

How to Teach Kendo to Beginners

Akira Tajima, August 2011

1. Basic Attitude

Anyone who teaches kendo should realize the responsibility of teaching as the importance of good teaching is much higher in kendo than in most of other sports. It is necessary for both the teacher and the learners to set the same goal and work together to approach it. Learners have a lot of different ideas: some want to be champion players, some want to get a higher dan grade, some may be more interested in the spiritual or cultural side of kendo. Some even may want to take up kendo just to lose weight or to reduce their stress. The teacher must understand and accept what the learner wants (of course, if he/she has a wrong idea, the teacher needs to correct it). But whatever their reasons and the style of kendo they want to learn may be, they must master the fundamentals of kendo and the teacher is responsible for that.

We should not forget that they will be the people who carry on kendo, which is a great, not only, sport but also an art, a culture and a tradition to the next generation. I, myself have never been such a good kendoka and a teacher, but through my experience of teaching junior and senior high school students for over 25 years and seeing so many teachers and students, I am afraid that beginners are often not taught well in too many places in Japan. There must have been many students who wouldn't have quit kendo or would have become much better than they are now if they only had better teachers in the early stages of kendo. The same thing applies to foreigners who start kendo in Japan. They are the people who are interested in Japanese culture and believe that Japan is the best place to learn kendo. We really have to cherish these people and teach correct kendo as they will spread kendo all over the world and might become leaders of kendo when they go back to their home countries. However the reality is often different.

Often in local community dojos where everyone in the area can join, high level senseis are busy teaching advanced players and beginners are left to volunteers who are not as capable of teaching. That's why I am writing this article. Much of what's written here is based on my own experience and observation. However I have also been inspired by other teachers and leaders, including people from different fields other than kendo. You don't need to agree with everything written here. I am very happy if this article can just make you think about the attitude of teaching kendo and even happier if some of the ideas can help you when you teach kendo to beginners. Also this article is focused on teaching beginners and some of the things I wrote here don't always apply in teaching advanced players, though the basic ideas of teaching are the same.

2. Bad Teachers

Unfortunately there are teachers who can't teach simply because their kendo is not good enough to teach other people. But the following are bad examples of the ones who have problems in their teaching attitude though their kendo is OK.

- 1) Impatient - Ones who often shout and make the learners nervous.
- 2) Arrogant - Ones who talk too much to show off their knowledge, teach for their own self satisfaction.
- 3) Too hard - Ones who don't think of the physical strength of each learner.
- 4) Too hasty -
 - a. Ones who move onto the next stage before the learners master something.
 - b. Ones who make the learners wear bogu too soon.
 - c. Ones who teach small men uchi, or kote-men before the learners can hit a correct single big men uchi.
- 5) No explanation - Ones who don't or can't explain the purpose and reason of what they are teaching.
- 6) Too trivial - They often miss the point.
- 7) Ones who can teach but can't correct because -
 - a. They are too careless to notice the learners' incorrect habits.
 - b. They can notice and analyze the cause, but don't know how to correct them.
- 8) Not balanced - They teach the only things they are good at.

Things that are common are lack of communication, careful observation and respect towards the learners and their will to learn. It always takes a lot of courage to learn anything new, especially something like kendo. Even more so if the beginner happens to be an adult. Strong players and higher dan graders don't always make good coaches because they often lack this attitude of respecting beginners. Also, it is not always easy for them to understand the psychology of beginners or slow learners because it was such a long time since they were beginners and probably it was easy for them to master basics.

3. Four Main Tasks of Teaching

- 1) Judge: to judge personality, type, level, motivation, needs, problems advantages and disadvantages of the learner.
- 2) Model: to demonstrate what the learner must do and how. If you can't, get someone else to do it as seeing is believing for the learner. Also, the teacher needs to be a role model as a kendoka.
- 3) Teach: to teach both the mental and the physical side of basics efficiently according to the level of the students.
- 4) Correct: it is best if the learner has been taught correctly and doesn't have any bad habits, but if they have already picked up any bad habits, it is necessary to correct them as early as possible because they say, it takes three times as much time to get rid of a bad habit. This means once a bad habit is established and the learner has kept it for a year, he needs three years to correct it. To correct bad habits, don't just look at the phenomenon, but analyze why and how it occurs, then think of the best way to correct it.

Too many teachers just criticize or comment, but criticism and commentary without giving a solution is not teaching (especially for beginners).

4. Good Teachers

Of course their attitudes are opposite to those of the bad teachers I mentioned. I can also add a few other things. The main thing is to remember that we teach for the learners and not for us. We should never expect any reward such as respect or fame as a great teacher. It is important for us to keep improving our own kendo as we can only teach the things we can do ourselves. When you have to teach something you can't do by yourself, learn it from someone who can do it or ask them to show it to your students. It doesn't matter if the person's grade is lower than yours, but many teachers hesitate to do this because of pride.

