

The Fundamental Theorem of Kendo?

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Kendo is composed of an immense number of techniques and concepts centered on the combative scenario of Japanese swordplay. Many of these concepts are intertwined with one another.

Even concepts which seem to be of completely different mindsets have inherent relations. One specific example is **shikake** and **oji waza** or “attacking” and “counterattacking” techniques. While these are related in the obvious sense that they are both ways to hit a target their relation is much deeper than this.

Using this example as a starting point, the intent is to show how many common concepts in **kendo** can be generalized from their “beginner” definitions to ones which give rise to a much wider scope and attempt to broaden our understanding of these concepts. The result of this generalization will be to show how **shikake** and **oji waza** are related to one another so deeply that they can in fact be considered the same thing. Through this relation, a simplification of **kendo** appears.

Basic Definitions

The following are basic definitions for the various notions discussed throughout. These basic definitions will be built upon in the following sections.

Suki. “(1) *Gap, space*, (2) *break, interval*, (3) *chink (in one’s armor), chance, opportunity*”. In **kendo** **suki** is used to refer to an opening in the opponent’s (or your own) defenses. This opening can either be physical, for example an exposed target area, or mental such as a momentary loss of concentration, focus, or **connection** with the opponent.

Shikake waza. **Shikake waza** are techniques in which one initiates an attack. Examples of **shikake waza** would be **tobi komi waza**, **harai waza**, **katsugi waza**, etc... The general idea is that the **kendoka** creates or takes advantage of an existing **suki** by attacking with strong spirit.

Oji waza. **Oji waza** are techniques in which one responds to an attack initiated by the opponent. Examples of **oji waza** would be **nuki waza**, **suriage waza**, **uchiotoshi waza**, etc...

The title of this article is a play on “Fundamental Theorems” from Mathematics, most notably the Fundamental Theorem of Calculus ($\frac{d}{dx} \int f(x) dx = f(x)$ and $\int_a^b f(x) dx = F(b) - F(a)$, $\frac{d}{dx} F(x) = f(x)$) which relates two seemingly unrelated concepts.

Connection. This refers to the mental and physical connection one establishes with the opponent. A very rudimentary example of this connection is the one established through basic **metsuke**¹ or “point of observation”. In this example, this point is the eyes of the opponent. Once this basic **connection** is established one begins to perceive the opponent’s movements and attacks through peripheral vision. A true **connection** distinguishes an opponent from a **motodachi**.

¹ The full term is “enzan no metsuke” (遠山の目付け) or “looking at a distant mountain”. The concept of this is that one looks at something as a whole v.s. looking at a specific detail at the expense of others. A western equivalent is “can’t see the forest for the trees.”

Sente. “*First move, initiative*”, abbreviated as **sen**. The idea of **sen** is that one is “ready to act”. A more concise explanation is that one never allows a **suki** to be passed up.

Sutemi. “*Body abandoning*”. **Sutemi** can be interpreted as “all or nothing”. This stems from the idea that in actual combat each strike must be performed with the mentality that to “kill, be killed, or both” are the only possible outcomes. The slightest hesitation or doubt would only result in your own death.

Kamae. “*Stance or position*”. The immediate notion of **kamae** in **kendo** refers to the stance one assumes with the **shinai** or **bokuto**, e.g., **chudan**, **jodan**, **gedan**, etc...

Kiai. “*Energy integration/union*”. Initially in **kendo** this refers to the shouts used when attacking; the verbal expression of our “fighting spirit”.

Ki ken tai no ichi. “*Spirit/energy, sword, body as one*”. This is one of the most commonly referenced ideas in **kendo**, and is often introduced very early to a **kendoka**. The most basic explanation of **ki ken tai no ichi** is that in order to strike effectively one must strike the target at the same time as the foot lands with strong **kiai** all in a smooth motion.

Zanshin. “*Mind that is left-over/remaining*”. **Zanshin** is most commonly introduced as “follow-through” (after a strike) in **kendo**. The basic explanation of **zanshin** is that after one strikes “you must move past your opponent and return to **kamae**.”

Seme. “*To attack, or to assault*”. **Seme** is often translated as “pressure” in **kendo**, but in the sense of a mental or physical pressure applied (to the opponent) as a result of one’s imminent attack.

