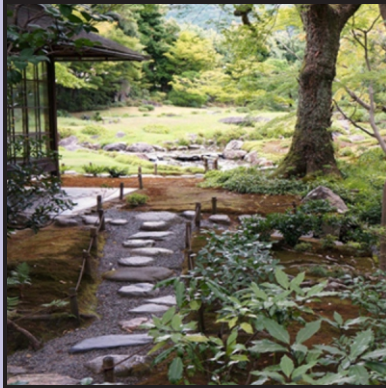


Sword and Spirit

The Journal of Itten Dojo

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— 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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My Narrow Path to Itten Dojo

During the age of the samurai, the poet Matsuo Basho penned the epic work, *Narrow Road to the Interior*, [literally: *The Small Way to Hidden Depths* (奥の細道)] in which he chronicles a long and challenging pilgrimage to legendary destinations. As a young man, for me, Itten Dojo was “the interior,” and what follows is a brief description of the “narrow road” which led me there, and some of the important markers I encountered along the way. As the child of a champion fighter, I had been raised in the arts, and had absorbed an eclectic martial arts portfolio along the way, but on the precipice of adulthood, I had been in search of a traditional Japanese sword school in the United States for some time, with no luck.

Marker: The best schools are not always easy to find.

The first step in this quest was the acquisition of a book on this subject, which I found one day while rummaging through a second-hand bookstore store in Philadelphia. On the train ride home, I became so enthralled by this material that I missed my stop—and several more—and was snapped back to reality only by a porter informing me that we had reached the end of the line (in New Jersey no less).

Marker: When you find the way, you will know it.

The very next day, I reached out to the book’s publisher by telephone in an effort to find out more about the origins of this entrancing work. This led to an introduction to the author, an in-depth discussion of the art and my interest in it, a referral to a local chapter, an in-person visit, a further interview, and ultimately, acceptance into the *ryu*.

Marker: Membership is not automatic; it must be earned.



As if the book alone had not been enough to solidify my interest, then the atmosphere upon entering the dojo certainly was. It was spacious yet fully employed. Well-appointed yet austere. Simply furnished yet exquisitely tasteful. And whether empty or in the full swing of class, it was profoundly tranquil. From the moment I stepped inside, it felt not only right, but also somehow transformative.

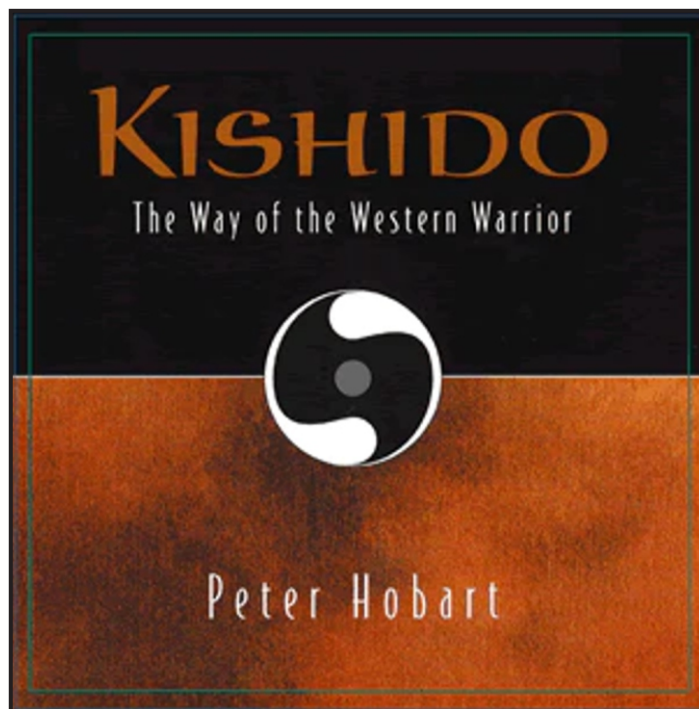
Marker: The atmosphere may be more important than the techniques themselves.

With most of my available income going toward college expenses, there wasn't much left over for extracurricular activities, but one of the pre-requisites at the time was that students must have a *shinken*, a real sword, for training. In addition, I didn't have a car, and the school was over an hour away from home with no direct public transit options available. Having already passed the first few markers, however, this was not about to stop me. I begged, borrowed, and stole enough to buy an entry-level (but authentic) *katana* and a beat-up car that cost about a third of the price of the sword. In the category of "you get what you pay for," the blade served its purpose well, but the car had to be jump-started most days, and often had to be run along a curb in conjunction with vigorous hand-braking in order to bring it to a complete stop! It nevertheless got me through a year or more of early morning commutes, allowing me to begin working my way through the ranks at this exceptional academy.

Marker: Membership in a traditional *ryu* requires serious dedication and commitment.

Several months later, on the occasion of my first promotion, three unusual things happened:

First, I arrived early—as I often did when traffic was minimal—and found one of the senior instructors searching for something on the ground in the parking lot. Before I could offer to help, he stood up triumphantly holding what appeared to be a fist-sized rock, winked at me, and walked away. We said no more about it at the time, and it was only later that I learned that it was his



The cover of the audio CD of Mr. Hobart's book, Kishido—a number of events that transpired at Itten Dojo are described in this book.

practice to give such stones to newly-minted black-belts as a symbol of the burden which that rank carries with it. For those who received this symbolic gift, it became one of their most treasured possessions.

