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Philosophy of kendo: killing sword and life living sword. Reconsider the meaning of the culture of kendo in connection with the ideas of *setsunintou* and *katsuninken*

Teruo Oboki

Saitama University, Japan

Abstract

This paper is intended to make the philosophy of kendo clear on two themes: the first is about martial arts, which were originally a culture of destruction—one that specifically denied the lives of others for the sake of one's survival—and which were thus developed as techniques to kill and maim others, and which then became a measure to educate people to realize the importance of living together and one that has since been developed as a culture of creation; the second is about when and by whom battle techniques were converted into an apparatus to promote awareness of life. Author present theme from the viewpoint of body-and-mind relations, namely the philosophy of *setsunintou* (sword to kill people) and *katsuninken* (sword to restore people to life)—one of concepts in Zen, that was introduced into swordsmanship. The philosophy changed swordsmanship from killing techniques into techniques to restore and foster people.

To consider the issue, author focus on the relationship among military commanders, masters of martial arts and Zen priests, who lived from the latter half of the 16th century—when firearms were introduced from Europe into Japan, to the first half of the 17th century—when swordsmanship was systematized and written records about swordsmanship were compiled, focusing on: Nobutsuna Kamiizumi (1508-1582?), Muneyoshi Yagyu (1527-1606), Ieyasu Tokugawa (1542-1616), Munenori Yagyu (1571-1646), Soho Takuan (1573-1645) and Musashi Miyamoto (1584-1645). The spirit of these people, who lived through the Warring States Period of Japan and built a peaceful time, has been handed down as the spirit of swordsmanship.

Keywords: philosophy of kendo • sword to kill people • sword to restore people to life

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Corresponding author: Teruo Oboki, Saitama University, 255 Shimo-Okubo, Sakura-ku, Saitama City, Saitama 338-8570, Japan; e-mail: tobokiuno@yahoo.co.jp

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is intended to make the philosophy of kendo clear on two themes: the first is about martial arts, which were originally a culture of destruction—one that specifically denied the lives of others for the sake of one's survival—and which were thus developed as techniques to kill and maim others, and which then became a measure to educate people to realize the importance of living together and one that has since been developed as a culture of creation; the second is about when and by whom battle techniques were converted into an apparatus to promote awareness of life.

All people who are born into this world are destined to struggle with how to survive this world until they depart their lives. The challenge of how to live a given life is a fundamental and compelling issue for those of us who have lived “right here and now” through different countries, regions and generations. People have made many and varied efforts to seek an answer to that question in various places around the world in various times. These efforts have been embodied today in the forms of religions, ideas, philosophies, and literatures. On the other hand, people have continuously killed each other in battles and wars throughout history. How can we understand and overcome the biggest contradiction embraced by humankind? There is a contradiction between two sides of human nature: to commits murder each other and to persist in life. That can be considered one of the most difficult question among many difficult questions.

In 2000, 15 years ago, a book titled “Why War? – An exchange of letters between Freud and Einstein” was published in Japan. In 1932, Albert Einstein (1879 – 1955), who was then 53 year old and who had been awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics that year, was asked by the League of Nations to deal with a theme that Einstein deemed most important to human beings and to exchange letters with the person with whom he most wanted to exchange opinions concerning that theme. The title of the book come from a theme selected by Einstein. The correspondent selected by Einstein was Sigmund Freud (1856 – 1939), a psychoanalyst who was then 76 years old. Einstein asked Freud whether we could free ourselves from the constraints of war and whether we could lead our minds to a specified direction so that we would not be touched with the mental diseases of hatred and destruction. In reply, Freud sought to answer the questions by using the words of *eros* (life drive) and *thanatos* (death drive). Freud placed his last glimmer of hope on the ‘development of culture’, saying that it didn’t seem likely that we could rid people of

aggressiveness.