Mitsu no sen. “*The three sen*”. A somewhat more advanced topic in **kendo**, this is the three opportunities (in time) at which point one

can attack the opponent. The **mitsu no sen** are (1) sen no sen, (2) go sen no sen, and (3) sen sen no sen or essentially “attacking as your opponent initiates”, “attacking after your opponent initiates”, and “initiating an attack to draw your opponent’s attack, then attacking the **suki** made by their action” respectively.

San satsu ho. “The three laws”. These are three methods through which one can defeat their opponent: ken o korosu, ki o korosu, and waza o korosu or “kill their sword”, “kill their spirit”, and “kill their techniques” respectively.

The four sicknesses. These are four afflictions of the mind which have the effect of disrupting one’s ability to express/perform **sen**, **sutemi** (attacks), **ki ken tai no ichi**, **zanshin**, or to disrupt one’s **kamae** or **connection**. The **four sicknesses** are fear, doubt, surprise, and confusion.

Extending our Definitions

Focus will be placed on expanding the previous basic definitions with more details, and more importantly, giving a generalization of their scope.

Ki Ken Tai no Ichi Revisited

Ki ken tai no ichi (hereafter KKTI) is the easiest place to start in our expansion. The basic definition given is often assumed to be the entirety of what KKTI implies.

The basic definition of KKTI given above, p.2, interprets the components as: **ki** implies **kiai**, your verbal expression of your “fighting spirit”, **ken** implies the sword striking a target, and **tai** implies your (front) foot landing during **fumi komi**, all of which must happen simultaneously in a smooth motion (“no ichi” or “as one”). But what about when we aren’t striking? Is KKTI something that we primarily ignore and then “turn on” when we strike? Examining each of the components of KKTI, expanding on their meaning, will help show that the basic definition is really only the tip of the iceberg.



Figure 1: Only the tip...

Ki. **Ki** translates as “spirit” and “energy” whereas the basic explanation given above implies **ki** is a “forceful yell” at the moment of striking. While **kiai** in **kendo** relates to yelling, yelling is not the same as **kiai**, nor is it the same as **ki**.

Kiai, literally translated, is “*Energy (ki) union/integration (ai)*” and is the natural by-product of the mind and body working together². An example of “real” **kiai** is the automatic grunt people utter the moment they lift something heavy. We don’t think of making this sound, it just happens naturally. This is simply the effect of our mental intent to lift the object combining with our body, motion, and muscles acting on that intent. This grunt is often a far cry from a “forceful yell” but it is real **kiai**. **Ki** then cannot only refer to **kiai**, even when limited to the yell at the moment of striking, as **kiai** refers to a *coordination* of energy whereas **ki** refers to the energy itself.

² Minoru Kiyota. *The Shambhala Guide to Kendo*. Shambhala, Boston and London, 2002

The mental component of our energy could be thought of as a composition of two previous ideas: **sen** and **sutemi**. In this context **ki** refers to an abstract notion; the energy or focus from a particular mindset. For **sen** it’s readiness to attack. For **sutemi** it’s determination to carry through with our intent regardless of outcome.

In each of the above (**kiai**, **sen**, and **sutemi**) **ki** is a component. However each of these aspects are essential not just during our strikes but *before, during, and after*. Given these broader interpretations perhaps a better translation for **ki**, in regards to a more generalized notion of KKTI, would be that it refers to one’s “*intent*”.

Ken. **Ken** is translated as sword, but in the limited context of the basic explanation of KKTI given, it specifically pertains to the sword striking the target. However our sword serves more than just as a means of striking a target. What about before our strike, i.e., our **kamae**?

The sword serves both as a means of offense and as defense in that an active **kamae** can create **suki** in our opponent as well as prevent them from appearing in our own defenses. What about immediately after the strike, i.e., during **zanshin**? An effective strike itself has many components, but in the context of “after the hit” the sword must be held in the proper position and at a correct angle. Aside from emulating a cut, this helps to maintain our posture and balance and also helps to protect ourselves from counter-attack.

Tai. **Tai** translates as body, but in the context above **tai** was limited to footwork. If we extend the notion of **tai** to the more general sense, i.e. that of the body before, during, and after a strike, **tai** refers to our body in general: movement, posture, balance, grip, breathing, and any other number of body movements.

