

Kendo Promotional Exam Study Guide



Note: This study guide reflects general concepts agreed upon by many Kendoists, however, there will always be those who have their own viewpoints and ideas. To fully learn about the philosophy and concepts of Kendo, one must continue their own education by studying all aspects of Kendo and not only limiting their study to this "guide".

Contributors & Sources

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REI-GI (Etiquette)

It is said that Kendo begins and ends with *rei-gi*, so a natural place for this guide to start is with a discussion of *rei-gi*. The physical aspect of *rei-gi* is represented by the *rei* as one enters the dojo or *shiai-jo*, thus starting each practice by the display of respect for the place of practice and its members. The end is by repeating the process thanking everyone for the practice as one leaves the dojo. The natural outgrowth of this is that same manners carry over into all aspects the Kenshi's daily life.

The *rei-gi* of Kendo is correct behavior in all dealings with other people as you work through your daily activities. In Kendo, a failure in this behavior is a moral failure in the Kenshi's character and training. At the practice level, Kendo is an art form the purpose of which is to defeat one's opponent in a combat of mind against mind and strength against strength. Without the rules of etiquette from beginning to end, the Kendo becomes merely a bashing of the opponent with the only goal to win with any means possible. Kendo with *rei-gi* remains an art and the opponent is yourself to overcome. With this in mind one is thankful to your partner for having struck you, this exposes your weakness and allows you to improve. Thus practice is an exchange of technique and the Kenshi must always be polite to the person giving you such a gift.

Appearance

Before the first *hajime* of the exam, the examiners have started to grade the candidate. At each progressive level the Kenshi must have a dignity and presence the exudes that rank for which they are testing. At the lower ranks this may only be the proper wearing of the uniform and equipment. All of us have seen Kenshi who don't wear their uniform and equipment properly. Here are some areas of observation:

The *keiko-gi* should not be worn in the fashion of a geisha with the nape of the neck exposed or bulging out in the back. After the *hakama obi* are tied the person needs to reach inside and pull the ends of the *keiko-gi* across the front to remove all bulges and wrinkles from the back.

The *hakama* should be the right length with the hem lower in the front and a little higher in the back and crossing at the ankle bone. The *koshi-ita* should not be hanging loosely, but fit tightly and flatly against the small of the back. The *obi* should be tied in a square knot and the ends tucked into the obi along the waist at the hips. The *hakama* pleats should be straight as they represent the samurai code of ethics. *Jin* (humanity), *Gi* (justice), *Rei* (courtesy), *Chi* (knowledge) and *Shin* (trust).

The *tenugui* should be tied on the head so that there is no part flapping out of the back of the men like a chicken tail. Neither should the *tenugui* be so low on the forehead that it is visible through the *men-gane*. There should not be an extra *tenugui* folded up inside the *men* in the chin area, a special pad is made to be placed inside the *men* to take up space on a *men* that is too large. Often children have a *men* that is too large for the size of their head and should use a pad. The special pad not only provides extra protection for the child on the top of the head but eliminates the unsightly situation of the *tenugui* in the chin area which often falls out during *keiko*.

The *men* should have the *himo* tied in the proper bow knot (*cho-musubi*) and be in straight lines as if one cord rather than look as though a

fishnet has been cast upon the persons head. The length of the ends and the loops of the bow knots should all be the same and not exceed 40 centimeters.

The upper *doh himo* should be tied with the ends tucked inside and not hanging down the front of the *mune*. The lower *doh himo* should be horizontal and tied in a bow knot (*cho-musubi*).

The *tare obi* should be flat, run across the *koshi-ita* in the back and not bulging under the *odare* in the front.

The *kote* should not have frayed *himo*. Lastly the Kenshi should stand tall, straight and walk with dignity. These are the basics before the match even starts.

JI-KEIKO

During the *ji-geiko* phase of the examination the following points are observed by the examiners:

Is the beginning *rei* to the opponent done properly, is the *shinai* at *sage-to* during the *rei* and at *tai-to* with thumb on the *tsuba* as each Kenshi advances onto the court.

