

SENSING AND SEIZING THE OPENING IN KENDO

Introduction

'Lorsque l'endroit à attaquer se révèle à votre esprit, jetez vos peurs et frappez sans faute ce point de toutes vos forces...'.¹

In late July 2018 Markus FREY-sensei was driving me to Helsinki after the summer kendo camp in Pori, Finland. In the car were also two Japanese kendo 8 dan sensei. Approximately halfway of the trip we made a stop for refreshments. During this break KADONO Masato, kyoshi 8 dan, was asked how he had so easily fenced with European high-level kenshi. He replied that: *'I can see the colour change [...in/of the opponent]'*.²

This short exchange led to several years of reflection for me and to an attempt at understanding how one could reach such a level in kendo as to be able to perceive the intention of one's opponent and to utilize that opportunity. This reflection is far from finished but here I nevertheless venture to shed light on my imperfect insights up to now.

Trying to understand intellectually

My first attempts were intellectual, mainly through reading kendo literature and listening to lectures on the topic in kendo seminars (notably SUMI Masatake, hanshi, in seminars in France; KOZAKI Hiroshi, kyoshi, in seminars in Mainz; Claude PRUVOST, kyoshi, in seminars in Luxembourg; and Markus FREY, kyoshi, in seminars in Luxembourg come to mind. As well as the teachings of Jean-Pierre LABRU, kyoshi, which recently have been very influential for my kendo. I cannot omit to mention my gratitude towards Dany DELEPIÈRE, kyoshi, either) and watching kendo videos (especially the plentiful Facebook posts of Quique ORTIZ ANDRES).

In an English version of the YAGYU family's classic *Heiho Kaden Sho* (SATO, 1986) on p. 65 in sub note 1 is written the following: *'The original term for "change" is iro (color). [YAGYU] Mitsuyoshi explains it this way: "Iro refers to that moment in the mental state of your opponent when he changes his intention – to take an attack initiative, to get out of something, or to make a switch....The mental ability to follow an iro cannot be achieved unless you attain the state where you do not assert yourself at all, but leave everything to your opponent".'*

Other important hints were found in a volume edited by George MCCALL (NOMA, 2014). In a chapter on ken-tai on p. 86 is the following sub note 5: *"colour" is an Itto-ryu teaching that refers to telegraphing actions'. In the same book in the chapter on kikai (strike opportunity) it is written that what is needed is 'knowledge of ... opportunities for victory'. Furthermore, also in the same chapter on kikai, text from an old manual, *Kempo Gekishiron* 1862, is cited regarding strike opportunity: 'Avoiding his strengths, strike him where and when he is weakest, strike him at the moment of his attack; strike him when he is confused; strike him when he hesitates; strike him when he moves to attack; harass him and strike'.*

¹ A quote attributed to MIYAMOTO Musashi; translation of the original quotation in UOZOMI T., *Miyamoto Musashi, Nihon-jin no michi*, p.287-288, in TAVERNIER and BOFFA (2016), p. 132.

² In a recent interview in *KENDO JIDAI*, 28.09.2020, KADONO-sensei said similarly: *'In kendo, we aim to sense the opponent's state of mind...'*.

In a further volume also edited by George MCCALL (OGAWA, 2015), there is a section on datotsu no kikai (strike opportunities) on pp. 64-65: *'There are many different opportunities to attack, here I will list the main eight. 1. When the opponent has an opening in their kamae; 2. At the moment the opponent's technique is finished; 3. At the very instant the opponent attempts to attack; 4. When the opponent blocks your attack immediately attack again; 5. When you see the opponent is confused or lost about what to do, attack them immediately; 6. When the opponent stops moving for some reason (for example, when they stop due to tiredness, out of fear, doubt, etc). Take advantage of their weakness and strike them quickly. 7. When the opponent attacks kill their technique and strike them (for example, on an incoming attack execute a harai, nayasu, osae, suriage, nuki, etc. in order to stop their attack dead). 8. Drive in and attack (when your partner has no physical openings you should use your spiritual strength or utilize the sword tip in some way to cause the opponent to go into disarray. At the instant an opening is made, attack).'*

