

The Importance of Context in Understanding Japanese Martial Art

Suggestions and Reading Lists for Students

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Everything we experience, learn, or do exists in its own context. We know that when we take things out of context, we may find that we have misunderstood or misinterpreted an act or remark, even to the extent of completely twisting its original meaning or intent. Yet despite awareness of the dangers of ignoring context in everyday life, it's not uncommon to find people practicing a dangerous or potentially deadly martial art with little or no knowledge about its context - its historical, cultural, and philosophical foundations.

It's not hard to see how this can happen in martial art training today, at least as it's often presented in the Western world. There are dozens of arts available in corner dojos or strip mall studios, each one touting the benefits of training in its style.

While some people research various arts and investigate the dojo and sensei they are considering before signing up, many people simply join the most convenient or cheapest place they can find, or go to the club that their brother-in-law recommended or that their neighbor's daughter attends. Then they often find that they didn't really know what they were getting into. Other people buy videos or try to copy what they see on YouTube.

Their reasons for starting a martial art are varied: self defense; interest in martial skills; self empowerment and confidence; fitness; general self improvement; mental or psychological development; personal growth; self actualization; camaraderie; and more. Some people love competition and are attracted to martial arts or ways that are also practiced as a sport, such as judo or certain styles of karate and jujutsu. Not everyone who starts a martial art is interested in what lies beyond the physical techniques. There are students who approach the practice of martial art with the idea that it is really all about getting a good workout and gaining more skills. Anything that doesn't immediately add to those capabilities is seen as a distraction.

Teachers also bring a variety of views about the scope of study in martial art. The path of each dojo is laid out by the sensei. If the art taught there is a modern Western creation that is based on an older Japanese art, but its leaders want it to be known as a modern system, then its cultural parentage may not receive much attention from its own practitioners. Some teachers feel that students should focus most on learning techniques and their applications and have little regard for anything beyond the immediately practical. In their view, students will make better use of their time concentrating on the physical techniques; they see little to be gained by reading about Asian philosophies or the writings of 17th century sword masters. In those cases, it may be harder for students to appreciate learning much about the contextual underpinnings of their art or its antecedents. If even learning more vocabulary and concepts in Japanese is seen as not only unnecessary, but kind of a waste of time, it is the students who will end up poorer in knowledge and understanding of how their art was designed to work. Lessons from centuries of martial history will remain unread. Awareness of significant principles may be lacking. The students' grasp of higher concepts of martial art will be limited to what they can glean from class. Their understanding of the intent of techniques may be affected, as poor translations distort the actual meaning of the technique's name; this sometimes results in a change in technique execution, based on incorrect interpretation or translation of the name.

When significant elements of context are forgotten or ignored, the relevant body of knowledge starts to become diluted. This diluted knowledge is then passed on to future generations of students. Without grounding in a defining context, the knowledge set is subject to personal reinterpretation each time it is passed forward.

The larger implication for this ongoing erosion of knowledge is that the system itself will continue to undergo changes in the future, but these may not be in accord with its original intent or principles. The style may eventually end up becoming something else entirely. Change can be a very good thing, but it is important to fully understand what you are changing and how you are changing it. Otherwise, you may end up throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

But the study of martial art goes well beyond acquiring skill with techniques. Japanese martial art has a long history of developing the mind and the character as part of mastery.

The samurai were subject to guidelines (*kakun*, or house codes) dealing with expectations for conduct and study not just as enhancement of their military bearing, but as a code of behavior for life off of the battlefield. A degree of literary and cultural accomplishment was also expected of certain ranks, resulting in a balance of warrior skills and scholarly attainment. These expectations had benefits both for the warriors and for their various masters. A compilation by Nitobe (1899) under the relatively modern concept of "bushido" outlined seven virtues or ideals of the samurai that he described as still having "continuity and permanence" in turn of the century Japan. But it is the various sources of these bushido ideals - the philosophies and social traditions - that inform some of the higher attainments of Japanese martial art. Throughout Japan's long history of martial traditions, principles and strategies culled from centuries of experience in the world of combat

have made their way into hundreds of martial systems. Many martial arts in the modern world are in one way or another beneficiaries of this knowledge from the past. These teachings are often presented as integral to training in the various arts. Appreciation for where these came from adds to your understanding of how they may fill out your training today.

