

Sword and Spirit

The eNewsletter of Itten Dojo

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

Life Hacks from the Martial Arts...

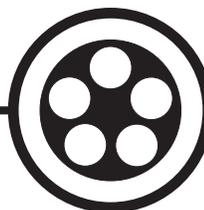
21st Century Kenjutsu

The study of kenjutsu — classical Japanese swordsmanship — would seem to have little or no practical relevance in the modern world. After all, it's not like you can walk around with a katana...or even a sword cane for that matter. Why would anyone invest hundreds of dollars or more in a uniform and equipment, and countless hours of practice, to become proficient with a weapon that has been obsolete for centuries? Actually, for the exact same reasons kenjutsu has remained a source of fascination and utility for more than a thousand years.

Historically, the sword was not a primary weapon on Japanese battlefields during the feudal era. The *bushi* (warriors) relied mainly on the bow and spear, with the sword usually serving the same role as a sidearm for a modern soldier — more a weapon of last resort. Prior to the adoption of firearms, the spear tended to dominate the battlefield due to its lethality and relative ease of developing proficiency with its use. Nonetheless, there is a long tradition of training with the sword as a study of conflict in microcosm, a source of insight to psychology, and a methodology for forging spirit and will.

Elements of strategy that are applicable to multiple levels of warfare, commercial business, or even interpersonal relationships can be learned and practiced within the two-person, combative exchanges called *kumitachi*. Because there is real, physical and psychic risk inherent in the practice of *kumitachi*, personal strengths and weaknesses become apparent to the practitioner — as well as to his or her colleagues in the dojo. (This shared exposure, rather than being a negative aspect of training, is in fact an explanation for why relationships with one's fellow members of the dojo are some of the most intimate friendships we're likely to experience.) But one's true, inner character is not static — the very nature of kenjutsu practice hones strengths and pares away weaknesses. These aspects and consequences of training are constant, everyday benefits.

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But the benefits are not limited to the inner person. Much rarer, but still significant, are instances in which modern students of kenjutsu have utilized techniques learned in the dojo, successfully, against armed assailants. A knife employed in the manner an *iaido kata* (sword-drawing form), or an aluminum flashlight applying a *waza* (technique) from *bokken-jutsu* (the science of dueling with wooden swords) are examples experienced within our own organization.

Enhanced awareness, greater recognition of distancing and vectors of attack, as well as refined posture and patterns of movement all contribute to the tangible aspects of self-protection.

The above considerations are excellent reasons to train, but one factor surpasses all others as the impetus for training extending over decades: Kenjutsu is an incredible amount of fun. To be engaged in something only a very few people around the world on any given day are doing is

kind of cool. To experience yourself transforming as skills and understandings manifest in and out of the dojo is even better. This experience can substantially improve satisfaction in life. According to author James Clear, who writes extensively about self-improvement tips based on the latest scientific research:

“Working on challenges of an optimal level of difficulty has been found to not only be motivating, but also to be a major source of happiness. As psychologist Gilbert Brim put it, ‘One of the important sources of human happiness is working on tasks at a suitable level of difficulty, neither too hard nor too easy.’”

Kenjutsu is an ideal endeavor providing inexhaustible challenge and reward, potentially for a lifetime. Far from being obsolete, few activities provide greater benefits than classical, Japanese swordsmanship. ☸

Robert Wolfe, the chief instructor at Itten Dojo, began martial arts training while in college in 1975, has taught since 1985, and holds senior ranks in Itto Tenshin-ryu kenjutsu, Yamate-ryu aikijutsu, and Isshinryu karate. His articles addressing martial arts have been featured in publications such as *The Bujin*, *Budo Shinbun*, the *Journal of Asian Martial Arts*, *Bugeisha*, *Aikido Today Magazine*, *Inside Karate*, *Martial Arts Training*, and *Martial Arts Professional*.

