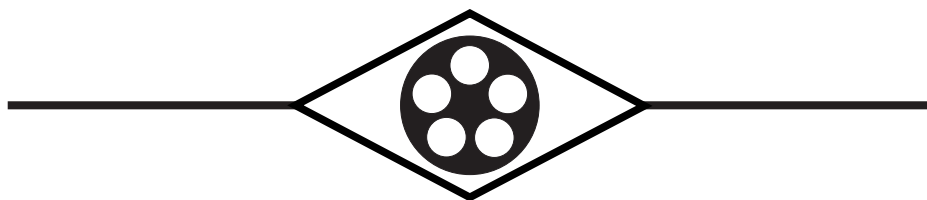
Reigakudo Retrospective

Training in Ono-ha Itto-ryu Kenjutsu in Japan

On January 8th, 2020, I landed in Japan to start a three-month stay while studying the Japanese language and society. My language and humanities classes started a week later, as well as my move to the dorm that I chose to stay at. A week after that I received an email from Mr. Mark Hague, the visiting instructor to the Itten Dojo kenjutsu-kai, stating that the Reigakudo would be opening again on Saturday, January 25th, following the annual closing for the New Year holiday. That Saturday was my first class in an exceptional time training in kenjutsu at the Ono-ha Itto-ryu home dojo—I'd like to share my experiences training at that dojo and interacting with my seniors there.

To get to the Reigakudo, I would start by walking about eight minutes from my Ikebukuro dorm to the Kanamecho Station. There, I would take the Fukutoshin Line to the Shibuya Station. After that I went up two flights of stairs to the second floor of Shibuya Station, to jump on the Inokashira Line and ride to the Komaba-todaimae station. For my first trip to the dojo, Mr. Hague met me at this station and walked me the rest of the way, about seven minutes, to the dojo. Overall, the trip usually took me nearly 50 minutes and 500 yen, with my school pass lowering the price.

My first time showing up for training, Mr. Hague brought me into the dojo, and told the seniors there that I was the student he recommended from the United States. Unfortunately, the *Soke* (headmaster) was not coming to class that day, so the *menkyo* (senior that held a license of complete transmission of the ryu) in charge had to email Yabuki Soke to get his permission to allow me to start training immediately rather than first just watching for three classes. Within about ten minutes, Soke emailed back stating that because Mr. Hague was recommending me, I could train immediately. The *menkyo* told me to get upstairs and get changed, so I did as I was told and got ready to train. My first class had me training exclusively with Mr. Hague. He went over the different sets of stretching and warm up exercises, *kiri-otoshi* (the most fundamental and ultimate technique of Ono-ha Itto-ryu), and the first five *kumitachi* (combative forms), *Hitotsugachi* through



Wakigamae no tsuke. The practice ran from 1:45–5:00 p.m., and once class was over, I went home sore, due to it being the first time I got to use *onigote* (“devil’s gloves,” the heavy gauntlets worn during training to allow full-power strikes from the heavy, wooden swords used in *Ittoryu*). This first class was amazing, and a preview of what the rest of my training there would be like.

The Reigakudo, as the photo depicts, is located in a church. Entering through the front doors takes you into a lobby area. To the left of the entrance are some chairs and to the right there are long shelves for shoes. Just as in many Japanese buildings, there is a slight rise in the flooring to designate the point from which shoes should not be worn. Looking forward from the start of the hardwood, there is an elevator and a set of stairs that takes you down to the bottom floor. The bottom floor has a kitchen, a dining room, and another room (the purpose of which I don’t know). In front of the stairs is a small closet that has the sink we used to wet the rags for *soji* (cleaning). Up from the lobby and to the right is sliding glass door to the dojo.

Smaller than the mat at Itten Dojo, the training area is entirely hardwood. To the front is the podium used in church services. Both the left and right sides of the room have a line of benches. The left-side benches are primarily used for students to sit and watch due to the dojo being small and not everyone being able to train at once. The right-side benches were mostly used to place the multiple sets of *onigote*. Also on the sides of the dojo are cabinets used to store something, but I never asked what was in them.

Above the sliding door is the scroll of the Ono-ha Ittoryu curriculum. The right side of the dojo also had a closet where the chairs for church services and the *onigote* were stored. Right beside the storage closet is the stairway to the dressing rooms. There are two dressing rooms, each with a set of curtains to separate them. The larger, men’s dressing room is straight in front of the stairs, while the smaller, women’s dressing room is around the corner from the stairs. At the bottom of the stairway from the dressing rooms is a wooden box filled with “loaner” *bokken*.

I did not have the chance to explore every room in the building, so there could be more to the layout than what I’ve described here.



Class started with bowing-in. Due to the Reigakudo not having a *shinza*, we just bowed to the right-side of the dojo and to *Soke* (or whomever was leading the class). Then the class formed a circle for warm-up exercises, which included arm and knee rotations, body movements, and different bending motions. Next came *Kake kyu-hin*, a warm-up used to review the nine, primary postures. Then we moved to cutting drills: *Shomen-uchi* (striking the head) and *Te-no-uchi* (striking the inside of the wrist), followed by striking from *wakigamae* and *yoko-gamae*.



