

# Why Men Uchi is Essential in Kendo

Kendo Study Site from はくどー / 佐々木博嗣- translated by Ted Imoto, 05/01/2014

## 1. About Modern Kendo Techniques

- Modern kendo techniques, as we know, come from sword techniques ancient Japanese warrior, Samurai (侍), used for combat. The techniques were studied, developed and rationalized to this day.
- Therefore, people think modern kendo techniques are imitations of those Samurai's techniques by replacing sword with Shinai and by using Bogu to assure safety.
- However, if you consider that this image of learning techniques to attack and kill is original kendo, as some people might feel, then many incomprehensible problems and questions are raised to the modern kendo techniques.
- For example, "Is the Men Datotsu technique capable of cutting and killing a man if the sword is used?" "Why you have to call the name of Datotsubui (打突部位), Men, Kote, Dō, etc. when you strike?" "Why you need to go through opponent's side after you strike?" "Why you need to maintain your posture after the strike and show Zanshin (残心)?"
- These are some of the questions raised by many not only who do not practice kendo but also who are practicing kendo. They have mixed feelings about these questions which contradict and are confusing. The purpose of practicing Kendo set forth by All Japan Kendo Federation is too vague to understand, and no one is paying attention anyway.
- Although the kendo federation defines kendo as Budō (武道), martial art, and not a sport, some people think the modern kendo techniques have already adapted many aspects of sports and deviated away from sword techniques.
- It is difficult to teach proper kendo and understand essence of kendo unless we clarify these questions and convince people the relations between the sword and Shinai techniques,
- Now, after clarifying these questions, we search for what is pursued or should be pursued on modern kendo techniques that were originated in the ancient history of Japan.

## 2. Questions on Modern Kendo Techniques

Let's list some of the questions below for discussion

### (1) Difference between Sword and Shinai

- If you learn Tameshikiri (試切り) using a live sword to cut Makiwara (巻き藁 rolled straw), you know that you must stand very close to the straw, swing up high, swing down with your hip power, and pull slightly to cut.
- However, in the case of Shinai Men Uchi for example, you learn to stand at Issoku Ittō (一足一刀) distance, swing up a bit, jump off with the left foot, swing down and push to hit Men.
- What a difference this is! Well, the Shinai process is quite different from Sword process. The reason for this difference will be clarified.

### (2) Restricted Datotsubui (打突部位)

- One of the questions is why Shinai Kendo has restricted striking zone, Datotsubui (打突部位); namely, Men, Kote, Dō, and Tsuki. These locations are a relatively safe zone in sword combat because armors protect them.
- These locations Men, Kote, and Tsuki are certainly not aimed at, from the standpoint of practical sword combat. Instead, places like neck rather than Men, Ura Kote rather than Kote, sides of the chest rather than Dō, lung or heart rather than Tsuki and many other places like arms, legs were aimed to cut and kill with a live sword.
- In Shinai Kendo, however, these places other than Men, Kote, Dō and Tsuki are not allowed to hit as a rule. For this reason, Kendo is not pursuing the sword techniques of actual combat situation, but rather kendo has adapted aspect of the sport since safety is provided by the use of Shinai and Bogu.
- Is it really that the reason for the restricted Datotsubui (打突部位) is for safety purpose?

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## (3) Pursuance of Beauty Aspect

- Kendo emphasizes Datotsu posture, attitude and Zanshin (残心). For this reason, you do not score points when you strike your opponent if your posture breaks up, if you show disrespectful or overjoyed attitude, or if you do not pass through your opponent's side for Zanshin (残心).
- If the Shinai is imagined as a live sword, a hit will injure your opponent regardless of your posture, attitude and Zanshin (残心) as long as the Datotsu has correct Hasuji (刃筋), cut with opposite side of the Shinai string (cutting edge).
- Also, some higher rank sensei makes a grim face and advise you to strike proper Men if you try to hit Kote or Dō persistently, or if you try to hit Kote by faking for Men during kendo practice. Why?
- Is there any preference in kendo as to which technique Men, Kote, Dō or Tsuki should be practiced first? Is there beauty aspect to consider in kendo just like Figure Skating or Gymnastics in sports?

