

A PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH OF KENDO

# KEIKEN SURU

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A pedagogical approach  
of kendo:  
Keiken Suru

*Embrace your own Experience with Force, Efficiency, Soberness*

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ISBN numérique : 979-10-262-8325-6

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**Embrace your own Experience with  
Force, Efficiency, Soberness**

# Foreword

What is a man/woman? What is his/her role, life meaning, purpose, essence? Before writing this text, late 2018-early 2019, I felt the need to reflect on the true purpose of a Man in the World, his role and place in Nature. It seems difficult to understand our inner self, without knowing who we are physically, intellectually and emotionally. Do I recognize myself in this material shape, in my own body? What are my values, my thoughts, my beliefs? What are my true feelings, beyond my immediate and spontaneous desires? This topic is wide, deep, probably infinite and reflections can easily go around, trapped in a closed loop, leading to insanity. Anyways, my reflections reached the shape of a Declaration of Men Duties (presented in the conclusion as a perspective on this text). At first, I did not intend to include these thoughts in this particular work on *kendo*<sup>1</sup>. But the recent events related to COVID-19, concurrent with the writing of this book, resonate with this matter. As the path of *kendo* echoes the pursuit of ourselves, this inner quest cannot be successful without a deep understanding and the growth of a close relationship with our environment, with Nature. I sincerely wanted to focus this text on the topic of *kendo*, and I have most likely both succeeded and failed at this challenge. I succeeded, because I propose, here, a teaching and learning method for every isolated *kenshi*<sup>2</sup> around the World, in countries where *kendo* is not part of the traditions, where there are few clubs, few members and very few to no high-ranked *kenshi*. Moreover, in this manual, the beginners can find references to guide their practices and monitor their improvements. Finally, I believe that advanced or expert *kenshi* can find here a « peculiar » point of view, because *kendo* is far from my own culture. Moreover, I have learned, practiced over various continents with sincerity and love, made many wonderful and precious encounters. Thus, I believe that my approach of and sensitivity to *kendo* are somewhere between the Japanese tradition and the Western vision, with a touch of Freedom (in the humblest way possible, because our Freedom is always restrained by our Duties). I also failed, because I fully recognized that *kendo* is just a tool available for seeking an « ultimate » essence,

well beyond the essence of *kendo*. This « ultimate » essence takes over the narration of this text and it can be felt in each page, each paragraph, each line. *Kendo* becomes just a link, footprints acting like a ray of light in a dark tunnel or a ray of darkness in a bright tunnel. That's the reason of my failure for being unable to dedicate this work exclusively to *kendo*. Some parts of this text may require more than one reading to be understood. Take these pages as a starting line for your reflections and thoughts, not as a finishing line. In front of the same painting, it would be sad to feel the same emotions, at the same time, with the same intensity. So, adopt a free state of mind while reading and make your own interpretation (physically, technically, mentally, emotionally). If I may give an advice, consider each section of each chapter like a teaching form, take it and manipulate it (physically, intellectually, emotionally), make it yours. Then, read it back from time to time to deepen your understanding. It may be a scholar approach, but this is just an advice, feel free to do as you please. Let the « ultimate » essence guide your steps and you will reach your destination. I sincerely hope that this « peculiar » point of view is worthy of your time, if it is not, feel free to burn this book in the fireplace or to throw it in the recycling garbage can. If it is worthy of your time, I will be glad to know that these pages have earned a place in your library. In order to help the readers, beginners or even curious readers, I have added through the text succinct explanations of the *kendo* terms, in order to introduce their meaning in a practical context. Moreover, a glossary of all the Japanese words is included at the end of the book.



# Introduction

Embrace your own experience with Force, Efficiency, Soberness; this my personal interpretation of *Keiken*<sup>3</sup> *suru*<sup>4</sup>. Indeed, this not a literal translation of the Japanese language, but my intimate, and without a doubt subjective, understanding of these words applied to the matter of learning and teaching *kendo*. The following pages are going to give the necessary basics, tools and explanations to clarify my opinion.

## Why write this text?

My *kendo* experience, in and outside Japan, led me to the following thoughts:

1. *Kendo* practices in Japan are an enchantment, it is like having a taste of the best caviar and champagne
2. Back to my regular environment (outside Japan), the everyday practice tastes like a Big Mac menu. The caviar taste becomes a distant memory that I try to revive in my dreams, but I can't and I wake up in my reality (this is not a moral judgment, like many people, the Big Mac is my first choice of burger)

This reality implies that *keiko*<sup>5</sup> and teaching are constant challenges:

- 2 club practices per week
- unsuited accommodations for kendo training (hard floor and its difficulty for practicing *fumikomi*<sup>6</sup>)
- unattractive training timetables (early in the morning or late at night)
- none or very few high-ranked *kenshi* (6, 7, 8th *dan*<sup>7</sup>) to look up to
- few members registered in the club
- even fewer members to show up at every classes (less than 30%)
- few kids and teenagers to ensure the transmission and the survival of *kendo* in our region
- and last and not the least, a fragile *kendo* culture, relying on movies (Star Wars, the last samurai ...) and mangas, which are very far from the « truth »

of the practice of *kendo*, based on rigor, discipline and abnegation

In this context, *kendo* is at best a hobby, at worst a curiosity, used against monotony. As a result, *kendo* struggles to reach its full martial art dimension and spirituality.

Therefore, I ask myself how to spice up the « Big Mac menu »?

