

Sword and Spirit

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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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701 W Simpson Street, Suite C
Mechanicsburg, PA 17055-3716
www.ittendojo.org

Toy Swordsmen?

“Toy swords make toy swordsmen” was an oft-heard litany in the style of swordsmanship we trained in for many years, over the course of two separate, extended periods of time. For simplicity, I’ll refer to this former study of swordsmanship as the “legacy style.” The “toy swords” phrase was intentionally disparaging of anyone training with an *iaito* (an alloy-bladed, blunt version of a katana) rather than with a *shinken* (a “live sword” of sharpened steel), implying that anyone not using a real weapon is just playing.

There’s no question that practicing solo forms with what amounts to a three-foot butcher’s knife adds a level of realism and danger to training that is mostly absent in practice with an *iaito*. *Iaito* still have a point, and students can still nick themselves with that *kissaki*, but they’re never going to lose fingers. Or insert a *shinken* all the way through his left upper arm, as one unfortunate student at another dojo in that legacy style managed to do. (He was then ordered to “Cut through and finish the kata!” Which he did, with entirely predictable results, in what was also an exceptionally accurate assessment of the sanity of all involved.)

It’s possible to incorporate an optimal measure of controlled danger to training without the use of steel. More important considerations than the specific training tool used include the reasons for training, the desired outcomes of training, and the demographic of individuals most likely to benefit from the training.

Quick aside: It’s not as though we don’t use *shinken* in our current training. Black-belt students are allowed to use *shinken* in practice of solo forms—typically separated from others using *iaito*—and students of any rank, under proper supervision, will use *shinken* in *tameshigiri* (test-cutting of rolled, straw targets).

A number of the most senior members of Itten Dojo have more than 30 years consistent training here, through different iterations of the arts on which we’ve focused. The changes in arts were consequences of primarily black swan events that the dojo survived thanks to the core membership believing that the most important thing was always to find a way to keep training, together.



One significant consequence of our storied (or in some cases, checkered) past is that we've had opportunity to train for extended periods of time in both legitimate *koru* (old-style) and *gendai* (modern) Japanese martial arts, as well as in certain legacy arts of dubious legitimacy, with some of the most prominent (for good or ill) instructors. We're one of very few groups with sufficient, direct experience to offer an informed opinion on the more important considerations cited above.

Rather than writing a negatively-focused critique of some of our previous training experiences, I'd like to focus on a number of strikingly positive consequences of training in Muso Jikiden Eishin-ryu iaido under the direction of Nicklaus Suino Sensei of the Japanese Martial Arts Center in Ann Arbor, Michigan). In the mid-2000s I mentioned to one of those (good) most-prominent instructors that I'd learned more about the actual use of a sword in 12 months of training in Shinto Muso-ryu Jo than I'd learned in 12 years of training in the legacy art. 36+ months of training with Suino Sensei have been even more illuminating.

As we built our iaido program here, the first thing I noticed was that new Eishin-ryu students developed much better mental focus and physical form, much faster than was ever the case in the legacy style. Ironically, I believe this can be attributed to the fact that new Eishin-ryu students can practice mental focus and proper form absent any worry about injuring themselves with a shinken. The premise of the legacy style was that use of shinken would rapidly facilitate the development of desired traits in



students, but experience is demonstrating that the opposite is true. To be fair, however, exactly what those desired traits are needs to be considered.

The desired outcome of the legacy training, as posited by some seniors in that group, was an individual capable of cutting without attachment. The implication, of course, was cutting down another human being. While I always moderated that sentiment in our dojo with the caveat, "When no other choice is possible," I am much more comfortable presenting Suino Sensei's overtly-stated philosophical approach that focuses on the concept of *katsujin-no-ken* ("the sword that gives life"). As described in Suino Sensei's book, *Strategy in Japanese Swordsmanship*:

"In Japanese swordsmanship our highest goal is expressed in the phrase *saya no uchi* or *saya no uchi no kachi*, which means 'victory with the sword still in the scabbard.' It is an exhortation to the swordsperson to recognize that physical combat is a last resort, and a reminder that a master strategist will find a way to win without fighting."

While the original purpose for training in Japanese swordsmanship was defense of the feudal clan, there must be other reasons to train for the art to have any relevance





Testing for rank during Suino Sensei's most recent visit to Itten Dojo. Two military veterans are in front of this group; two more are standing, waiting their turn to test. Why I'm pointing that out will be made clear at the end of this essay.

in modern life. Training in the Suino approach to Eishinryu offers iaido students a wide range of benefits, including—as enumerated by Suino Sensei—physical fitness, improved concentration, deepening of perception, serenity, clarity of outlook, and a greater ability to apprehend truth in world around them. To these I would add an immersive experience that is endlessly fascinating, a source of deep satisfaction in the development of skill in an exceptionally challenging art, enhanced coordination and precision of movement, more dignified bearing and presence, and the sense of worth derived by playing a part in the preservation of a unique and enlightening endeavor with distinct societal value.

The demographic of individuals likely to benefit from training in iaido is extensive, covering virtually anyone capable of physical activity (and in many cases even those dealing with some limiting factor). The Suino approach to iaido has astonishingly broad appeal—our iaido program

includes men and women ranging in age from early teens to late-60s, with utterly diverse backgrounds and interests. We have almost three times as many people now training in iaido than the total membership of the dojo pre-pandemic. Current dojo enrollment overall, including iaido, kenjutsu, jujutsu, and shodo, is almost four times greater than 2019. Iaido is the largest component of Itten Dojo, and enrollment continues to grow.

All of this is without sacrificing any “practical” ability to use a sword. A highly unique aspect of Suino Sensei’s approach to iaido is “bokken fencing,” a form of almost-anything-goes free-sparring with wooden swords that has only one rule: “Don’t hurt your training partner.” Wooden swords are not, as some might assume, a safe alternative to real swords. Many lethal duels in feudal Japan were fought with bokken. Miyamoto Musashi, for instance, frequently used a bokken in duels. The legacy style of swordsmanship included occasional sparring with bokken—sometimes





Holland Sensei and Miller Sensei demonstrating bokken fencing at the Iaido Training Camp in Kitchener, Ontario. These images are used with permission of Chris Hanson of the Karate Unity program (<https://www.youtube.com/@KarateUnity>)

even with shinken (although none of us ever did that, in perhaps what might also be considered a measure of sanity). So, it might be assumed that the “non-toy swordsmen” were most accomplished in this form of training. I might have thought that myself, prior to seeing Suino Sensei and his most-senior students demonstrate bokken fencing earlier this year at the First International Iaido Training Camp in Kitchener, Ontario.

In a word, I was gob smacked. I’ve *never* witnessed such speed, power, precision, subtlety, intensity, and what with real swords would be absolutely lethal skill. It was fantastic. But the wildest thing about Suino Sensei’s bokken fencing is that it’s not just about “winning,” or

“cutting the opponent.” According to Sensei, it’s overriding purpose is “meant to be a largely harmonious training endeavor designed to cultivate a joyful state of flow.”

A final observation with regard to whether the use of iaito produces “toy swordsmen.” Almost 15% of Itten Dojo members training in iaido are former or active military, and many of these men and women have combat tours—sometimes multiple tours—in their résumés. In other words, these are actual, modern-day warriors, not people doing samurai cosplay.

To dismiss them as being “toy swordsmen” is beyond ludicrous. 🌀

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*.



Use this QR code to watch Chris Hanson’s excellent video report on the First International Iaido Training Camp.

The *Karate Unity* channel covers a wide variety of topics related to martial arts, including cross-training, conditioning, instructional videos, and interviews.

