

Japan Kendo Kata, Meaning of

Kendo Study Site from はくどー / 佐々木博嗣- translated by Ted Imoto, 09/21/2017

Forward

Japan Kendo Kata #1 thru #10 explained herein is not intended to describe the detail of actual Kendo Kata that you can learn by reading the instruction manual, seeing on YouTube or by attending at Kendo Kata seminar. But it is to present here the real meaning of each Kendo Kata explained in Kendo Study Site by はくどー庵/佐々木博嗣, Sasaki Hirotsugu sensei.

Kendo Kata may be categorized into the three groups based on the contents and purposes; namely, "It teaches **waza**," "It teaches **reason/principle**," and "It teaches **the way of truth/goal**."

When Kendo Kata is looked at from the standpoint of thoughts and ideas for the cut it may be categorized into the three cases; namely, "Cut to **kill life for justice**," "Cut to **kill waza for mercy**," and "Cut to **kill heart for courage**."

In the old days, the fight and winning the war was **justice** for the clan because they gained more farmlands meaning more food to produce and share for their peoples. Therefore, to win the justice they studied their enemy, themselves, and all the situations to prepare for the win.

1. Japan Kendo Kata #1: Tachi no Kata (太刀の形), Ippon-Me (一本目)

In the Ippon-Me, **Uchidachi** (打太刀, a role of teacher) is teaching **Shidachi** (仕太刀, student) a proper kendo **Ma-Ai**, by choosing "Men Nuki Men" waza both staring from Morote-Jōdan (諸手上段) stance. We learn Ma-Ai of Issoku Itto as a basic stance and Tōma, Chikama based on this basic standard distance measured with Shinai you are using as a guide. However, the original meaning of Ma-Ai is a relative distance between the two competitors in confrontation not to be measured by the Kensen (剣先).

Moreover, Uchidachi makes Shidachi to take a basic Furikaburi (振りかぶり, swing up overhead) move from kendo Chudan stance with good composure, called "Migi-Jōdan" not to be confused as a stance, but it is a basic posture of Furikaburi for Shōmen Uchi (正面打ち, straight Men strike) in Suburi Nikkyōdō. Uchidachi takes an official stance called "Hidari-Jōdan" in this case "Morote Hidari-Jōdan (諸手左上段)." The mutual Jōdan stance symbolizes **Sei (正, the justice to kill)**.

Uchidachi observes that Shidachi moves three steps forward with good Kigurai (気位, confident state of mind), and stops at correct Ma-Ai. Then, Uchidachi goes for Men strike in a big motion to show a fatal power cut, Kikioroshi (切り降ろし) including Shidachi's hands.

This action is "Cut to kill life for justice," but Shidachi retracts his hands and evades the cut, immediately responds with Men counterattack and wins (kills Uchidachi). Uchidachi takes one small step back on left-foot with the tip of Kensen to Gedan position. Sasaki Hirotsugu(佐々木博嗣) sensei says the act of this small step stepping back by Uchidachi is considered a kind of pantomime for his death just like you will see in Chambara play that dead Samurai walks away sometimes from seen to continue the play.

Shidachi assumes Uchidachi is fatally wounded on the ground but not sure of his death. Therefore, he follows up with his Kensen to Uchidachi's face as he makes a small step back, and then shows his Zanshin with a big Morote Hidari-Jōdan expressing that his justice is done when Uchidachi steps back the second time.

Hanshi Inouye (範士井上) sensei says the action expresses his repentance because claiming your justice and taking someone's life is not necessarily right. Let's look at the Kendo Kata #2 next searching for one's conscience regarding this aspect.

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2. Japan Kendo Kata #2: Tachi no Kata (太刀の形), Nihon-Me (二本目)

In the Nihon-Me, Uchidachi is teaching Shidachi a proper kendo's **Seichūsen** (正中線, True Center Line), by choosing "Kote Nuki Kote" waza both staring from Chūdan stance. The Seichūsen is not a line like a word implies, but it defines all the standard position, direction, and Ma-Ai, front/ back/ left/ right about your stance concerning how it should be.