The class then moved into the *kiri-otoshi* drill followed by *Shin-gyo-so* (a drill in which the *kiri-otoshi* is executed sequentially to three different levels). For the *kiri-otoshi* and *shin-gyo-so* drills, Yabuki Soke typically had everyone training at the same time. Once the drills were done, it was time for *kata*. For *kata*, not everyone trained at the same time, so half of the class would sit on the left-side benches to watch and talk with each other until there was an open space to train. Usually around three o'clock we would bow-out of class and take a ten to 15-minute break before repeating the routine over again. At five o'clock, we again bowed-out of class and started *soji*. For *soji*, two or three people wiped down the floor, two or three people wiped down the stairs and the bottom floor hallway.

Lastly, once the cleaning rags were rung out and hung to dry, everyone would bring the church chairs out and line them up. Once this was completed, class was done and everyone got dressed and ready to leave, although many people stuck around to talk to some of their classmates before heading home.

Gradually, my classes had me meeting and training with more and more of my seniors. During my second class, one of my seniors, Mrs. Rii, took me into the lobby after the *Kake kyu-hin* to go over that exercise as well as *reishiki* (ceremonial etiquette). She told me that she was slightly surprised by how fast I was learning the *kamae* (postures), until I explained that I had been training in *kenjutsu* for more than three years. After Mrs. Rii finished

teaching me the *kamae* and cutting, we returned to training with the others.

Mr. Hague was not in class that day, so instead I had the honor of training directly with Yabuki Soke. Soke only had me train *Hitotsugachi*, to make sure I was doing the right things. Unfortunately, I had three major mistakes. My *seigan-gamae* ("aiming at the eye" posture, the primary *kamae* in *Itto-ryu*) was an artifact of the *chudan-gamae* (middle-level posture of the previous style of *kenjutsu* in which I'd trained). The same with my cuts. Worse, I was not keeping my full intention while we backed away from each other after each *kumitachi*.

Although Soke was telling me that what I was doing was not correct, he was not in any measure either rude or arrogant. After our sets were done, Yabuki Soke started conversing with me while he and I watched the other students train. Soke wanted to know where I was from, why I wanted to learn Japanese, etc. He also joked around and laughed while talking with me, something I would never have thought would happen.

And it wasn't only Soke; everyone I trained with and talked to were amazingly kind to me, which I honestly was not expecting. Before starting my training at the *Reigakudo*, I expected to be kind of an outcast, not only due to me being a young foreigner, but also because I did not understand Japanese at all. Instead, not only were the members of the *dojo* kind and welcoming to me, my insufficient Japanese did not cause as many issues as I




feared it would. Most of the people at the Reigakudo understood some English, and I soon understood at least a minimal amount of Japanese, so we were able to communicate well enough. There were times when the language barrier did impede some conversations, though. My first conversation with Yabuki Soke was one of them. I was trying to explain where I was from, but Soke did not understand it in English and I could not tell him in Japanese. When something like that happened, the person I was talking to and I would just move on to the next topic or end the conversation if we were leaving the dojo.

For how kind and welcoming my seniors at the Reigakudo were to me, I can think of one great example. This was around halfway through my stay and Mrs. Rii sat on the bench beside me to tell me about the Taikai that was being held two weeks later. I thought I was going to have to buy a ticket to attend, but that was not the case. Rii-san handed me a ticket because I was a student at the dojo—and gave me two more tickets just in case I wanted to invite a few university classmates to watch. Now, I was

not going to be participating in the Taikai, but I was invited to be part of the commemorative photo after the Taikai with the rest of the group.

Unfortunately, I misunderstood the directions, went to a different *budokan* (martial arts training hall) in a different city, and ended up missing the Taikai and the photo. Even though I failed to make it to the Taikai, I count those tickets and the invitation to be included in the photo as proof that my seniors at the Reigakudo saw me as a member of the dojo.

In the end, I had an amazing time training at the Reigakudo. The training was intense, interesting, and fun; as kenjutsu training should be. My seniors and Soke were kind and treated me like I was a serious student, instead of just some visiting foreign tourist. I enjoyed my time training and talking with them, even if they could not understand everything I said (and vice-versa).

I'm now back home and training in Ono-ha Itto-ryu at Itten Dojo, but I cannot wait to go back to Japan and train at the Reigakudo once more. 



Gary Burkett is a member of Itten Dojo, and started training in kenjutsu in 2016. He's currently an undergraduate student at Shippensburg University majoring in History with a concentration in Asian Studies. Mr. Burkett studied Japanese language and culture at KCP International for a semester in Shinjuku, Tokyo, while also training in Ono-ha Itto-ryu. He plans to attend graduate school in Japan to obtain advanced degrees in Japanese History.