Japan is a complex society; a tapestry woven from many threads, some of which can appear baffling to the uninformed Western eye. Martial art arose from this tapestry. It's important for students to become at least somewhat culturally literate about the art that you are practicing. Increasing your knowledge of this context will not only allow you to better understand why your art does some of the things it does; it will enrich your total experience and give you a better appreciation for the higher objectives of the art. It will give you the tools you need to better evaluate what you are doing, or what you see happening in other styles or systems. You don't need to become a Ph.D. in history or become an expert in Asian philosophies to gain the bit of contextual understanding you ought to have to support your practice. But you should be aware of some of what constitutes the underpinnings of your art, and work to familiarize yourself over time with important elements that have contributed to its development.

So what should you be looking for? A lot of what you will need to begin your journey toward martial art literacy can be found in the 5 categories below. Use this list to help fill out different areas of context for yourself.

I. Language: At a minimum, you should become familiar with 3 things: 1.) Japanese pronunciation, 2) basic dojo vocabulary, and 3.) the meanings of relevant concepts and principles.

Pronunciation of both spoken and written words in Japanese will help you expand your learning. No one expects you to sound like Toshiro Mifune when you use a Japanese word in the dojo, but by paying attention to the sounds of the language, you should be able to achieve a reasonable approximation to the correct pronunciation. There are many websites with native speakers available today that can help you with this.

Learn the conventions of pronunciation for Japanese words written with the Latin (English) alphabet (*romaji*), and their accepted spellings, and you will find it easier to remember written words. You will also be able to communicate to others more effectively and credibly.

Basic dojo vocabulary: Whether in Japanese or English, this includes the names (and meanings) of all the techniques, forms, ranks or other labels used in your system; vocabulary used to open and close the class; common phrases that may be used during class; and any other terminology that is used in your dojo. Learning relevant vocabulary in Japanese will also allow you to visit or join different clubs and be able to participate comfortably when you find they use Japanese terms.

Concepts and principles: This is an area where you especially want to go beyond a one- or two-word definition or translation. Many useful concepts in martial art require more of an explanation than a simple translation can give you. By memorizing only the translation or definition without examining the nuances or context of meaning for the concept, you will lack the more complete understanding you could get by doing your homework about these important fundamentals.

II. A.) Know your own art: Take the time to learn the specific philosophy, history and objectives of your own art. Familiarize yourself with the story of your system's founder and how and why he developed his system the way he did. If your art uses kata, be sure you know why you are doing the movements in the forms. Understand what is being preserved and passed on through the kata. Know where your art fits in on the spectrum of martial arts, and be sure its aims are a good match for your own objectives.

B.) Know something about other arts: No system exists in a vacuum, and many of them developed out of other already established systems. You will find interesting and helpful contrasts and parallels to your own art when you take the time to investigate others. Include in this study a look at the founders and their objectives for their arts.

C.) Know the difference between an integrated system and a mixed or composite art: Integrated systems are characterized by internal consistency of principles. That is, the principles apply universally to all of the techniques in the system. In a mixed or composite art, typically formed by combining pieces from a variety of different arts, some principles may apply selectively to different parts of the program. Elements such as power generation, stance, tai-sabaki, use of ma-ai, method of striking, method of throwing, style of ukemi, and more, often vary from art to art. In an integrated system, the consistency of underlying principles connects these elements to allow for seamless transitions of movement and technique; often the ultimate goal is to operate on principles rather than to rely on technique. Whichever type of art you choose, be aware of its inner workings so that you may gain the best possible understanding of how it operates.

III. History of Japan/China: Having a sense of the historical background of the culture that produced Japanese martial art and its participants will go a long way toward enriching your appreciation for martial art development over the centuries.

IV. Major philosophies, cultural traditions and martial practices: It's a good idea to have some understanding of these schools of thought and contexts. For example, what are the major tenets of Taoism, Buddhism, Shinto, and Confucianism? You'll find their influences in various martial arts. If you then go on to read some of the classic writings in martial art and budo, you will better understand what they are about.

