

**Essence of Training (Keiko) in Japanese Culture:  
Technique (Waza) Acquirement and Secret of Kendo**

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Introduction

When learning traditional Japanese martial arts or other performing arts, a term of “keiko”, which means practices and training, is often used. The term is formed from two Chinese characters meaning “antiquity” and “to think” or, more specifically, “to reflect upon the things in the past; or to learn their logic by reading old books and referring to ancient matters” according to the Japanese dictionary.

Since I practice and discipline myself in kendo daily, I feel obligated to demonstrate what I am learning. I am constantly aware of the importance of practicing what I have learned including all the actions. Based on my empirical knowledge and the record of interviews with the headmasters and grandmasters of the Japanese arts, we will discover the essence of “Keiko (training)” in kendo as we find the similarities between Japanese arts and martial arts.

Our main theme is to learn details about the “technique” acquirement that underlies the headmaster system. In Kendo and Judo, the main focus is to use your technique of striking or throwing the opponent to win the match. The validity of how to get one strike or throw (ippon) is immeasurably important. Therefore, the technique acquirement is the key to learn the martial arts and other performing arts. Without it, they would not have survived this far. How has this been passed down through generations?

In order to find the answer, we will first consider the “headmaster system”, which is the fundamental form of passing down the secret of the martial arts and other arts. The system has been assessed in three main theories: art theory with sociocultural emphasis “house” theory from a social perspective, and theory of master-pupil relationship through the learning of techniques from an educational perspective. This thesis discussed the “headmaster system” from the perspective of the third theory.

1. Framework of Training and Master-Pupil Relationship

When there were various schools (ryuha) of kendo in the past, one had to belong to one school to learn swordsmanship. When he became a pupil of a kendo school and asked his master to teach him the swordsmanship, he had to do one thing for his master. He was to write “kishomon” or pledge to make an oath to his master. He also had to follow the “school rules” (dojo-kun), “regulations” (sadame) and “codes” (okite).

a. What is Kishomon?

When one wished to learn at a school of swordsmanship and found an excellent master, he was required to sign kishomon to follow his master loyally, swear to the gods that he would devote himself to practice, follow the school tradition, keep school secrets, and strictly keep confidential documents on initiation even from family members.

After becoming a pupil, he must respect his master faithfully and must not have a match without his master's permission or disgrace his school. Without license of teaching from his master, it is impossible to become a master of school in other countries. If the pledge was ever broken, he was to be punished by the gods. To prove that he would put his soul on the line, he would prick his finger and seal with his own blood (keppan: a blood oath). The Gods that he would pledge to would be the god(s) he believed in, which represented his true sincerity. This was a rule (okite) to follow when a pupil became a pupil of a school.

b. Relationship with Master

There is a Japanese proverb that says ‘It is worth waiting for three years to find an excellent master’. To wait doesn't mean waiting absent-mindedly, but taking the initiative in seeking for a master. One pupil's master may not be a good master for others. Only your own confirmation can assure that you will be able to respect your master to the end. Only when you choose your master in such a way and become his pupil, you will be willing to follow regulations and codes of his school.

If a pupil fought with someone and hurt him in anger, it affected his family, superiors, and lord; and could also have resulted in disgracing his swordsmanship master as well.<sup>1</sup>

In the Japanese martial arts and other performing arts, the principle element is “Waza” (the technique) that has been passed down. The master-pupil relationship has played a crucial role in preserving the technique and passing it on to the next generation. If one pursues martial arts or other arts, he will choose a superior master for himself, become his pupil, follow his master's discipline, devote himself to practice, and continue to learn in order to acquire the technique.

For the purpose of preserving the technique, the relationship has occasionally been exclusive and restrictive because of its solidity. In teaching and passing down the technique,

the teaching license had several different levels according to the progress. The technique was secretly taught and was not to be revealed or mentioned to others. It was a strict rule to follow that was even applied to immediate family members. If the rule was broken by a pupil, his master had every right to expel him.