How then can we find a clue to solve this old-but-new difficult question from our standpoints as practitioners who belong to a sports group and who have placed ourselves in the world of fighting sports? In daily life, the actions of hitting, kicking, throwing and grappling an opponent are prohibited as wrongful acts. However, in sports in which practitioners confront and compete against each other, the integrated operation of all mental and physical functions to strive for victory—including rational mind, emotion and physical sense—is valued. As a result, the victor is praised. What is prohibited in daily life is permitted in the fictitious space of sports. This can be seen notably in fighting sports including martial arts. In fighting sports, what do people utter from the movement *sensuos*¹ that can be recognized through the fictitious space of a match? In particular, this paper will focus on the words of *kendo* that were generated based on the worst possible situation for human beings in which people pointed swords at each other in a struggle for life or death.

THE WORLD OF KENDO

Fifty-three years has passed since I started practicing martial arts, and forty-three years has passed since I became interested in the culture of martial arts and started to explore what the martial arts are, while having a glimpse into the world of martial arts and Zen in old times and their historical backgrounds.

In the world of martial arts, we practice what is prohibited in daily life as a matter of course. Moreover, defeating an opponent in an excellent way is praised. *Kendo* was originally developed as a training method for killing and wounding others with one stroke of a Japanese sword (*ittou*) for self-defence or in a battle. *Kendo* has since evolved in its own right as an athletic sport to compete for *ippon* with *shinai* while wearing armour. Thus a world in which we previously sought to kill each other was placed into an athletic event called *kendo* in the framework of sports and practiced by many devotees. By the way, the 16th World Kendo Championships was held on May this year at the Nippon Budokan and practitioners from 46 countries and regions participated. The number of devotees of *kendo* are increasing not only in Japan and also throughout the world.

As I said, *kendo* started from the idea of killing and wounding each other with a Japanese sword. Although

1. Movement sensuous, the conscious mind feeling sense of movement. The movement sensuos Kinaesthese which Husser says.

the Japanese sword was replaced by a *shinai*, there was no change in the structures of the motions in delivering passes and blows. Even although *kendo* assumes acceptance of what we are prohibited from doing in 'normal life', the number of *kendo* practitioners is increasing. If I may explain the sensuous movement to be felt as a practitioner, I might be attracted by the strong pressure and sense of release by throwing an explosive *ippon* generated from the pressure.

In *kendo*, the concepts of facing each other and never retreating are valued. In a normal environment without psychological pressure, people are supposed to process information properly, make a level-headed judgment and act in a prompt manner. However, in *kendo*, practitioners are required to behave normally in an abnormal environment in which they come close to one another and put psychological pressure on each other. *Kendo* training aims to foster an ability to convert pressure into more energy. That ability is considered to correspond to an ability to convert trouble into an opportunity.

The culture of *kendo* has twice faced the threat of extinction in Japan. The first time was during the Meiji Period (1686-1911), a time when Japan ranked with the Great Powers of the West and had started out on its voyage as a modern state. The second time was in 1945 when Japan surrendered unconditionally in the Pacific War. Despite the two threats to its existence stated above, *kendo* has survived and gained popularity among women and overseas devotees. What was the strong energy of *kendo* that enabled it to survive?

To answer that question, it is essential to consider *kendo* from a historical viewpoint.

To understand the culture of *kendo*, we have to look back to the 10th century when *samurai* appeared as a class of rulers in society. In the 12th century, *samurai* held the reins of government and invited many Zen priests to Kamakura, the capital at the time, from China. These priests came to be spiritual support for the *samurai*. Zen priests metaphorically applied the sword function of 'cutting' to saving souls and healed the distress of *samurai*. Zen priests used the words *setsunintou* and *katsuninken* as means to heal distress of *samurai*. On the other hand, *samurai* felt something similar to belief towards swords which were used as means.

WHAT ARE SETSUNINTOU AND KATSUNINKEN?