A further hint was found on the late Geoff SALMON's blog (<https://kendoinfo.wordpress.com>) in an article from February 3, 2011 called *The Aim of Kendo – by Matsumoto Toshio, Hanshi Kyudan*, where the following are listed as good chances to attack: *'1. Not to attack when your opponent is in replete condition, but to try to attack when he is unaware and off guard; 2. Attack just before your opponent starts to take (initiates) his action; 3. Attack when your opponent is settled; 4. Attack when your opponent has exhausted his tricks; 5. Attack at the time that your opponent has doubt in his mind; and 6. Urge your opponents action and attack the created off-guard position'*.

HIRAKAWA (2019) lists the following striking opportunities: *'1. Strike the moment the opponent moves (degashira). 2. The moment after you defend the opponent's strike and they have stopped moving. 3. When the opponent is both mentally and physically exhausted, or their strikes are off-target and they cannot regain their composure. 4. Pre-empt the opponent's next waza and attack. Avoid their strong point and look for holes in their movement. 5. Attack the opponent as they contemplate their next move. 6. Strike when the opponent's mind and body have come to a standstill. 7. Fluster the opponent and then strike.'*

All of these above concepts are familiar to the reader of the authoritative *The Official Guide for Kendo Instruction* by ALL JAPAN KENDO FEDERATION (2011). In Chapter 7 Section 2 ENGAGEMENT (SEME-AI³) the concept of san-sappo (killing the ken, killing the waza, killing the ki) is introduced and on p. 180 the concepts of shikai (astonishment, fear, doubt and hesitation) and mittsu-no-sen (sen-sen-no-sen, sen, go-no-sen).

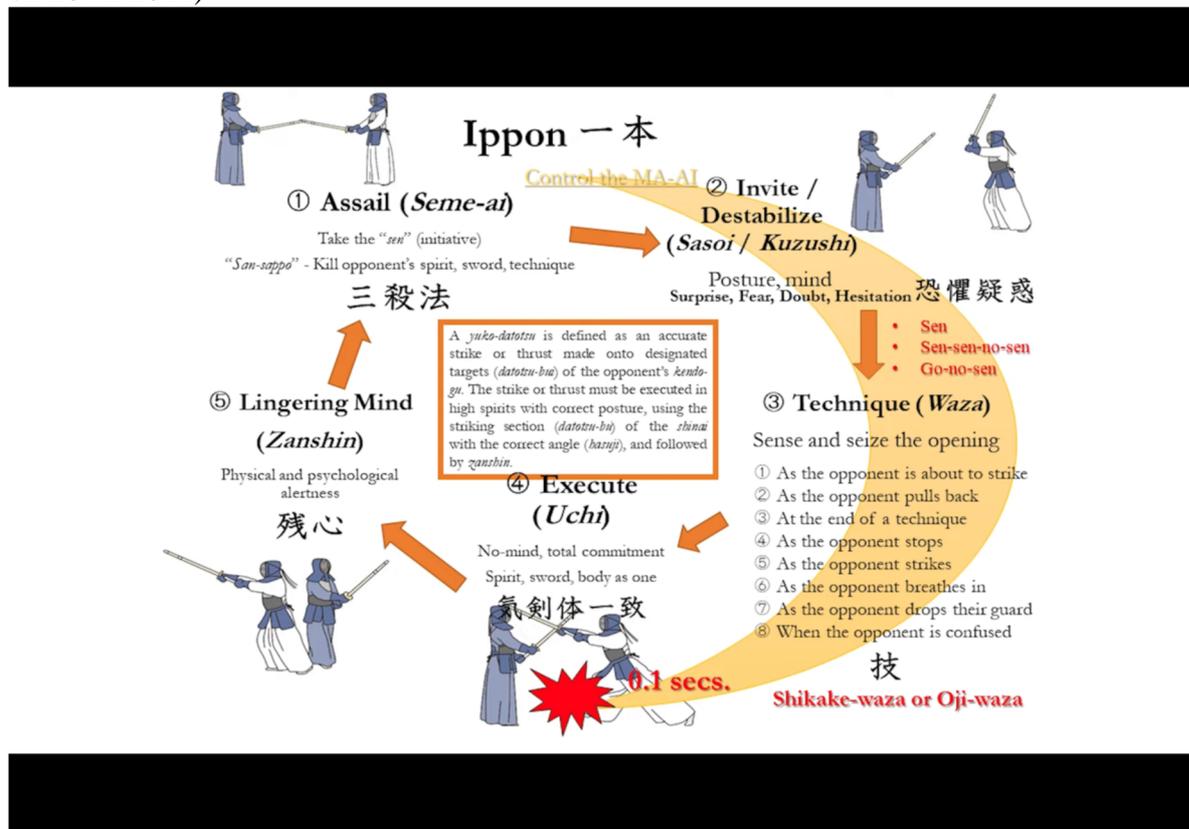
The following graph by Alexander BENNETT synthesizes and elegantly brings together how seme-ai, san-sappo, shikai and mittsu-no-sen form part of the process of making an ippon (Figure 1).