This relationship between master and pupil is established on a one-on-one relationship. The need of technique learning created this dominance relationship. As an author Kawashima points out in his "Family system as Ideology", "The relationship has every element to create a large chain of individual master-pupil relationship, which will then develop into an enormous hierarchy group."<sup>2</sup>

As the figure 1 shows, the pyramidal hierarchy group is formed with one headmaster at the top.

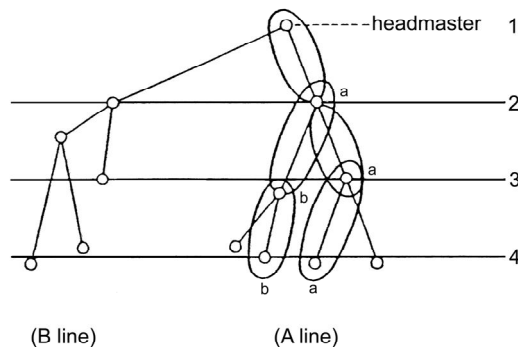


Figure1

Matsunosuke Nishiyama and Francis L.K. Hsu also reached the same conclusion. Particularly, Hsu points out that the Japanese "headmaster system" is nothing more than one of many examples of hierarchy group in his "Clan, Caste, and Club".

The master-pupil relationship, which is the fundamental one-on-one relationship in the headmaster system, is human relationship with a master who has fine techniques and a pupil who desires to acquire them from him.

The pupil aims to learn the techniques from his master and works hard to acquire them. At the same time, the pupil becomes interested in learning his master's entire character. The master is touched by his pupil's dedication and develops his affection for him. Thus, their relationship of mutual trust is established based on the motivation of learning. In other words, the master-pupil relationship is trust relationship through the technique learning, which is an important element to maintain the headmaster system. In the relationship, a pupil always respects his master. This respect is shown to a master who has continued to learn and

acquire the techniques, revised them uniquely, and reached a higher state.

The skill or technique is sometimes called as masterpiece or consummate technique. The respect will be paid to three subjects: skill or technique, discipline until reaching the higher state, and the individual's entire character that achieved the goal. The respect develops into charismatic authority that maintains the headmaster system. If it were not for the pupil's respect for his master, the trust relationship would not have existed.

## 2. Pupil's First Lesson before Learning Techniques

In the Japanese martial arts and other arts, a new pupil doesn't start learning techniques right away. When learning performing arts, a master begins by teaching his pupil how to bow and other minimum manners that he needs to follow on stage. In martial arts, a master teaches how to sit down on the floor and bow as sitting on the floor or standing and explains rules to follow in school. Only after the basics are taught, a pupil can start to learn the techniques. Traditionally, the basic philosophy of instruction is not to explain verbally. We will take a look at an example of swordsmanship school in Edo period (1603-1867).

After learning the basic manners, a pupil would start learning the techniques, which were taught by a master on an individual basis at the beginning. With no protective gears, he taught the techniques of kumitachi, or partner forms with wooden swords, as he plays an attacker (uchitachi or uchikata) and the pupil plays a defender (shitachi or shikata) as he defends himself according to his master's teaching. The intention was to let the pupil sense the moment to strike between each technique. An unguarded spot could be found only when the master's mind and physical movement didn't match. When striking, the sword was stopped right before hitting the pupil. Through this teaching technique, he learned mental and technical fundamentals and principle of using the sword for both offense and defense. After he acquires the principles with continued practices, the master teaches him repeatedly to make full use of his techniques against unexpected technique without using known moves.

The training of kumitachi should progress as follows: "If practicing with a beginner, an attacker strikes him as if he was ready to hit him, but doesn't actually hit him. The next stage, an attacker will actually strike him. If practicing with an expert, an attacker will strike as if he wasn't ready to hit him but actually hit him." <sup>3</sup>

The techniques can't be refined or acquired with verbal explanation only. One-on-one practices of actual striking, thrusting, attacking, defending and dodging between master and pupil accomplish the acquirement.