Given these generalized notions of **ki**, **ken**, and **tai**, KKTI can be extended to situations before, during, and after a strike. This allows us to address our original question of whether or not KKTI was something that is simply turned on only when we wish to strike. The answer ought to be clear: “no”. KKTI must be present at all times or we couldn’t begin, land, or finish a strike in an effective or meaningful way.

Zanshin Revisited

Zanshin literally translates as “remaining mind” or “the mind that is left over”, but is commonly given the meaning of “follow-through” as indicated in our basic definitions. But this basic interpretation pertains to physical actions, whereas the literal translation of **zanshin** pertains to the mind. It makes sense that since **kendo** has both mental and physical components a stronger definition of **zanshin** encompasses both of these.

This is alluded in the IKF (International Kendo Federation) definition of “proper” **zanshin** with regards to **yuko datotsu** (lit. “*effective strike*”) as “*follow-through and a readiness against counter-attack*”³. This implies that after a strike, as well as the usual physical follow-through, one is also able to be prepared for the opponent’s possible counter attack. In essence a return to “readiness” mentally and physically. This has a very obvious connection to the notion of **sen**. From this we can see that the physical **zanshin** brings us back to our physical ready position, **kamae**, whereas the mental component of **zanshin** allows us to return to our “mental **kamae**”, **sen**.

However, what about motions or actions other than striking? We can in fact extend **zanshin** to a more general sense, as before, where it is present before, during, and after a strike. From our definitions **suki** can be both physical and mental openings; a gap in ones defenses or in ones concentration. Thus in order to maintain ones mental and physical readiness at all times one must exhibit a constant **zanshin**; a return to readiness after *each and every action*. This encompasses large actions such as moving, pushing, dodging, striking, parrying, etc... to small actions such as observing your opponent, looking for openings, adjusting your **kamae**, confirming your strike validity, etc...

The IKF’s definition of **zanshin**, as required in landing **yuko datotsu**, alludes to an extended definition of **zanshin**.

³ International Kendo Federation. *The Regulations of Kendo Shiai and Shinpan*. International Kendo Federation, 2005. March 2003 revision, 2nd printing

to even minute actions such as breathing, blinking, hearing your teammates call your name during **shiai**, etc...

This extended notion of **zanshin**, that of constantly returning ourselves to readiness, gives us a much more all-encompassing definition. While it ought to be clear that the basic definition of “follow-through” is most certainly an aspect of **zanshin**, it is not the entirety of **zanshin** itself. In this general context a better interpretation than that of “follow-through” would be that one demonstrates a constant “return to readiness” or a “sustained alertness”.

Sen and Sutemi

Another relatively simple relation that is not necessarily ever pointed out during practices is the relation between **sen** and **sutemi** (attacks).

Specifically, there needs to be expression of one in order to express the other in somewhat of a circular relation. That is they are both learned and practiced at the same time with one naturally strengthening of the other. In order to attack without hesitation or doubt, as indicated in the definition of **sutemi**, one must be in a constant state of “readiness to act” as defined by **sen**. And in order to truly be “ready to act” as defined by **sen**, one must possess the ability to attack without concern for outcome as defined by **sutemi**.

By examining this relation, we uncover one of the core components of **kihon** (fundamental/basics) **kendo**. When one practices **kihon**, apart from practice of basic **waza**, **maai** (distance & spacing), etc..., the common instruction given is always the simple notion of “attack, attack, attack!”, especially beginners. And why is this so important for **kihon**? The answer is simple: *by eliminating the choices one has during **kihon** practice exclusively to **shikake waza**, it naturally forces the practice of the **sen-sutemi** cycle.*

The necessity of fully incorporating this cycle into one’s practice, and illuminating as to why it is of such fundamental importance, will be shown in the following sections.

Seme

We can now start to pull the various pieces together and begin the next topic: **seme**. **Seme** is relatively simple to define and in fact the definition given at the start of the article is exactly what **seme** is. It is a pressure put on the opponent and while it is most often a perceived pressure versus a physical one, it is not strictly limited to this. The difficult issue, which we are now prepared to tackle, is the common question “how do I make **seme**?”