You learn to position yourself squarely face to face against your opponent with proper Ma-Ai concerning the target to strike so that you will hit the target if you swing Shinai in the center of your body. Uchidachi shows his Seichūsen cut to Shidachi not aiming at his Kote; otherwise, he would move his body slightly toward left for the Kote waza. Shidachi responds to it with "Kote Nuki Kote" waza with proper **Seichūsen** parrying Uchidachi's Kensen by his body moving back diagonally left with his left foot.

The Chūdan stance symbolizes **Jin** (仁, **the heart of mercy/thought of caring and concerning others**) wishing to avoid conflict; however, Ki (気), the feeling is not to defend nor escape from conflict but to win by Sen Sen no Sen (先先の先). Uchidachi notices this Kigurai (気位) in Shidachi's Chūdan stance, sees that he stops at correct MaAi, and then Uchidachi goes for Kote strike in a big motion, but unlike in Kata #1, his cut is Kiritsuke (切付け), just enough to cut off Shidachi's wrist.

Shidachi's Tai-Sabaki (bodywork) taking his own **Seichūsen**, facing Uchidachi with good Kigurai, and parrying Uchidachi's Seichūsen is the basic of basic for any martial arts. Taking advantage of his position, Shidachi gains control of the situation for the win. We know "Kote Nuki Men" is more common kendo waza than "Kote Nuki Kote." The reason why the latter was chosen is to show this **Jin** (仁) concept.

Note Kata #1 takes an enemy's life and win, but Kata #2 wins by temporarily disabling the enemy. Since Uchidachi stands there with the injured wrist, Shidachi keeps the Chūdan stance with a good Kigurai (気位) as his Zanshin. Hanshi Inouye (範士井上) sensei says Kata #1 teaches "Waza to win" and Kata #2 teaches "Way of win." Kendo training changes from waza to way. Let's look at the Kendo Kata #3 next to see how these concepts evolve.

3. Japan Kendo Kata #3: Tachi no Kata (太刀の形), Sanbon-Me(三本目)

In the Sanbon-Me, Uchidachi is teaching Shidachi a proper kendo Seme at **Chūchin** (中心, the core) of the opponent, by choosing "Tsuki Nayashi-ire Tsuki" waza both staring from Gedan (下段) stance. In general, you see that we take the center (Chūchin, 中心) of the opponent using Kensen for Seme and press Shinai to the side to attack. The Kata #3 tells otherwise, teaching to use Nayashi move keeping Kensen always middle so that eventually opponent's Kensen will go off center.

There are two ways to take the center. One way is to take the center physically by pressuring center using Kensen. The second way is to take the center, timing wise, between the two moves. The latter is called "Datotsu Chance," and there are well known three chances when to strike.

In Kendo Kata #3, Uchidachi thrusts Shidachi's solar plexus, and Shidachi responds it by a "Nayashi-ire Tsuki." This waza chance is called "**waza ga tsukita tokoro** (技が尽きた所)" catching the time between when Uchidachi's waza appeared as in shape and when the waza becomes effective; namely, this is Oji Waza (応じ技) or "**Go no Sen** (後の先)."

Shidachi parries Uchidachi's Tsuki waza and counterattacks by "Nayashi-ire Tsuki." Uchidachi parries the Shidachi's counterattack by stepping back with right foot and tries quickly to restore his composure by stepping back with left foot. But Shidachi not allowing this move immediately thrusts another Tsuki. This waza chance is called "**degashira** (出頭)" catching the time between when Uchidachi is ready for a counterattack and when he goes for a strike (motion); namely, this is Debana Waza (出ばな技) or "**Sen no Sen** (先の先)."

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Uchidachi, whose will to counterattack was nullified by Shidachi's intensive Seme attack, steps back, and Shidachi chases him not allowing his MaAi, and places Kensen to the center of his face. This waza chance is called "**itsuita tokoro**" catching the time between when Uchidachi is unconsciously retreating and when he becomes conscious of the situation; namely, this is **Sensei-no Waza** (先制の技), seals opponent's intent to strike, or "**Sen Sen no Sen** (先先の先)."

