

HANSHI SAYS

A series in which some of Japan's top Hanshi Sensei give hints of what they are looking for in grading examinations based on wisdom accumulated through decades of hard training.

“Always keep the ‘principles of the sword’

THE LATE OKA KENJIRO (HANSHI 8-DAN)

Translation of “Shinsa-in no me” from *Kendo Jidai*, May 2002
Translated by Alex Bennett

Study with a correct frame of mind

Many kendo masters have already contributed to this column and have given advice based on their own experiences. I would like to talk less about my own kendo philosophy and take this opportunity to introduce the teachings of my instructors of a previous generation.

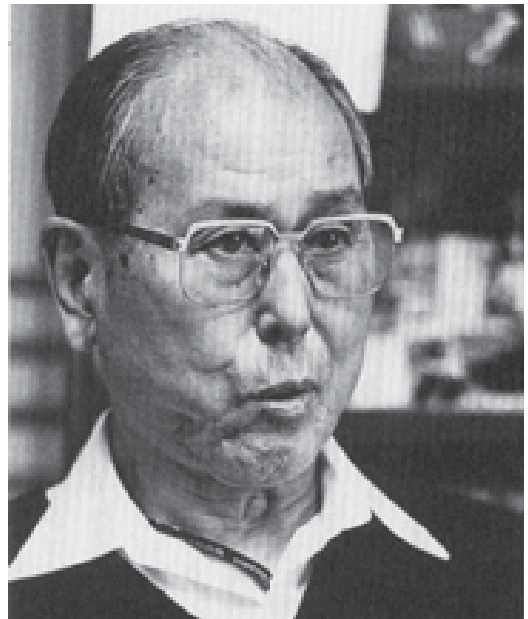
I first started studying kendo under Yuasa Tetsutarō, in 1939 when I entered junior high school. In 1942, Aoki Hideo, a live-in student of the Kōdō Gikai, came to teach us as a contract teacher. Aoki Sensei’s *katate-tsuki* thrusts were incredibly strong. Even with one hand, he could fire us across the floor into the backboards. One day I asked him how he was able to generate such power with his *tsuki* attack. He replied, “If the opponent is coming forward it won’t work. When they are thinking of retreating, that’s when I unleash the attack.”

Aoki Sensei seemed to take a liking to me, and invited

me to join the Kōdō Gikai. I took up this invitation and trained there after school practices. Aoki Sensei was drafted into the army 18 months later, and Morita Tsunejirō Sensei was sent to teach us in his place. I was fortunate to spend a lot of time with Morita Sensei, and often went to his house to visit. However, we rarely talked about kendo. *Keiko* was the only time when he was prepared to chat about kendo. I think that some kendo teachers today actually give too much verbal information to their students. Incidentally, *keiko* in those days meant *kakari-geiko*. Not once were we ever taught *waza*.

Aoki Sensei and Morita Sensei were very good friends and I heard that Aoki Sensei was a man who worked extremely hard. When everybody else was asleep, he would go to the *dōjō* in the middle of the night and suspend a coin from the ceiling with a piece of string and practise *tsuki*. He got so good at it that people called him “*tsuki-Aoki*”. I was most fortunate to have met these two teachers, and my whole outlook on

in mind when training”



Oka Kenjiro (Hanshi 8-dan) was born in 1927 in Tokyo. In 1939, he commenced kendo training under Aoki Hideo and Morita Tsunejirō. Two years later, he became a student of the prestigious Kōdō Gikai and entered the Tokyo Higher Normal School in 1945. After the war he became a high school teacher. During his career, he served as the second-in-charge of the All Japan Physical Education Kendo Section; Police Academy Professor; and Professor and President of the International Budo University. He won the coveted 4th Meijimura Kendo Tournament for 8-dan practitioners and served as an official for the All Japan Kendo Federation. Oka Sensei sadly passed away in 2006, and Kendo World is grateful to Mrs. Oka for permitting us to publish this article. We are also indebted to Kendo Jidai magazine for allowing us to translate from the original Japanese.

kendo changed as a result. They, and also Tanijima Saburō Sensei were referred to as the “three birds” of the Kōdō Gikai; they were very famous and greatly respected for their kendo skill.

Reidan Jichi—Feel it and embody it!

