

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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Budo Culture

An Excerpt from *Budo Mind and Body: Training Secrets of the Japanese Martial Arts*
by Nicklaus Suino

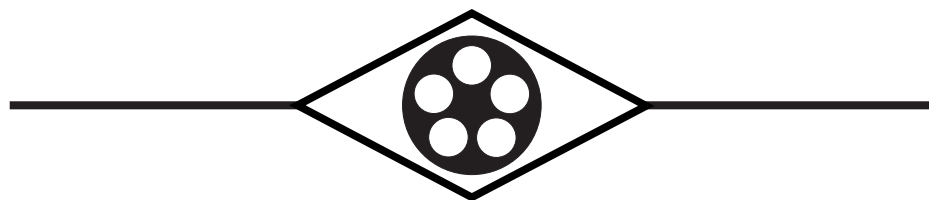
Purity is something that cannot be attained except by piling effort upon effort.
— Yamamoto Tsunetomo

About Budo Culture

People who practice budo are members of a special group. They are seekers after truth, people who want something more from life than a paycheck and a nice home. Their abilities allow them to make unique contributions to their communities and to the world. Unfortunately, there are many misconceptions about budo, held both by non-practitioners and by those within the ranks of martial artists. Because of the incomplete or poor education of many of our so-called “masters,” martial artists are often seen as aggressive people, overly concerned with fighting and winning. While these stereotypes may often be true, they are not reflective of the ideal martial artist.

We need regular reminders of the high standards which we must set for ourselves. Since we set out to learn unique and dangerous skills, we must have a code of behavior to ensure that we do not use those skills for wrongful purposes. Such a code, *bushido* (literally, “the way of the warrior”), has existed in Japan for centuries, but it is sometimes difficult for modern Westerners to understand how the antiquated and sometimes odd-sounding rules of this code apply to them. In the few places where they have been written down, these rules are enmeshed in an enormous amount of information about the culture that gave birth to them, which can make it difficult to understand their practical value. It is helpful to study how they are applied and to determine their purposes if we want to know how and why we should follow them today.

Many Western students of budo believe that a moral or social code is a waste of time, assuming that physical practice is the only thing that will help them make progress in their chosen art. In fact, the non-physical qualities of



good martial artists—such as sincerity, politeness, loyalty, honor, and courage—are qualities that actually help them succeed. Martial arts practice, like most human endeavors, is a social act, and none of us can succeed without a great deal of contact with other people. The rules of bushido govern our interactions with those people, our teachers, our peers in the dojo, competitors, and junior students whom we help. Our egos are exposed in practice by encounters with fear and pain, and bushido helps to provide a buffer against the conflicts this might create.

Sincerity

In martial arts, as in life, you are expected to mean what you say. This is simple to understand when it is a matter of expressing your intention. If you say, “I am going to practice this technique one thousand times,” then everybody who heard you say it will think less of you if you quit after six hundred and fifty repetitions. The simple rule in such a case is: If you are not sure you can do it, don’t say anything.

In all matters in the dojo you are expected to be sincere. This extends to the smallest action or word. When you bow to show respect for the masters, it will an empty gesture unless you know something about them and why they are worthy of respect. If you are thinking about your work when you bow, the bow is insincere.

Similarly, using the word *sensei* has an important role in your training. Your teacher gives you all the most important building blocks in your martial arts career, but many students forget this after a few years. These students begin to imagine that their ability is entirely due to their own greatness. You should always use the word *sensei* with respect and affection in your heart. This will help you remember your relationship with your teacher in the proper light.

You must monitor yourself to make sure that your training aims are appropriate. Training just to earn a promotion or to impress someone in the dojo will cause you to veer off the path. No teacher can read your mind, but eventually your actions will demonstrate where your heart lies. The sweat and intimacy of training guarantee that sooner or later you will reveal your true intentions to your teacher. Before you begin to act upon these incorrect goals, they will have begun to develop in your mind. The time to root them out is early, when they first appear.

Sincerity is a powerful tool in your training, because it allows you to act without hesitation. Insincere actions and words destroy confidence and cause hesitation; these problems are deadly to a martial artist. Mental weaknesses translate into physical shortcomings. Next to prolonged training, simply deciding on a course of action and carrying it out with total commitment can improve your



skill in the dojo tremendously. I have seen this over and over again in my students.