Kendo Kata #3 also teaches basic principles of kendo for the offending and defending. The Gedan (下段) stance symbolizes **Yu** (勇, **courage**), state of mind and body that has full spirit and a strong heart to face any situation without fear. However, a real courage is "**Fudōshin** (不動心, **immovable heart**)" that can handle any tasks calmly with good composure; otherwise, it becomes only "banyū 蛮勇," wild and vulgar. The Gedan (下段) stance is considered as "有構無購," "無心の構え," or "自然の構え," Kamae of being and non-being, Kamae of mindlessness, or natural Kamae, and there is no thought of fight or not to fight, or win or lose.

When Uchidachi reaches to a proper Ma-Ai starting both from the Gedan stance, he quietly starts raising his Kensen up toward Chūdan stance to test Shidachi's "Fudōshin." Shidachi reacts naturally to his move and follows to this motion like his shadow. This movement like a shadow is used as Seme with his Ki (気). The moment Shidachi makes Chūdan stance naturally following Uchidachi's move from Gedan, Uchidachi trusts Shidachi's "Fudōshin" with a Tsuki waza knowing that this is a chance "**itsuita tokoro**." If Shidachi makes an unnecessary move with this thrust, his kendo skill needs improvement. However, he maintains "Fudōshin" and reacts with "Nayashi-ire Tsuki" counterattack aiming Uchidachi's heart. He surprises Uchidachi who barely blocks Shidachi's Kensen with left-right footwork." His counterattack continues with "Fudōshin" with the second Tsuki by his body while Uchidachi tries to counterattack with right-left footwork. Therefore, Uchidachi retreats, Shidachi chases without delay not allowing Uchidachi's Ma-Ai, and Shidachi finishes the match with his Kensen at Uchidachi's face without striking, called **Katsujinken** (活人剣, win by help alive).

Hanshi Inouye (範士井上) sensei says this Kendo Kata #3 teaches training of Kendo that leads from Waza (技) to Way (道) and the difference between kendo as sports competition and kendo as Budo (武道) or Bushido (武士道). If kendo training is ultimately for this winning without a striking opponent as in the Kendo Kata #3, it is interesting to know that thoughts and ideas that all the lifetime training of kendo leads not to protect us but to protect others. Nakayama Hakudū (中山博道) sensei saddens over the fact that Kendo Kata nowadays is not properly communicated in this aspect.

Addendum

The Kendo Kata #1- #3 was introduced by former Ministry of Education to a high school under the old system of education in Japan in 1911 (明治 44 年). It's noticed that Uchidachi and Shidachi take the same Kamae, Jōdan, Chūdan, and Gedan respectively for the Kata #1, #2, and #3. The Kendo Kata #4- #10 was introduced by former Dai-Nippon Butokukai (大日本武徳会) in 1912 (大正 1 年), and unlike the Kata #1- #3, they take different Kamae in the Kata #4 - #10.

The Kamae is distinguished by **In** (陰, **shade**) and **Yō** (陽, **the sun**). This **InYo theory** (陰陽説) comes from the conception "there is a shade where light is" and they are not absolute, but relative. For example, a candlelight in daytime is **In** (陰), but a candlelight in the night time is **Yō** (陽). When this theory is applied to kendo Kamae, you might think Jōdan is **Yō** (陽), and Gedan is **In** (陰). But this is wrong. One that moves up from bottom side is **Yō** (陽, the sun), and one that moves down from top side is **In** (陰, shade).

Each Kamae is given a Chinese character Hi (火), Mizu (水), Tsuchi (土), Ki (木), and Kin (金), respectively for Jōdan, Chūdan, Gedan, Hassō, Waki-Gamae (Kamae=stance). Hi (火, fire) wins Kin (金, gold). Mizu (水, water) wins Hi (火, fire). Tsuchi (土, soil) wins Mizu (水, water). Ki (木, tree) wins Tsuchi (土, soil). Kin (金, gold) wins Ki (木, tree). This theory is called **InYoGoGyō Setsu** (陰陽五行説). Therefore, Shidachi chooses Waki-Gamae against Uchidachi's Hassō stance to win in the Kata #4, Chūdan against Jōdan in the Kata #5, and Gedan against Chūdan in the Kata #6.