The words *setsunintou* and *katsuninken* can be found in Rules 12 and 15 of "*Hekiganroku*," a

collection of sayings compiled in the early 12th century that indicated education methods for a master of the Zen sect to instruct disciple in achieving the state of mental detachment (*mushin*). A good master observed his disciples and, while being opposed to each other, uses the two methods of *setsunintou* and *katsuninken* flexibly—according to time and occasions—without placing too much weight on either method to instruct his disciples in how to achieve the state of *mushin*. *Setsunintou* means to deprive a disciple of and disallow worldly thoughts. *Katsuninken* means to accept and approve the words of a disciple. Sogen Omori, who succeeded as master of the swordplay school called the Jikishinkage School established in the Edo Period was also a Zen priest, and he explained *setsunintou* and *katsuninken* in his book "*Hekiganroku*" as follows: *setsunintou* is the function of denial and is synonymous with deprivation. *Katsuninken* is, in opposition, the function of affirmation and is synonymous with giving. Affirming and giving are not always good, and denying is not always bad. Using two swords properly, according to time and occasion, eventually resulted in one sword. This was a discipline of Zen priests, in other words, a practice and an example from old times to master the double-edged sword that can kill and spare others as one likes freely without interference.

I would like to call your attention to this by pointing out that using two swords (*nitou*) properly according to time and occasion eventually result in one sword (*ittou*). In this case, *ittou* means the ability of a master to read the state of mind of his disciples intuitively and determine which sword to use. This ability is referred to in Zen as a function to seize an opportunity (*ki wo miru kokoro*). For that purpose, a master is confronted by a disciple with seriousness and wields two swords when the opportunity comes to make his disciple understand the function of *mushin*.

In the 13th century, the philosophy of Zen as stated above was imported from China by Chinese Zen priests and accepted by the *samurai* during the Kamakura Period (1192-1333) when the *samurai* obtained political power. In course of time, prominent Japanese Zen priests appeared and brought relief to the wavering minds of *samurai* and many other people. In particular, the *samurai* who handled administration and military affairs in society formed a closer relationship with Zen priests. One of the reasons for this is that the spirits of the *samurai* and the Zen sect has the common theme of looking at life from the viewpoint of death and also has a common point in addressing a challenge on one's own.

The social roles of *samurai* and Zen priest alike are, for the sake of principle, to give relief to all living things.

Although it tends to be thought that a *samurai* carried a sword or a spear, as a matter of fact, Ieyasu Tokugawa (1542-1616) made the most of firearms to suppress the country. In 1615, Ieyasu destroyed the Toyotomi Family and brought the long-standing and war-torn country to an end. However, Ieyasu then imposed strict restrictions on the production of firearms that had yielded the military victories, and restored swordplay with the use of sword that was not as effective as a military weapon. The system established by Ieyasu built a period of peace that lasted for about 260 years until 1868. What was his intention?

Unfortunately, no description as to his intention appeared in Japanese literature. However, a description was identified in “Giving up the Gun: Japan’s Reversion to the Sword” written by the American author Noel Perrin in 1979, 36 years ago. That book had anti-war and anti-nuclear themes, and was translated into Japanese by Heita Kawakatsu and published in 1991 [1], and said:

Only a few years after firearms were introduced to Japan in 1543, Japan started to produce guns and created the best weapons in the world by improving their function and became the leading country in terms of possessing guns. However, as Noel Perrin said, Japan relinquished that position for five reasons.

- I. Many *samurai* felt that control over the country was not working effectively;
- II. The Japanese were tough soldiers and the islands of Japan were difficult to invade due to natural conditions;
- III. A sword had far more symbolic meaning in Japan than in Europe;
- IV. The background factor to the downgrading of the role guns was a reactionary trend that the attitude of Western people toward the Christian religion and commerce was unacceptable; and
- V. The sword as a weapon is connected to a graceful movement of the person wielding it. The reason, therefore, is simple as a sword is more dignified than a firearm.

Although all the above reasons are persuasive, in my opinion, there were more important factors.

That was the fact that military commanders who had fought with pride and honour in facing an opponent and fighting fairly were killed by a gunshot from an unknown shooter in confrontations with gun-bearing troops consisting of foot soldiers (*ashigaru*), which were organized and delivered an intense attack. As a result, military commanders in each region who had possessed military and political powers since the 12th century felt a sense of crisis that wisdom, courage and ethics as *samurai* might be instantly dispelled. Therefore, Ieyasu Tokugawa—who brought together military commanders in each region—took the measure to refrain from using firearms and keep swordplay alive, not as a technique to kill and wound an opponent in war, but as one for creating a new era of peace that incorporated wisdom, courage and ethics to be passed on to offspring.