In 2019, I had the chance to meet Alex Bennet *sensei*<sup>8</sup> at *Kansai Dai*<sup>9</sup> in Osaka. Watching him work on video contents for the *Kendo* World internet site, I realized that he was carrying out a fundamental task for the international *kendo* community: **the foundation of an International *Budo*<sup>10</sup> Culture** outside Japan. And this is probably the way to spice up, enhance the Bic Mac Menu, by making a « living and original » *Budo* culture. I have a tremendous respect for his work, which is a colossal task. I also realized that Bennet *sensei* is not a lonely man on this path, he has along his side every devoted *kendo* instructor in the world (In America, in the Caribbean, in Europe ...). With the same sincerity and love for the practice of *kendo*, we are all moving in the same direction, towards the international *kendo* evolution, which will require time, dedication, experience, work and sweat.

This is the way to look, one day (not there yet), the Japanese *kendo* in the eye, without blinking. The culture of *kendo* in Japan is rich and profound, relying on centuries of history, experience, tradition and culture. *Kendo* in Japan has its own heart, its own soul, which is not going to falter. We cannot compare or imitate it, however we sure can be inspired by its spirit and strength. This is with this thought in my soul, this feeling in my heart that I am writing to share my reflections on how to build an **International *Kendo* Culture**.

1. In Japan, practice is based on « discipline ». It is obvious for any student to follow the *sensei*'s instructions without arguing
2. Outside Japan, practice is clearly « less disciplined ». It is almost a « tradition » to question everything actively or passively. Learning is mostly viewed as a puzzle and the place of each piece must be questioned (this is how we generally interact with things to understand them). Therefore, the



puzzle global image and meaning are neglected, unity is neglected for the benefice of why (s) and how (s). This natural process leads to a form of indiscipline which is challenging for any instructor

In some countries, this type of « indiscipline » is even viewed as a virtue (ask a French citizen!!!)

On one side, in Japan, the inherent discipline eases the teaching progression, on the other side (outside Japan), the inherent constant questioning gets in the way, even provoking « a passive hostile » environment. In order to pacify the atmosphere, one should be able to **provide meaning** to the practice, by bringing meaning to every explanation, every demonstration, every concept of *kendo*. And this is not an easy and/or trivial task.

### **Providing meaning, meaningfulness?**

I will not give exhaustive explanations on *kendo* or *kendo* techniques. For that you have your *sensei* and club instructors, or all the *kendo* experts during the various available seminars around the World. I will focus my reflection to articulate all the points for achieving an international *kendo* culture. Actually, we need to move away from harmful exotic fantasies about *kendo*, and center our practice in our own cultural realities. *Kendo* needs to become concrete, tangible, material, we need to touch it. I will discuss tools that, I believe, will fortify a pedagogy designed for its transmission outside Japan, without affecting its essence and soul. I will expose the tools on *kendo* basics and also give a personal explanation of these basics. Let me be clear, I do not pretend to detain the truth of *kendo*, but I want to share my own truth, forged by my own experience of practice. I will be glad if it helps some *kenshi* along the way.

Meaningfulness implies that the instructor has to provide an appropriate explanation and demonstration for each technique or concept. Students need to be able to fully embrace the knowledge; they have to:

- **Visualize** (provide meaning for the mind, the intellectual process)
- **Feel** (provide meaning for the body, the physical and sensual process)
- **Live** (provide meaning for the heart, the emotional process)

These are the tools that I will use to build up and structure my *kendo* pedagogy and display the basics.

In Japan, meaningfulness in teaching/learning *kendo* seems mostly useless, since meaning can be felt in the Japanese way of *Budo*; in the culture, in the *dojo*<sup>11</sup>, in all the interactions during *keiko*. The student is naturally involved in the transmission process, there is continuity between the *sensei* and each of his students. Moreover, students have so many examples to look for in the *dojo*, they just have to keep open eyes and ears (written like this, it may look easy but it is not), and reproduce what they see from 6, 7 and 8th *dan* around them. Outside Japan, *kendo* is not yet a tradition, a culture, we need to constantly provide meaning to answer all the why (s) and how (s). Visualization, feeling and living are the tools available to evolve and improve on our way.

### **Free the practice: live and let live**

Do not keep *kendo* in a box, free it and let it live, let it feel your environment, and ultimately, there will be no distinction between environment and *kendo*. At this junction, *kendo* will be a part of your culture and you will achieve your goal of building a natural *kendo* culture. Despite the *kendo* code and its rules, *kendo* should not become rigid. Practicing *kendo* is hard and demanding enough without also adding up the constraints of rigidity and inflexibility. The code and the rules are there to free the body, the heart and the mind of frivolousness and foolishness, not there to enslave your body, heart and mind.

By letting *kendo* out of the box, it becomes possible to find cultural references in our environment to help the visualization process. Actually, it is very difficult to connect to a Japanese reference when one has never been to Japan, never had a *keiko* experience in Japan. Moreover, the Japanese language and syntax are not straight forward for outsiders, therefore all *kendo* concepts (*kikentai*<sup>12</sup>, *seme*, *tame*, *sen* ...) can become mazes for the body, heart and mind. How can one relate to *kendo*, without being able to feel it, to touch it through the Japanese way, without knowing Japan at all or even one Japanese citizen? We have to connect *kendo* to our reality, our references, our environment. First, we need to live it, to feel it in ourselves, to be able to embrace it. So do not put and keep *kendo* in a box, *kendo* is universal, experience it, live it and let it live.