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4. Japan Kendo Kata #4: Tachi no Kata (太刀の形), Yonhon-Me (四本目)

In the Yonhon-Me, Uchidachi is teaching Shidachi the importance of **Ai-Uchi Men** or **Ai-Men**, by choosing Waki-Gamae for Shidachi against Hasso no Kamae for Uchidachi. Both stances have the common issues of not showing the length of the sword, especially Waki-Gamae. Therefore, some instructor may say to make small three steps and strike from Tōma distance. However, this is wrong because you know your sword length; therefore, you go to your Issoku-Itto distance and strike. Kendo technique with a sword is FACE attack by Kiritsuke (斬りつけ, first nonfatal blow); therefore, it is so important that you train this technique with Ai-Men practice. You also learn with Ai-Men practice how to win center and how to **Mikiri wo Tsukeru** (見切りをつける, **barely evade**) with a paper thin distance to save you against opponent's strike.

After the Ai-Men, Uchidachi takes Chūdan stance carefully stepping back with left-foot to make his Ma-Ai. This breath-taking move is similar to the move you break up from Tsubazeriai. Shidachi stays with a good Kigurai(気位) without stepping back but focusing on winning the center for Datotsu chance. For this reason, Uchidachi trying to win the center reacts to Makiosae, Surikomi -Tsuki (巻き抑え, 擦り込み-突き). Shidachi catches the Okori (起こり) or the Debana (出ばな), use Maki-Kaeshi Men waza and win, parrying Uchidachi's Shinai and pulling him off balance.

5. Japan Kendo Kata #5: Tachi no Kata (太刀の形), Gohon-Me (五本目)

In the Gohon-Me, Uchidachi is teaching **Oji-Waza** to Shidachi and the importance of **Kigurai (気位) of Sen Sen no Sen** (先先の先) when you use Oji-Waza. Oji-Waza is usually learned after you master **Ma-Ai, Seichusen-swing, Chūshin-Seme**, and **Ai-Men** you learn in the Kata #1 thru #4. Through vigorous training of Ai-Men, you also learn **Datotsu no Kikai** (打突の機会, a chance to strike) and attain technique of **Mikiri** (見切り, barely evade).

Uchidachi strikes Shidachi's face from Jōrdan stance like the Kata #4. Shidachi parries with his body using Mikiri learned in Kata #4 with a small step back and at the same time parries Uchidachi's sword with a Suriage technique using Hidari Shinogi (左鎧), and then immediately strike Uchidachi's head.

Entire sword technique is first to destroy enemy's defense mechanism, Ki (気), Ken (剣), Tai (体) by Kiritsuke (斬り付け) technique, and then strike with final blow by Kirioroshi (斬り下ろし) technique. The Kiritsuke is also referred to as **Shotachi** (初太刀, nonfatal 1st cut), and the Kirioroshi is referred to as **Ni no Tachi** (二の太刀, fatal 2nd blow).

If you can do the **Mikiri** with a good composure against opponent's Shotachi to your face, and pull him off his Setūsen with the Suriage, you can feel and use that as your Shotachi. And this Oji Waza cut is considered as Ni no Tachi, under this situation although it is first. That is the reason you don't normally run thru your opponent's left side after a good Oji waza.

6. Japan Kendo Kata #6: Tachi no Kata (太刀の形), Roppon-Me(六本目)

In the Roppon-Me, Uchidachi is teaching Shidachi a **newly acquired Seme that must come from mastering Oji Waza** principle learned in the Kata #5. If you master the Oji waza **Men Suriage Men**, you don't feel scared of any attack you receive from your opponent. Therefore, you naturally gain a good composure need for kendo, composure for mind/heart and composure for Kamae, all of which become and appear as Seme to your opponent.

In this Kata #6, Shidachi seems to start initiating the waza move whereas, in all other Kata, Uchidachi starts initiating the move and Shidachi follows. This confusion is explained as follows: Uchidachi moves from Chūdan (Kensen at throat) to Seigan (晴眼, Kensen at eye level) stance; therefore, Shidachi immediately follows and goes to Gedan stance from Chudan based on the InYōGoGyō theory learned in the above addendum.