V. Specific codes, creeds, texts, classic literature: After you have become a little familiar with some of the history, philosophies, social structures and cultural traditions of Japan across the centuries, you will get a lot more out of reading some of these writings. The authors were writing from their own cultural context to others in the same context. Without some knowledge of what that context involves, some of their meanings will be lost on a modern Westerner.

The categories listed above should give you an idea of where to start filling in some context for yourself, but they are just a beginning. You will likely find that each thing you read will lead you to something else, much of which is not included here. The study of martial art is usually seen as a life-long journey, and this should include examination of its historical, cultural and theoretical foundations as well as its physical techniques.

Suggestions for Reading

Following are some recommendations to help you get started reading about some of the topics listed in the five categories described in this article. These are not comprehensive lists, but include works in English that are usually readily available from various booksellers or websites.

The lists also include some translated works. It is a good idea to have a bit of background in Asian philosophies and traditions to help provide some context for the translated texts. Keep in mind that when reading a translated piece, you are reading the individual translator's unique perspective. There are many factors that go into translation; it is always a good idea to read more than one translation of a particular work when possible in order to better discern the intent of the original author.

The books below are listed only by author and title in most cases since many of them are available in different editions. I provide a little more information for separate articles to enable you to find them more easily. Some of the titles may well fit in more than one category but in order to avoid needless repetition I simply chose one placement for each.

I. Language

The main recommendation I have here for someone just beginning to explore martial art context is to find a good Japanese-English dictionary as a first step. You will want one that provides a pronunciation guide as well as an introduction to the Japanese writing system (both phonetic and characters). Be sure that the Japanese words are provided in both romaji (Roman letters) and in the original kanji (characters). There are many words in Japanese that are pronounced the same way but are written with different kanji which reflect different meanings.

Keep in mind, however, that the language of martial art is a specialized one, and you will not find many of the words that we use in a "normal" dictionary. An internet search will lead you to various websites that specialize in martial arts vocabulary.

You can always fill out your understanding of the language with a college or home study course. There are innumerable resources available which you can find with an internet search. There are always courses such as those offered by Berlitz, Pimsleur, Claypoole, Rosetta Stone, and others.

II. Know your own/other arts

These recommendations are works that provide historical, theoretical or biographical information. The lists for some categories are more comprehensive than others, but there is enough here to give you some representative choices in each area to get started.

A. Judo

1. [Modern Bujutsu & Budo, The Martial Arts and Ways of Japan](#), vol. 3, Donn Draeger
2. [A Brief Look at the "Root Arts" of Judo](#), 1996, S.R. Cunningham
3. [Mind Over Muscle](#), Kano & Murata
4. [Judo Memoirs of Jigoro Kano](#), Brian N. Watson
5. [The Way of Judo - A Portrait of Jigoro Kano and his Students](#), John Stevens
6. [A History of Judo](#), Syd Hoare
7. [Jigoro Kano and the Kodokan: An Innovative Response to Modernisation](#), A. Bennett
8. "The Principles of Jujutsu", The Oriental Review, 1913, Jigoro Kano

9. "The Contribution of Judo to Education", Jigoro Kano
10. "Principles of Judo and Their Application to All Phases of Human Activity", reprinted in Journal of Combative Sport 2001, Jigoro Kano
11. "Jigoro Kano in North America", The Kano Society, Joseph R. Svinth
12. "Professor Yamashita Goes to Washington", Aikido Journal, 1998, Joseph R. Svinth
13. "Memories of Jigoro Kano's Visit to the London Budokwai in August 1933", The Kano Society, Trevor Leggett
14. Sara Mayer's letters to G. Koizumi, 1934, Journal of Combative Sport, Feb 2000, Richard Bowen
15. "The Death of Professor Jigoro Kano, Shi-Han", The Kano Society, K. Hirasawa
16. "The Evolution of Women's Judo, 1900-1945", InYo 2001, Joseph R. Svinth
17. My Study of Judo, G. Koizumi (Introduction and Chapter 16: Educational Aspects of the Judo Training Related to the Way of Life)
18. "The Fundamental Principles of Judo", tomiki.org, K. Tomiki
19. "Interview with Kenji Tomiki", Stanley Pranin, Aiki News #44 (1982)
20. "Judo As Moral Education", Classical Fighting Arts Magazine, vol. 2, L. Yiannakis
21. A Complete Guide to Judo, Robert W. Smith
22. The Canon of Judo (Introduction), K. Mifune
23. Judo A Samurai Legacy, David Monteverde
24. Saving Japan's Martial Arts, Christopher M. Clarke
25. Kata Judo, Introduction, T.P. Leggett
26. Judo Formal Techniques, Chapters 1-5, Otaki & Draeger
27. "The Dynamic Nature of Kata", Aikido Journal, L. Yiannakis & S. Cunningham
28. Born for the Mat, Keiko Fukuda
29. Ju-No-Kata, Introduction, Overview and "Jigoro Kano Shihan, Fukuda Hachinosuke, and I", Keiko Fukuda
30. "The Life of Keiko Fukuda, Last Surviving Student of Judo Founder Jigoro Kano", blackbeltmag.com, Dave Lowry

