

# 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...*

# “Spiritual” Budo

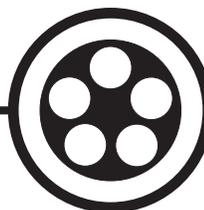
## Martial Arts and Spiritual Development

Any time I interview a candidate for admission to Itten Dojo, I usually ask what is motivating the individual to seek martial arts training. Some candidates are merely looking for an interesting way to get into better physical condition, while others seek some measure of capacity for self-defense. A few people say, “I don’t really know; it’s just something I’ve always wanted to do” (a very good answer, in my opinion, as is, “It looks like fun”). A frequent answer in the variety of reasons offered is a desire for spiritual development. This presents me with a bit of a quandary, because I don’t believe the study and practice of martial arts is a source of spiritual development in the sense many people seem to assume (or, more properly, have been led to assume, particularly with regard to the art of aikido). You might find this a surprising revelation, especially considering the title of this publication. Don’t get me wrong — I do most definitely believe the various budo (martial Ways) are vehicles for personal development in several important respects. I take issue only with what is meant by describing budo as spiritual training.

When I speak of spirit in the context of martial arts, I’m talking about an individual’s focused will or intent. At the low end of the spectrum, this might be something as simple as enthusiasm at practice; at the high end it might be ironclad determination to survive (or to save others from) an attack or similar, life-threatening circumstance. Spirit, as I define it, is an aspect of character and something that can be trained.

“Spiritual,” in the sense which many prospective martial arts students seem to refer, relates to understanding of oneself and one’s place in the universe, insight to the nature of ultimate reality, and the cultivation of moral values. In other words, spiritual in this context addresses topics much more properly, in my opinion, the purview of religion.

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For Ueshiba Morihei, the founder of aikido, there was absolutely no distinction between his personal practice of martial arts and his religion. An ardent adherent of a radical religious movement known as Omoto-kyo (an eclectic mix of Shinto, Taoism and myth aimed toward achievement of utopia on earth), as well as a personal disciple of its leader, Deguchi Onisaburo, Ueshiba believed aikido to be the product of divine revelation and its physical practice a form of *misogi* (spiritual purification), a means to reconcile Man and Heaven. Aikido training for Ueshiba consisted of daily, spiritually oriented practice of meditation, prayer, chanting and ritual, and time on the mat in the dojo, with both aspects comprising a unified whole. His objective seemed to be becoming in some sense a conduit for effecting the transformation of society worldwide, not just through his example but by means of some direct, personal influence on the underlying structure of the world.

Me, I'm just trying to manage a decent aiki-nage...

According to researcher Peter Boylan, an overt linkage of martial arts training and religious/spiritual practice is unusual (though not unheard of) even in Japan, outside the writings of Ueshiba and subsequent instructors of aikido. Sure, there have been a number of books over the years attempting to tie budo and Zen, but even cursory review of the available literature pretty quickly demonstrates such linkage — to the extent it exists — is relatively modern. Historically, the samurai were far more interested in Mikkyo, an esoteric form of Buddhism, the practice of which was thought to confer invisibility and other attributes very handy in mortal combat. The samurai were seeking advantage on the battlefield for the benefit of the clan, not individual, spiritual development in the modern sense.

At some point, though, the quest for power in the temporal world was overlaid with at least a veneer of polishing the inner self. Following the unification of Japan at the turn of the seventeenth century and cessation of the state of constant civil warfare that had prevailed for more than 200 years, the practical need for martial training diminished rapidly as most samurai made the transition from warriors to bureaucrats. Persons wishing to promulgate martial arts had to find reasons to train other than self-preservation, and self-perfection came to be a

primary rather than secondary or tertiary objective. At various times over the subsequent 250+ years, the Tokugawa shogunate was forced to mandate training, evidently because so many samurai simply no longer wanted to bother with it. While most people can readily grasp the desirability of acquiring skills directly related to keeping them alive, fewer people are attracted to the concept of arduous training in order to become a better person. Even today, or more like especially today, the cleverest marketing touts ways to become a better person with no effort whatsoever (and likely implies the reason you're not much to begin with is somebody else's fault). Fortunately for us, and future generations, there has always been a small subset of the world population interested in the study and preservation of traditional martial arts for their own sake.

So what can the practice of budo accomplish?

