

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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A Road Less Traveled Attending the OHIR International Seminar

My alarm goes off at 2:00 a.m., Tuesday morning. First stop, picking up Randy Manning, friend and training partner for more than two decades. A short drive to Harrisburg International Airport, a layover in New Jersey, and it's off to Tokyo for an experience I've trained for, but still didn't feel prepared for. I'm about to participate in a gathering of men and women from around the world that train in Ono-ha Itto-ryu (一刀流). Founded in the late 16th century, it's a very comprehensive school of swordsmanship utilizing *bokuto* (wooden swords), *habiki* (blunted swords), and *onigote* (heavily padded gloves) used to receive powerful cuts from the bokuto to the forearms.

A brief history, taken from the Reigakudo website:

Founded on 15 December 1963 as both a kendo training hall focused on ancient Japanese martial arts (kobudo) and a Christian hall of worship (later, the Komaba Eden Church), the Reigakudo was constructed and established through the support of many people surrounding Sasamori Junzo and his wife and Sasamori Takemi and his wife. Sasamori Junzo became the first chairman (doshu).

The "rei" of Reigakudo refers to observing courtesies and customs, while the "gaku," in addition to meaning "to enjoy," also means to place a premium on culture, tradition, and scholarship. "Do" refers to a place where one enjoys learning. It was completed and christened the "Reigakudo" as a place where one brings multiple approaches together in a quest for personal development through the forging of the mind and body with the spirit of reverence for God, mutual respect, and love of country.

In 1975, Sasamori Takemi received from his father the highest licenses (menkyo kaiden) in Shin Muso Hayashizaki-ryu, Chokugen-ryu (received in 1956) and Ono-ha Itto-ryu, and also received the Tetsujo Tekka license and the Origami certificate in Ono-ha Itto-ryu. He succeeded his father as the headmaster (soke) of these disciplines and assumed leadership as the 2nd Chairman of the Reigakudo. In these capacities he promoted the development and dissemination of Japan's ancient martial arts.



Sasamori Takemi passed away in August 2017. In October of the same year, Yabuki Yuji succeeded him as the next headmaster of Ono-ha Itto-ryu and took his place as the 3rd Chairman of the Reigakudo.



The Rev. Takemi Sasamori, ordained Methodist minister.

Although several of us at Itten Dojo had experienced the Sokaku-den variation of Itto-ryu, I found my first introduction and fascination for Ono-ha Itto-ryu through a book by Sasamori Soke, *Bushido and Christianity*. What I didn't know was that the person who translated this book

into English would later purchase a home locally and walk through the doors of Itten Dojo, becoming the Instructor in Residence of our Itto-ryu Study Group.

There's something special about investing your time in an endeavor so challenging that it enriches your life and, in turn, you become part of something much bigger, expanding your own understanding of yourself, while supporting others on the same journey. And to find something that pushes you in a way that few others in the world choose to do only adds to how special the journey can be.

So, after 19 hours of travel and some jet lag, I'm preparing to enter the Reigakudo, a structure that is both Church and Hombu Dojo (本部).

Meeting Gary Burkett, (also a member of Itten Dojo) at the bustling metro train platform, we hop on the train for quick ride, and then a healthy walk to the Reigakudo. Preparing my mind and spirit for *keiko* (practice), we find ourselves behind one of the senior instructors, walking with purpose. Recognizing two of the three of us, a quick exchange and we continue to make our way to the dojo.

Approaching the building—it's unassuming, tucked away in a residential area but letting you know from the *kanji* outside the building, and the cross adorning the roof that this was someplace special—reminders that you're entering a house of God and a place of ancient martial arts tradition.



Randy Manning outside the Reigakudo.



The first foreigners to arrive, our senior lets us inside. We would assist in preparing onigote to be used that day. They are taken from their storage area with newspaper stuffed in them to help to soak up the perspiration from prior keiko. The three of us start pulling the newspaper out and placing the onigote on a bench.

I didn't bring my bokuto, knowing that there would be plenty to borrow, but like a well-worn *keikogi*, there's something very comforting training with your own weapons. I would later find that I would be too busy to be distracted by a loaner sword.

After changing and receiving basic instruction from our hosts, we lined up to begin the day.

Starting with the basics—proper *seiza* (upright kneeling), weapon handling and *reishiki* (etiquette), we jumped into *waza* (techniques).