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Uchidachi moves forward with the Seigan (晴眼) stance, and Shidachi move with Gedan stance to his Ma-Ai. When Uchidachi is going to pressure from the top, Shidachi starts raising his Kensen to pressure Uchidachi from the bottom. Uchidachi can't stop Shidachi's strong Seme; therefore, he pulls his right-foot to take his Ma-Ai and changes his Kamae to Jōdan.

Here, if Shidachi continues to press with the same Ki-Zeme, Uchidachi intends to strike from Jōdan, but Shidachi changes the Seme just like the Kata #5, prohibiting Uchidachi's waza. Therefore, Uchidachi changes to Chūdan stance immediately pulling his left-foot back, and tries to catch Dehana Kote if Shidachi comes to Men strike. However, these anticipated moves are not made by Shidachi who is calmly pressuring Uchidachi. Therefore, Uchidachi goes for a quick Kote strike. Shidachi parries this Kote Uchi with a small Suriage motion and strike back with Kote waza.

This Shidachi's Seme teaches so-called "**Sansappō**, 三殺法 (3kill ways)"; namely, 1) Ki wo Koroshi, 氣を殺し (kill Ki), 2) Waza wo Koroshi, 技を殺し (kill waza) and 3) Ken wo Koroshi, 剣を殺し (kill Ken) and then strike. You may relate this method as to kill Ki (気, spirit), Ken (剣, sword), and Tai (体, body), where the Tai, in this case, is Waza that your body is mastering.

Note that Kote cut in Kata #6 is different from Kote cut in Kata #2 in that Shidachi does not intend to cut off Uchidachi's wrist but to restrain its function from injuring. Therefore, Uchidachi, though suffering from the injury, undauntedly makes a big step back to his left with an attempt to counterattack after he is settled. However, Shidachi chases immediately after him with Jōdan stance, takes his Setūsen and doesn't allow Uchidachi's counterattack. Uchidachi acknowledges his defeat because he is facing sideways with bad posture and no chance to recover his Kamae.

7. Japan Kendo Kata #7: Tachi no Kata (太刀の形), Nanahon-Me(七本目)

In the Nanahon-Me, Uchidachi is teaching Shidachi a higher skill for Seme called "**Kassatsujizai no Ken** 活殺自在の剣" as an application of the **Sansappō** (三殺法) learned in the Kata #6. The phrase "Kassatsujizai no Ken" means "Sparing or not Sparing is within oneself in the ways of kendo. It's in his Tenouchi (will) and heart."

In the Kata #7, Uchidachi pressures Shidachi thru his center by stepping forward and goes to Men strike knowing that Shidachi moves back with his Kensen away from the center. However, the Shidachi's move is intended to bring out his Men strike by parrying his Kensen in such a way that Shidachi's Kensen and Hasuji are directed ready for Dō strike. He brings out Uchidachi's **ken**, **waza**, and **ki** for his Men strike by pushing sword forward, by supporting sword up from the bottom, and by stepping back. I (translator) think the reason Uchidachi steps out from left-foot in Ayumi-Ashi for the Men strike is to illustrate he is using Tsugi-Ashi as you can see if the two moves (his Seme and Men-Uchi) are blended. Here, I think, the Tsugi-Ashi move is separated into two parts to demonstrate the details of the Shidachi's move.

This Dō strike by Shidachi is indeed the "Kassatsujizai 活殺自在." He can cut through the Dō for kill or cut his skin or just cut Hakama girdle. Uchidachi, who was thus defeated, faces Shidachi helplessly and returns to starting position harmoniously together with Shidachi thanking him for his mercy.