- 1) Always be positive and encourage the learners.
- 2) When you say "Don't ~", always say "Do ~, instead of ~"
- 3) Let them realize what they have improved by saying, "Yes", "That's it." etc.
- 4) Find something good about the learners and praise them from your heart. There is always something good, if not, you can praise them just for showing up.
- 5) Make learners feel they have made progress or learnt something new every time.
- 6) Make learners think and understand why they need to do it.
- 7) Be polite. Speak softly. Avoid a masterful attitude and language.

- 8) Try to understand the learners as much as possible by listening to them or asking them questions, character, motivation, sports they have done, etc.
- 9) Never get angry or scold when they fail in grading or lose in competition as they feel sadder and angrier with themselves than we do. We should rather empathize and help them realize what was wrong and what they need to work on for the next chance.

5. How to Teach

There are many books about teaching written by great kendo masters. So I just mention a few things I think are important and the attitude of teaching:

- 1) Be specific, avoid difficult and abstract expressions. Instead of just saying “toma”, “chikama”, “issokuittounoma”, tell them what distance they really are such as one fist distance away from each other’s kensen. If maai is too close, tell them how farther it needs to be, such as another 10cm or one fist away. A lot of kendo technical terms like tenouchi, zanshin are too hard for the beginners to understand, especially for children, though they may sound mysterious and cool. Also some expressions such as “Hold shinai as if you hold a baby” or “Hit men as if squeezing a wet towel” are not always appropriate.
- 2) In kendo, it is always a requirement to do several different movements at the same time, but that is too difficult for many beginners. Before teaching kirikaeshi, teach sayumen without moving forward. For menuchi from tsuma, teach menuchi from issokuittounoma without moving forward and hitting through. For nukiwaza, separate nuki (dodge) movement and hitting movement.
- 3) Before using a shinai, it is recommendable to teach suburi with both hands together to learn the balance of the arms and the correct angle of furikaburi (raising the arms up until the left fist is above the forehead).
- 4) Teach single (left) hand menuchi, using a short shinai or holding under the tsuba. This will give an idea of how to use the left hand and the correct hitting angle of a shinai. It is also the best way to learn good nuke and zanshin. Make sure to keep the right arm touching in front of the do to give the body balance. Also be careful to always keep the left fist in the center line of the body. However, over doing this training can cause inflammation of a tendon sheath (especially for children)
- 5) For beginners, hitting is always better than “suburi” as they can feel the difference between a bad hit and a good hit and it is more so in single hand training. Also, left handed suburi is pointless and can be harmful because the learner would concentrate too much on stopping the shinai in the air and it will make learners use their shoulder and elbow too much instead

of the wrist and the suburi will lose speed. And if they try to use the wrist without losing speed and stopping the shinai in the correct position, it will cause a damage to the wrist.

- 6) The role of the motodachi is very important. Always keep the right distance. Don't dodge before the learner finishes his hit completely, otherwise the learner will not hit straight as he does not want to miss. As soon as he finishes his hit completely, you must move to the side as quickly as possible. If not, he will pick up a habit of not going straight through to avoid collision.
- 7) Footwork is always important, but not many teachers spend enough time on teaching it.
 - a. To teach the correct angles of the left foot and knee is to stand on the left leg and with the heel slightly up. The angle which one can stand the longest is the right angle. The stance is often said to be one foot wide, but this is too narrow. It should be one foot long for an average person. There are some people who have big or small feet for their height (this especially applies for children) so we should be careful to judge what the best stance for each learner is. The angle of the knees, the right knee slightly bent and the left knee slightly stretched. The left heel up (just a little), the right heel not up, but still with the weight slightly forward (on the ball of the foot).
- 8) For suriashi, the idea is to push with the other foot to the direction you want to go. If you want to move forward (reverse), push with the hind (fore) foot and if you want to move to the left (right), push with the left (right) foot, just like skating. Always make sure not to take wide steps. For uchikomiashi be careful not to lift the right leg too high or to take a too wide step. The idea is not to stamp but it's just the shift of the weight at the time of hitting.
- 9) After the learner has learned how to hit a single menuchi, combination uchikomi keiko is a very effective way of training, because the learners can acquire correct posture of the body and the position of shinai after every strike as he needs to be ready for the next strike. Think of someone whose zanshin of reverse do is bad. If he needs to hit kote men from there, he has to maintain a good posture the position of shinai needs to be in the correct position and he has to take enough distance to hit kote men. Therefore the zanshin naturally becomes good. However, we should not let them do this unless they can hit a correct single men with ki ken tai together. These combination uchikomi geiko, such as men, men, kote-men, kote-do, without taiatari or men taiatari, hiki-do, kote-men etc., must be taught before we let the learners do kakarigeiko which is one of the most effective training methods and one that teachers are impatient to have the students begin. However, the students must be able to hit at least single men, kote men, sagariwaza after taiatari, otherwise kakarigeiko is not only effective but also harmful.

