

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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Self-reference

Back in the old karate dojo in the late 1980s there was a precocious preteen up for a rank exam, in this case one of the preliminary tests on the way to green-belt. Isshinryu karate *kata* (forms) are unusually long and challenging, even in the early stages of training. Nonetheless, I knew this young gentleman would have no difficulty passing the exam. On a whim, just to make things more interesting, I blindfolded him. He proceeded to execute the *kata*, a form that included stepping and returning on angles in addition to the front and back, and sides. And he finished exactly in the spot from which he had started, facing just a bit—and it was a tiny bit—off perfectly to the front. I was astonished, and left wondering whether I could have done as well.

His performance reminded me of a point in my career as a civilian logistician for the Navy during which I managed an inventory of several inertial navigation systems. These sophisticated gyroscopic mechanisms enabled a nuclear submarine, starting from a known point, to navigate anywhere in the oceans without reference to the outside world, just by keeping precise track of all the cumulative changes in velocity, depth, and direction as the vessel sailed.

Kind of like what the young karate student had done during his exam.

When training in martial arts that utilize solo forms, new students can easily become dependent on external references—like the *shomen* (front wall) of the dojo—in order to move in the appropriate directions during a *kata*. Obviously, this is disadvantageous, for a number of reasons. The simplest reasons have to do with whether the student can execute the *kata* when starting from facing a different direction than normal, or when training outside. A more complex reason is the potential diversion of attention to outside references when a major reason for practicing a solo might be, as is the case in *iaido*, building a specific and proper internal physical structure. Achieving that internal structure is a very heavily mental process.

Self-referencing has applications for more combative situations as well. When sparring, whether it be karate *kumite* (sparring) or *iaido* bokken fencing, it's usually a mistake to chase incoming strikes that would actually miss. A student reaching out from optimal guard positions to block a strike or

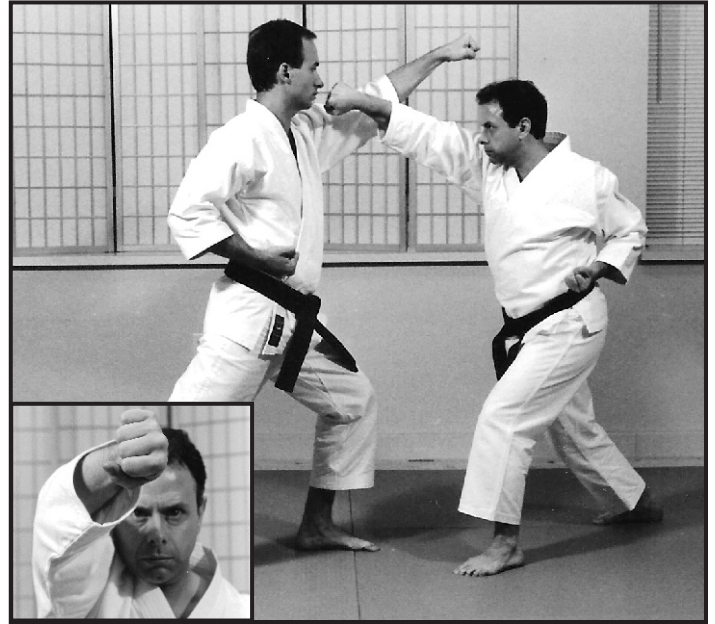


cut opens targets for the opponent. Developing the ability to assess whether an attack is likely to land is a highly desirable outcome of training. Defending only when it's necessary saves energy, eliminates wasted movement, and avoids opening other targets to attacks.

To help students get an idea of how this works, I use the metaphor of a wedge and the assumption of attacks from a single opponent targeting above the waist. I have the student stand naturally and extend his or her arms to the front, out from their center line, with fingers touching. If the fingers are pointed toward the opponent, the arms form the defensive zone. If an incoming strike or cut isn't going to cross the perimeter of the defensive zone it isn't on track to land. This approach is an oversimplification—the defensive zone is really a sphere surrounding the student, but it provides an understandable methodology for new students to begin building free-sparring skills, especially with regard to counter-fighting, a strategy generally considered to be the most reliably effective way to spar. Bear in mind that sparring is not fighting—it's an exercise—and that real-world self-defense may demand more immediate, aggressive action.

Within the context of sparring, if a student knows an incoming attack will miss, the student can maintain a guard and counter-attack directly without first blocking. More likely, the student can deflect the incoming attack with a “just in case,” minimal displacement of his or her own hands or bokken only to the perimeter of the defensive zone, facilitating a quick counter strike. In the most sophisticated applications, the deflection of a potentially successful attack is itself the counter-strike, with the hand or bokken impacting the opponent as an integral part of a single motion. Examples are the *nagashi-zuki* (flowing thrust) of karate or the *kiri-otoshi* (dropping cut) of Itto-ryu kenjutsu.

Self-referencing in these physical applications is really just body-awareness. Practicing kata and fundamental drills blindfolded or simply with eyes closed is an easy way to enhance this sense. Maintaining structure and balance will prove challenging, because in addition to the vestibular system of the inner ear a primary sensory component of balance is the visual reference. Paired practice drills can also be utilized, assuming one partner keeps eyes open!



Nagashi-zuki, in which the defender punches directly back into the oncoming attack, deflecting the incoming strike by means of the rotation of his arm. These photos were originally published in the *Journal of Asian Martial Arts* in 1995, with my article “Control of the Center.”



Kiri-otoshi, in which the defender's counter-cut deflects the incoming attack opening the line for a thrust.



There is also a critical, non-physical aspect to self-referencing, and that is trusting one's own intuition. Whether by design or evolution—personally, I believe by design—humans have highly developed intuitive processes that can provide reliable guidance.

Just as we look to government and experts, we also look to technology for solutions to our problems, but you will see that your personal solution to violence will not come from technology. It will come from an even grander resource that was there all the while, within you. That resource is intuition. It may be hard to accept its importance, because intuition is usually looked upon by us thoughtful Western beings with contempt. It is often described as emotional, unreasonable, or inexplicable. Husbands chide their wives about “feminine intuition” and don't take it seriously. If intuition is used by a woman to explain some choice she made or a concern she can't let go of, men roll their eyes and write it off. We much prefer logic, the grounded, explainable, unemotional thought process that ends in a

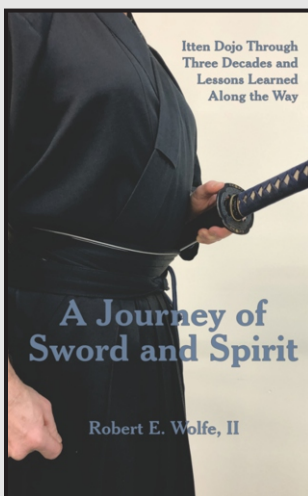
supportable conclusion. In fact, Americans worship logic, even when it's wrong, and deny intuition, even when it's right.

Men, of course, have their own version of intuition, not so light and inconsequential, they tell themselves, as that feminine stuff. Theirs is more viscerally named a “gut feeling,” but it isn't just a feeling. It is a process more extraordinary and ultimately more logical in the natural order than the most fantastic computer calculation. It is our most complex cognitive process and at the same time the simplest.

— de Becker, Gavin. *The Gift of Fear* (pp. 12–13).
Gavin de Becker. Kindle Edition.

As we train in physical processes of martial arts that require constant attention and assessment in order to achieve continual improvements, we are simultaneously developing greater sensitivity to and trust in the inner signals that can provide one of the most profound components of self-defense. 🌀

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*.



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