When my pupils ask me questions about kendo, I always answer that this is the way it has

been. I also tell them to think it out before asking. Practically speaking, they need practice if they can't master a certain technique. Then, they will revise the technique and practice repeatedly until they acquire it. In learning the Japanese martial arts or other performing arts, we have original teaching philosophy to allow pupils acquire the technique physically without using any logic, theory or intellectual method. The philosophy is described in "Sanma no Kurai" meaning the integrated improvement of three elements including learning, training and revising, in the Book of Yagyu Style, as shown in the figure 2.

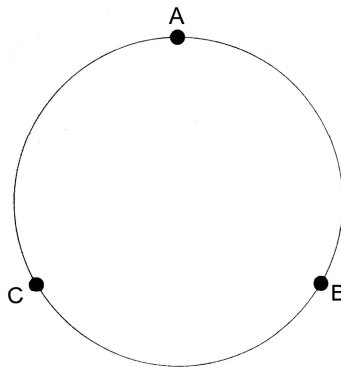


Figure2 Yagyu Style "Sanma no Kurai"

I found the same teaching technique in Western music in Forkel's "Bach's Life and Art".

"What he did first was to teach his unique way of touching the keyboard to his pupil. In order to acquire the technique, he had to spend months practicing passages made for each finger with the defined, beautiful technique in mind. He affirmed that his pupil needed to continue the practice for at least six months to a year." <sup>4</sup>

The following quote from the same book explains how the technique can be acquired.

"The only way to raise an impeccable, superior teacher is to let him identify his goal as a pupil and have him go through difficult self-teaching process and numerous mistakes until he reaches the goal. He will gradually learn the entire concept of art through repeated fruitless trials and errors. Every obstacle on the way helps him learn how to avoid another. Needless to say, this journey lasts for long periods of time" <sup>5</sup>

Regardless of the cultural differences between east and west, the method of technique acquirement, which requires revising, continued practices, and trial and error, is applied to not only the Japanese martial arts but also other arts.

### 3. Training of Boarding Pupil

A skilled sword appraiser explained how to improve the appraisal techniques. "There is no special training method to follow. All you have to do is to look at a grand sword by your side every day. After a year, you will have fine appraisal techniques." In other words, even if you don't receive special training, you will acquire techniques by having contact with genuine object.

This theory precisely applies to the training of a boarding pupil in the Japanese martial arts and other performing arts. During the training, a master only shows his techniques and doesn't give any instructions. The boarding pupil lives in his master's dwelling and shares the life. During that time, he mainly performs domestic duties including cleaning and washing, but has no special time allocated for training. However, he has opportunities to look at his master teaching his "commuting pupils", who, unlike the boarding pupils, visit the master's house for training from their homes. Although he can only observe the practice carefully, this is actually an excellent opportunity for him to learn and come in contact with authentic techniques. He uses this opportunity to revise his techniques by learning by sight his master's techniques and mastery.

On the other hand, a commuting pupil is given an opportunity to create an image of art with his imagination by listening to his master's detailed verbal explanation. In the Japanese martial arts and other performing arts, the traditional basic philosophy is to "learn the techniques by stealing it".

Although the technique acquired with every possible helps is easily forgotten, the one acquired through repeated revising with trial and error is hard to forget.

Kozo Masuda, grand master of shogi (Japanese chess), explained how he trains his boarding pupils in his book.