## 3. Relation of Kendo and Actual Combat

- To answer the questions in preceding paragraphs, let's study about actual combat using live swords by going back to the era of origin of kendo.
- The following content of description was found on some bulletin board of internet:  
"Modern kendo techniques can be approached to the ancient sword techniques adapting each Koryū (古流) style and the techniques if additional sets of Bogu are designed to protect back of the head, shoulder, neck, legs and Ura Kote (裏小手) and if Shinai size 34 with 1000 gram is designed."
- Realizing ancient sword techniques by imitation; one way is thus to make Bogu and Shinai as close as possible to actual situation or, on the contrary, make Bogu and Shinai as light as possible and increase safety. The latter is so-called "Sport/Chanbara (チャンバラ)" and you can see this in some modern Samurai play, movie and Ken Bu (剣舞).
- In either case, real combat situation cannot be realized in mimic combat under the conditions of secured safety.
- Therefore, ancient Samurai must have adapted the only those elements of combat techniques that are necessary for real combat situations rather than imitating all as close as possible to actual combat situations.
- Namely, they are laidō (居合道), Kumitachi (組太刀), Tameshikiri (試切り), Battōdō (拔刀道), Kendo (剣道), etc. Ancient Samurai believed that these various arts could be learned separately and train those elements that are necessary for actual combat.
- Let's list, then, what are those elements that are necessary for actual combat including other martial arts like boxing and Karate (空手) as examples:
  1. Body development using a weapon:
  2. Body Movements using a weapon:
  3. Techniques to learn Kakehiki (駆け引き, Tactics) and timing to attack with one blow
  4. Handling of Weapon
- Thus, it is necessary to learn and train the above three (or four) elements harmoniously to learn actual combat techniques.
- In the case of Karate (空手) and boxing, for example, the above elements are included harmoniously in the training methods; however, in the case of Kendo, these elements are separately embedded, somewhat specialized and developed independently.
- Of course, Battōdō (拔刀道) has Tamshigiri (試切り) and Iai Kata (居合形), Kendo has Kendo Kata, and there were ancient Kenjutsu (剣術) using Bokutō and Shinai in parallel with Iai (居合) practice. So, they were not completely specialized.
- However, as far as the Kenjutsu (剣術) is concerned it is a fact that the practice method has been inherited separately from each school (Ryuha, 流派). It seems that Kendo was inherited the above third element from one of the Ryuha (流派) of Kenjutsu (剣術). With this view let's examine the technical characteristics of today's modern kendo.

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## 4. Live Sword Techniques

- In general, when you hear about a live sword you associate it with an image that you swing it up high and pull to cut as you swing it down like Tameshikiri (試切り) on Makiwara (巻き藁). However, this is only half of the entire sword technique. That is called “Todome no Ittō (留めの一刀)” or “Kirioroshi (斬り下ろし)” technique.
- There are many techniques inherited from ancient Japanese swordsmen, for example, cutting thumb, cutting upside of the chest, thrusting thigh from the groin area, etc. There is hard evidence that they devoted their lives to the perfections of various techniques.
- Among them relatively seen in many schools, there were also techniques that quickly attack and injure face using the tip of the sword.
- For example, you will see in laidō (居合道) that first Nukitsuke (抜きつけ) is to injure, say, face and immediately get closer and strike with final blow “Todome no Ittō (留めの一刀).”
- This first blow is called “Kiritsuke (斬りつけ)” and the second blow is called “Kirioroshi (斬り下ろし)” or Todome no Ittō (留めの一刀)” in Kenjutsu (剣術, Kendo comes from this Kenjutsu).

### (1) Kiritsuke (斬りつけ) Technique – destroy enemy’s defense mechanism of Ki (気), Ken (剣) and Tai (体)

- In principle, Kiritsuke (斬りつけ) techniques do not imagine to defeat the enemy by the first cut. Instead, the purpose is to destroy enemy’s defense mechanism and immediately connect it to final blow, “Kirioroshi (斬り下ろし).”
- Therefore, balanced body after the “Kiritsuke” becomes an important factor, so that you can quickly strike 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> blow as necessary to defeat the enemy when you missed due to a quick enemy’s reaction.
- For this reason, it is necessary to keep posture easy to move by facing an opponent without lowering hip, keeping left foot behind right foot, and keeping the sword about the same height every moment after the cut.
- Of course, the Kiritsuke is not intended from the beginning to go for the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> blow and the Datotsu power is not neglected, but it is executed expediently within an expected opportunity.