14 students from America, Belgium, Italy and France with five instructors allowed students that had limited experience to receive focused attention, while others of us were getting refinements, each *waza* being demonstrated for us by *Soke* (the headmaster), emphasizing key components.



The Reigakudo, before our day begins.

Soke had incredible energy and commanded the room, offering instruction with Mark Hague interpreting (Mr. Hague has trained in OHIR since 2002). Soke's intensity and passion for what he was sharing seemed to only increase as the day went on. Not someone that seems unapproachable, Soke's enthusiasm filled the room and energized all that were there. He taught at a level we could

understand, while offering us a glimpse of what could be, if willing to put in the work.

The seniors of Reigakudo were attentive and very helpful, always keeping an eye on us to encourage or correct. With corrections, the challenge I found was that as they spoke, my mind wanted to look for Japanese words I knew, but then I'd be focused on that, missing the overall point I'm sure they wanted to convey. Sometimes, after the correction and taking my best shot at improvement, I would then hear, "Okay, okay," or "So, so...so!" There were times the instruction was very clear when firmly told, "*Nodo!*" or "*Kiri otoshi...tsuki!*" I knew the expectation and worked until there was moderate satisfaction from my seniors.

We couldn't all train at the same time because of the size of the group, so we would sit on benches along the sides to learn through observation. Although I was focused on watching others train, my mind drifted, thinking about the "feel" of the room and watching the seniors as they either floated around instructing or sat next to me, offering me commentary, in Japanese, as we both observed.

On one occasion, I found myself smiling as I looked over at a senior, pulling from behind himself a book. Like a well-marked bible, I saw it was his *Itto-ryu Gokui* (the definitive text for this art)—red ink throughout the pages showing the years of study and fine tuning of a life devoted to this art.

As a Christian, I was intrigued by what this building provided for a community of worshippers, while being a home for kenjutsu. There's spirituality here—a mix of something that's hard to describe. Even the stained glassed windows offer images of what this building is, combining both Christian and budo images. My impression after a conversation is that about a third of the Reigakudo members are part of the church congregation.

At the end of our day, we were fortunate to observe a test for teaching licenses. The panel was made up of Soke and four senior instructors, and the exam was formatted in a way that allowed the students testing to show their prowess in the art.

We then had a wonderful tempura dinner at a restaurant that had been around since the Edo period. This was followed by a walk in the cool night air,



marveling at the mixture of big city lights while seeing temples and the history that they held.

Exhilarating first day.

Having breakfast at the hotel, consisting of a mix of Japanese and American standards, Randy and I are off to the train station for our Day Two. For today's keiko—because it was during their regular Saturday training schedule—we were joined by Japanese students, with each of the two classes that day having new faces rotate in.

Because of this, the room was packed with people swinging swords. One of the advantages was we trained with many different people at varied levels, and then had a chance to sit and observe. Soke had other commitments that day, so the afternoon was led by his senior instructors, and they allowed a pace that included great instruction and energy throughout the day.

As a former student of Isshinryu karate, I was reminded of part of the code, “The eye must see in every way; the ear must listen in all directions.” Training in close quarters and trying not to take-out one of my seniors behind me, I stayed aware of my surroundings. Unfortunately—as I was working with my patient and insightful Japanese partner on waza, I heard a bokuto from behind about to clock me. While narrowly missing getting hit, I took my “eye off the ball” and—with the sound of wood hitting skull, had whacked my training partner. With him taking a second to shrug it off and me in a deep bow, “*Sumimasen*,” we continued through the set until completed. I was pleased to see he continued to train the rest of the class, although I suspect he really felt it the next day. Lesson learned.

We finished the day with *soji* (cleaning), then resetting the chairs so that the Reigakudo would be ready for church services the next morning. Once again, I observed how closely linked the house of training and worship were.

Day Three was not at the Reigakudo, but at a sports center that was a longer train ride and a longer walk than the one to the Reigakudo. This would be a full day. Morning training, lunch, afternoon training, and then a gathering after.

Arriving, we were enthusiastically greeted by the Reigakudo instructors and students, doing their best in Japanese to offer direction to the foreigners on where to go,

where to change, and where to stow our gear. They brought bokuto and onigote and placed them on the wooden-floored area where we would be training.

Soke would not be with us most of the day, due to commitments for an *embu* (demonstration) where he demonstrated to an “inside” group on Saturday and then on Sunday to the public, but we received plenty of attention and instruction from the most senior members of the Reigakudo.