Clearly we are engaging aite already in step 1 when applying seme⁴ and attempting to take the initiative (sen). This is done to invite and/or destabilize aite in step 2 to enable us in step 3, using mittsu-no-sen, to perform a technique (waza). The discussion here is nevertheless limited to *'sense and seize the opening'*, outlined in step 3. Eight hitting opportunities are listed by BENNETT: *'1. As the opponent is about to strike; 2. As the opponent pulls back; 3. At the end of a technique; 4. As the opponent stops; 5. As the opponent strikes; 6. As the opponent breathes in; 7. As the opponent drops their guard; and 8. When the opponent is confused'*.

³ *'...the mutual interplay of pressuring and attacking'*, Honda (2012).

⁴ *'The state where one constantly maintains a position which is advantageous over the opponent...'*, AJKF, (1996).

Figure 1: The process of ippon by BENNETT-sensei (Facebook upload of a video by Kendo World on 28.12.2021)



These are attacking opportunities. SASAMORI and WARNER (1985) write: 'Once the kendoist has made a decision to initiate an action, he must put it into effect without a moment's delay. In other words, all his actions must be made reflexively with lightning speed.' How can we sense the attacking opportunities? How can we seize them? The All Japan Kendo Federation (1996) explains the concept of shin-ki-ryoku-icchi as: '...in response to a stimulus, something which is intuitively perceived and consciously decided by the mind is immediately expressed in the form of waza by way of the mental functions.' This I interpret as the capacity of being in a state of empty mind (*mushin*) and intuitively perceiving the intentions (colour) of the opponent, and transforming it into physical action (of seizing the opportunity) by way of a conscious thought process. In a very high-level kenshi these components of shin-ki-ryoku-icchi are taking place so closely together that they can be said to be unified.

Intellectual study is not enough. The capacity to sense and seize opportunities needs to be developed as part of our regular keiko. SHIGEMATSU (2016), on p. 49 (in a section on keiko with kenshi of a lower level) advises us: 'Use the opportunity to polish your "sense of intuition", or "kizashi". Openings identified with kizashi are not visible, but are felt in the mind from the slight fluctuations in ki. The most fulfilling interaction in kendo is having the confidence to attack based on kizashi. This only comes from being able to probe deeply into your opponent's mind. If you strike aimlessly, you will never be able to improve your sensitivity to the ebbs and flows of ki.'

In addition, who has not received the advice from one or several senseis to actively use our work as motodachi, especially for advanced waza or uchikomi-geiko, to observe aite (your partner) and look for opportunities?

Our basic training nevertheless needs first to have advanced to a level where we have mastered the mechanics of attacking. Notably the capacity to perform a yuko datotsu, fulfilling the criteria as described in Figure 1, is required.