8. Japan Kendo Kata #8: Kodachi no Kata (小太刀の形), Ippon-Me (一本目)

In the Kodachi Ippon-Me, Uchidachi is teaching Shidachi a meaning of **Shin** (真) **spirit**. The Shin (真) means, in Kendo terms, the attitude that immediately cut fairly and squarely from the Kamae without any off-guard moment and not giving any chance to your opponent. Uchidachi takes Morote Hidari Jōdan (諸手左上段). Shidachi holding Kodachi (小太刀) with right-hand takes Chūdan Hanmi (中段半身) stance with the feeling to cut opponent's fist diagonally. Hanmi (半身) is usually referred to right-foot Hanmi, stepping right-foot out with your body turned side and facing your opponent.

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As Uchidachi moves forward, Shidachi moves with the **Shin** (真) spirit, as soon as he reaches within his Ma-Ai, goes to **Irimi** (入見, Seme with right shoulder forward to extend Kensen) to bring out Uchidachi's Men strike, then parries and strike Men. He uses Hidari Ukenagashi(左受け流し) technique with Hidari Shinogi (左鑓) raising his hand high overhead with body open to the right.

9. Japan Kendo Kata #9: Kodachi no Kata (小太刀の形), Nihon-Me (二本目)

In the Kodachi Nihon-Me, Uchidachi is teaching Shidachi a meaning of **Gyou** (行) spirit. The **Gyou** (行) means, in Kendo terms, the attitude that cut fairly and squarely after prohibiting opponent's moves and then pressures opponent to bring out his Men strike in Kodachi Kata #2.

Uchidachi takes Gedan (下段) stance, and Shidachi takes Chūdan Hanmi (半身) stance. When mutually gets close to proper Ma-Ai, Uchidachi starts to bring his Kensen to Chūdan stance; therefore, Shidachi suppresses it down with Irimi (入見) Seme as if he is jumping into Uchidachi's chest area to take advantage of Kodachi (小太刀). Uchidachi reacts and opens immediately to Waki Gamae to take his Ma-Ai, but Shidachi tries again Irimi (入見) Seme. Uchidachi, therefore, changes to Morote Hidari Jōdan and strike Men. Shidachi parries and strikes Men. He uses Migi Ukenagashi(右受け流し) technique with Migi Shinogi (右鑓) raising his hand high overhead with body open to left. Moreover, he holds Uchidachi's right arm at the elbow from the top and shows Zanshin with his Kensen aimed at Uchidachi's throat.

10. Japan Kendo Kata #10: Kodachi no Kata (小太刀の形), Sanbon-Me(三本目)

In the Kodachi Sanbon-Me, Uchidachi is teaching Shidachi a meaning of **Sō** (草) spirit. The **Sō** (草) means, in Kendo terms, the attitude that wins without cutting fairly and squarely after letting opponent do whatever he wants to do and defending each situation.

Uchidachi takes Chūdan (中段) stance, and Shidachi takes Gedan Hanmi (下段半身) stance. As Uchidachi moves forward, Shidachi suppresses and moves to go Irimi (入見) Seme; therefore, Uchidachi immediately goes for Men strike using Morote Migi Jōdan's Furikaburi (振りかぶり). Shidachi parries this attack using Suriage/Suriotoshi (すり上げ/すり落とし) techniques and tries again with Irimi (入見) Seme; therefore, Uchidachi can't go for Men, so quickly goes for Dō strike. However, Shidachi parries the Dō attack using Hidari Shinogi Surinagashi and Surikomi techniques and hold Uchidachi's right arm at his elbow from the side and locks his upper body; therefore, Uchidachi pulls back to escape, and Shidachi continues his Seme following his steps and shows Zanshi with Kensen aimed at Uchidachi's throat.

Postscript

The Nippon (Japan) Kendo Kata established in 1912 is surprisingly expressing the thoughts and ideas of peaceful Japanese cultures, the concept of kendo and the purpose of practicing Kendo which is written by All Japan Kendo Federation.

Today's kendo has tendencies to learn the techniques as a competitive sport and the original thoughts, ideas and purpose are somewhat under a taboo. We need to continue kendo practice to reach the levels that we can appreciate this kendo Kata so that we can hand down proper kendo and kendo Kata to our new generation.

These thoughts and ideas about the above Kendo Kata are based on my (author's) studies and ideas, so please allow there may be some errors or incomplete concept. I hope it arouses more interest in the Kendo Kata and learns the true meaning.