### (2) Kirioroshi (斬り下ろし) Technique – defeat with fatal blow

- Kirioroshi (斬り下ろし) technique is aimed to defeat the enemy by a fatal blow. The sword is swung up high, a big Furikaburi (振りかぶり), body posture is balanced by lowering hip with wide open feet.
- For this reason, Kirioroshi must be done at the moment of condition that enemy cannot dodge, react nor counter-attack quickly enough because the Kirioroshi technique is concentrated for final blow and not very flexible to quickly change the situation.
- The entire sword techniques, Kiritsuke and Kirioroshi combined, are also seen in old-style kendo, Koryu Kenjutsu (古流剣術), as in Kumitachi (組太刀) and as in Iaido Kata (居合道形).
- In a word, the entire sword technique is first to destroy enemy’s defense mechanism by Kiritsuke (斬りつけ) technique and then immediately to strike with final blow by Kirioroshi (斬り下ろし) technique.
- That means that it is almost impossible to closely approach and suddenly defeat with one blow against an enemy who is trying to do the same in a combat situation.

## 5. Shinai Techniques

- According to the Home page on ZenKenRen (全剣連), shortcut of All Japan Kendo Federation, history shows Shinai Kendo was established in 1711-1715 (Era of Shōtoku 正徳) as Uchikomikeiko (打ち込み稽古) using Bogu by Jikishinkage Ryu (直心陰流), Naganumashirōsaueimonkokugō (長沼四郎左右衛門国郷)

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- Then, in 1751-1764 (Era of Hōreki 宝暦), Ittō Ryu (一刀流) Nakanishi Dojo (中西道場) started Uchikomikeiko (打ち込み稽古) using Bogu made of iron. And very soon in 1789-1801 (Era of Kansei 寛政) tournaments were flourished among all schools. Toward the end of Edo era (1800-1865), Shinai Kendo techniques were systemized by Chiba Shūsaku (千葉秀作).
- Here we observe that the Bogu and Shinai were used at that time for Uchikomikeiko (打ち込み稽古). Eventually, the kendo technique from each dojo was compared, analyzed and systemized further by Chibashūsaku (千葉秀作).
- Based on history, the kendo is developed from ancient Uchikomikeiko (打ち込み稽古) which may consist of the two kinds of techniques; namely, Kiritsuke and Kirioroshi. However, we can say based on the following characteristics listed below that only the first blow of Kiritsuke is inherited to modern kendo from the Uchikomikeiko (打ち込み稽古).
  - (1) The kendo techniques emphasize Shotachi (初太刀), 1<sup>st</sup> hit, by jumping from distance relatively away.
  - (2) The kendo techniques emphasize good posture before and after Datotsu movement keeping the hip level high.
  - (3) The kendo techniques emphasize Zanshin (残心), the state of mind after Datotsu to be alert for next move.
- It is now clearly explained that modern kendo is to learn and train the Kiritsuke(斬りつけ) techniques that connect to 2<sup>nd</sup> hit if necessary immediately after the Kiritsuke (斬りつけ) or Shōtach (初太刀) which requires the technique that you break up opponent's posture without losing your composure.