Mastering the mechanics of attacking is a prerequisite

Modern kendo is often taught by starting with etiquette. OZAWA (1991) explains on p. 20: *'Paradoxically, successful Kendo depends on your ability to keep up a fighting spirit while continually showing appropriate respect to your partner.[...] Besides facilitating better practice, correct etiquette also gives rise to the beauty found in Kendo.'* Thereafter kamae is taught and handling of the shinai and bokuto (including tenouchi) as well as hassei (kiaï), metsuke, ashi-sabaki, tai-sabaki, suburi and ki-ken-tai-icchi. Important is learning about maai and executing (and receiving) strikes on a partner (or/and possibly a target) with zanshin. As the beginner progresses much emphasis is put on achieving a good foundation by doing much kirikaeshi and uchikomi-geiko (and kata) and later on also various waza. After having acquired the basics the kenshi is allowed to do ji-geiko (free sparring) and even shiai (competition) if she/he so wishes.

Doing ji-geiko can actually be quite a difficult and maybe even shocking experience as the kenshi has been following instruction until now, and copying and doing much rote repetition for a long time and is suddenly in a dynamic situation, where she/he is expected to improvise and innovate and engage in a dialogue with the opponent. SALONEN (2010) explains this (on p. 27 when talking about the HA stage in SHU-HA-RI), as a stage where learning is focused on interaction with new opponents and training partners, when the kenshi learns to utilise the basic techniques she/he has acquired as the result of rigorous basic training. Sparring with someone of the same level is very useful provides an opportunity for benchmarking and reflection of our progress (Honda, 2012).

Nevertheless, hikitate-geiko is a training form traditionally much recommended where the junior is practicing with and instructed by a more experienced kenshi (ideally a sensei). OSHIMA and ANDO (1986) on p.221 summarise the benefits of hikitate-geiko to a beginner as [freely translated from German by me]: *'...confirmation of basic techniques; getting rid of bad habits; finding and nurturing natural talent'*. More advanced students, which have already achieved the aforementioned goals, *'...should be made aware of techniques hitherto unknown to them; they should be shown the strengths and weaknesses of their kendo'*. A further advantage of practicing with high-level sensei, and an absolutely necessary element of improving as a kenshi, is the growing of your ki as you bounce your energy off of the sensei (SHIGEMATSU, 2016). It should be noted that when practicing with a high-level sensei the focus of the junior should be on an active use of shikake-waza (Honda, 2012), and (traditionally) with the willingness to finish the encounter with uchikomi-geiko and/or kirikaeshi, so not to hold back and/or try to 'win' (excluding for the shodachi of course) but to give it your all.

Concepts such as chushin (centre line)⁵, sutemi⁶, seme and tame are explained to enable deeper understanding and progress. Also heijoshin⁷, fudoshin⁸ and mushin⁹ are much focused on. Thus it takes quite a long time, usually several years, until a true dialogue (and mental connection, en¹⁰) with your opponent is expected and required of a kendo practitioner.

For the discussion at hand the main point is nevertheless, that to be able to seize an opportunity in kendo a prerequisite is to have learned the mechanics of attacking and performing a yuko datotsu first. This should be done while maintaining proper basic form, yet with the capacity to perform it as a reflex action. As the All

⁵ Called seichusen by BELHOMME, ENDO and LABAYE (2021).

⁶ *'... without thinking of the outcome, attempting a single offensive blow.'*, AJKF (1996).

⁷ *'One's usual state of mind. A disciplined state of mind which can respond calmly in a normal manner to changes in situations, without becoming agitated or confused.'*, AJKF (1996).

⁸ *'An emotional state which is unmoved by anything. Also, a flexible mind which is able to respond to various changing situations.'*, AJKF (1996).

⁹ *'A completely free state of mind; a mind which is not preoccupied with anything.'*, AJKF (1996).

