

Sword and Spirit

The Journal of Itten Dojo

August 2023



— Benefits of 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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Why Nihon Jujutsu?

In the December 2021 edition of this journal, I answered the question “Why Iaido?” in an essay that was later republished in the April 2022 issue of *Bugeisha—Traditional Martial Artist* magazine. More recently, in the February 2023 issue of *Sword and Spirit*, I wrote about “The Art of Letting Go,” describing my experience during a visit to the Japanese Martial Arts Center in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Nicklaus Suino Sensei had encouraged us to learn Kihon Kata I from Nihon Jujutsu so that he could work with us in his “real-time self-defense” applications. Kihon Kata I includes several *waza* (techniques) that are closely analogous to *waza* in our legacy style of aikijutsu. Analogous, but clearly superior, while breaking a variety of supposed rules we’d been taught *must* be followed for the *waza* to work. The Nihon Jujutsu versions of the techniques worked far more efficiently and effectively, especially against a resisting training partner. By the end of that initial session of jujutsu at JMAC, my previous intention to build a curriculum on a foundation of our legacy art...died.

So, now that we are well into the transition of our former practice of aikijujutsu to Nihon Jujutsu, under the direct guidance of Suino Sensei and with the support of John Gage Sensei (the leader of Nihon Jujutsu), I’d like to use this issue of our journal to highlight some of the things I’ve learned in just these early stages of training that will help explain my fascination with and heartfelt “conversion” to this art. Please note that what follows are my personal perceptions that, while based on my decades of training in related arts, are nonetheless potentially compromised by my very limited experience at this point in Nihon Jujutsu. If I’m off base in anything I say, I trust Suino Sensei will correct me.

As described on the homepage of the Nihon Jujutsu website (<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, taihojutsu



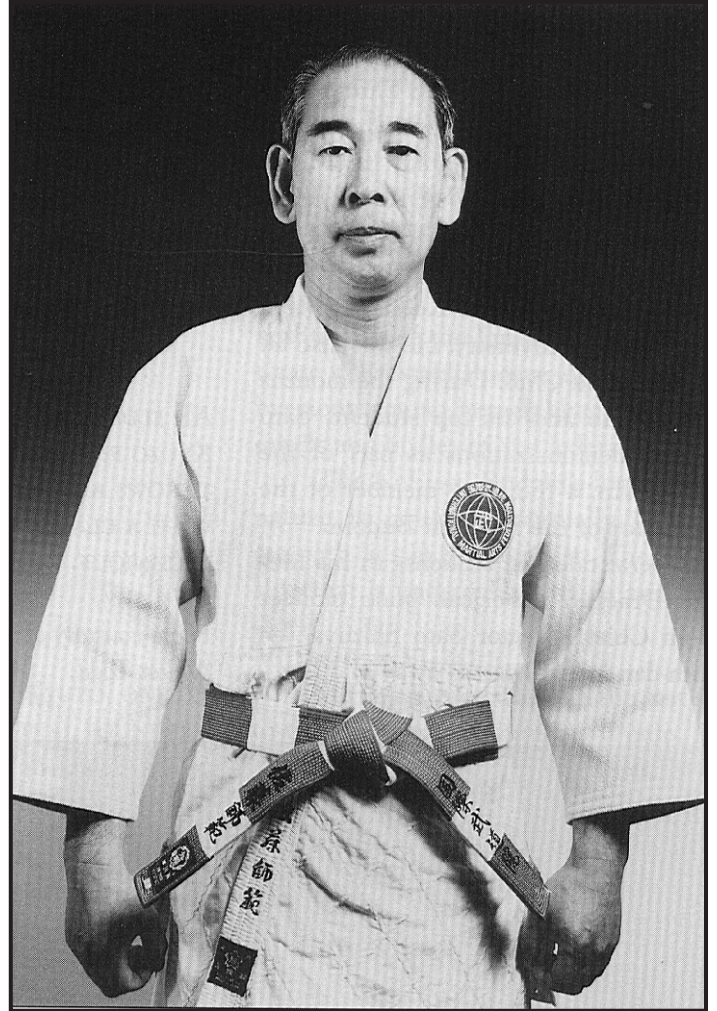
(*Japanese police immobilization and arresting methods*), and *Kodokan judo*.

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 to modern *budo*.

The list of the men with whom Sato Sensei trained directly or was influenced by reads like a catalog of the greatest Japanese martial artists of the 20th century:

- Ueshiba Morihei (1883–1969). The founder of aikibujutsu and aikido.
- Mifune Kyuzo (1883–1965). 10th-dan Kodokan judo, senior instructor at the Kodokan, and founding member of the International Martial Arts Federation.
- Nagaoka Hidekazu (1876–1952). 10th-dan Kodokan judo.
- Ito Kazuo (1889–1974). 8th-dan Kodokan judo; Founding Member and First Chief Director, Kokusai Budoin, International Martial Arts Federation (IMAF).
- Kotani Sumiyaki (1903–1991). 10th-dan Kodokan judo, Director of the United States Air Force Strategic Air Command's combatives course at the Kodokan, and one of the Kodokan's foremost experts on judo kata.
- Hosokawa Kusuo (1918–1997). 9th-dan judo, taihojutsu instructor of the Strategic Air Command's combatives course at the Kodokan.
- Ishikawa Takahiko (1917–2008). Instructor of the Strategic Air Command's combatives course at the Kodokan, two-time All Japan Judo champion. Dedicated 30 years of his life to establishing judo in North America.
- Dr. Tomiki Kenji (1900–1979). Founder of the Japan Aikido Association and Shodokan-ryu aikido (also known as Tomiki-ryu aikido), 8th-dan Kodokan judo, 8th-dan aikido, chief aikido instructor of the Strategic Air Command's combatives course at the Kodokan.