The footwork as they advance onto the court should be smooth sliding steps with the toes down. The draw of the sword should be in the *kesa-giri* manner as each Kenshi starts their third step. The *sonkyo* position should be assumed with the back straight and the elbows not touching the thighs.

The *ken-sen* should be pointed at the opponents *nodo*. The *shinai* will have the *naka-yui* in the proper place 1/3 from the *ken-sen* and the grip on the *tsuka* should be with the left hand on the end and the right hand near the *tsuba*.

At all levels of the examination, the manner of *keiko* should not be as if one were fighting for *shiai* points but be proper basic Kendo. During the match, proper footwork, striking and posture must be maintained rather than avoiding being struck by excessive blocking, dodging by bending the waist and bobbing the head. Hanging at *tsuba-zeri-ai* is not proper but instead maintaining the correct *ma-ai of isoku-itto* is what the judges are looking for. At each successive level, the ability to know when to attack and recognize the opportunity (chance) of attack will determine your success in the examination. Just hitting indiscriminately, when you want, rather than when an opening exists, results in poor strikes. This is not to say that you should not be offensive, it is said Kendo is 50% offense and 50% defense, but offense is the bigger half. Defensive hitting is downgraded while even unsuccessful offensive attacks with good spirit that result in *ai-uchi* (simultaneous strikes by both opponents) will help you pass. Opportunity is created in a number of ways and this study guide will address those methods after finishing this section.

Other factors in *ji-geiko* are good *ki-ai* and *ki-ken-tai-ichi*, *seme*, *sutemi* and *zanshin* which will all be covered in later sections.

KATA

The failure of most candidates *kata* at lower dan is the lack of practice, the mechanics should be just rote memory. It is very obvious which candidates have neglected *kata* for long periods of time, hurriedly preparing by practicing only a few times before their test. Logically one would expect that if *kata* is 50% of the test the candidate would put more effort in to the practice and the learning of *kata*.

The *uchidachi* must demonstrate a strong leading of the *shitachi*, while the *shitachi* must be able to read the *uchidachi's* intention. A *kodansha* performing *kata* must express a strong and true spirit, reasonable mind and balanced *zanshin*. The performance shows stroke with drive and spirit, *ri-ai*, *ma-ai*, and understands the rhythm of each of the 10 forms.

Starting at *1st-Kyu* where just the basic mechanics are needed to *Sandan* where all the mechanics and the basic fundamentals previously discussed are required, the *kata* of the candidate should improve at each dan level. At *Yondan* the *kata* must demonstrate a better understanding of the *hei-ho* of Kendo, the rhythm, *seme* and *zanshin*. All these things must steadily improve at each succeeding level.

Points that are observed when grading by the examiners:

- o Manner before and after the *tachi-ai*.
- o Does the candidate understand all five *kamae* in 1 through 7 and *han-mi* and *iri-mi* in the *kodachi kata*?
- o Does the candidate demonstrate an understanding of *me-tsuke* and breath control matching with the partner?
- o Does the candidate demonstrate an attitude of reality and dignity for the rank requested?
- o Does the candidate demonstrate the relationship between *uchidachi* and *shitachi* in movement and rhythm?
- o Is the timing of the strikes correct, is the *shitachi* receiving correctly?
- o Is the *ma-ai* correct?
- o Is the strike with *mono-uchi*?
- o Are the basic mechanics of the strikes correct? Not too big or too small.
- o Is the footwork sliding or just walking? Are the heels touching the ground, flatfooted?
- o Does the *shitachi* demonstrate *ki-gurai* and does the *uchidachi* respond to the *shitachi's zanshin*?

Expectations of Rank

6th-kyu through 2nd-kyu can be awarded at the dojo level depending on the regional federation. Other federations formally test for these grades and some have age restrictions for children. *1st-kyu* and above are done through the formal examination process. While it is normal

to have both adults and children testing for the same level of kyu there can be a great deal of difference in the basic skills between the adults and children. Most often the children have been doing Kendo much longer and have much better basics than the adults. However when the mental maturity of the adults is factored in this should not be a problem. An experienced examiner will understand this kind of situation and grade accordingly. (see attachments for skill guidelines used by some regionals)

1st-kyu requirements: enter and leave the court properly, strike with *ki-ken-tai-ichi*, good energy and 1 or 2 *yuko-datotsu*.