"I reproach my pupil until he learns the basic manners. I thoroughly train him with basics and break his old habits. ... It is irresponsible to let him do what he wants from the beginning. The right way is to discipline him first and let him be after he learns the basics. It is master's responsibility to teach the basics to his pupil, but after that, it is his (the pupil's) responsibility to develop and acquire his personal style, which is very important."<sup>6</sup>

"I decided to become the best shogi master when I was fourteen and left home in Hiroshima. I went to master Kimi's house in Osaka and became one of boarding pupils. I used to work very hard washing dishes and clothes and running errands... Senior pupils mostly taught me shogi, but master Kimi never did. During the practices, they didn't even tell me any case-by-case advices you may find on tactics book for amateurs. Even though I lost badly many times, I never gave up and trained myself until I mastered the techniques."<sup>7</sup>

As a boarding pupil lives in his master's house and performs domestic duties, he observes

his master teaching other commuting pupils and comes in close contact with his master's human nature through learning of the techniques. As he learns the master's approach to the techniques and art in everyday life, he will learn them naturally and eventually master the school style without even realizing it.

Since it takes a long time to learn the techniques of martial arts or other performing arts, there are less and less boarding pupils now. Their future isn't promising even after many years of hard work. Needless to say, life as a boarding pupil isn't financially secure, either.

From a training perspective, it is an excellent way to become a boarding pupil because you will have many opportunities to observe practices to learn the techniques. The technique is a medium used to pass down the culture of martial arts and other performing arts to the next generation. Neglecting the technique learning will lead to the decline of martial arts or other performing arts. The educational significance of a boarding pupil system is to learn the techniques thoroughly.

Ikuta called it as an initiation into a "world of technique" <sup>8</sup> in her book. To move oneself from everyday living space into a unique space of a training room or dojo in order to learn the techniques is educationally significant because it will enhance a boarding pupil's awareness as a learner. In that sense, he is more conscious about the initiation into the world of swordsmanship and learns more techniques both consciously and unconsciously than a commuting student.

#### 4. Training and Seeking

Ukichichi Sato, author of "Eternal Kendo", explained in his book that he considered the following section of Max Webers' lecture "Science as a Vocation" as the fundamental spirit of kendo training.

"And whoever lacks the capacity to put on blinders, so to speak, and to come up to the idea that the fate of his soul depends upon whether or not he makes the correct conjecture at this passage of this manuscript may as well stay away from science."<sup>9</sup>

Sato emphasizes that kendo professionals must apply this idea to their intensive kendo training. It is meaningful to devote oneself in kendo training with a focus on the techniques and make a sincere effort with the simple spirit of learning the techniques.

The training method of the Japanese martial arts and other performing arts is shown in the figure 2. It is a simple circle figure with three dots, which represents: (A) Learning correct techniques, (B) Revising the techniques, (C) Practicing the techniques repeatedly. While a pupil revises the correct techniques and continues to practice, he receives little instruction

from his master. After the explanation of basic techniques, he continues to practice until he can employ them subconsciously. A brief instruction may be given if any movement is found awkward. The purpose of this method is to let him take time to practice according to his level. Although it may seem mindless, the pupil will be able to find reason for his existence and his passion to risk it in the course of practice.

Supported by such passion, he practices again and again to acquire the techniques and achieves the unthinkable result.

Tomio Yamanouchi, who has the highest ranking in kendo, followed his sword principle and took two and half years to achieve one million swings after he became 60 years old. He told me as he reflected, "Around 300,000 times, I learned the right way to hold the sword and around 700,000 to 800,000, I learned the right way to swing. When I reached one million, I had this indescribable sense in my palms when I struck and thrust with the sword."

This is a fundamental method to acquire the elements of techniques by swinging the sword, which is the most basic way for acquiring the techniques in kendo. It is also a good example to substantiate that "knowing" and "doing" are different.

When practicing the martial arts or other performing arts, to know the techniques doesn't mean that you can actually do it. Specifically in this case, knowing how to hold a bamboo sword and strike with it doesn't mean that you can immediately employ the technique. Without strict, hard practices, it is impossible to acquire and employ any techniques. This theory applies not only to the martial arts and other performing arts but also to the academic fields.