Marker: Value comes not from outside appearances, but from within.

The second surprise that day was that upon completing my own, much more junior test set, I was presented with a hand-written fan rather than a pre-printed certificate. Given the complexity of the *kanji*, the placement of several seals, and the ribbed texture of the writing surface, I realized that it must have taken my teacher a great deal of time to create this beautiful diploma, and yet he did this for all of us, for every one of the initial junior ranks (and, as I would later learn, the senior ones were even more intricate).



Marker: Obligation is a two-way street.

The third and final event that made that day so memorable took place on the way home. The promotion fan was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen, and given the blood, sweat, and tears that had gone into earning it, I wanted to find a safe place to keep it. My drive always took me through antiquing country, and while I had never stopped there before, I thought perhaps I could find something suitable for safeguarding my treasure in one of the quirky little shops that lay dotted along this rural path. To this day I have trouble believing what happened next, but the proof is sitting on a shelf next to my desk as a type these words: Upon walking into the first shop I saw, the old lady at the counter looked up as though she had been expecting me and said: *“Can I show you something? It’s a traditional Japanese fan holder in brocade—the only one I’ve ever seen up close before . . .”*

Marker: Sometimes the Universe gives you a nudge in the right direction.

Time passed, and upon graduating, I took a job much closer to Itten Dojo (although if anyone tells my wife that this was the primary reason I accepted the job, I’ll deny it). And even though the path grew less “narrow” as the commute diminished and the flow of money moved from expenses to earnings, the destination remained far—not in space, but rather in time. This is so because whenever we entered that special place, we attuned ourselves to a philosophy, a methodology, and an approach to life that has been passed down through the generations from ancient times. In a world that tends to worship what is new, what is evolving, and what is fashionable, a traditional dojo reveres what is eternal, what endures, and what has stood the test of time.

Marker: The dojo is a portal to the wisdom of the ages.

This is not to suggest that the traditional arts are lifeless. While the syllabus is firmly-established, the way in which particular techniques are performed can vary—at

least a little—from one practitioner to the next, especially as the student body strives to grapple with the deep truth of the teachings that the past masters were attempting to impart. What is essential, however, is that each new student is exposed to the same reliable, dependable, proven methods, just as their predecessors were in ancient times.

Marker: We are all links in the same chain.

Over the years, I came to appreciate that it was the overall ethos of the place, as opposed to any particular techniques—which made it so special. For example, some who observe a traditional dojo may come away with a sense that discipline is more extreme than in a modern school. This is not exactly right, at least not in a hierarchical sense. The silence, the focus, and the absence of distractions on the mat stem not from the fear that the dojo master will rain down retribution for any transgressions, but rather from a shared sense of propriety that is palpable in every aspect of the school’s operation. When dedicated, like-minded, highly-motivated people gather together to practice an art that is as beautiful as it is dangerous, the right atmosphere simply emerges.

Marker: If you build it correctly, the rest will follow.

Related to the concept of discipline is the ideal of respect—a cornerstone of the martial arts. The respect with which the students treat their teachers (and indeed one another) is not so much demanded as it is earned and expected. As parents the world over will recognize, any failure in this regard evokes not so much anger as disappointment. When training in a traditional dojo, you will get to know your teacher better than some members of your own family, but that familiarity should never deteriorate into impudence.

Marker: Respect is the keystone.

Despite having moved many times since my initial posting near Itten Dojo, I continue to practice (and



preach) what I learned there, and I have been fortunate to be accorded the courtesies of an itinerant member throughout my travels. There can be no doubt that my draws, cuts, deflections, falls, throws, and locks all improved immeasurably because of time spent there on the mat, but the lessons which I use on a weekly, if not daily, basis are less to do with bladed or unarmed self-defense, and more to do with confidence, judgment, discretion, strategic planning, tactical awareness, and philosophical grounding.

Marker: The true battleground lies within.

The process of training in a traditional school is—and should be—transformative. It is hard to define the exact

qualities that mark the members of such an extraordinary institution, but with a respectful tip of the hat to the author Trevanian, the result should look something like this:

“Confidence without arrogance. Humility without weakness. Discretion without furtiveness. A commanding presence. A trustworthy demeanor. And a clear understanding of *why* things work the way they do.”

Something like that, anyway...

If any of this sounds like it might be what you have been looking for, I can recommend no better place to begin than my beloved Itten Dojo, and no finer guide than my friend, mentor, and teacher, Bob Wolfe. 🌀

Peter Hobart has been a devoted student of the martial arts since his father—a Golden Gloves Champion—first introduced him to the sweet science as a child. Since then, he has lived in many different states and countries, and in each place, he has sought out, and been fortunate to find, some of the world’s finest teachers. His connection with Itten Dojo began as a commuting student in the early 1990s, flourished following a move to Central Pennsylvania (which he tells his wife had nothing to do with the location of the dojo), and continues in a variety of ways to this day. He currently lives in Northern Virginia, works for the government, and manages to write, train, and teach on the side just enough to ensure that it hurts every time!