B. Jujutsu

1. Classical Fighting Arts of Japan, A Complete Guide to Koryu Jujutsu, Serge Mol
2. Koryu Bujutsu, Classical Warrior Traditions of Japan, Diane Skoss, ed.
3. Japan's Ultimate Martial Art, Jujutsu Before 1882, Darrell Max Craig
4. The Hidden Roots of Aikido: Aiki Jujutsu Daitoryu, Part I, Overview & History, Shiro Omiya
5. "On Jujutsu and its Modernization", tomiki.org, K. Tomiki
6. The Art of Jujutsu, The Legacy of Minoru Mochizuki's Yoseikan, Introduction, History, and Basic Principles, Edgar Kruyning
7. Unlocking the Secrets of Aiki-Jujutsu, H. E. Davey
8. "Jujutsu and Taijutsu", koryu.com, Meik Skoss

C. Aikido

1. A Life in Aikido: The Biography of Founder Morihei Ueshiba, Kisshomaru Ueshiba and Moriteru Ueshiba
2. The Art of Peace: Teachings of the Founder of Aikido, Morihei Ueshiba and John Stevens
3. The Essence of Aikido, Morihei Ueshiba, John Stevens
4. The Secret Teachings of Aikido, Morihei Ueshiba, Moriteru Ueshiba, John Stevens
5. The Philosophy of Aikido, John Stevens
6. The Spiritual Foundations of Aikido, William Gleason

7. [Aikido and the Dynamic Sphere: An Illustrated Introduction](#), Adele Westbrook and Oscar Ratti
8. [Aikido The Way of Harmony](#), Introduction, John Stevens with Shirata Rinjiro
9. [Hidden in Plain Sight: Tracing the Roots of Ueshiba Morihei's Power](#), Ellis Amdur
10. [Aikido and the Harmony of Nature](#), Mitsugi Saotome
11. [Aikido Shugyo: Harmony in Confrontation](#), Gozo Shioda
12. [Aikido: My Spiritual Journey](#), Gozo Shioda and Yasuhisa Shioda
13. "Aikido and Judo: Interview with Gozo Shioda and Masuhiko Kimura", Aikido Sangenkai
14. "Interview with Minoru Mochizuki", Aiki News, 1983, Stanley Pranin
15. "Reminiscences of Minoru Mochizuki", Part 1, Aiki News 1986, Stanley Pranin
16. "Reminiscences of Minoru Mochizuki", Part 2, Aiki News 1986, Stanley Pranin
17. "Morihei Ueshiba and Minoru Mochizuki", Aikido Journal, Stanley Pranin
18. "The Dawn of Tomiki Aikido", Aikido Journal, Seiji Tanaka
19. "Kenji Tomiki: The Second Jigoro Kano", Stanley Pranin, Shodokan Aikido Espana
20. "Interview with Ikkusai Iwata", Aikido Journal, Stanley Pranin
21. "Shoji Nishio, Aikido's Innovative Genius", Aikido Journal blog, Stanley Pranin
22. "Interview with Aikido Shihan Shoji Nishio", Aikido Sangenkai
23. "Who is Koichi Tohei?", Aikido Journal blog, Stanley Pranin
24. [Book of Ki: Coordinating Mind and Body in Daily Life](#), Koichi Tohei
25. "Morihiro Saito's Aikido Bible", Aikido Journal, Stanley Pranin