## 6. About Catching Datotsu Chance

- Let's analyze next the Kiritsuke (斬りつけ) techniques in more detail.
- The analysis reveals Kiritsuke (斬りつけ) techniques can be divided into two techniques; namely, "Where and How you do Kiritsuke (斬りつけ)" and "When and How you do Kiritsuke (斬りつけ)." The former is the technique of Tachisuji (太刀筋), and the latter is the technique of catching Datotsu chance.
- To learn and train the technique of Tachisuji (太刀筋), where and how you cut with correct Hasuji, the Bogu is not necessary, and Shinai is not proper tool, because the round cross-section with a string, opposite side being cutting edge, does not image concept of correct Hasuji (刃筋). Instead, all you need is a sword or Bokutō and practice like Kendo Kata to learn and train correct Hasuji (刃筋).
- Therefore, a real purpose that ancient Kenjutsu (剣術, today's kendo) techniques started using Shinai and Bogu was for the latter; namely, for the techniques of catching Datotsu chance, "When and How you do Kiritsuke (斬りつけ)."
- Before Bogu and Shinai, ancient Samurai was using Bokutō to practice Kenjutsu (剣術) in the form of Kata, known as Kumi Tachi (組太刀). The Shinai Kenjutsu (剣術 today's kendo) became so popular and spread quickly around 1800-1865. Why?
- The reason for this is that you cannot learn techniques to catch a Datotsu chance using Bokuō in Kata form and that this technique is necessary for actual combat or sword fighting.
- Moreover, in peacetime, it is not necessary to pursue Kirioroshi (斬り下ろし) to put to death after Kiritsuke (斬りつけ).
- Therefore, in modern kendo, referee pronounces "Shōbuari (勝負あり)" with Shotachi (初太刀) or Kiritsue (斬りつけ) if the Datotsu meets the minimum criteria for Yūkō Datotsu (有効打突).
- From these facts, the technical purpose of Shinai Kendo is not to learn many technical ways to cut as a live sword. But it is to train how to break up opponent's posture without losing your composure. It is how to destroy his defense mechanism Ki (気), Ken (剣) Tai (体). It is how to catch Datotsu chance. And it is to master the timing for Yūkō Datotsu (有効打突) which is an essence of Kiritsuke (斬りつけ) technique.
- In kendo, they say "**Do not win by hit, but win then hit.**" That emphasizes to catch Datotsu chance first and then strike. Winning by an accidental hit is discouraged. The purpose of kendo technique is not Datotsu itself but to catch the Datotsu chance.

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## 7. Meaning of Men Uchi

- Kendo technique so far was assumed to use Kiritsuke (斬りつけ) and learn how to catch Datotsu chance by destroying opponent's defense mechanism, Ki (気), Ken (剣) Tai (体).
- However, there are four Datotsubui (打突部位), Men, Kote, Dō and Tsuki to decide in kendo. Why?
- The places other than these four Datotsubui can also be used effectively as a target to cut if it is based on the concept that Shinai is a sword. So, it is a more actual fight to allow hitting any part of the body for winning points like Sports Chanbara (チャンバラ).
- After all, is the restricted Datotsubui for safety factor? Let's imagine once more real sword fighting.
- Most people think attacking leg is effective since you can cut any places with a real sword. By the way, we saw Kendo vs. Naginata (薙刀) match both wearing shin protectors and have seen that Naginata (薙刀) pole hits rather easily at the leg of the kendoist.
- The reason why kendo does not allow leg as Datotsubui (打突部位) is considered to be the length of the sword. Namely, the blade length is normally only 2.3 feet (二尺三寸) not very long like Naginata (薙刀). If you try to attack leg with this sword length, you need to bend down and lose your balance and composure.
- Some Koryu Kenjutsu (古流剣術) Ryuha (流派, school) trained leg and hip muscles completely for this attack, or even tried Nagatsuka (長柄, longer handle), but they did not succeed. It is a bit reckless to attack leg knowing that enemy might attack your Men from over your head because cutting leg is not a fatal blow.
- Then how about thighs, arms or shoulders? That is also a bit reckless for the same reason because the enemy can still strike you immediately after you hit these places with good posture.
- In these situations, both hurt their arms and legs without fatal wounds and end up with bloody fighting till their physical and mental strength diminishes which is a matter of time. That is certainly not for Kendo technique, because of kendo demands for a sure victory, Hisshō (必勝).
- Then, where is the most effective Datotsubui (打突部位) that you can aim at without losing your composure and that you can connect to Kirioroshi (斬り下ろし) for sure victory, Hisshō (必勝)?
- Miyamoto Musashi (宮本武蔵) never lost in sword fighting match in his life totaling at least sixty matches. He said he always aimed at opponent's face between two eyebrows and won without missing.
- Namely, Men Uchi itself was the technique of Tachisuji (太刀筋) for sure victory, Hisshō (必勝), for Musashi (武蔵). Musashi's Gorinsho (五輪書), Mizu no Maki (水の巻), under "Omote wo Sasu (おもてをさす)" explains the importance of face attack.
- A human being has usual reactions to face attack such as closing eyes, avoiding it by bending the neck to side or back, or losing body balance. In the case of real sword fighting, these reactions can easily be linked to death due to break up of body balance.
- One who initiated this face attack must immediately, before the other recover, finish with a final blow, "Ni no Tachi (二の太刀)" or "Kirioroshi (斬り下ろし)." The face attack is called "Shotachi (初太刀)" or "Kiritsuke (斬りつけ)"
- So, kendo technique is to catch Datotsu chance and use Kiritsuke (斬りつけ) technique by attacking face.
- However, modern kendo uses Shinai that is much longer than the sword and strike head part rather than face; moreover, we teach to pass through opponent till his rear side and to show Zanshin (残心). Why?
- Apparently, the modern Shinai and Bogu set were designed to strike head not face, but the technique is Kiritsuke except you strike head instead face. Note that the length from Tsubamoto (鍔元) to target (head for kendo, face for sword) is about the same for both Shinai and sword. However, MaAi (間合い) is different when facing with the tip of Shinai or sword. Therefore, in Shinai Kendo you need to find out your own Issoku Ittō distance, jump in from Tōma if you can to strike Men with full spirit and energy so that you can pass through opponent for Zanshin.