Shodan: same as above with *nidan waza* included.

Nidan: demonstrate the use of *shikake waza*, *harai waza*, *dehana waza*, *hiki waza*, and *oji (oh-ji) waza*. Obviously the occasion may not arise to use most of the mentioned *waza*, but the candidate should show better basics than the *Shodan* level and be able to use more advanced technique as above. The Kenshi at this level should not be obsessed with the use of *waza* but start to master the opportunity of attack. Cuts should have good vertical motion with the use of both hands and *te-no-uchi*.

Sandan: Use *seme* and *ken-sen* to initiate attacks and have sharp *waza*. Particularly the use of *oji* type of *waza* should be incorporated in the candidates Kendo.

Yondan: should display very solid Kendo and *kamae*, display mastery of a variety of techniques, *yuko-datotsu*, excellent footwork and posture. An attacking *kamae* full of spiritual energy should be displayed rather than a waiting *kamae* that reacts to the opponent.

Godan: starting with the Godan examination the candidate must truly exhibit the use of *seme* and *ken-sen* to create the moment of attack. Often failure is caused by the candidate doing *shiai* style of *keiko* and trying to win points. One must demonstrate the control of the center, the opponents spirit, and mastery of the footwork and *shinai*. The Kendo must be logical without unnecessary strikes and actions. The strike is followed by *zanshin* that is true mental alertness.

Rokudan: the same as Godan, but even more, the *ri-ai* must be demonstrated. Strong control of the center, efficient use of *waza* and footwork, mental control of the opponent and situation.

Nanadan: all aspects of the previous ranks must be present and an essence of dignity that speaks to quality Kendo. This dignity shows both on and off the court in the persons life.

Kodansha Kendo is not only just winning a strong *shiai*, strong *keiko* or beating an opponent in the *shinsa*. You must express your Kendo with the correct *kamae*, strong *ken-sen*, reasonable *ma-ai*, smooth flowing footwork, body movement and a strong, smooth stroke in your strikes. This must be performed in one rhythm with sharp *te-no-uchi*.

The Written Exam

The written examination asks the candidate to either discuss or list concepts, principles and even opinions on the various aspects of Kendo. This section will present the material in a discussion and a factual manner. It is up to the candidate to read and absorb the material such that the test questions can be answered.

Kirikaeshi is one of the fundamental learning tools used in Kendo. It contains 5 elements which are described by the metropolitan police as the following: 1. *sho-men*, 2. *tai-atari*, 3. four *yoko-men* forward followed by five backwards, *sho-men*, 4. four *yoko-men* forward followed by five backward, 5. *sho-men* followed by *zanshin*.

Conceptually *kirikaeshi* develops strong *ki-ai* and breath control, large motion, correct cutting angle (*ha-suji*), correct grip (*te-no-uchi*), correct footwork (*ashi-sabaki*) all with *ki-ken-tai-ichi*. It also limbers the muscles, promotes harmonious action of the whole body and correct *ma-ai*, follow through with *zanshin*. *Kirikaeshi* is said to provide 10 virtues to the attacker and 8 virtues to the receiver. It makes the *waza* sharp and swift, strengthens the cut, builds stamina, relaxes the stroke and body, improves the motion of the body, improves dexterity and grip, improves the vision of the partner, improves the *ma-ai*, teaches mental tranquillity, improves observation of the opponent, makes the grip firm yet flexible.

Ma-ai is the interval between the two opponents or partners when practicing Kendo or kata. It is described as 3 intervals:

Issoku-itto-no-ma-ai (one step-one sword interval). This *ma-ai* allows you to strike the opponent by taking one step forward and to avoid the opponents attacks by taking one step to the rear or to the side. It is also called *uchi-ma* or the strike interval. At this interval either party can strike.

Toii-ma-ai (to-ma) or distant interval is when the opponents are separated such that more than one step is required to strike the opponent. As the opponent moves forward, you have the chance to strike.

Chikai-ma-ai (chika-ma) or close interval is that distance less than the one step interval. There are many strategies that can be employed from this distance also.

