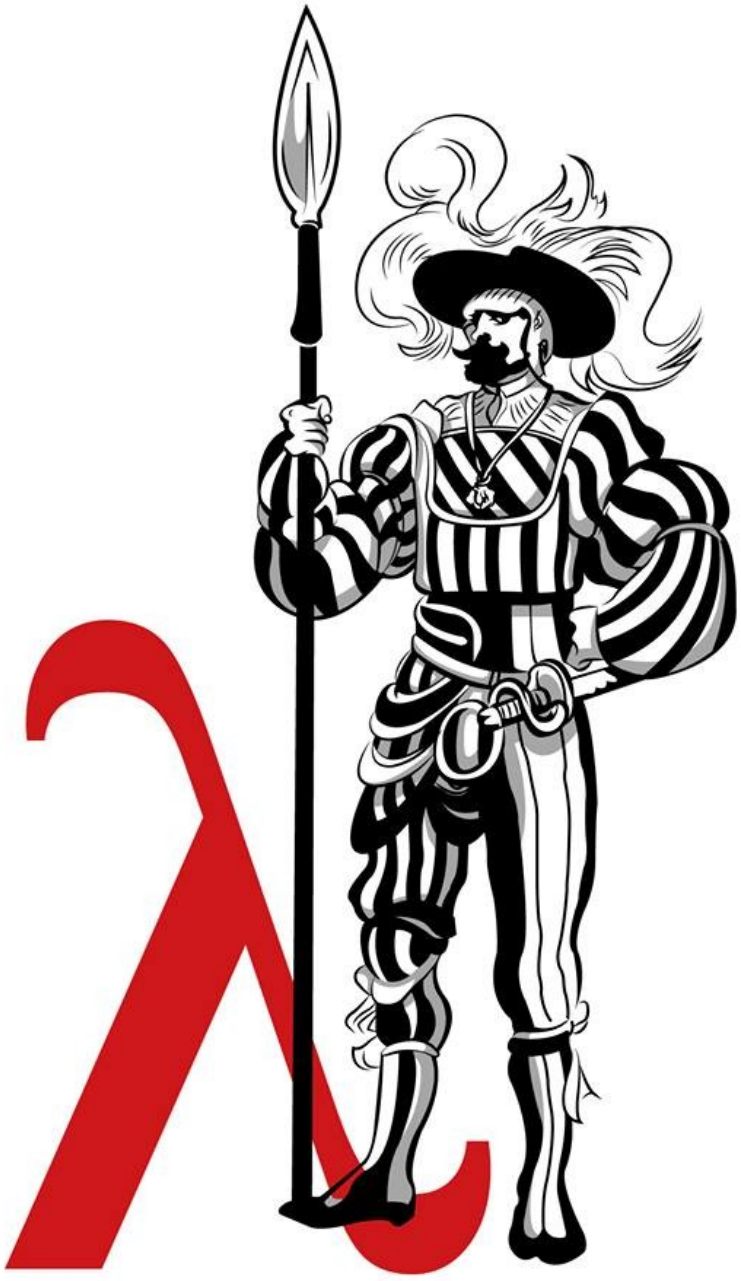

THE WAY OF THE SWORD

Introduction to the spirit of kendo

Federico Goglio

The Cowboy: “Good evening.” Adam Kesher: “Good evening to you.” The Cowboy: “Lovely night. I’d like to thank you for leaving your hotel and coming all this way to meet me.” Adam Kesher: “My pleasure. What’s on your mind?” The Cowboy: “Well, well… Here’s a man in a hurry to get down to business. You’re eager to know, aren’t you?” Adam Kesher: “What do you think?” The Cowboy: “A man’s attitude. A man’s attitude goes hand in hand with the life he’ll lead. Do you agree with that?” Adam Kesher: “Yes…” The Cowboy: “Did you answer that way because you thought it was what I wanted to hear… or did you actually think about what I said and answer because you truly believe it?” Adam Kesher: “I agree with what you said.” The Cowboy: “What did I say?” Adam Kesher: “That a man’s attitude determines his life.” The Cowboy: “Then, since you agree… you must be a man who doesn’t care much for a comfortable life…”

(Mulholland Drive, David Lynch)

Some years ago, following my master, I traveled to Romania to practice kendo in a dojo in Bucharest and later in one in Brașov, in the heart of Transylvania. We rented a car and set out from the gray plains of Wallachia toward the Carpathians, navigating potholed roads crowded with all sorts of vehicles—some still pulled by animals. We wound our way into Europe’s wildest mountains, where bears skirt the edges of towns at dusk in search of food, and castles stubbornly guard tales of wars fought with blades… for the sword transcends time and unites people across the world. (This was something Alfredo Rota—an Olympic fencer who won gold in the team épée event at Sydney 2000—had reminded me of not long before, when I interviewed him for work. Meeting me, a kendoka, he shared reflections on the martial roots common to all forms of fencing, from Western to Japanese.)

In Brașov, a Transylvanian city with Saxon roots—also known for nearby Bran Castle, a rocky sentinel guarding the frontier between Wallachia and Transylvania since the 13th century and, by tradition, the residence of Voivode Vlad III, the Ottoman-impaler who inspired the literary figure of Dracula—we practiced in the evenings at the local dojo. This was a school gym repurposed to host the exotic Japanese fencing art, with locker rooms lacking showers or any other comforts typical of the modern fitness era. It didn’t surprise us much: after all, we were in a remote corner of Europe, in many ways unfamiliar, practicing a martial art with ancient roots born on the other side of the world among warrior clans who once vied for the Land of the Rising Sun by the sword.