I consider the optimal outcome of martial arts training to be the creation of a more capable individual, in as many aspects as possible. The dojo is both laboratory, a place in which to experiment, discovering one's strengths and weaknesses, as well as forge, a crucible in which to purge fear and temper the body and will. Our training is geared toward physical outcomes of increased fitness, flexibility and overall health, as well as practical self-defense skills, and spiritual (in my terms) outcomes of enhanced personal discipline and the ability to get a necessary job done when the job is *really* something one doesn't want to have to do. Mind and body reflect each other, and the greater the degree to which we can improve the functioning of both, the resulting synergism will yield a sum greater than its contributing parts.

As for martial arts training imparting moral values, about the best notions I've been able to come up with are:

1. If you fight you'll likely get hurt even if you win, so if at all possible it's probably better not to get into fights.
2. It's a good idea to be considerate of your training partner, because it's his turn, next. In other words, "do unto others..." unless your ukemi is utterly flawless.

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3. By being at the dojo, you're not hanging out at the bar, pool hall, or race track (at least not until after practice). On the other hand, depending on the class schedule, you might not be in church, either, so this one is probably a wash.

Beyond that, I just haven't in 40 years of training seen much evidence that martial arts practice effects spiritual improvements of the nature often claimed in books or presented in movies or on television, à la Kwai Chang Caine in *Kung Fu*. In fact, in an unfortunate number of instances, I've observed (and had personally to deal with) just the opposite. Martial arts, being derived from military arts, are, at the core, about the exercise of power. And this paradigm is ripe for misuse.

You won't have to look very far in the martial arts world to find utterly contemptible examples of abuse, exploitation, delusion and grandiose self-inflation. In many cases there is a direct correlation between the number of years of training the perpetrator has under his belt and the egregiousness of the offense. What's worse is that such cases seem most prevalent in the very arts, like aikido, popularly assumed to be the most "spiritual" in nature. To be fair, we see these same depredations in religious organizations. The bottom line is all human institutions are inherently corruptible, and can function with any measure of propriety only when all persons involved maintain focus and vigilance and do their best to cleave to an absolute, external standard.

This last is one reason martial arts fail as spiritual development: while there is an external standard for performance (or even behavior), it is individually derived and not absolute. The founder of an art or subsequent, subordinate instructors can establish standards, but those standards are always subject to revision by other individuals. Only standards external to individuals, things like the Ten Commandments, have any chance of providing a moral compass. (Of course, you don't have to believe in absolutes, in which case I guess you're on your own. Although I concede we, in this world, may not have a completely clear idea of what the absolutes are, I do believe absolutes exist and that it behooves us to try to apprehend the absolutes to the best of our ability.)

The other, primary reason martial arts don't make one more spiritual (which is to say, don't develop the soul) is the simple fact that perfecting a sword cut, for example, does not yield anything other than a better cut. I see nothing intrinsic to the practice that might determine to what end that cut is ultimately employed, or that might result in a person becoming saintly. If you want to be able to hit harder, do pushups and practice your punching. If you want to learn how to live, read scripture. Pick the tool best suited to the task.

In short, I think believing the dojo to be a substitute for church, synagogue, or mosque, or budo an alternative to active and engaged faith, is making a mistake.

It is certainly true that the dojo, through its constituent members, can provide community, mutual support, and a deep sense of shared purpose. It's also true that the discipline of training can provide meaningful challenge and satisfaction across the course of a lifetime. For some people, this may be sufficient. I believe we are better served looking beyond "the course of a lifetime," that everything we do, every thought we think, has spiritual implications and consequences — and I do mean spiritual in the larger sense of soul and a world beyond this. For me, the dojo community and the experience of training are considerably enhanced when viewed within an encompassing framework of faith.

There are more efficient ways to get in shape than practicing martial arts, and far more effective methods to defend oneself. But, all things considered, martial arts do a pretty good job of accomplishing both. Moreover, they're a heck of a lot of fun. And that's the real reason I keep training and instructing. Fortuitously, I think there are grounds to believe at least one of the reasons we are on earth is to appreciate this creation and where proper to have a good time. Rather than being a way to gain power in the temporal world, or effect its transformation, the practice of martial arts is to me a way to share, to give back, to express God-given talents in a manner that is, I hope, pleasing to God.

Martial arts may not make us more spiritual, but we can make spiritual the practice of martial arts by what we bring to the practice: reverence for our creator, love for each other, and joy at the chance to experience it all. ☸