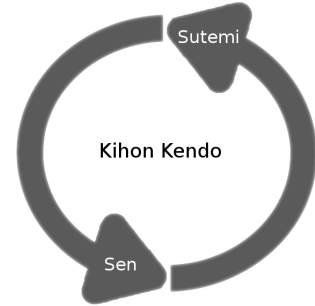


Figure 2: Sen and sutemi’s cyclic relation.

The relation between sen and sutemi uncovers one of the core aspects of practicing kendo basics.

Much like all things in **kendo**, **seme** is something that can only be discovered through years of practice. However the *verbal* answer as to how one makes it isn't all that complex given the discussions above. There are three aspects that we can break **seme** into: (1) "physical" **seme**, (2) "perceived" **seme**, and (3) "spiritual" **seme**. Before we go on, let's recall the definition of **seme**: "*to attack, or to assault*". **Seme** is often translated as "pressure" in **kendo** but it is in the sense of a mental or physical pressure applied (to the opponent) as a result of one's imminent attack.

It is important to note that there is no *guaranteed* source of **seme**, only *potential* sources. This is the difficulty beginners have with the notion of **seme** and is the reason for its elusiveness. The lack of guaranteed **seme** production is due to the fact that it depends both on oneself *and on the reactions and perceptions of the opponent*.

Physical seme. Physical **seme** pertains to a physical movement which conveys one's intent to attack. The act of moving toward the opponent, the visible initiation of one's attack, and attempts to physically disrupt the opponent's defenses are all examples of which can potentially create **seme** as they are all a possible prelude to attack.

It ought to be obvious that these examples will only produce **seme** if one performs them while expressing **sen** and of course **sutemi**. In fact, *seme will not be produced until one's expression of sen is established with the opponent*. This statement is the basis for all types of **seme**, however physical **seme** is primarily a direct consequence.

This needs to be clarified as it pertains to understanding **kihon kendo**. Establishing one's expression of **sen** means that the opponent knows that should you perceive a **suki** in their defenses there will be no hesitation on your part in attempting an attack. But the only attack which will establish this intent fully and allow you to take the perceived **suki** is a **sutemi** style attack. Thus *physical seme is a product of kihon kendo via the sen-sutemi cycle* discussed above, and is the basis for the more difficult forms of **seme**.

Perceived Seme. Perceived **seme** is much more difficult to produce as it depends both on your own ability to produce physical **seme** as well as on your opponent *perceiving seme* when you are not directly exerting it, i.e., your opponent perceives your intent and your ability to attack.

The first barrier of seme is that of establishing your expression of sen with the opponent.

Physical seme is a direct product of kihon kendo practice.

Connection. Before going further, we must more clearly define **connection**. To begin exerting perceived **seme**, one must establish and maintain a **connection** with the opponent. This **connection** has both mental and physical aspects. The mental connection implies one must perceive how the opponent will act to a given situation, their intents, as well as perception of their level of focus, KKTI, and **zanshin**. The physical connection allows one to react to physical movements, maintain distance, adjust **kamae**, etc. Thus a **connection** allows you to “mirror” the opponent mentally and physically, keeping a balance until a **suki** is found or created by oneself or one’s opponent. Maintaining an effective **connection** to the opponent is yet another barrier in understanding **seme**.

As this **seme** is perceived by the opponent it affects them (via the **four sicknesses**) in two crucial ways: their offense and defense. That is they become fearful of your initiation of attack and doubtful of their own initiatives due to perception of your intent to counter-attack.

Clearly, this type of **seme** is rooted in the notion of **sen** in the same way as physical **seme**. However, in order to extend **seme** from physical to perceived we must also express both of our generalized notions of **ki ken tai no ichi** and **zanshin**.

Expression of KKTI implies our intent, **kamae**, posture and movements are coordinated (with the intent to attack), while expression of **zanshin** implies we are constantly able to return to readiness after every action. This eliminates **suki** in ourselves and allows us to pursue or create them in our opponent. These are the conditions under which the opponent will perceive **seme**.

Spiritual Seme. The term spiritual **seme** could also be called projected **seme**. Projected **seme** is an extension of perceived **seme** and is the most difficult to produce. At the same time it is the most powerful in terms of its effect on the opponent. The idea of projected **seme** is that one is able to *pro-actively push their intent into the opponent’s perception* instead of passively waiting for it to be noticed.