Metsuke or *enzan-no-metsuke* is the fixing of the eyes or gaze upon the opponent. *Enzan-no-metsuke* refers to "gazing as though looking at a far mountain". In this sense it is to see everything without focusing on any one object. Basically you fix your gaze at the opponents eyes and read their intention through these windows to their mind. When the opponents eyes fix upon an object such as your sword or a target, their mind becomes "fixed or stopped" and you can then attack.

Ki-ken-tai-itchi or "spirit, sword, & body are one", are the essential elements to a *yuko-datotsu* (correct strike). This means that all three elements of the strike happen as one element and make the perfect strike. The ability to do this is the ideal which all practice should strive for as a goal.

Zanshin, what is *zanshin*? The typical answer given is "remaining spirit". This is correct, but there are more meanings and feeling to *zanshin* than the simple definition implies. It is very simple. However simple does not necessarily mean easy. It is a concept unique to martial arts

and it is to the kanji that we must look for further clarification.

The kanji "*zan*" and "*shin*" can be read two ways. *Kokoro-Wo-Nokosu* which means "I consciously do the action of getting my spirit to remain" and *Kokoro-Ga-Nokoru* which means "My spirit remains unconsciously, spontaneously."

The first definition is appropriate to the beginning Kenshi and the latter to the practiced Kenshi. In effect, it means that if you must think about it, it is too late. The action is always slowed by the thought. If you think about *zanshin* preceding the cut, the cut will not be good. If you think about *zanshin* after the cut, an unexpected attack can occur in the split second that you are thinking of keeping your pressure.

Application of the principle of *zanshin* is most easily exemplified in the *Nihon Kendo Kata*. In all ten *kata* the *zanshin* begins immediately after the cut and continues until both the *uchitachi* and *shitachi* returns to *chudan-no-kamae*. This is stated specifically on *ippon-me* and *nihon-me* in Takano Sasaburo's book on Kendo. "Immediately after the cut, if there's any movements, my *zanshin* says I am ready to strike at any moment, until we both return to *chudan*."

Therefore, *zanshin* does not mean only to take the position of *jodan-no-kamae* after the cut, as in *ippon-me*, but it is the spirit of *zanshin* which must be present immediately after such a cut.

Then how can *zanshin* be identified in *shinai* Kendo? Does anyone in *shinai* Kendo normally take or display the stance *zanshin* emphasizes in the *Nihon Kendo Kata*? Obviously the answer will be no. It is spiritual awareness that is important, not the final stance, *Kokoro-Ga-Nokoru*, a naturalness. *Zanshin* thus means that the Kenshi is always prepared, even when exhausted, even when the match is over, the spirit remains.

Seme as defined in the dictionary is "an attack, the offensive, assault, or siege". In Kendo, it can also be defined as pressure; that is, to pressure the opponent before the attack. There are two kinds of *seme*: visible and the invisible, or physical and mental, outer or inner. Although it is sometimes difficult to see because even the overt actions occur in split second speed, the visible pressure is easiest to understand. Visible *seme* occurs when one person pressures an opponent by actual movements with the *shinai*, feet or the whole body.

Techniques vary. For example in the *chudan* stance, you pressure your opponent by movement of the *shinai* as though you are pressuring to strike *kote*. Instead you strike *men* because now the *men* is open because the opponents mind has gone to their *kote*. *Seme* occurs during actual *shinai* contact by the use of *harai*, *uchiotoshi*, *makiotoshi* or some such *waza* that moves the opponents *shinai* off center and creates an opening. Thus if I can see with my eyes or feel the *shinai* putting pressure on my *kote* or *men* the intention is already given; the *seme* is visible. However if the *shinai* doesn't move, but I can still feel the pressure, then it is invisible *seme*. The tip of the sword, *ken-sen*, becomes alive and communicates the *seme* without any *shinai* or body movements.

Invisible *seme* is the most powerful, the *seme* with the whole body and soul. Invisible *seme*, *kurai-zume*, is the ultimate aim of the Kenshi. By gazing (*metsuke*) into the opponents *hara*, intentions are detected before any movement and thus the opponent's first move is forced. As in *kata*, the *shitachi* always applies the pressure and is never on the defense. The spirit is always ready and a milli-second ahead of the opponent, the opponent moves and is defeated.