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- There is a fact that during the era of Edo (江戸) Bogu used in Niten Ichi Ryu (二天一流), had no protection on the head but only Men Gane (面金) as face protection. The word “Men” calling today is the meaning of face and not Head (Atama, アタマ, or Tō, 頭).

## 8. About Other Datotsubui than Men

- Next, let's look into the Datotsubui (打突部位) other than Men; namely, Kote, Dō, Tsuki to see any significant meaning.
- As previously mentioned, attacking other than “Face” has no merit since the main purpose of Shotachi (初太刀) is “Break up opponent's posture without losing your composure.” Therefore, they must have practiced earnestly to develop skills on “Shotachi's Men Datotsu” in original “Uchikomi Keiko (打ち込み稽古).”
- Then, what happens during practicing Men Uchi is that Motodachi (元立ち) finds that some students are not “catching Datotsu chance” and noticed “Waste of Motion” and “Tardiness.” Motodachi must have hit these places, Kote, Dō, or Tsuki to teach them what is wrong, missing or lacking.
- For example, in the process of Men Uchi, Motodachi may hit Kote or Dō if your wrist raised too high or your side is opened. Tsuki might be used if your center is off guard or your chin is raised.
- Therefore, we think, the Datotsubui other than Men was used for teaching and for training necessary techniques of Men strike for Shotachi (初太刀) rather than to practice for target hit to get the point for Kote, Dō or Tsuki.
- In modern kendo, we do not strike Left Kote in Kamae Chudan. We do not thrust chest or heart, but a small area of the throat. Because we teach to catch Datotsu chance by defending middle and attacking from the center; we think, that corrects a bad habit of using right hand.