- 10) To receive kirikaeshi, it is best to let the learners hit sayu men without blocking with the shinai. If you do block with the shinai, keep it close to the men, and pull his hits and don't push back. If the learner becomes good, you may hit back to make him hit harder, but still never receive far from your men as it will make him aim at not your men but your shinai. In the unlikely event of receiving sayumen without men on, keep your shinai far from your head and make the learner aim for it. Be sure to receive with good tenouchi.
- 11) Using bokuto for suburi is good to learn how to hold shinai correctly and to learn the correct angle to hit sayumen and do. But for small children I cannot recommend this as a standard bokuto is too heavy for them. For them, both hands together is more recommended to learn the diagonal cuts. Also using bokuto can be dangerous, there have been some serious accidents, not so much by hitting the partner, but thrusting in the face of someone walking behind at the time of furikaburi.
- 12) When the learners have reached the level to hit men with fumikomiashi, let them wear kote preferably a soft pair which is easy to use. Then tare and do to get used to bogu. Even after they have men on, don't hit them. There will be the time for them to experience a certain level of pain from getting hit, but not in the early stage as it will make them too afraid to get hit and they will become defensive. For the same reason if the beginners have to practice the basics with each other, try to match their height. For a shorter person, receiving men cuts can be painful and for a taller person, receiving do cuts can hurt. In any case, it is always better to have an experienced player as motodachi.
- 13) Keep your eyes on their bogu to make sure their bogu is safe and the size is correct. Often their bad habits come from unsuitable bogu. Too big do leads to bad kamae and wrong sized men will make them look down or look up. If the bogu isn't safe enough and they feel too much pain, they may even want to quit. Usually beginners use club bogu and often they have to use unsuitable bogu. Also the teacher needs to be careful not to let them use heavy shinais as heavy shinais make them use too much power on the arms and shoulders (especially on the right).

6. Confusing Principles: Principle and practice often differ

Principle ideas must be taught, but at the same time we need to be realistic and teach them how it is done in the real situation. Also some of the things often said are totally wrong. Here are some examples that are confusing for beginners.

- 1) The correct angle of do is diagonal or horizontal? In principle diagonal, but in practice close to horizontal.
- 2) Does the left fist always have to be in the centre of the body? How about when you receive kirikaeshi or hit kaeshi do? The centre point between both hands should be in the centre of your body, and both hands should be within the width of your body.
- 3) In doing suburi, where should the kensen stop - the head, the eyes, the nose, the mouth or the neck and shoulder? This depends on the person, for strong cuts, cutting as though to the mouth or neck can be effective, but practicing this with beginners can be too painful and result in too much force with the right hand. Also, the head is not strong enough and often makes the angle of shinai incorrect. For beginners I recommend the eye or mouth level.
- 4) In doing suburi, do we really squeeze both hands like we squeeze a wet towel, doesn't it make the shinai stand vertically? Squeeze and reach forward with the wrist without using much power from the right shoulder and be sure to keep the wrists no lower than the elbows.
- 5) In hitting kote-men, should it be 50-50? Is it necessary to try to hit correct kote? The basic kote-men technique puts equal emphasis on the kote and the men, but in keiko and shiai there is more emphasis on the men cut.
- 6) Should we always keep our eye on the opponent, even while hitting through? In principle this is correct, for example in the kata. However, in shinai kendo, until the cut is finished completely don't look back or the cut will lack nuke and correct posture. Both methods should be taught, but beginners should focus on cutting through.
- 7) When we hold the shinai, should the position of the right fist be just below the tsuba almost touching? This depends on the length of the tsuka. It is recommended to use the right size tsukugawa. The left hand should always be at the bottom and the position of the right hand can be adjusted to the correct distance between the hands.
- 8) Should we always stamp (press) hard with the right foot and jump further for a strong men cut? No, this can hurt the heel and result in incorrect posture. It is better to start from the correct distance, not raise the right foot too high and be sure to land it flat (not on the heel or ball of the foot).

7. Other Effective Separate Training Methods

Although these terminologies are not so popular even in Japan, there are total training methods (Zenshu-ho) and separate training methods (Bunshu-ho). Popular training methods like Jigeiko, kakarigeiko and kirikaeshi are Zenshu-ho. Here, I'd like to introduce some Bunshu-ho trainings for certain purposes.