## 5. Endless World

Although many introductory books of the martial arts and other performing arts offer photos of each technique movement, you can't learn the "flow of 'ma' (distance in space and time)" between each picture. It is very important to learn "flow of 'ma'" in the martial arts and other performing arts. It can be acquired only through master's correction, own revision, and repeated practices.

I found an interesting fact by comparing the method of practice and instruction of samisen (Japanese musical instrument) and piano. Today, chemise is learned using musical note (or staff notation), but it used to be taught by master's verbal instructions. Compared to the old method, it is much easier to play samisen now; however, the experts say the sound has become "soulless". In other words, although the music is technically correct because it is played according to the music note, it has no "ma" and the sound lacks quintessential



Japanese beauty of “wabi-sabi”. “Soulless” means it is not appealing to a listener and has no character. Although it’s not wrong to play samisen according to the note, it’s not interesting to listen to it either.

A musician from foreign country once made a remark on a Japanese pianist saying, “The pianist played the music notes perfectly and has advanced techniques. However, I felt that the music was something different.” This has something in common with the “soulless” sound of samisen. Since each player has different personalities and grew up in different environments, the passion towards music naturally differs. Such differences form each player’s characteristics and the ability to acquire “ma”.

What touches or strikes someone’s mind is based on the type and amount of training accumulated over the years. Since it’s not a technique to be taught by someone, you need to learn it by yourself.

You move up the ladder by imitating and practicing again and again, however, neither master nor student has a clear criteria of when to advance to the next level. The Japanese traditional method to learn and teach techniques is not to define each level so that students can set their own goal. In that respect, each level in the martial arts is merely a rough standard and doesn’t assure the acquirement of techniques.

The ultimate goal of technique acquirement is to “surpass” one’s master; however, it is unprecedented or unfounded. You may be convinced that you have surpassed your master, but no one else may approve it. The martial arts and other performing arts are referred to as “endless world” because of their unclear definition of each level and the evaluation. As he who lives in this endless world ages, he adds more “profoundness” in accordance with his learning process and character. Some people describe it as the quintessence of technique or art. Although everyone has different style of kendo technique and it is difficult to pinpoint the difference, each technique represents unique beauty and profoundness of the person despite its invisibility.

Ultimately, you can’t repeat the same physical moment twice. However, you can accomplish it by the acquirement of “ma”, which needs to be acquired by yourself and can not be taught by someone. This is an eternal theme in the martial arts and other performing arts.

Although the training in the martial arts and other performing arts is considered to be an “endless world”, the time to retire will come when you feel “imbalance between mind, technique and body”. You must make your own judgment when you need to step down.

## 6. Secret of Kendo and “The Cat’s Eerie Skill”

The story of “The Cat’s Eerie Skill (Neko no Myojyutsu)” is in one of traditional books of swordsmanship secrets called “Inaka Soshi”, which was written by Chozan Issai (given name: Niwa Juro Uemon Tadaaki) in the 18th century (between Genroku and Kyoho period). Chozan was a samurai in Sekiyado Domain located at the turnoff of Tone River, which was very prosperous with important transportation passage to Edo and Choshi. He got paid as a flag commissioner (hata bugyo) in the domain and was well-acquainted with Shintoism, Confucianism and Buddhism with particular knowledge of Taoism and Zen Buddhism. The story of “The Cat’s Eerie Skill” was valued by Tesshu Yamaoka and hardly shared with anyone although he shared other books regardless of the school. The story sounds rather too well-made and artificial, but I will try to explain it plainly.

The story starts with “There used to be a swordsman named Shoken”. A big rat started living in his house and is giving him a hard time by running wildly in his reception room in the daylight.

He decided to borrow a couple of feisty cats from his neighbors and put them in the room, but none of them was a match for the rat. Being impatient, he grabbed his wooden sword with one hand and tried to strike him, but he slipped right through his swing. He almost got scratched when he wasn’t paying enough attention.