The difference between the two types is linked to the strength of one’s **kamae**. Specifically, being able to use **kamae** to *constantly* challenge the opponent. The essence of this is that this type of **seme** is *proactive*; one threatens the opponent when in position to attack, and “*brings the threat to them*” if one is not in position. This proactivity is constant, which is the source of this **seme**’s devastating effects.

Establishing and being able to maintain a connection is another barrier of **seme**.

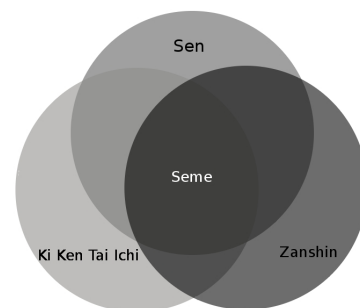


Figure 3: Simultaneous **sen**, **ki ken tai no ichi**, and **zanshin** produce **seme**.

It must be noted that **seme** is still possible without all conditions being perfectly met. This could be used to describe the difference between a high and a low ranking kendoka; aside from their technical proficiency it is their ability to express correct KKTI together with **zanshin** and a strong feeling of **sen** which sets them apart.

As projected **seme** is an extension of perceived **seme**, perceived **seme** is a barrier toward producing projected **seme**.

While **kamae** is a core aspect of perceived **seme**, it is much more important here as it is the source of our proactive threat. If one's **kamae** is perceived to be weak at any time, then it cannot be perceived as a threat. In order to project **seme**, the threat of attack must be constant; any **suki** in this offense can break this perception.

Strong **kamae** can be described as one's **kamae** being *active*. Instead of **kamae** being a static physical position of the sword, it has an active mental and physical component; one's intent is displayed through **kamae** as well as *pro-actively threatening and adapting to the opponent*. While **kamae** is implied in KKTI, it is of such importance here it must be emphasized separately. Given this understanding we can sum up our results as:

Ki ken tai no ichi, sen, and zanshin expressed properly have the effect of producing **seme** as a by-product of their union through one's **kamae**.

Mitsu no Sen, San Satsu Ho, & the Four Sicknesses Revisited

We will now roughly re-examine the **san satsu ho**, **mitsu no sen**, and the **four sicknesses** (hereafter SSH, MS, and FS respectively).

The SSH's meaning are clear from their descriptions. By disrupting the opponent's **kamae**, spirit, and **waza** we can create **suki**. Each are carried out through our **kamae**, **seme**, and expression of **sen**, KKTI, and **zanshin**.

The FS are effects produced through **seme** and are sources of **suki**. The primary result being disruption of one's **connection**, **sen**, KKTI, and **zanshin**. The SSH and FS are related in that the use of the SSH can produce one or all of the FS. Should the opponent suffer from one of the FS one can more effectively perform the SSH. The core idea is that they both stem from an application of **seme**.

It is also natural to ask what the defense would be against the SSH and the FS. The answer is simple: one's own ability to maintain their **connection** to the opponent, and to continue to maintain their expression of **sen**, KKTI, and **zanshin**.

The MS are three opportunities where one can strike the opponent. However, given our discussion of **seme**, the MS can now be interpreted as three types of **suki** made *through the application of seme*.

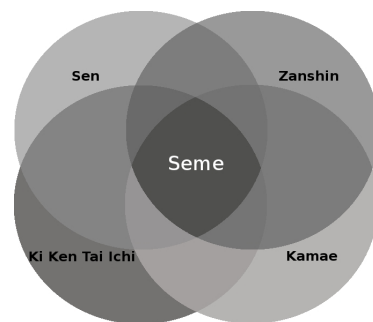


Figure 4: Simultaneous sen, ki ken tai no ichi, zanshin, and an active kamae enables projected seme.

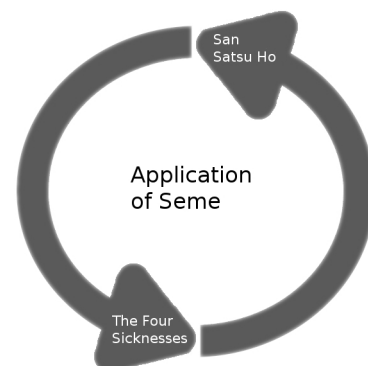


Figure 5: Application of seme.