- 1) To learn uchikomi (fumikomi) ashi or stamping footwork.
 - a. Make the students do sankyodo no suburi with stamping footwork.
 - b. Make sure not to lift the right leg too high or to take too wide a step.
 - c. Make them hit either shinai or men so that they can hear whether the sounds of hitting and stamping are together or not. If so, make them say "men", so that they can get the idea of ki, ken, tai together at this stage.
 - d. The next step is zenshin men, 7~10 times consecutively with stamping footwork without coming back to kamae. Suriashi (at least 5 steps) is to follow for the last men. In doing this, it is still recommended to receive each hit with shinai. (The receiver must keep moving backward slowly at the hitter's speed). When you receive menuchi with shinai in front of your face, make sure your arms are fully stretched, hold the shinai horizontal at the height of your eyes unless there is too much difference in the height. When beginners do this with each other the receiver often rise shinai higher, because he is scared, but it's more dangerous.
 - e. The next level is men followed by 5 step suriashi with arms stretched. In the normal size dojo, at least three times consecutively in the row then kote-men in the same way. Always the first hit is from kamae and do not come back to kamae after each hit. Also ikkyodo (one motion) no suburi with stamping footwork should be done more widely.
- 2) To learn sayumen for kirikaeshi, make them hold the shinai just below the tsuba with one hand, hold the elbow with the other hand and let them hit sayumen. Hit with the right hand, the left hand and both hands, 10 each for a set. Make sure to stop for a second or two after each hit and stretch the back slightly at the time of impact. Also be careful to always keep the fists in the centre. The receiver needs to keep the right distance and it is better to hold the shinai standing in the center of the body so that the learner can know whether he is hitting the right men and the left men in the same angle or not.
- 3) To move with suriashi maintaining good kamae, the teacher and the students face each other in issokuittono maai with chudan no kamae. Then have the students move with suriashi while the teacher moves together, both trying to keep the original kamae. The movements are: 1. forward and back; 2. right and left; 3. forward, back, right and left or

back, forward, left and right with command. After a while, students can do this training with each other.

There are a lot of other training methods, but for beginners to master the basics, we don't need much more. The next level is normal men-uchi, then move on to renzoku (continuous) men, kote-men, men-tai-atari-hiki-waza. When to teach do is up to the teacher because it is a very different technique to men and kote.

8. Zanshin

Zanshin is a notion that is unique to kendo and it is very difficult for beginners to understand. To make it easier to understand I would explain it this way. Zanshin has three meanings. They are proof, readiness and appeal.

- 1) Proof that the hit was correct. You prove that your cut is correct (angle balance, etc.) and straight by zanshin. That's why the position of shinai and posture after each cut must look good and be correct.
- 2) Readiness means being ready for the next attack in case your cut was not ippon that is why you need to go back to kamae either jodan or chudan.
- 3) Appeal means to convince the opponent and shinpan that you believe your hit is ippon. This idea is a little shiai oriented and some senseis may not agree, but it is usually done in practice.

9. Kiai

There are many reasons why kiai is important in kendo. When we look at it from the physical side, hits and voice have certain relationship. Recently many tennis players shout when they hit a ball with a racket. The shout at the time of impact obviously gives extra strength to the hit. We also need to think about the relationship between kiai and hit as kiai is a form of exhale. Therefore a big and long kiai makes the hit strong and the zanshin big. Even if the kiai is not very loud, as long as it's sharp, it makes the hit sharp. Exhale all the air in the lungs with the kiai when you hit, except in the case of nidan waza when some is exhaled with each of the two cuts.

There are two different types of kiai.

- 1) To encourage yourself and to give pressure to your opponent. This is the kiai when you use right after the shinpan says "Hajime", "Nihonme", "Shobu" or after any interval and at the time of tsubazeriai.
- 2) To show the opponent and shinpan by calling out the name of the position you hit that it is not by chance, but you aimed for the hit and your confidence.

10. Manners

I did not mention anything about manners of kendo. There must be a lot of teachers who believe that the manners and formalities are the most important thing in learning kendo, therefore they should be taught in the very beginning. I can understand the idea and it may be appropriate in teaching people, especially adults, who are more interested in the cultural side of kendo. But for most young beginners, I don't want to make it too formal as I think the manners can be taught gradually according to their level. Of course very basic manners such as how to treat shinai or bowing to dojo must be taught with the reasons in the beginning. We should rather teach them important things in life to be a respectable, not only kendoka but also a human being through learning kendo.

The AJKF says the philosophy of kendo is to develop fine character. Therefore the better your kendo becomes the better your personality must get. In Japan, however we often see people who become worse when they get higher dan grade. Maybe we should rather teach our students the meaning and the purpose of dan grade in the early stage so that they would not misbehave when they reach a higher dan grade. The purpose of dan grade is to know your level and to improve your kendo by making efforts to reach the dan, and after getting it, you would try to behave and play the style of kendo to match your grade. Of course, "behave" does not mean to behave like a great master. Many people seem to misunderstand this. We need to understand that getting a higher dan grade is not the 'Holy Grail' of kendo.