Because *seme* is pressure which creates relationship, especially strong invisible *seme*, it is related to both *sen* and *zanshin*. It is not really separate from *sen*, but precedes it as *sen* precedes *zanshin*. Focused to *waza* it is reflected in *sen*. After the attack it is focused in the *zanshin*.

Mitsu-no-sen or the three attacks. According to Miyamoto Musashi there are three *sen*:

- *Ken-no-Sen*, you attack just before the opponent.
- *Tai-no-Sen*, the opponent attacks first but you strike first and win.
- *Tai-Tai-no-Sen*, both attack at the same time but your cut is first and wins.

Takano Sasaburo explained the *mitsu-no-sen* as: *Sensen-no-sen* or *kakari-no-sen*: to use *seme* and then strike the opponent just before he moves when their mind has committed to attack.

Go-no-Sen or *Sengo-no-sen* or *Tai-no-sen*: when the opponent has started their technique but the action is not completed. Move effectively avoiding their cut and strike yourself.

Sen or *Senzen-no-Sen*: when the opponent is in mid-attack deflect it and counter attack.

If you study the strategy of the *kata* you gain an understanding of *mitsu-no-sen*.

Related to *mitsu-no-sen* is **San-satsu-no-ho** or **San-sappo**, the 3 methods of killing.

- Kill the sword or *ken-o-korosu*
To kill the sword is to attack the sword with any number of *waza* such as *uchi-otoshi* or *harai*, in other words sweep it away, shove it aside, hit it down, twist it around, anything to move it out of center.
- Kill the *waza* or *waza-o-korosu*
Kill the *waza* using *sen-no-ki* to attack the opponent before they can attack you, if they are busy fighting off your attack it is hard to counter attack. It is also to move in and spoil their attack before it even happens by looking inside and seeing their intention. It is also detecting their *waza* and using the counter *waza* to it such as *men*, *suriage-men*.
- Kill the spirit or *ki-o-korosu*
Kill the *ki* or mental balance by such forceful *seme* that they become frightened. Use your strong *ki* to kill their *ki*, invisible *seme*, mentally cut the opponent's mind with your mind.

All these methods lead to the **four sicknesses**; fear, doubt, surprise and confusion. **Fear** by weakening the opponents mind by your strong *ki*.

Doubt causes the opponent to become tight and hesitant. If you kill their *waza* they will begin to doubt their ability to succeed.

Weaken their mind by doing the **unexpected**.

Confuse them by changing the rhythm and timing of the match, this will throw off their comfort zone, their natural mind (*hei-jo-shin*). *Hei-jo-shin* is the normal calm state of mind that allows one to make accurate decisions.

To accomplish these things one must have excellent footwork. **Ashi-sabaki** or footwork is broken down into four types:

- *Ayumi-ashi*, which is essentially normal walking used to cover a lot of ground quickly.
- *Okuri-ashi* or the basic Kendo footwork of pushing off with the left foot positioned in the rear and sliding the right foot forward simultaneously, followed by snapping the left foot forward to achieve the original spacing of the feet.
- *Hiraki-ashi* or diagonal footwork is moving in any direction but forward or backward with basic Kendo footwork.
- *Tsugi-ashi* or *de-ashi* is to bring the left foot up parallel to the right foot and then step forward in an attack.

All of the footwork is performed with *suri-ashi*, sliding motion.

Waza are categorized as either *oji (oh-ji) waza* or *shikake waza*. The actual techniques such as *suriage*, *harai*, *nuki* etc. fall into one of these two categories.

- *Shikake waza* is further defined by whether there is blade contact or no blade contact. In *shikake waza* you take the initiative through your *seme* and create an opening and attack.

- In *oji waza* the opponent initiates the attack and you counter see the section on *mitsu-no-sen*.

When you attack it must be with the mind set of **sute-mi** or to have no care for your life. To throw away your life so that you have no fear of losing but total commitment to the attack.

These discussions cover most but not all of the material of the written test.

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