

Sword and Spirit

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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 an authentic dojo provides.

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The Art of Letting Go

There is, supposedly, a classical strategy in kenjutsu known as *hanashi-no-heiho* (放技の兵法)—to discontinue a strategy that is not effective and try something else. I say supposedly, because I’ve only ever seen this discussed in one book, in English, and at that a book that does not cite sources. According to Rie Hashimoto Bailey Sensei, our *shodo* (calligraphy) instructor and resident expert in Japanese language, history, and culture, even with using Japanese search engines and websites she was unable to find confirmation of this claim. So, we’ll take another route to approach the topic.

I finally found the source for a quote I referenced some time ago, but couldn’t locate at the time I was writing. I had thought, incorrectly, that the line might have come from *The Little Prince* (but I did at least get the French part right). Charles Du Bos was a late-19th / early-20th century French essayist and literary critic. His quote that so deeply resonates with me is:

“The important thing is this: to be able at any moment to sacrifice what we are for what we could become.”

Multiple times in my personal life I’ve reflected on this quote when facing a transition that seemed at first daunting, disadvantageous, or even almost overwhelmingly distressing. And I’ve had as many, or more, opportunities to consider “letting go” over the 30+ year history of our dojo.

The senior members of Itten Dojo are intensely serious about training, and the juniors are typically well on their way to becoming so. Obviously, we enjoy what we do and have a lot of fun doing it, but at no time are we casual about our studies. At a number of critical junctures, we’ve had to completely reinvent the dojo, when circumstances—sometimes chosen; sometimes not—dictated a change in the teachers we work with and/or the arts we study. The most important lesson we’ve learned through these events is that the members of the dojo training together and supporting each other is more important than the specific art(s) we’re training in. As one of my old karate instructors used to say, “It is the doing and the sharing of the doing that is the essence and true value.”



That being said, when the remaking of the dojo results in new relationships that are manifestly more healthy and arts to train in that are far more valuable in every way, it's a huge win for everyone.

We're going through another such transition now.

In consequence of events in mid-2020, I first approached a good friend of the dojo to enquire about the possibility of training with him in iaido, a form of swordsmanship. Nicklaus Suino Sensei is Director of the Japanese Martial Arts Center in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and one of the foremost instructors in the country in a variety of arts. Even though I presented the request in terms of our training with him in iaido being just a supplement to the other arts in our dojo, Suino Sensei readily agreed. Little did I know that iaido would rapidly become the primary art practiced at our dojo, with the largest number of students involved—50% of the overall membership—and such a passion for me that I would give up training in kenjutsu completely. The trend with iaido seems to have established a precedent for us when training with Suino Sensei.

The mid-2020 event led eventually to our being cut-off from all senior-level instructors in our legacy art of aikijutsu. Initially, our in-house instructor cadre focused on crafting an independent approach to the art. Courtesy of Mr. Butz, our motto became, "If it's baroque, we'll fix it." As part of process, we scheduled a jujutsu session with Suino Sensei during one of his weekend visits here. At the end of that session, Amber Cathey—then a brown-belt—and Dan Holland Sensei demonstrated the kata Goshin Ho II from Nihon Jujutsu. Watching Ms. Cathey toss Holland Sensei my first thought was, "Oh, man, I wish the women were here to see this."

Followed quickly by, "Oh, man, I am *glad* they're not here to see this." Because their logical question would be, "Why aren't we doing that?" I only regret that I do not have video of that demonstration.

Discussing the matter further with Suino Sensei, it was decided we should learn Kihon Kata I from Nihon Jujutsu, to facilitate Sensei working with us in his "real-time" self-defense applications. This seemed like a reasonable approach, again with the intent to just supplement what we were doing with aikijutsu. But, as



had been the case with iaido, original intent went straight out the window when we experienced our first real exposure to Nihon Jujutsu.

Alan Starner and I were at JMAC for our introduction to Kihon Kata I, and the experience was eye-opening, to say the least. Our legacy practice of aikijutsu was in a derivative of Daito-ryu aikijujutsu, and while a lot of fun to practice, the techniques tended to rely on intricate manipulations—which is to say, fine motor skills—that are the first thing to evaporate under stress. It was often demonstrated to us that these fine manipulations were critically important factors that had to be present in order for the particular technique to work. And that was true, within the context of the intricate applications.

Consequently, in the first several years of training the emphasis was on highly collaborative practice. Students were literally told, "At this point, you won't be able to make the technique 'work,' but if you focus on working with your training partner to create an ideal representation of the technique, you'll learn the requisite body skills and eventually be able to execute the technique against an actual opponent."

The first technique in Kihon Kata I is *Ude Hineri Nage* ("Forearm Twisting Throw"), analogous to *Kote-mawashi* ("Turning the Wrist," *sankyo* for the aikido folks). Right off the bat, Mr. Starner and I realized that *Ude Hineri Nage* violated several of those "critically important factors" that supposedly had to be present for *Kote-mawashi* to work, and then had the temerity to work better. A whole lot better. As in, it simply doesn't matter



what *uke* (the person on the other side of the technique) is doing, if the technique is reasonably in the ballpark uke is going down, better.

And then the same blasted thing happened with the next technique, *Uchi Tenkai Nage* (“Inside Turning Throw”), analogous to *Shiho-nage* (“Four-direction Throw”). Mechanically much more simple and intuitive to apply and devastatingly more effective.

And the same with *Kote Gaeshi Nage* (“Returning the Wrist Throw”), analogous to *Kote-gaeshi*.

And with *Ude Kujiki Osae* (“Elbow Wrenching Takedown”), analogous to *Ude-osae* (“Controlling the Forearm”).

And with *Ude Kakaē Nage* (“Elbow Locking Throw”), analogous to *Zetsumyo*.

At that point of the session I was thinking, “Well, \$%^ ^!!! We have a problem.” Five of the eight *waza* (techniques) in the kata had direct analogies in our legacy

practice, but the Nihon Jujutsu versions were clearly superior.

We’ve still only seen a tiny sliver of Nihon Jujutsu but the experience has been consistent. Yet another example is the Nihon Jujutsu applications of *Kote-gatame*, a wrist-lock called *Kote-maki* in our legacy practice (*nikyo* in aikido). In every instance, the Nihon Jujutsu versions are easier to achieve and provide faster, more complete control.

So, we’re making a transition to Nihon Jujutsu. We’ll still retain some aspects of our legacy practice that we find useful or that we particularly enjoy, but the emphasis will be on Nihon Jujutsu. The advantages to this path are enormous, and include the fact the body mechanics are highly complementary to our iaido training—in fact, we’re finding those two arts to be mutually reinforcing.

The best part is I no longer have to tell new students they won’t yet really be able to do something. It’s become, “Here. Do it this way.” And, BOOM! 🌀

From the website of the International Nihon Jujutsu Association

(<https://www.nihonjujutsu.com/>)

“Nihon Jujutsu is a modern Japanese martial art that focuses on practical, efficient techniques as originally found in both ancient and contemporary martial arts. Its principles and techniques derive from Japanese unarmed combat and self-defense techniques from pre-1945 judo and *aikibujutsu*, as well as *taihojutsu* (Japanese police immobilization and arresting methods). The founder of Nihon Jujutsu, Sato Shizuya, established this system based on his extensive studies with leading Japanese *budoka* (traditional martial artists), many of whom introduced ancient bujutsu methods into modern budo.”

Suino Sensei and his close friend John Gage Shihan (the current head of Nihon Jujutsu), both trained directly with Sato Sensei, in Japan.



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*.