We partnered up to begin—me with a student from Texas. We were told to grab a pair of onigote. At the end of the line, I found only one pair remaining. They looked thin but I was confident they'd work just fine. After spending about 15 minutes being hit by my strong Texan friend, I knew this could be a long day. However—as instructed by our seniors, it was critical to train with intensity and focused power. And with it being my turn to be shikata, I made sure uchikata knew what I had felt. During a break, we smiled and laughed about it, with my training partner saying he didn't realize how much punishment I was taking until I started to return the favor.



Working on the fundamentals.

After an incredible morning of keiko, a Bento Box lunch was served—unusually light yet filling for this *gaijin*



(foreigner). A conversation with the Itten Dojo group and off to train again.

Continued focus on the core waza, supplemental waza, and an advanced set of waza called *Goten*, all under the watchful eyes of seniors, offering correction and encouragement when done to their satisfaction. Each waza demonstrated and broken down with clarity, with Mr. Hague interpreting.

With approximately an hour left, we were told that we would have our own embu—demonstrating five techniques. With Soke arriving and ready to observe our work, I signaled to my surprised Texas partner that I'd like to be part of the first pairs to demonstrate. With us completing our set, we now watched as several other groups demonstrated. After each set was completed, we applauded the work, along with Soke as he stood off in the corner observing.

We then lined up for the closing reishiki. With Soke appreciative of the work that we had put in and reminding us why we do what we do, the three days were completed.



Manning, Starnier, and Burckett during the closing of the seminar.

It was appropriate to bring the seniors and Soke a small gift of gratitude and we thought a little flavor from home would be appreciated. We chose chocolate, Hershey's chocolate. With all participants sharing a giant bag of Hershey's chocolate miniatures and senior instructors being handed over-sized Hershey's Kisses, it was with smiles on our faces and laughter from the seniors when Soke was given a five-pound, giant-sized Hershey's Bar. With that response, we knew that it was a hit.



A gift from home.

Then, off to a party to celebrate a great weekend of training. It was held in the sports center cafeteria, in an area that allowed us all to mingle. The all-you-can eat buffet was fantastic. I put things in my mouth that I wasn't exactly sure what it was, but thoroughly enjoyed. While we poured Asahi Beer for each other, I was surprised to see Soke—with a large bottle of Asahi in hand—going table-to-table making sure every glass was full. Laughter and energy engulfed the room throughout the evening. Although four languages were being spoken at our table, we all found ways to communicate, relate, and enjoy the evening and each other's company.

With the walk to the station, a train ride to our destination, the four of us from Itten Dojo said our goodbyes, wishing safe travel to each, with Randy and I staying two more days for sightseeing. 🌐





Group photo at the end of the seminar.



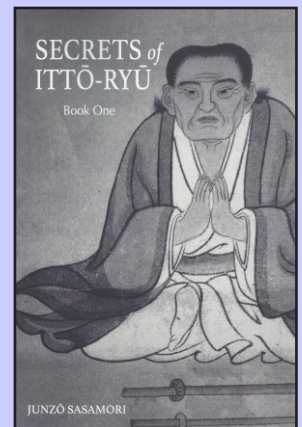
Alan Starner has been a student of martial arts since 1986 and is ranked in several arts, including karate, aikijujutsu, and swordsmanship. As a founding member of Itten Dojo, he has had the opportunity to train with senior Japanese and American martial artists in the U.S. and abroad.

He serves as Itten Dojo assistant instructor for jujutsu and iaido, and is a student of Ono-ha Itto-ryu kenjutsu and shodo.

The first and only English translation of the *Itto-ryu Gokui*, written by Junzo Sasamori, the 16th Soke (headmaster) of Ono-ha Itto-ryu. Published in 1965, *Secrets of Itto-ryu* represents over 70 years of practice and painstaking study of the physical techniques, the philosophical background, and history of this 400-year-old school of swordsmanship.

Book One, the first in a series, focuses on the history of this pivotal school of Japanese kenjutsu. The work is translated by Itten Dojo Instructor in Residence, Mark Hague.

Mr. Hague started training at the Reigakudo under Takemi Sasamori in 2002. Awarded the *Kanajisho* license (*mokuroku*) in 2009, he is the most senior exponent of the art outside of Japan. A certified instructor (*shidosha*) of the Ono-ha Itto-ryu America Branch, Hague teaches kenjutsu on behalf of the Reigakudo in classes, seminars, and demonstrations in the U.S.



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