Sincerity means matching word and deed, but in budo it means more than that. It means matching word and deed with state of mind, or with the intentions of your heart. We are not often taught this, because it is a much harder way to live, but the satisfaction of acting with a unified mind, body, and spirit cannot be compared with any other reward.

Courtesy

The dojo is a place where there are many chances to hurt other people, physically and emotionally. Uncontrolled punches and thoughtless words can both cause injury, so all students must learn caution in these areas. Good manners smooth the rough edges of practice, and good control of technique is nothing more than the extension of the same principle into the physical realm. You must show regard for your training partner at all times.

What may seem like an empty ritual is more often an important component of training. For example, we do not allow our students to walk between two other students who are talking or practicing together. The physical awareness of the personal space of others is crucial in budo, and it makes no more sense to unconsciously walk between two training partners in the dojo than it would to carelessly get between two people who are fighting on the street. If crossing between them is unavoidable, we extend our right hand out and down, which is the non-verbal Japanese equivalent of saying, "Excuse me." By borrowing the Japanese hand gesture we are linking a rule of common courtesy to a physical movement, which helps students to remember it.

The rules of almost every dojo require that students who are bowing in a line wait for the senior students to rise from the bow first. This follows the rules of respect for rank, but also helps develop awareness, peripheral vision, hearing, and tactile awareness. It is a mistake to think that the training starts only after the bow is complete. Every action in the dojo, from paying dues to free sparring, should be a training exercise.



Budoka vs. Budoman

Among martial artists, the words used to describe people hold a special importance. How you refer to someone can have a great impact on how others perceive that person. When deciding whether to attend a seminar, for example, it is not uncommon to query other martial artists about the teacher to find out what he teaches, what his background is, how skilled he is, and if he is a competent instructor. The skill levels at a certain rank are so variable from school to school that it is not enough just to hear that such and such a teacher holds a seventh-degree black belt or a teaching title.

Two terms used to distinguish between different types of martial artists are the suffixes *-ka* (Japanese for "person" or "profession") and *-man* (the English word). These follow the name of the martial art practiced by the person under discussion, as in *karateka*, *aikidoka*, or "judoman." *Karateka* means a person who has devoted him or herself seriously to the art of karate, the aikidoka to aikido, and so forth. On the surface, both the *-ka* and *-man* endings have essentially the same meaning (*-man* being coined in English when few women practiced martial arts, so no corresponding female suffix has yet come into common use), but in actual usage they connote a very different sort of person.

Even though the *-ka* ending is taken directly from Japanese, in English it is often used to refer to a martial



artist who puts on airs. Thus, the use of aikidoka, karateka, or judoka implies that someone is more concerned with form than substance, imagines himself a real samurai warrior somehow transported into the 21st Century, prefers talking about himself to training, or thinks that his spirit is strong even though his techniques are weak. It is difficult to say why this usage evolved, but it may have something to do with the awkwardness of using terms from another language.

A budoman, however, is usually a person who is strong in technique and in body. Because these traits are most desirable in judo and karate, you are most likely to hear people praise the attitude and technique of a judoman or a karateman. Since softness and harmony are more valued in most types of aikido, you are less likely to hear someone described as an aikidoman.

Typically, the more exalted or historic the term, the more ridiculous it sounds to people who understand budo. Calling someone a samurai in an English-speaking country is a form of ridicule, and makes no more sense than would calling someone a knight. Master, as in “he is a karate master,” usually means either the speaker or the person being spoken about doesn’t have a clue about real karate. *Shihan*, a term that refers either to an instructor or a master instructor, depending on the context, is often overused.

Knowing the dictionary definition of a word does not mean that one understands how to use it properly. Be very cautious about using Japanese expressions in your conversations.

PX Rangers

PX is short for “post exchange,” a sort of general store on a military base. The term “PX ranger” is used to refer to a soldier who hangs around the base telling others of his exploits in the field. Of course, the stories are usually fictional. In martial arts, we might call such people “beerhall budomen.” These sorts are far too common, and can often be found lurking around martial arts seminars or tournaments. There are several easy ways to identify them.

The first notable characteristic of beerhall budomen is their affection for emblems, patches, embroidery, and certificates. They seem to like nothing better than to stand

in a crowd of martial arts students, pointing to their decorations and explaining the significance of each. A black-belt patch will be sewn onto their uniform below a sensei patch, above which you can find *dai-sensei*, “champion,” and “chief-instructor.” These people attend special events mainly to add to their collection of ego-gratifying paraphernalia.

