

KENDO
Characteristics and Merit

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K. Maeda, Chief instructor
KAIFUKAN dojo

As in the case with all other popular practices in Japan which have the name “-do” for their suffix, such as in ken-do, ju-do, sa-do (tea ceremony), ka-do (flower arrangement) and many others, kendo is also taken very seriously as ‘a way of life’ by many people who practice it, regardless of nationalities. Kendo, therefore, is the way of life through the practice of swordsmanship.

A sword as a weapon is, indeed, obsolete in this day and age. Nevertheless, just the notion of a piece of bamboo stick being a sword, a lethal weapon, and learning how to use it somehow heightens your level of tension. Assuming that you are handling a real sword instead of a mere bamboo stick, kendo practice requires a great amount of concentration. While you are at it, worldly desires, worries or hardships you encounter daily at work or elsewhere have no chance to come into your thoughts to bother you. Consequently, the moment you practice kendo, you free yourself from the trivial and mundane world, which allows you a peace of mind in the realm of tranquility.

Kendo, from the aspect of physical exercise, can be very strenuous to the point you can be totally exhausted in the matter of a few minutes of sparring. On the other hand, however, it can be relatively less taxing and easy so that people as old as 88 can practice on equal footing with the young ones, which is rather rare in most other sports and definitely in martial sports. I am not saying that 88 years of age is the maximum age to be able to practice kendo, and most likely it is possible to continue even longer, but I have actually witnessed people at this age practicing kendo when I was in Japan and now in Honolulu.

A seven-dan (seventh black-belt) *sensei* (teacher), I know in Honolulu by the name Mr. Muramoto, is 88 years old. He has physically weak legs due to his age so that he has difficulties even getting up easily from Japanese style sitting position, sometimes requiring someone’s assistance. But once he takes his *shinai*, a bamboo sword, he points it so rigidly and accurately, aiming right at you that you see no opening to attack him. If you dare to attempt to attack him, his *shinai* may hit you in the abdomen, counter-attacking your move before you know what has happened.

Kendo holds a rather unique position among other forms of martial arts due to its longevity of years of practice and its uni-sexuality. This is attributed to the fact that players only deal with a *shinai*, which, in reality, is a piece of bamboo stick after all, and have very little physical contact with your opponent-partner. What is required of players, therefore, is not much muscle strength but skills and techniques of the sword; and the ones who trained themselves well, regardless of age or gender, can be stronger than any young men at their prime. In other words, kendo is good for man and woman, the young and old.

Above all else, propriety is considered the most important in kendo practice. Propriety is defined as manners, etiquette, politeness and all other acts of showing respect in the *dojo* (practice place). Kendo players are expected to show proper reverence at all times by bowing. Many Westerners might feel a bit awkward or even feel aversion to following this pattern of behavior. Believe me, even Japanese people nowadays feel somewhat strange doing it. Then why is it so important and why do we do it?

Again, unlike other martial arts like judo or karate, kendo requires a weapon to practice. This is why we must strictly abide by the *dojo* rules for safety and order, which extends itself to the point that we must conform to kendo propriety to stay and enhance our humanity, in spite of the aggressive practices. After all, we must never forget that we are not in any way learning skills of violence but rather “the way of life.”

We, kendo players, pay our respect to the *dojo*. This is followed by our showing of respect to *sensei* (teacher), then to friends whom you practice with, and to *shinai* and *dogu* (equipment) that physically protect you during your practice. We show our appreciation to all of these mentioned above. If and when this pattern of behavior and sense of gratitude become a natural part of you, as a matter of course, rather than remaining foreign in your mind, then you are the one who has mastered kendo in its truest sense. You will become a great asset and a most welcomed member to the society, where moral uprighteousness, sense of appreciation and decency are rapidly being forgotten and a thing of the past.

The Charter of the Japanese kendo federation reads, “...kendo as the way to build a better human being..etc..”