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Ki Ken Tai Ichi

When performing an action in *kendo*, be it anything from a complex series of movements ending in multiple strikes, to a simple movement one step to the left, the player must act with purpose and focus at all times. The phrase “*Ki Ken Tai Ichi*” succinctly explains the state of being that a successful player must achieve during a match or performing *kata*. The three key elements, *ki*, *ken*, and *tai*, must be one, *ichi*.

Ki is translated as “spirit” or “energy”. While it can be explained in esoteric religious terms, in a straightforward sense it can be understood to mean a mixture of a person’s passion to succeed commanded by their mental discipline. Both of these aspects, passion and control, are necessary for *ki* to be complete. A player with passion but no control may make impressive efforts, but those efforts will amount to nothing. A player with control but no passion may have a technical proficiency, but is in danger of being overwhelmed by a balanced opponent. To “cut an opponent’s *ki*” is to disrupt that person’s control over his own passions. Sometimes this is as simple as startling an opponent with a well-timed yell, or perhaps through deflecting an opponent’s passionate strikes while projecting a strong, cool presence. Whatever the exact method used, this is an important strategy in *kendo* because *ki* is the foundation from which all movement begins.

Tai is translated as “body”. In *kendo* the body must move as a coordinated whole. A proper posture keeps the entire body balanced and allows fluid movement. Movement of the body is focused from the *hara*, which is conceptualized as the seat of the soul from where *ki* springs forth. In practical terms, the *hara*, or belly, is centered at roughly the waist line. This is an effective center of gravity for the body when posture is correct. When the spine, shoulders, and feet are in-line with the *hara*, the player has a stable body. He can move in any direction easily, or brace himself to make it difficult for an opponent to move him. As previously stated, *ki* is the foundation from which all movement begins. A player with an imbalance of passion and control in his mind will

express this imbalance in his body, resulting in poor posture and sloppy movements. Movement radiates from the center, and that which begins with deviation will grow exponentially more wrong the further from the origin it goes. So it goes with any movement in *kendo*. A movement lacking physical control will obviously become erratic and ineffective. Less obvious, a movement lacking passion will be timid or uncertain, without conviction, lacking *tenouchi*, which invites a strong response from a prepared opponent. In either case, advantage is given to the opponent.

Ken is translated as “sword”, which in *kendo* is represented with a bamboo analogue called a *shinai*. The simple, though incomplete, object of a *kendo* match is to strike the opponent before, or without, being struck in return. On a deeper level, however, *kendo* is about much more than simply hitting an opponent with a bamboo stick. Originating in the training regimens of pre-modern dueling schools, modern *kendo* developed rules that distilled the available techniques into a small set of scoring strikes that represent basic cuts from which all other cuts can ultimately be derived. In pursuing such a narrow precision, the player is also cultivating proper movement and posture, *tai*, as well as the passion and control to use them, *ki*. Ideally, the *shinai* is moved as if it were a part of the player’s body. Imbalances present in the body will radiate out into the *shinai*, resulting in lack of precision and thus will not score. There is no possibility of the *shinai* being correct on its own, it is an extension of the player.

These key concepts, *ki*, *ken*, and *tai*, must come together as one, *ichi*. The complete object of a *kendo* match is to strike the opponent before, or without, being struck in return while maintaining good posture, projecting good spirit, and using the sword appropriately. When all three exist harmoniously the result is beautiful *kendo*, that which *kendoka* strive for their whole lives. The pursuit of this harmony is demonstrated in the physical components of a *kendo* strike. Beginning with correct posture and following proper form, a player aligns three components of a strike. The first is the *shinai* striking the target correctly. The second is the player’s *kiai*, which in a match is the yelled out name of the target location. The third is the *fumikomi*, a precise stamping of the leading foot. These are outward identifiers of the player’s intent, showing observers that the player is aware of his actions and in complete control of them. Without that awareness and complete control, a player is simply flailing at his opponent with a bamboo stick, which is more than just not beautiful *kendo*, it is not *kendo* at all.