D. Karate

1. [Bubishi. The Classic Manual of Combat](#), Patrick McCarthy, trans.
2. [Okinawan Karate: Teachers, Styles and Secret Techniques](#), Mark Bishop
3. [Okinawan Karate: A History of Styles and Masters: Vol 1: Shuri-te and Shorin-ryu](#), Christopher Clarke
4. [Ancient Okinawan Martial Arts: 1 & 2](#), Patrick McCarthy
5. [Zen Kobudo: Mysteries of Okinawan Weaponry and Te](#), Mark Bishop
6. [Karate-Do. My Way of Life](#), Gichin Funakoshi
7. [The Twenty Guiding Principles of Karate: The Spiritual Legacy of the Master](#), GichinFunakoshi, J. Takagi
8. [The History of Karate: Okinawan Goju-Ryu](#), Morio Higaonna
9. [Wondering Along a Dark Path - Searching for the Truth of Goju-Ryu Karate-do](#), Garry Lever
10. [Yushikan: Entering Through the Gateway of Gojuryu](#), C. Michial Jones
11. [The Karate Dojo: Traditions and Tales of a Martial Art](#), Peter Urban
12. [Shin Gi Tai: Karate Training for Body, Mind and Spirit](#), Michael Clarke
13. [Katsu Jin Ken - Living Karate - The Way to Self Mastery](#), Masayuki Shimabukuro & L. Pellman
14. [The Inner Art of Karate: Cultivating the Budo Spirit in Your Practice](#), Kenji Tokitsu
15. [The Way of Kata: A Comprehensive Guide for Deciphering Martial Applications](#), Lawrence Kane and Kris Wilder
16. [Empty Handed I Entered the World: Great Okinawan Karate Masters Lost in 2012-2014](#), Christopher Clarke

III. History

1. [Japan An Illustrated History](#), Shelton Woods
2. [Japan: A Short Cultural History](#), G.B. Sansom

3. [A History of Japan to 1334](#), George Sansom
4. [A History of Japan 1334-1615](#), George Sansom
5. [A History of Japan 1615-1867](#), George Sansom
6. [Japan from Ancient Times to 1918](#), Kenneth Scott Latourette
7. [Japan Its History and Culture](#), W. Scott Morton
8. [The Cambridge Illustrated History of China](#), Patricia Buckley Ebrey
9. [A History of Chinese Civilization](#), Jacques Gernet

IV. Philosophies, cultural traditions and martial practices

1. [Asian Fighting Arts](#), Donn Draeger and Robert W. Smith
2. [Classical Bujutsu, The Martial Arts and Ways of Japan, vol. 1](#), Donn Draeger
3. [Classical Budo, The Martial Arts and Ways of Japan, vol. 2](#), Donn Draeger
4. [Encyclopedia of Japanese Martial Arts](#), David A. Hall
5. [Myths and Legends of Japan](#), F. H. Davis
6. [The Philosophies of Asia](#), Alan Watts
7. [Eastern Religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Shinto](#), Michael D. Coogan, ed.
8. [Confucius and Confucianism: The Essentials](#), Lee Dian Rainey
9. [The World of Zen](#), Nancy Wilson Ross
10. [Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind](#), Shunryu Suzuki
11. [Manual of Zen Buddhism](#), D.T. Suzuki
12. [Eloquent Zen, Daito and Early Japanese Zen](#), Kenneth Kraft
13. [The Three Pillars of Zen](#), Philip Kapleau
14. [The Way of Zen](#), Alan Watts
15. [A First Zen Reader](#), Trevor Leggett
16. [Zen and the Ways](#), Trevor Leggett
17. [Zen Flesh, Zen Bones](#), Paul Reps
18. [Zen in the Martial Arts](#), Joe Hyams
19. [Zen Bow, Zen Arrow](#), John Stevens
20. [The Zen Way to the Martial Arts](#), Taisen Deshimaru
21. [Shinto the Kami Way](#), Sokyo Ono
22. [Shinto, The Way of Japan](#), F.H. Ross
23. [Shinto A Celebration of Life](#), Aidan Rankan
24. [What is Tao?](#), Alan Watts
25. [Taoism An Essential Guide](#), Eva Wong
26. [The Taoism Reader](#), Thomas Cleary
27. [Tokugawa Religion](#), Robert Bellah
28. [The Fighting Spirit of Japan](#), E. J. Harrison
29. [Martial Musings. A Portrayal of Martial Arts in the 20th Century](#), Robert W. Smith
30. [The Dragon Mask and Other Judo Stories in the Zen Tradition](#), T. P. Leggett

