

# Sword and Spirit

The Journal of Itten Dojo

February 2025



## — Why 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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## Dojo Health *and the* Sempai

After training in the martial arts for decades, one would hope that students put away the childhood fantasies that they had about the journey. This does not always happen. A certain level of maturity should set in, especially after productive training, and proper mentors and teachers.

Try not to hold on to the trappings of the martial arts and instead distance yourself from chasing rank and titles. How many times have we seen 50- to 60-year-old men still chasing rank and needing to proclaim a title that is loftier than that of the guy up the street?

How about those that refer to themselves in the third person, beginning with their lofty title? LOL. There is a certain immaturity there. I have run my dojo and organization for decades but when people meet me, I'm simply Edward or, if they are a family friend, then Manny. I have no need to be anyone's grandmaster, super Grand Poobah Pseudo Yoda figure, and certainly not a supreme grandmaster. Again, LOL.

It is very important that we ignore the trappings. Now, this is different from accolades that one has actually earned, but that are tempered with humility and efforts to destroy the egocentric self. If that tempering is missing, there were lessons missed along the journey.

Another sign of martial arts maturity is a willingness to tear down the pedestals that people try to place us upon. One who is all too willing to glow in the adulation of well-meaning but misguided students has a type of imbalance that is difficult to navigate. You can tell this type of teacher because it comes out in the things that they say and, especially, in how they speak of themselves.

It seems to be a rare occurrence, but when you hear of someone that forestalls the kind of overt adulation that borders on a cult of personality, then you know that individual has developed some balance in their mind and their heart.

Why, after decades of training, do some folks hold onto the trappings and allow others to place them on a pedestal? What was missed in their training? What happened in their childhood that they did not resolve? Were they ignored or feel marginalized?



Dojo culture should embody a place of not only fun training but an experience tempered with accountability, obligation, and adherence to a path showing us just how small we are, no matter how technically proficient we become. The dojo should build excitement, anticipation, a sense of obligation, and, yes, a certain type of fear. I'm not talking about fear because one is being abused, but rather a fear of falling into the role of the martial arts clown. No makeup is required to be a martial arts clown, but one's actions and words often reveal it to be the state that certain people find themselves in.

The dojo should be a serious environment, without the participants taking themselves too seriously. One can be self-disciplined, self-motivated, highly skilled, and helpful to others—without developing the personality of the martial arts clown.

The best dojo are something I separate from martial arts schools. Martial arts schools can be very beneficial but will differ culturally, and with regard to standards and expectations, from a traditional dojo. By the same token, the traditional dojo need not be a place of relics and procedures and techniques that are worthless in modern times. It is all about balance. It is of *paramount* importance in the dojo of my group that one can rock and roll when needed in modern society. We live in a violent and litigious society, so it is a tightrope walk, at best.

Everyone cleaning the dojo together, everyone humbly submitting the tuition for the betterment and continuation of the dojo, and those upholding standards of technical excellence and, just as importantly, safety, should be of great value and importance to everyone involved. A great dojo should weed out the wannabes, those seeking overt adulation that hasn't been earned, and those that would misuse the teachings and techniques presented. A solid dojo will reinforce the premise that budo is a lifetime of experiences, decisions, actions, and deeds.

The responsible dojo will, in the most subtle manner, call us out on our BS. This should be done with good intentions, good character and manners, but in a straightforward way, like medicine that is good for us but that does not taste good. The responsible dojo does not placate or justify abusive mindsets, and it should never empower those that would like to misuse the path to

become a technically proficient clown that is self-centered and harmful to the overall community. No well-meaning and highly trained dojo members do this.

The sad truth is, the martial arts draw in people of all different backgrounds, mindsets, personality types, and those with histories that may include abuse, narcissism, severe mental trauma, and a need and willingness to impose their will on others. We like to think that the dojo is impervious to such characters but this is far from true. How many times have we seen even instructors that are talented as far as technique is concerned, turn into monsters, or hide their damaged personalities behind rank, acclaim, and adulation?

The *sempai* (seniors within a dojo) are an important line of defense. They should defend the honor of the dojo and the sensei; they should protect the *kohai* (juniors) from others, each other, and themselves. If there is a problem in the dojo, a good core group of seniors can head it off at the pass, address things before anything goes too far, and oftentimes make sure that circumstances do not frustrate or destroy the good energy that is otherwise present in the community.

Senior students must realize that they have more obligations and responsibilities than privileges. "Be careful what you ask for," is an old saying. If you are put up in front of the students in a dojo, you have a heavy obligation and you must honor it. The senior students are a barrier to foolhardy actions, habits, and decline setting in because of problems within the dojo. They must know how to read the room, understand the directives set before them and, all the while, be decent training partners for one and all.

The senior students have a hand in producing the future leaders of the dojo by setting a good example, providing gentle guidance, technical insights, and corrective action as far as violations of the regulations and guidelines of the dojo.

I'm asking any students that are considered senior members of their school or dojo (these do differ, as I mentioned) if they fit the criteria of a protector of legacy, of standards, and of the sanctity of all that is supposed to happen during training, events, and other activities?

Sempai who cut the mustard and meet their obligations should be greatly respected, highly valued, and, if going



far beyond expectations, compensated in some way. I'm not speaking about financial compensation (though if they are helping the sensei professionally, that is a must). There should be a level of mutual respect and understanding between the sensei and the senior corps of membership.

I've seen many talented sensei who were technically outstanding but who lacked leadership skills and never developed a sempai group that could elevate the dojo to new heights and uphold the standards that we are discussing. If such sensei were teaching, demonstrating, sparring, or doing anything physical, they are often outstanding and respected by the martial arts community. But if one had not been a responsible student, it will be very difficult for them to become a proper sempai, let alone a great sensei.

Let's hope that in the future, senior students understand the obligations and responsibilities that they hold. Many dojo members feel like customers these days and that by paying tuition, their obligations stop there. This is far from true. Members of a proper dojo understand that the bills need to be paid and that if the teacher is presenting the art full-time—and I mean truly full-time—they deserve to eat and make a living. A healthy dojo can be productive and truly initiate change in a community if that dojo and its members are community-minded. I believe martial arts are a wonderful educational system, if presented correctly, and with good intent.

In closing, I would like to caution anyone that is considered to be a sempai to monitor the student body for abusers, to present compassionate advice to their juniors, and represent not only the best aspects of the dojo but of themselves. To those of you that are doing this, kudos and thank you. If you are reading this and wondering what I'm even talking about, you have missed many of the lessons along the journey. Enjoy your practice, learn to stay out of

the way, and don't let any self-destructive patterns affect the lives of others along this beautiful path.

I bid you all a good day—let's try to be the best juniors, senior students, and teachers that we can be. Have a beautiful day, on purpose. 🌀



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