Exhausted from the battle with a big rat, Shoken wiped the sweat and took a short breath. Then he remembered about the rumor of an “incomparably talented cat” that lives six or seven blocks from his house. He sent an errand immediately and borrowed the cat, but he was very disappointed at the appearance of the cat as he looked old, dull and very weak.

“I might as well take a chance and put him in the room”, said Shoken. So he opened the screen door and threw the cat in the room. To his surprise, the wild rat became terrified all of a sudden and couldn’t even take a step. Without any attempt, the cat grabbed him by the mouth and dragged him to Shoken. Thus, all the hassles caused by the rat ended quickly.

The main subject of the story is the lesson of the dull cat to the other feisty cats and it starts from here.

“Quick black cat” began talking as he was getting frustrated. “I started my mouse catching training as a kitten and have studied the feat of agility and acrobatics. I have never failed to catch rats running on beams, either.” The dull cat responded, “The only thing you learned was the form of technique. That is why you are constantly seeking for the moment to use your technique. The principle of technique is taught during the practice of technique acquirement. The principle itself may seem simple but it contains the deep truth. If you only imitate the form of technique without knowing the truth or principle, you tend to compare your techniques with someone else’s. Since they aren’t based on the truth or principle, they

become artificial and do more harm than good.” He warned the harmful effect that may be caused by those who are exclusively oriented toward techniques or who are proud of their techniques.

Next, “Big striped cat” stepped forward saying, “What I think is important in martial arts is force of energy (ki). I have trained it for a while. My energy has become very strong and expanded greatly. Only after I overpowered my opponent with my concentrated energy (kiai), I fought with him freely according to his tactics. I could employ any techniques with ease, but my tactics wasn’t effective at all against the rat.” The dull cat said, “The only thing you trained was using the force of energy. In that case, you are still relying on yourself. It works only when your opponent has less energy, but if the opponent has more, he will be beyond your control. You have no chance against someone who would risk losing his life like that rat.

“Older gray cat” said, “I already learned the theory and have made an effort to train my mind. I have refrained myself from expressing my anger, kept myself from fighting with anyone, and maintained my peace of mind. This is, so to speak, my tactics of “beating the air”. However, my peace of mind didn’t stand a chance against the rat.” The dull cat said, “Your tactics is closer to the secret than the tactics using the force of energy, but alas, it’s not natural because you reasoned yourself into making peace. You need to throw away discretion and use your techniques in a detached state of mind according to your sense. Thus, the dull cat denied each cat’s training method that was dedicated for technique (waza), energy (ki) and mind (kokoro) respectively. He changed the tone of his voice and came to a conclusion. “Even the best man meets his match. When I was young, there was a cat in the neighboring village. He did nothing but slept all day, and had no energy in him. He was just like a wooden cat, but strangely, there was not even a rat seen around him. If he was taken to a rat-infested place, they would disappear instantly. I asked him what he did, but he would just laugh and didn’t give me an answer. He who knows the truth never speaks and he who doesn’t always speaks. He was truly great because he attained the selfless, unfettered state of mind. He was far more superior to me.”

It is a difficult concept to learn, but the “secret of kendo” is to attain the self-less, aimless state of nothingness where you respond like a wind without leaving any trace.

## Summary

The world of technique seems to generally focus on the physical techniques; however, as we learned through the story of “The Cat’s Eerie Skill”, we know that it focuses something beyond the physical techniques. In view of the elements that make up martial arts and other

performing arts, the technique acquirement first requires concentrated efforts to observe and imitate and then, in a more advanced stage, incorporating every single hint that inspires you in your surroundings.

As I see how my pupils learn kendo techniques, I have noticed in many cases that they aren't training themselves in a wise manner. I presume that they will try to acquire all the techniques in a shorter time if the training is based on a certain curriculum. However, as I explained in the chapter of "Training of Boarding Pupil", something that is considered unnecessary actually contains an important element of learning. Everything that you are exposed to while learning the techniques helps build your own style and profoundness in your techniques.

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