I believe it's critically important when purporting to offer training in authentic Japanese martial arts to be able to cite a readily-verifiable, person-to-person lineage of instruction. *Nihon Jujutsu* can trace its roots to *Daito-ryu*



Sato Shizuya, Founder, Nihon Jujutsu

Aikijujutsu, *Tenjin Shinyo-ryu Jujutsu*, and *Kito-ryu Jujutsu*. Even more important to me is the fact that Sato Sensei selected the *waza* for his system from the techniques that had been taught to wartime military and civilian law enforcement for use in potentially lethal, hand-to-hand combat. While there is very definitely a strong focus on personal development and fitness in *Nihon Jujutsu* as the art exists today, the foundation on which the art is built is techniques that work.

As I wrote in February, “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 evaporate under stress.



It was often demonstrated that these fine manipulations were critically important factors that had to be present in order for a 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.’”

Nihon Jujutsu most certainly does not rely on compliant training partners. Even in the early stages of learning a new technique or application, *uke* (the person “receiving” the technique) is encouraged to provide integrated structure and intentionality in their “attack,” leading directly to practice against serious, physical opposition. We’re still adjusting to this paradigm, and it’s not unusual to have Suino Sensei call out—even across a Zoom connection—“Stop just going-with the technique!” The huge upside for me is being able to share with my students techniques that work to start with, and that only get more powerful and effective as students increase their level of skill.



An integral aspect of Nihon Jujutsu that facilitates learning is the inherent logic and geometry of the techniques. From what I can see at this point, there are a limited number of foundational principles that define movement patterns, and which pattern to apply is based on the position, in the moment, of *uke*. In other words, what *uke* does practically tells *tori* (the person applying the technique) which direction to go and what to do. And *tori* can make this assessment very quickly, because the “picture” is painted with a broad brush.

This is *very* different from our legacy art, in which techniques generally required a specific circumstance, out of all the myriad things that could be happening, and the “defender” had to identify almost instantaneously which technique to choose in response. Hence why the legacy art was practiced purely as *kata* (choreographed forms) well into the black-belt ranks. Nihon Jujutsu students practice their techniques in semi-freestyle sparring almost immediately and are tested on that ability at the green-belt level. First-degree black-belt candidates must demonstrate spontaneous, completely freestyle sparring against multiple opponents “attacking” with any kind of strikes, grabs, or bear-hugs. By contrast, first-degree black-belt candidates in the legacy art are told to choreograph, supposedly secretly—which is to say, fake—the *randori* (sparring, in this case against a single *uke*) portion of their exam.

Another especially appealing aspect of the Nihon Jujutsu logic and geometry is the ready availability of *henka-waza* (a variation, or change technique). A *henka-waza* is a means to continue a defense when the initial technique attempted is jammed, countered, or otherwise fails. Even in just Kihon Kata I, almost every technique has a reciprocal. If *uke* manages to stop *tori*’s initial effort, *tori* can reverse direction and execute a technique appropriate to that momentary geometry.

During another era in our storied past, in which we were the test-bed for an eclectic approach to aikido, all *waza* were to be practiced in pairs, specifically to facilitate *henka-waza*. The problem was the techniques had been chosen, maybe not randomly, but without the inherent logic of the Nihon Jujutsu curriculum. Consequently, that approach did not develop the early facility in *randori* offered by Nihon Jujutsu.



I'm also substantially enamored of the fact Nihon Jujutsu addresses all ranges of hand-to-hand combat: striking (punching and kicking), arm's-length grappling (aikijujutsu and jujutsu), close-range grappling (judo), and ground-fighting (newaza). While Itten Dojo students will not be as expert in any given range, compared to students at schools focusing entirely on only one of those ranges, they will be one heck of a lot more capable overall. The variety embodied in Nihon Jujutsu is not only hugely beneficial in its own right, the variety provides for much more engaging, long-term training.

Although we've not yet started in this portion of the curriculum, Nihon Jujutsu does include use of weapons. I had a chance to observe a bit of a class at JMAC, during which Gage Sensei was teaching techniques using the *jo* (four-foot staff), just one of the weapons addressed in the art. The *jo* is one of my favorite weapons and, based on what I saw Gage Sensei doing, I can't wait to get into this aspect of the training.

Ultimately, the greatest appeal to me of Nihon Jujutsu is confidence in the art. As mentioned above, the foundational principles and techniques were chosen very specifically on the basis of demonstrated, practical utility in potentially life-threatening situations. Even with all my time in our legacy aikijutsu, I knew that if I ever had to defend myself, I would likely go straight to karate, the art in which I also had decades of training and experience with heavy-contact sparring.



My perspective on that is also changing. I've only received a fraction of the Nihon Jujutsu curriculum at this point, but I can clearly perceive that the core techniques, the practicality of which is only enhanced by Suino Sensei's "real-time self-defense" applications, provide a go-to art, one that will serve the members of Itten Dojo eminently well.

I'm immensely grateful that the opportunity to train in Nihon Jujutsu has been opened to us. 🌐

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 with his senior student Alan Starner founded Itten Dojo in 1992. His articles on martial arts have been featured in numerous publications, including the *Journal of Asian Martial Arts* and *Bugeisha*.