PEOPLE WHO CHANGED SWORDPLAY (KENJUTU) INTO SWORDWAY (KENDO)

To discuss this issue, I would like to focus on the relationships among military commanders, masters of the martial arts, and Zen priests who had lived from the late 16th century when guns were introduced into Japan from Europe, to the early 17th century when swordplay was systematized and written records were compiled.

The people whom I would address are Nobutsuna Kamiizumi (1508-1582), Muneyoshi Yagyu (1527-1606), Ieyasu Tokugawa (1542-1616), Munenori Yagyu (1571-1646) and Soho Takuan (1573-1645). They were all lived in the Age of Civil Wars in Japan and sought to establish peace. How were their spirits reflected in swordplay?

From Nobutsuna Kamiizumi to Muneyoshi Yagyu
 Kamiizumi employed *setsunintou* and *katsuninken*, the educational methods of Zen Buddhist, as the philosophies of swordplay. Kamiizumi defined *setsunintou* as defeating an opponent by attacking through to the end, and *katsuninken* as defeating an opponent by moving according to an opponent’s action.

Kamiizumi decided neither to acknowledge nor destroy other schools, and extracted the principle of *kimyou* from various techniques of many schools including the Kage School. To correspond to a new era, he created and systematized a technique to convert an attack according to an opponent’s action, which was a simple and sole technique against techniques manipulated in various manners. That was the Shinkage School. The main point of the Shinkage School was the training in putting oneself at risk and

seizing the opportunity to move oneself beneath the sword of an opponent and perform a technique. The school was proud of its training as not only a technique for a warrior in one-on-one battle but as a technique of a great and wise military commander for battle against a group of opponents.

Kamiizumi taught all his techniques to Muneyoshi Yagyu and imposed on Muneyoshi the challenge of developing a specific technique to express the idea of *mutou* [2].

From Muneyoshi Yagyu to Ieyasu Tokugawa Relationship between Muneyoshi and Ieyasu through swordplay

In 1594, Muneyoshi demonstrated to Ieyasu the techniques of *marobashi* and *tsutomete eiyu no kokoro wo shiru zegoku ittou* (the most important thing is to look at an opponent's action, taking efforts to understand his mind), which was a technique of *mutoudori* that represented a way of using a long sword (*tachi*) to change one's stance freely according to an opponent and indicate one's pride as a military commander. At that time, Ieyasu was in the second highest position in the whole country. Ieyasu was so impressed by the demonstration of Muneyoshi that he not only immediately became a disciple of Muneyoshi but employed Muneyoshi as an instructor for the Tokugawa Family. The thinking of Ieyasu can be analogized by the following statements.

Statements of Ieyasu [3]

I could rule the whole country thanks to both Shingen Takeda and Mitsunari Ishida. (*Roudanki*) Ieyasu was defeated overwhelmingly in the battle of Mikatagahara by Shingen Takeda, a general of the enemy, and decided to kill himself. After the death of Shingen, Ieyasu respected Shingen and learned from him as a master. Then, in the fateful battle of Sekigahara, Ieyasu narrowly defeated his rival Mitsunari Ishida. In later years, Ieyasu even felt gratitude toward Mitsunari. Hero knows hero's mind.

A general does not want to kill people. He thinks solely of avoiding having to face difficulty. (*Gyokuonsho*)

A good commander recognizes a reason for victory or defeat before avoiding a battle. (*Tootoumi Kenbun Ryakki*)

From Ieyasu Tokugawa to Munenori Yagyu (son of Muneyoshi)

Statements of Ieyasu to those who take a position of leadership

The whole country is for the people of the whole country. You should not consider the whole country

as being for you yourself. Likewise, a country is for the people of the country, not for yourself. Home is also a home for the family, not for yourself. Nothing can be formed by yourself. (*Buyashokudan*)