31. [Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan, First & Second Series](#), (1896), Lafcadio Hearn
32. [Kokoro, Hints and Echoes of Japanese Inner Life](#), (1896), Lafcadio Hearn
33. [Japan An Attempt at Interpretation](#), Lafcadio Hearn
34. [Bushido, The Soul of Japan](#), Inazo Nitobe
35. [The Japanese Art of War: Understanding the Culture of Strategy](#), Thomas Cleary
36. [The Spirit of Budo](#), Trevor Leggett
37. [The Essence of Budo](#), Dave Lowry
38. [Budo Mind and Body](#), Nicklaus Suino
39. [Budo Perspectives](#), Alex Bennet
40. [Legacies of the Sword](#), Karl Friday with Seki Humitake
41. [Old School](#), Ellis Amdur
42. [The Martial Arts Reader](#), Randy F. Nelson, ed.
43. [Traditions](#), Dave Lowry
44. [In The Dojo](#), Dave Lowry

V. Creeds, Texts, and Classics

Education of the nobility and of the upper ranks of the bushi in Japan included study of the Confucian classics as part of the curriculum, especially up until late in the Tokugawa Period (1603-1868).

The Confucian classic works include:

- I. *The Four Books*: The Great Learning; The Doctrine of the Mean; Analects; Mencius.
- II. *The Five Classics (Wu Ching)*: *Shi Ching*, The Book of Poetry; *I Ching*, The Book of Changes; *Li Chi*, The Book of Rites; *Shu Ching*, The Book of History; *Chun Qiu*, The Book of Spring and Autumn.

You will find an introduction to some of these works in the selections listed below.

1. [Tao Te Ching](#), Lao Tzu, Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English, trans.
2. [The Analects, Oxford World's Classics](#), Confucius, Raymond Dawson, trans.
3. [Analects, With Selections from Traditional Commentaries](#), (Hackett classics), Confucius, Edward Slingerland, trans.
4. [Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, & the Doctrine of the Mean](#), Confucius, James Legge, trans.
5. [The Essential Confucius: The Heart of Confucius' Teachings in Authentic I Ching Order](#), Thomas Cleary
6. [The I Ching, or Book of Changes](#), Richard Wilhelm
7. [Mencius, Penguin Classics](#), D.C. Lau, trans.
8. [The Art of War](#), Sun-tzu, Thomas Cleary, trans.
9. [Chuang Tzu, Basic Writings](#), Burton Watson, trans.
10. [Chuang Tsu, Inner Chapters: A Companion to Tao Te Ching](#), Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English, trans.
11. [The Thirty-Six Strategies of Ancient China](#), S.F. Verstappen
12. [Instructions for Practical Living and Other Neo-Confucian Writing](#), Wang Yang-Ming, Wing Tsit Chan, trans.
13. [The Unfettered Mind](#), Takuan Soho
14. [The Life-Giving Sword](#), Yagyū Munenori, William Scott Wilson, trans.
15. [Heiho Kadensho](#), Yagyū Munenori, K. Tabata, trans.
16. [Hagakure](#), Yamamoto Tsunetomo, William Scott Wilson, trans.
17. [The Demon's Sermon on the Martial Arts](#), Issai Chozanshi, William Scott Wilson, trans.
18. [The Book of Five Rings \(Go Rin no Sho\)](#), Miyamoto Musashi, Thomas Cleary, trans.

19. Ideals of the Samurai, William Scott Wilson, trans.
 20. Samurai Wisdom: Lessons From Japan's Warrior Culture (Five Classic Texts on Bushido), Thomas Cleary
 21. Training the Samurai Mind. A Bushido Sourcebook, Thomas Cleary, trans.
 22. The Code of the Samurai: A Modern Translation of the Bushido Shoshinshu of Taira Shiqasuke, Thomas Cleary, trans.
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