¹⁰ By contrast, traditional kenjutsu (or at least in Ono-ha Itto-ryu kenjutsu that I practiced for a few years until an injury sadly compelled me to stop) almost immediately starts by pairing the beginner up with an advanced partner and thus quite early on implicitly introduces the concept of connection (en) by working on prescribed forms, kumitachi (kata), under the guidance of the senior practitioner. En is defined by AJKF (1996) as: *'The connection and relationship between one and another'*.

Japan Kendo Federation (1995) writes on p.115: *'Even a simple technique must be practiced over and over again if you are ever to make it your own. Clearly, sophisticated, high-level kendo techniques demand even more training. Ideally, you will repeat and repeat kendo techniques until the thrusts and strikes become matters of reflex action.'*

Trying to understand by keiko

*'Lire les mots ne suffit pas, c'est par l'action que viendra la maîtrise.'*¹¹

The other Japanese sensei in the kendo seminar in Pori in 2018 was ASANO Seiichiro, kyoshi 8 dan. He really opened up my eyes to the importance of continuously maintaining tame (definition of tame by AJKF (1996): *'When producing a waza, the condition of being composed both mentally and physically and maintaining a spiritually replete state.'*). Consequently I have for the past years tried to deepen my understanding of seme, while being in tame, and being ready for either attack or defense depending on the situation and the opponent's reaction.

I have found a particularly useful application of ASANO-sensei's exercises to be in relation to debana-waza. Notably in an exercise where motodachi has to, before launching menuchi, wait for the seme of kakarite who is preparing debana-men or debana-kote (and kakarite importantly needs to maintain a mental connection, en, with motodachi). This enables kakarite to be in full control of the timing and to learn to observe the shifts in the state of preparedness (tame) of motodachi as well as to take the strike opportunity (datotsu no kikai). And it is useful also for motodachi to need to maintain tame and to learn to launch an attack instantly and without extra preparation or superfluous movements. These exercises already demand a certain highish level of automatism and capacity for standardized action of the motodachi. However, also with a more junior partner they can be performed but then more slowly and if needed with the exercises split into parts.

Once kakarite has learned to detect whether motodachi is in tame or not; then the next stage is to trigger motodachi into (still preagreed) action in various stages of preparedness, to see what works well. For instance, the triggering can be done when motodachi is in full tame.¹² Or it can be done the instant motodachi is just 'falling out' of tame, etc. A further stage is even more advanced. Kakarite triggers with seme a freely chosen men/kote attack by motodachi. That is, motodachi herself/himself decides whether to attack men or kote; and kakarite needs to learn to sense/see which attack is coming and to perform an appropriate response. E.g. Dehana-men, debana-kote or oji-waza against a men-attack and aikotemen or oji-waza against a kote attack. A still further even more advanced and difficult version of this exercise is when the motodachi can also decide not to attack. I.e., motodachi attacks men or kote or chooses not to attack, upon the seme of kakarite.

It is at first quite tiring to maintain full connection with aite but so very useful. The benefits are not slow to manifest themselves in kihon-geiko and more advanced exercises. However, the goal is of course to bring this capacity into our ji-geiko. Here it is of course quite difficult to quantify our capacity of being able to sense and seize openings in ji-geiko. We can however ex-post analyse our keikos (possibly also by watching videos of ourselves and of course listening to advice from our seniors) and thus we can hopefully continue improving.

¹¹ ENDO Katsuo, hanshi 8 dan, in his preface to BELHOMME, ENDO and LABAYE (2021).

¹² Albeit we are usually advised not to strike an opponent that is in jitsu (*'being replete with ki, prepared'*) but wait until they are in kyo (*'emptiness, unprepared'*); SHIGEMATSU (2016). Nevertheless, it is important to learn to distinguish between aite's alternating states of preparedness, and note also that sometimes striking a prepared opponent by a 'power-hit' can anyway be successful. See also BELHOMME, ENDO and LABAYE (2021) who interestingly liken kyo/jitsu to a behavioural two-way switch which needs to be comprehended in our search for efficiency during a ji-geiko.

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