One's ability to maintain their connection, KKTI, sen, and zanshin serve as a defense against the opponent's seme.

Defining the MS in this context gives:

Sen no Sen. Apply **seme** and strike the **suki**, via **shikake waza**, which opens as the opponent is just initiating their response.

Go Sen no Sen. Apply **seme**. The opponent responds with an attack attempting sen no sen via **shikake waza**. The attack is recognized and responded to via a counter attack (**oji waza**).

Sen Sen no Sen. Apply **seme** and draw out from the opponent a specific **shikake waza** response, again from an attempt at Sen no Sen, and then respond with an attack (**oji waza**) of your own using the “prior knowledge” of the coming attack.

Shikake Waza & Oji Waza

These **waza** often induce separate mindsets with beginners. With **shikake waza** one initiates the strike, with **oji waza** one waits to attempt a counterstrike. This may work with beginners but is unlikely against an experienced opponent. The issue is **seme**.

Seme has the effect of producing **suki** in the opponent in three ways: (1) **seme** produces a mental **suki** in the opponent by a loss of confidence, focus, concentration, or a break in **zanshin**, (2) production of a physical **suki** in that the opponent reacts or moves out of fear of impending attack, i.e., attempted block, parry, dodge, or some other movement, and (3) production of a physical **suki** due to the opponent (being forced into) initiating an attack.

The first two allow attack via **shikake waza** however in the last an opportunity for **oji waza** exists. Both opportunities are created through **seme**⁴. In this context there are not separate mindsets of attack and defense or preparing for **shikake** or **oji waza**. *Both shikake waza and oji waza opportunities arise from our intent to strike. Which waza is used and which target is attacked is determined purely by the reaction of the opponent.*

It is through our **seme** that our attack on the opponent begins. In conjunction with our **kamae** we are constantly applying pressure, i.e., to *pro-actively* induce **suki**. In this context we are always the aggressor and always initiate the attack. It simply becomes a matter of how we perform the strike.

Through the application of **seme**, **shikake** and **oji waza** lose the separation of offense and defense and are unified into attacking **waza**.

Kata	Uchidachi	Shidachi
1	Sen no sen	Sen sen no sen
2	Sen no sen	Sen sen no sen
3	Sen no sen	Sen sen no sen
4	Sen no sen	Go sen no sen
5	Sen no sen	Sen sen no sen
6	Sen no sen	Go sen no sen
7	Sen no sen	Go sen no sen

Table 1: The mitsu no sen are exemplified in the nihon kendo kata. Uchidachi attempts sen no sen throughout while the shidachi performs sen sen no sen in kata 1, 2, 3, and 5 and go sen no sen in kata 4, 6, and 7.

In these descriptions the opponent responds to seme with an attack. One could easily substitute the attack for some type of movement, blocking, parrying, retreating, etc...

Beginner's often have two distinct mentalities they will adopt during keiko: offense and defense. Each corresponds to usually exclusive use of shikake and oji waza respectively.

⁴ Hereafter applying **seme** implies that **sen**, **KKTI**, and **zanshin** are all correctly expressed.

The distinction now lies in through which *type* of **suki** we land a strike on the opponent. The following quotation from “*The Jungle Book*”⁵ encompasses this idea:

⁵ Rudyard Kipling. *Rikki-Tikki-Tavi*. HarperCollins, 2004

“If you move I strike. If you do not move I strike.”

Through this unification we obtain a simplification in **kendo** in that there is only one method of attack. The defeat of the opponent comes in creating the **suki**, the **waza** and the strike are determined by the type of **suki**. This simplification is summed up by the following quote⁶ (taken somewhat out of context):

⁶ Shunryu Suzuki. *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. Weatherhill, Inc., 1970

“In the beginner’s mind there are so many possibilities, but in the expert’s there are so few.”

References

- [1] International Kendo Federation. *The Regulations of Kendo Shiai and Shinpan*. International Kendo Federation, 2005. March 2003 revision, 2nd printing.
- [2] Rudyard Kipling. *Rikki-Tikki-Tavi*. HarperCollins, 2004.
- [3] Minoru Kiyota. *The Shambhala Guide to Kendo*. Shambhala, Boston and London, 2002.
- [4] Shunryu Suzuki. *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. Weatherhill, Inc., 1970.