## 9. Begin with Ai-Uchi Men (相打ち面) Practice

- Enemy, also, attacks your face to get Shotachi (初太刀) or Ninotachi (二の太刀) in actual combat. Therefore, it is necessary to prepare for Ai Uchi Men (相打ち面) and to attack without flinching for the Shotachi (初太刀).
- Kendo training starts with this Ai Uchi Men (相打ち面), called Ai Men (合面) in short. An important state of mind for this practice is that you do not fear for getting hit (death in the case of a live sword) and become “Sutemi (捨て身)” to strike the enemy with Shotachi no Ichigeki (初太刀の一撃).
- Throughout the practice/training of Ai Men (合面) you learn “Datotsu Chance” and “Mikiri (見切り)” techniques and your kendo advances to next higher level. Mikiri (見切り) is sometimes referred to as Issun no Mikiri (一寸の見切り) or Nisun no Mikiri (二寸の見切り) expressing the distance how close it is to you that opponent's KenSen (剣先) strike you. The two expressions are telling the same thing. You act or wait as close as this expression and use Sutemi (捨て身) to match the opponent's waza. Often, this waza is connected to Ōji Waza (応じ技) such as Suriage Men (すり上げ面).
- However, you do not learn real kendo if you strike Kote or Dō using Ōji Waza (応じ技) without mastering Datotsu Chance and Mikiri (見切り) and if you are waiting to react for Ōji Waza (応じ技). Therefore, some instructors discourage this kind of Ōji Waza (応じ技), especially for beginners.
- If you just think that kendo is a sport with certain rules to make score points, then it may be important for you to learn Ōji Waza (応じ技) for your level. However, the waza will be just effective for the same level opponent.
- Therefore, on the contrary, it is quite a waste of time if you did not learn and train the important kendo techniques of “Kiritsuke (斬りつけ), how to catch Datotsu chance” and “Mikiri (見切り).” The fact that you cannot get promoted or having difficulty may be for this reason that you have not mastered these techniques.

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## 10. Ultimate Development

- Since old times swordsmasters developed ultimate sword technique by further developing Ōji Waza (応じ技) and raising the skill level of Seme and Mikiri (見切り). It is an ultimate, secret technique that combines Shotachi (初太刀) or Kiritsuke (斬りつけ) and Ninotachi (二の太刀) or Kirioroshi (斬り下ろし) as one rhythm.
- You might hear the following names of Waza that belong to this secret Waza:
  - (1) “Hitotsu no Tachi (一之太刀)” from Katorishindō Ryu (香取神道流) by Tsukahara Bokuden (塚原卜伝)
  - (2) “Hitotsu no Tachi (一つの打ち)” from Gorinsho (五輪書) by Miyamoto Musashi (宮本武蔵)
  - (3) “Awashiuchi (合わし撃ち)” from Yagyū Ryu (柳生流).
  - (4) “Kiriotoshi (切り落とし)” from Onoha Ittō Ryu (小野派一刀流)

## 11. Summary

- Datotsu movement of the sword in warrior time was to kill the enemy and was categorized into two; namely, “Kiritsuke (斬りつけ cut to injury)” and “Kirioroshi (斬り下ろし cut down to kill).” The Kiritsuke (斬りつけ) is also known as “Shotachi (初太刀),” and Kirioroshi (斬り下ろし) is also known as “Ninotachi (二の太刀).”
- Kendo competes mutually in free forms using Bogu and Shinai; therefore, it is apt to think as mimic battle training under secured safe environment.
- However, if rules allow striking any places on body assuming safety is guaranteed, then speed, and motor skills are demanded in the kendo. Then, the kendo fails to support the principles of sword and the purpose of practicing Kendo set forth by ZenKenRen (全剣連), because pursuing kendo for a lifetime cannot be realized without the principles.
- If the Datotsubui (打突部位) is restricted, for example, Men Uchi only, then, the technique mutually focus to attack center, to catch a Datotsu chance, to strike Men, to train one’s mind and to communicate with an opponent for Yūkō Datotsu (有効打突). That does not require much strength because the rationale of the sword is realizable. The Men Datotsu movement in kendo that meets this rationale is the first category “Kiritsuke (斬りつけ)” or “Shotachi (初太刀).”
- The kendo technique uses Kensen (剣先) to attack (Semeru) opponent’s Ki (気), Ken (剣) and Tai (体), to agitate and then to create the chance to strike. The Datotsu movement is decisive and utmost without doubt of defeat. The technique is not for competition of Datotsu skill where you strike and win as it is thought. It is how you win. We as kendoka (剣道家) must confirm this once again.
- It is more effective and wiser to learn “where and how you cut” from already established Kendo techniques according to the correct rationale of kendo rather than creating your own style from free practice.
- It is important that you learn Datotsu movement with correct Hasiji (刃筋) through Kendo Kata practice.
- Thus, we surely realize the need for learning Kendo Kata and training kendo using Shinai to develop harmoniously balanced kendo, so that we can hand down proper kendo to our new generation.