

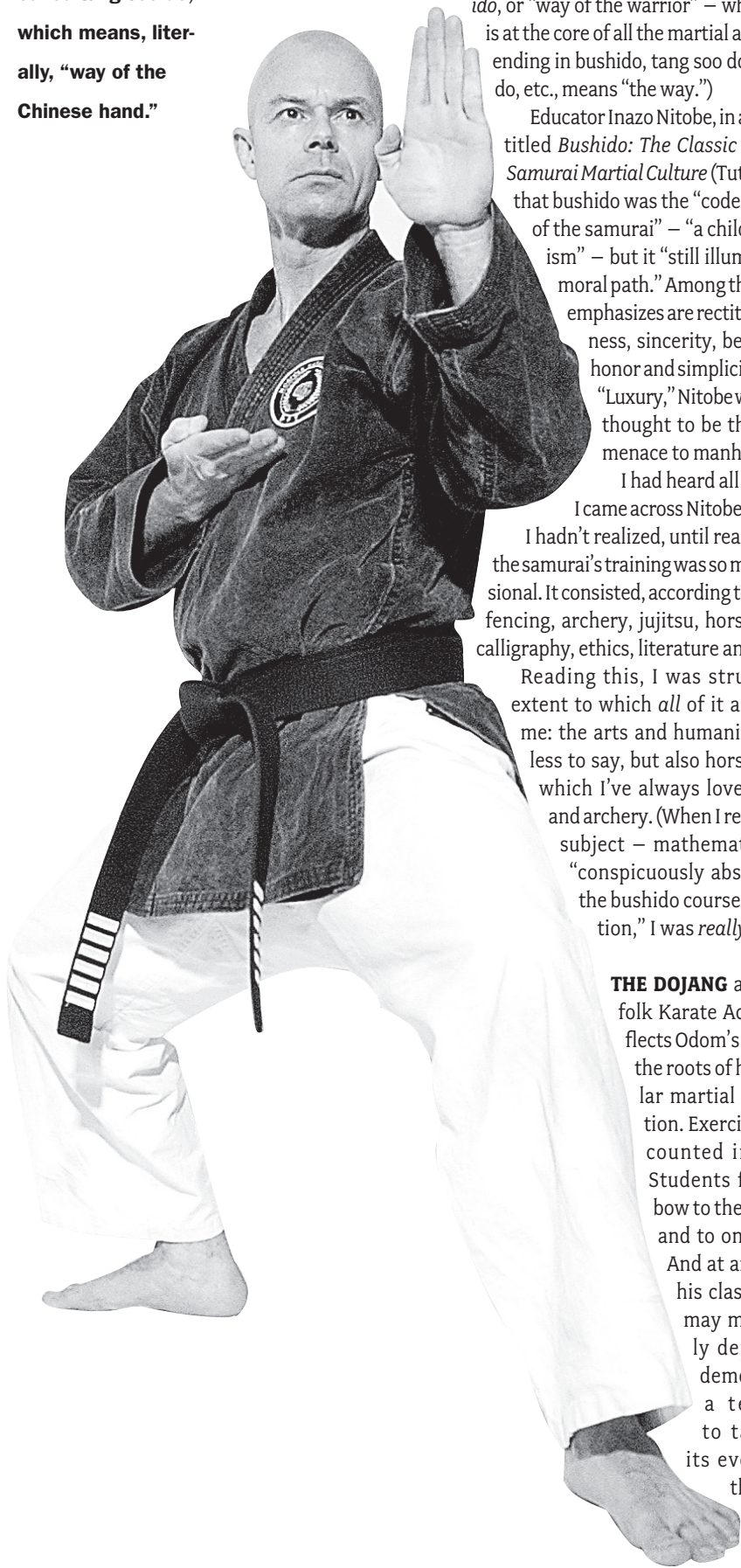
that they were right. I wasn't unconditionally opposed to war – not even *that* one, at the time. I was just scared. I knew that in the end, I would have to go if called.

Much to my relief, the draft, and then the war, ended before I turned 18. I've always been thankful that I didn't have to go. But I've wondered, on occasion, if I would have benefited from a stint in the military and everything that it is designed to develop: a strong body, mental discipline, teamwork and a willingness to do one's duty, however unpleasant the prospect might be.