Another way to identify people who like the aura of martial arts training better than the training itself is to watch during seminars classes. They usually find a way to avoid most of the serious training, either by going to the bathroom after the first twenty minutes of the seminar and returning just in time to bow out at the end, or by finding the weakest looking beginning student in the room and spending the entire class with him. If you see someone deliberately or frequently avoiding hard work, you can be pretty sure he is a member of this group.

It also seems that the people who do the least work try to grab the most attention outside the dojo. After noticing someone who avoids training in a few classes, watch that person in the cafeteria or bar afterwards. Note that the jaw muscles will be getting plenty of exercise now that the threat of serious training is past. You will find these folks sucking up to the head instructor while he tries to enjoy his post-workout beer in relative peace and quiet.

These slackers do have some usefulness in martial arts. They help to increase the total number of students who attend seminars, making it possible to host events that might otherwise be too expensive. They provide entertainment, if you care to listen, by unconsciously playing the fool (nothing they say matches what they do). They also make the serious martial artists look good, since their skill level never rises above what they can achieve in twenty minutes of basic practice per week. The one danger they pose is that some students will believe their stories and hold a falsely high opinion of them, or pay them to teach, but luckily most martial artists eventually come to see the truth about beerhall budomen, and learn to listen with a skeptical ear.

Wear a White-Belt

Whenever you go to a new dojo to train, wear a white belt. This shows that you have a sincere desire to learn,



and that you are willing to put aside your preconceptions. This point of etiquette is fairly widely known, but many people ignore it, either by actually wearing a colored belt or by failing to enter the dojo with an open mind.


The best possible impression you can make by wearing a belt showing your rank from another school into the dojo is that you are confident in your rank and would be willing to participate in all of the activities expected of people of that rank at that dojo. If these activities include *kumite* or *randori* (free fighting), you may be expected to spar with others of equal or greater rank. Don't be surprised if a special sparring session is arranged just to see how good you are.

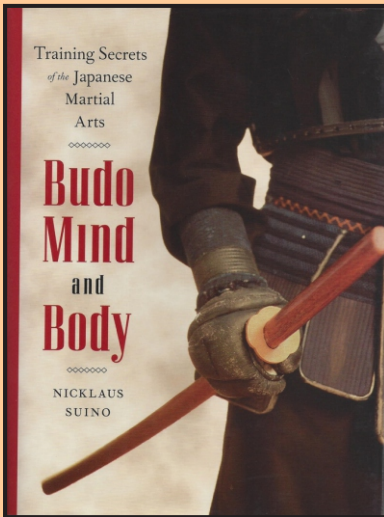
A more likely interpretation, however, will be that you are poorly trained, because you do not know the rule about wearing a white-belt. If your skill level does not match that of the students in that school (and how could it, unless you have trained in exactly the same martial art they do?), then you will also be seen as unskilled. Any protestations you make about your training having been different will sound

like whining. You can avoid all this by following the white-belt rule.

A closely related problem, more serious than wearing a colored belt, is the student who enters a new dojo carrying all the baggage from his or her past training. This student wants to learn what the new school teaches, but does not want to put aside the ways of his last teacher. The end result is that both sets of skills, the new and the old, suffer in quality, and the new teacher wonders why the student is asking for instructions but not following them.

Another similar problem can arise among students who stay in one dojo to achieve high brown-belt or black-belt ranks. They come to think that the relatively high rank they possess means they now know everything. They stop listening to their teachers, forgetting that it was the teachers who gave them the tools to get as far as they have.

In truth, every student must wear a white-belt, either actually or internally, at all times in the dojo. The act indicates a willingness to learn, which is our purpose in studying martial arts. 



***Sword and Spirit* is honored to present this excerpt from the very highly recommended book, *Budo Mind and Body*, reprinted with permission of the author.**

Originally published as *Arts of Strength, Arts of Serenity*, this revised and updated edition gives advice on training and etiquette that will be indispensable to beginning students and a potent reminder to more seasoned practitioners. Advanced students will particularly appreciate Suino Sensei's explanation of budo philosophy.

***Budo Mind and Body* is available from [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).**

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