Utensils will not avail you in the hour of danger, no matter how valuable they are. A treasure among treasures is a person. (*Iwabuchi Yawa Besshu*)

Every leader of a region should dispel the worries of the people with a merciful heart. (*Koroushodan*)

Statements of Munenori who accepted Ieyasu's will

Zegoku means to capture the essence of a subject. *Ittou* means to seize the opportunity of an opponent, not a sword. (*Heiho Kadensho*) [4] Munenori put stress there on fostering the ability to seize the opportunity. Munenori also explained using the words *setsunintou* and *katsuninken* employed by Kamiizumi that the blade that kills people should become the sword that brings people to life, and that if we use *setsunintou* in order to calm a disordered society and society becomes calm as the result, *setsunintou* is exactly *katsuninken*. Munenori proposed the idea that in an ordered society, a sword must be something that can contribute to the development of the personality of a *samurai*, not a practical technique for fighting.

Relationship between Munenori Yagyu and Soho Takuan

The Zen priest Takuan explained to Munenori that in order to seize the opportunity accurately, the ego in one's mind (*ga*) should be discarded—but not by stopping the function of the mind.

Munenori put stress on a state of mind that could totally accept and respond freely to the approach of an opponent, while explaining the methods of manipulating a sword. Accordingly, it was acknowledged that the art of war was consistent with Buddhism and had many common points with Zen. The concept of the sword and Zen are one (*ken zen icchi*) widely spread and had a lot of influence in the Edo Period, due as well to the authoritative position of Munenori as a master of the art of war for the Shogun Family.

CONCLUSION

As seen above, it can be recognized that a place where people killed each other was transformed into a place of live and death (actual fighting) → a place of real sword (accomplishments of art) → a place of confrontation (athletic sport)=a place of recovering from mental disorder.

Kamiizumi and Muneyoshi who were involved in the above transformation were not only swordsmen, but also military commanders who ruled regions. Their challenge was to create and hand down sword techniques from the viewpoint of such techniques being a necessary qualification that, as a *samurai*, the leader of a group should have. They established the Shinkage School to represent an awareness that the true enemy was not an opponent but within oneself, and to build the pride of *samurai*.

It is said that Ieyasu was so impressed by the technique called *mutō-dori* created by Muneyoshi Yagyu that Ieyasu acknowledged the technique as one worthy of securing the qualification as *samurai* in the peaceful age to come. Then, what is the *mutō-dori*?

I interpret this question that *Mutou*, as intended by Yagyu, was exactly the same as a *samurai* becoming a Japanese sword that did not fold nor bend, was sharp and which had a beautiful figure. Regarding this thoughts, Tenshin Okakura (1862-1913) who was taught by Ernest Francisco Fenollosa, similarly to Jigoro Kano, and served as the principal of the Tokyo Fine Arts School and the director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, USA, referenced that ideal of *samurai* living in the late middle age, the Muromachi Period (1392-1573), was to be a sword, not to use a sword. “A Japanese sword that did not fold nor

bend” means flexibility or the principle of flexibility (*Ju*), “to be sharp” means distinguished strength, and “a beautiful figure” means a natural posture that can apply a technique to convert an attack according to an opponent’s action. On the other hand, Tenshin said that being a sword meant that *samurai* became like a sword that was pure, clear, steadfast and always pointing to the pole star².

Here, I want to note a statement by Daisetsu Suzuki, a Buddhism scholar (1870-1966): In answer to the proposition “how can you forget yourself on the very eve of killing each other?” is that continuing effort to deepen the emotional function and the spiritual perspective through practice can lead to a universal truth beyond a mere individual activity (“The Eastern Way of Seeing Things”, Iwanami Bunko). This remark can be interpreted as the mental condition of a samurai who can reach after he become a Japanese sword.

The spirit built by the pioneers as described above has been inherited in the spirit of modern *kendo*. I am extremely desirous that the world of the martial arts can lead to a universal truth beyond a mere individual activity as explained by Daisetsu.

2. Tenshin Okakura, „The Ideal of the East”, Kodansha Gakujutsu Bunko, 1986: 152

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