I shied away from military service because, to my 1970s way of thinking – essentially I was a late-model hippy – the armed forces turned individuals into mindless drones. I've since realized how distorted this notion was. The military officers I know make up a diverse group, with strong individual opinions and sensibilities. But they've been taught to subordinate their individual needs for the greater good. In our hyper-individualistic age, there's something to be said for this. We tend to think of radical individualism as the supreme counterweight to the herd mentality, but to my mind, it is not. The great paradox of our culture is that the quest for individual contentment and immediate gratification has created a herd

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**Odom teaches a Korean martial art called *tang soo do*, which means, literally, “way of the Chinese hand.”**



mentality of consumerism. The notion of sacrifice for the greater good, by contrast, is rooted in development of individual *character*.

These are some of ideas at the heart of *bushido*, or “way of the warrior” – which in turn is at the core of all the martial arts. (The *do* ending in *bushido*, *tang soo do*, *tae kwon do*, etc., means “the way.”)

Educator Inazo Nitobe, in a 1905 book titled *Bushido: The Classic Portrait of Samurai Martial Culture* (Tuttle), writes that *bushido* was the “code of conduct of the samurai” – “a child of feudalism” – but it “still illuminates our moral path.” Among the virtues it emphasizes are rectitude, politeness, sincerity, benevolence, honor and simplicity of living. “Luxury,” Nitobe writes, “was thought to be the greatest menace to manhood.”

I had heard all this before I came across Nitobe's book, but I hadn't realized, until reading it that the samurai's training was so multidimensional. It consisted, according to Nitobe, of fencing, archery, jujitsu, horsemanship, calligraphy, ethics, literature and history.

Reading this, I was struck by the extent to which *all* of it appealed to me: the arts and humanities, needless to say, but also horsemanship, which I've always loved, fencing and archery. (When I read that one subject – mathematics – was “conspicuously absent [from] the *bushido* course of instruction,” I was *really* sold!)

**THE DOJANG** at the Norfolk Karate Academy reflects Odom's respect for the roots of his particular martial arts tradition. Exercise reps are counted in Korean. Students frequently bow to the instructor and to one another. And at any point in his classes, Odom may momentarily depart from demonstrating a technique to talk about its evolution in the context of martial-arts history.

Perhaps most noteworthy is the work of calligraphy that hangs on the front wall. Within a black frame is the word “*bushido*,” spelled out in beautifully rendered Japanese characters (see pages 22 and 36). The artwork was presented to Odom in December by his longtime teacher, James K. Roberts, a Hawaiian-born career Army infantryman who saw combat in Korea and Vietnam, and later opened a school in Northern Virginia, where Odom spent his high school years.

It was from Roberts that Odom learned *tang soo do*, which differs from *tae kwon do* in that it relies more on the hands. *Tae kwon do* emphasizes kicks. *Tang soo do* incorporates kicks as well, but it literally means “way of the Chinese hand,” *Tang* being a reference to the Tang Dynasty. (In this way, it is very closely related to Japanese karate.)

In *tang soo do*, as in most other martial arts, one earns colored belts as certain groups of skills are mastered. Beginners always wear white, but the other colors sometimes vary by school and style. Subsequent ranks at Norfolk Karate Academy are yellow, green, blue, brown and black.

Odom is quick to note a widespread misconception – that once you get your black belt, you've mastered the art. Not so, he says. Once you have your black belt, you can truly *begin* the journey toward mastery.

There are rankings for this phase as well. Black belts progress by “degrees,” typically taking two years to get their second degree, three more to get third, and so on. For this reason, it is extremely rare to reach the highest rank, 10<sup>th</sup> degree. Odom got his third, however, when he was still in high school. He earned his fourth in 1985, and continued to return to Roberts whenever possible for instruction and testing. He was awarded his fifth degree in 1998 and his sixth degree in 2004. In between these advancements, when his military assignments took him far from Northern Virginia, he would train on his own.

His office is a testament to his dual pursuits. On the shelves and walls are a mix of Army medals and tournament trophies. (He was a nationally ranked competitor in his youth and an AAU national champion at 42.)

**THESE KINDS** of achievements, as I said, seemed far out of reach as I took my first classes, not only because I hadn't trained as a child but because I had spent far too many hours as an adult in desk chairs, easy chairs and bar booths.

The reality of this negligence hit home when we began the first class with 200 jumping jacks – an exercise I hadn't done since high school gym class. I finished – barely – and was relieved to discover that the rest of that first class