I was successful in the 7-dan examination in 1967, when I was 39 years old. I started working for the High School Physical Education Federation (Kōtairen) as an assistant to Yuno Masanori Sensei. He would always become enraged if somebody asked him a question. His educational approach was to encourage the student to solve any riddles themselves before asking for a quick solution. When he did offer words of advice, they were so profound that it was often very difficult to understand without studying classic texts on Buddhism! However, there were five main points that I learned from his guidance:

1. Never retreat in kendo.

2. Don't strike indiscriminately! A *katana* is not something that you can make attacks with willy-nilly.
3. When you do strike, do it in one movement.
4. Study the significance of the *shinogi* on the *ura* side of the *shinai*.
5. Rather than breathe in, breathe out three times as much.

Through my work with the Kōtairen I had many opportunities to go on the road with Yuno Sensei. Two or three times a year we would do a national tour together to investigate tournament venues, teach at training seminars and so on. I always had to demonstrate what he was teaching, so I was constantly under pressure to pay close attention to what he said. Travelling the country with him after taking 7-dan turned out to be an extremely beneficial eight-year period in my kendo career.

To “strike indiscriminately” means that there is a good

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chance you will get hit instead. This encouraged me to devise many ways of not getting hit. I was never taught this directly, but I realised that if I moved the thumb of my left hand towards my opponent's navel as soon as they initiated an attack, I would end up hitting their throat. If I moved my *shinai* up while doing this, I would be able to execute *suriage-waza*; and *uchiotoshi-waza* if I moved my *shinai* downwards. In those days, most people attacked in a straight line, so it was relatively easy to master *suriage-waza*.

Through my association with Yuno Sensei, I was also able to make the acquaintance of many other famous kendo teachers. Every time Matsumoto Toshio Sensei laid eyes on me, he would make me assume *kamae* and fix my *tenouchi*. Tamari Yoshiaki Sensei told me to “apply *seme* to the centre!” “Learn the proper striking opportunities!” When I did a preliminary 8-dan examination, he warned me not to strike *nidan-waza*. “Oka! You could never use *nidan-waza* if you were holding a real *katana*.” He pushed me to do kendo in accordance with “the principles of the sword.”

Takana Magojirō Sensei taught me the importance of using a “light *shinai* as if it was heavy, and a heavy *shinai* as if it was light.” The *tsuba* on his *shinai* was very small. I asked him why, and he replied, “If you can do *tenouchi* properly, you don't need a *tsuba*. You don't learn *waza* just to suit the tools you are using; you learn by developing your dexterity.” When I trained with him, his *shinai* would be all over me like a snake, which made me very tense. But it inspired me to take notice of *tenouchi* and how it should be applied to devastating effect if done properly.

Nakajima Gorōzō Sensei remonstrated me on my posture when standing up from *sonkyo*. “You must be ready to fight when you stand up.”

Ogawa Chūtārō Sensei was a master of *degashira-men*, or striking *men* just as his opponent was about to move. I learned from him that kendo was not all about speed.

When I trained with Horiguchi Kiyoshi Sensei, his *kensen* would quickly gravitate over to the *ura* side. As soon as I made an attempt to attack, he would strike my *kote*. He was always researching how the *ura* side could be utilised effectively.

All of these teachers offered me something new. I was able to develop my kendo because of the knowledge they imparted to me, and by actually trying to put it to use.

Jiri-sōbō (Forgetting principles and technique)— the stage after Jiri-itchi (Unification of principles and technique)

Kendo is a way of cultivating the body and mind by training in accordance with the principles of the sword. As such, you must be able to demonstrate an understanding of this concept when attempting high-level promotion examinations. In the days when warriors actually fought with swords, they would rarely make the first attack. Instead, they coaxed their opponents into thinking that they had a good chance to attack, and just as they were about to launch their assault, they would nip it in the bud. This is the concept of *sensen-no-sen*.

When you are sitting a grading, you only have two minutes (or less) to demonstrate your level of kendo proficiency. During that time, how do you make your opponent attack? How do you confuse or unsettle them? These are the things you need to keep in mind in the course of your everyday training. If you truly take your training as a life-death encounter, you will naturally put emphasis on taking the first point. It is important to train with an attitude that is unforgiving of failure to achieve this.

Elegance and beauty in technique is not something that can be faked. It can only be demonstrated through continuous training with these points in mind. By doing so, your *waza* will become second nature, and an air of grace will naturally manifest itself in your movement. An old teaching suggests that any *waza* that can be explained is not real. In other words, to be genuine, it must be done unconsciously and naturally. This is *jiri-itchi*, and is the unification of technique and mind; an important goal in your training. However, to make acquisition of this level of mastery useful to society, you must then forget your fixation with technique and mind (*jiri-sōbō*). Only then can it be natural. That is the next level of mastery, and what we as *kendōka* should aspire to. This is to better the self for the betterment of society.