

Sword and Spirit

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— Why Budo? —

Regardless of the times you live in, or the circumstances of your life, success largely depends on things you actually can control:

- Building strong relationships in a community of achievement.
- Forging a disciplined and positive mindset.
- Enhancing your physical health and capabilities.

These are exactly the things membership in a dojo provides.

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Life Hacks from the Martial Arts...

Transformation in the Traditional Martial Arts

Traditional Japanese martial arts training takes place in a space that is set apart from the work-a-day world in many ways. In the dojo, there is a strange time dilation, like an adrenaline dump, that stretches the smallest moments out into impossibly long events. There is an informational density that is hard to explain to the uninitiated. Body, mind, spirit, history, and technique layer endlessly, one atop the other, stratifications of tradition and knowledge and intense physical activity. It is a transformative process.

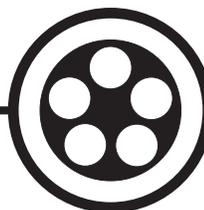
I am often asked how martial arts has shaped my life. I can't answer that question. My life is ongoing, my training is ongoing. The man I am today and the man I have been along the timeline of my life are only part of a narrative if I force one onto it. Real life is not a story.

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The room is quiet. The mat spreads out before me, glowing in the last light of day that comes through the single window. The high ceiling is lost to shadow, metal rafters just visible through the gloom. It is a spare, uncluttered space. The few things hanging on the walls accentuate the emptiness, the blank space. The wall on the far side of the mat is covered with racks. Bright, colorful bags protect the live steel swords, the *katana*, that are prominently placed above the rows of the wooden swords (*bokken*), aligned in precise, identical fashion. There is the sense that everything is in its place, and that there is no other place it could be.

It is the same room it has been for my almost 20 years of training, though it is not in the same space it was in 1997, when I climbed to the second floor of an office building in Camp Hill, Pennsylvania, for my first lesson. The space has moved, but it has not changed.

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High on the front wall is the shrine: the *shinza*. My eye is drawn to it, the same as it always is, and to the banner above: bold *kanji* (Japanese characters) spelling out the name of the dojo. My body snaps to attention, a subconscious reaction, as I turn to face the *shinza* and bow, back straight, an action that I seek to make as precise and correct as I can, every time. Every time it falls short of the ideal.

The room is quiet, still, ready for the students to arrive, to fill it with the noise of practice, of bodies slapping onto the mat, the war-eagle shriek of *kiai*, the distinct shuffling-sliding noise of feet gliding across the mat. It is patient, existing in a space both physically and spiritually different from the outside world. It is a room with its own rules and demands, and it brooks no deviation.

It is still and quiet and ready. But it is not empty.

It is never empty.

There are spirits here.

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“Remember,” Sensei said, “people died for this.”

We stood, sweat-soaked, in a circle on the mat. Our wooden swords held at our sides, hilts stained with the sweat of hours and days and years of practice. The swords were heavy, the techniques aggressive and powerful. Sensei had decades of practice under his belt, and was skilled and fast and strong. Working with him and with his senior students was an intense experience. Knuckles got busted. Heads got smacked. In the heat of the clash, minute mistakes in technique would be exploited.

In short, it was a demanding practice session, as all sessions with this sensei were.

“People died for this,” he said.

Formalized swordsmanship emerged from combat. The winners would return home, and share the tricks and techniques that they had discovered and with which they credited their survival. If those techniques and tricks continued to work, they would be further refined.

Successful schools were founded by men whose hands were bloody with victories.

The techniques we have today, the arts we practice, are built on the foundations of the defeated. We show up at the dojo and put on our uniforms and have a blast training for a few hours, but the fact remains that what we do is based on the skills of war and grounded in the deaths of those long-forgotten vanquished foes, the ones whose techniques and tricks were not quite good enough.

The Japanese are a complex people, with a language that can be exactly technical and beautifully poetic, often at the same time. They talk about the meaning and the “meaning behind the meaning.” *Ura* and *omote*. Front and back.

Four or more times a week, I walk into a room that exists because people took the time to study the arts I love and to pass them on. People spent the currency of life: money, time, moments with family, friends, and loved ones. They sacrificed for us. I can name two men without whom the dojo would have folded, both deceased within my lifetime.

I can name several others who have passed through on the journey of their lives, enriching all of us in the process. The *kami* (spirit) is alive, and it retains some of everyone who passes through the dojo.

I am a lapsed Christian at best, and a man who feels that spirituality outside of religion is a pretentious concept. I am not superstitious. And yet when I speak of spirits and *kami*, it is as real as air, as water, as food. And as vital. Paradox and dichotomy. The *budo* are full of these contradictions.

When I walk into the dojo, these are the spirits that are waiting for me. The honored dead. They demand that I be worthy of them.

Someday, if I am strong enough, if I stay the course, my name will be counted among those who died for this.

The road is hard.

I take the next step, onto the mat, and practice for another day. ☸

John Butz holds the rank of sandan (third-degree black-belt) in Yamate-ryu aikijutsu, and serves as an assistant instructor at Itten Dojo. This essay appeared originally on Curiata.com, and is reproduced here by permission.

