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The Benefits of Kirikaeshi

Kirikaeshi is an exercise that involves many aspects of Kendo, and is beneficial to both the Motodachi, the receiving partner, and the Shidachi, the striking partner. From basic footwork to blade control and Zanshin, Kirikaeshi teaches on several levels, with the understanding of Kendo peeling open like layers of an onion. I will examine each step of Kirikaeshi and talk about its benefits to both partners.

The exercise starts with the Shidachi releasing a Kiai and executing a bold Shomen strike. This is the most basic of strikes in Kendo. The Shidachi learns to take big swings, fundamental to Kendo, as well as Ki-Ken-Tai-Ichi, where the impact of the blade is synchronized with the Kiai and Fumikomi. Good posture, essential to any Kendo strike, is practiced as well. The Motodachi receives the strike to the Shomen, and the two partners come together in Taiatari. The clash of Taiatari is common in Kendo, so coming together in this way teaches the Shidachi the next logical step in carrying forward an attack. With this opening strike the Motodachi gains the experience of being struck with a proper Shomen attack. That experience allows beginners to get used to being hit on the head, necessary to relieve the stress and apprehension that accompanies it initially.

Following the clash in Taiatari the Motodachi takes four steps backward and five steps forward, leading while the Shidachi strikes at the Yokomen. Both partners here practice changing

direction during the giving and receiving of blows, something that is difficult for beginners to do while staying focused. The Motodachi learns self control while under attack, concentrating on posture, the movements of defense and proper footwork. The Shidachi and Motodachi learn to adjust and maintain proper Maai while following each other's movements. Without the right Maai executed with the right footwork, everything else about the strikes will go wrong, and Kirikaeshi is an excellent way to practice at "combat speed" under controlled conditions. In addition, the Shidachi practices precise strikes, and being aware of the Mono-Uchi. These strikes are to the Yokomen, and their proper execution requires awareness of the "edge" of the blade, taking care not to hit with the sides of the Shinai. Striking alternating sides of the Yokomen gives the Shidachi practice in maintaining control during multiple strikes, while practicing at subtle transitions in target choice. Each strike is accompanied with a strong Kiai, both reinforcing Ki-Ken-Tai-Ichi and building stamina, especially in the lungs, which helps the Shidachi learn to breath from the stomach in a controlled manner.

The first part of Kirikaeshi ends with the Shidachi reestablishing proper Maai, and the second part immediately begins. The transition between the first and second set of strikes should be smooth and controlled. The Shidachi learns to maintain his aggressive spirit during the transition, which is vital in Kendo. Beginners often expend their spirit with the energy of their attack, rendering themselves unprepared physically and spiritually for follow through or to defend against a new threat. Kirikaeshi helps to teach the Shidachi to maintain spirit and awareness with the second repetition of strikes. The second round of strikes is often more physically taxing as well, so the Shidachi learns to relax the muscles and the mind, building stamina.

The final movement is the Shidachi making a Shomen strike and moving through the Motodachi, who sidesteps after receiving the strike. To accomplish this, the Shidachi transitions from the five backward Yokomen strikes immediately into establishing proper Maai, and without hesitation releases a strong Kiai and executes the final strike. This brings the exercise full circle, starting and ending with fundamental kendo. The Shidachi learns follow through and remaining spirit, holding proper posture and executing proper footwork through the Motodachi's position, moving an adequate distance past the Motodachi before turning around and reentering a ready posture, with radiant spirit, an alert mental focus and physical readiness to engage the next situation. The Motodachi practices the footwork of avoiding a Shomen strike in the sidestep after receiving the strike.

At this point in the exercise, the roles are reversed. Each side gets to practice and learn the aspect of the other. Again, learning to remain in control during transition is learned and practiced. Kendoka learn through the immediate reversal of roles how to deal with the same in the fluid situation presented by sparring. It is necessary to exist in the moment, and this quick change of roles reinforces through practice.

Kirikaeshi is a play that tells the story of a duel. Executed properly it teaches those who participate every fundamental aspect, attacking and defending, winning and losing, living and dying. The repetition makes the practitioner mindful, conditioning the mind and body to be in the moment, and to react appropriately without hesitation.

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