After arming ourselves by donning the bogu—the traditional kendo armor composed of the men (protection for the head, face, throat, and shoulders), do (torso protector), tare (protection for the abdomen and hips), and kote (hand and forearm guards)—we followed a precise ritual of gestures, sequences, and codified timing. All of this unfolded in absolute silence, the kind that precedes the explosive shouts of combat. Then we began practice, revisiting the fundamental principle at the core of kendo: ki ken tai (spirit, sword, and body).

In kendo, every strike must embody three indispensable elements (so indispensable that, even in competitive matches, the three referees do not merely verify whether a strike landed to award an ippon—a point—but also assess its "qualitative" execution based on ki ken tai):

1. The sword (ken) must cut correctly, targeting precise areas of the body. Random or accidental strikes are never permitted—the cut must land exclusively on the head, torso, arms, or throat (via a thrust), and the intent to strike that specific target must be unmistakable.
2. The body (tai) must engage dynamically in the strike. A static posture is forbidden—the strike cannot rely solely on arm movement. It requires a forward thrust, a committed lunge toward the opponent without any retreat.
3. The spirit (ki) must be expressed and demonstrated. Every attack must be accompanied by a shout, a kiai—a precise, focused vocalization that channels resolve.

Without these three elements unified in action, a strike in kendo remains incomplete.

Ki ken tai is an integral principle of both form and substance. As mentioned, it comprises these three indispensable elements. The form of every ippon carries substantial meaning. For example, tai—the engagement of the body—reveals sincere commitment, as only by thrusting the entire body forward with unhesitating

momentum can one demonstrate the courage of the assault. In kendo, there is ideally no retreat; movement is always forward, toward the opponent. Even specialized attacking techniques that inherently involve backward zanshin (those born from close-quarters combat, which leave no space for forward momentum) still require that, at least in the instant of the strike, the cut is executed with a decisive forward thrust. In any case, retreating betrays weakness of spirit and inevitably leads to defeat.

There are masters—sensei—who, in combat, overwhelm their opponents even with mere semé: a control (seemingly static yet always surging forward, tense, pressing against the enemy) achieved through centeredness and spirit, maintaining a guard with sword against sword. They need not even strike. By holding their stance and pressing forward with relentless intent, they force their opponent to retreat meters, often without the opponent even realizing it.

Kendo is a discipline where there is no defense: one attacks and surges ahead. For there to be presence of spirit and will, the expression of kiai—of voice—is essential. Every strike must be accompanied by a shout. Here, too, form is the living expression of substance. What might appear as mere screams, in fact, reveals a clarity of spirit and precise offensive intent… After all, no warrior, in the midst of a mortal assault, would remain silent without externalizing their spirit through battle cries (consider, for instance, those who charged from the trenches, sword or bayonet in hand, ready to clash with the enemy).

In kendo, even silence is charged with purpose—until it ruptures into the cry that seals the unity of mind, blade, and body.

The sword (ken) must cut correctly. The strike must be executed with care, refined through practice after practice, targeting precise points: the head (men), wrists (kote), torso (do), or a thrust to the throat (tsuki). Accidental strikes are forbidden—precision and intent are paramount. This is also why the kiai shout must accompany the strike with clarity. The voice must declare the exact target in unison with the cut. This demonstrates that the strike is driven by deliberate intent and not left to chance.

“As a boy, I especially detested those characteristic shouts of kendo,” writes Yukio Mishima, a kendoka, in an October 1964 article for the Yomiuri Shimbun. “Those unbelievably vulgar, wild, menacing, crude, deeply visceral, uncivilized, uncultured, irrational, animalistic cries filled my bashful, boyish soul with shame. The thought of having to let out such a scream was unbearable to me, and when others shouted, I wanted to flee to avoid hearing them. Now, twenty-five years later, the situation has completely reversed: that shout—whether mine or another’s—gives me pleasure. I’m not lying; I truly love that cry. What change has taken place within my being?”“In my view,” he continues, “it lies in recognizing that this is the cry of ‘Japan’—latent in the depths of my spirit. This shout reveals what modern Japan is ashamed of, what it frantically tries to suppress and hide. It is tied to the darkest memories, to the vivid blood once spilled; it arises from the rawest recollections of the past. It is the scream of the deep layers of a people’s consciousness, flowing secretly beneath the veneer of superficial modern civilization. That monstrous Japan, now chained, starved, weakened, and groaning, can still roar through our mouths in kendo halls. This is its only moment of freedom. Now I love this cry intensely. And the attitude of contemporary Japan, which stubbornly closes its eyes to this cry, strikes me as utterly superficial.”

In the final years of his life, Yukio Mishima had immersed himself deeply in kendo, embodying its most authentic spirit. And though it is almost certain that Mishima was neither a connoisseur nor a scholar of katanas, the sword he used for his seppuku was an extraordinary piece. It had been gifted to him by Hiroshi Funasaka, the owner of Tokyo’s Taseido bookstore.

Funasaka practiced kendo in the same dojo as Mishima, holding a higher rank than the writer. One day, after a training session, he had asked Mishima if he owned a katana. When Mishima said no, Funasaka offered to gift him one from his personal collection. The writer accepted, visiting the man’s home where, among 25 displayed swords, one caught his eye. It was a battle katana forged in the 16th century by the master swordsmith Seki no Magoroku.

“It has two nicks because it was used in battle,” Funasaka had explained. “Used in battle? Good. Then I think it’s the right sword for me,” Mishima replied, making his choice. This reflected one of kendo’s core principles: the sword is no soulless object. It resonates with its past, bears the weight of its history, and carries the grave responsibility of being capable of taking human life.

That evening in Brașov, nestled in the Carpathians, after practice we headed to a brewery in the city center to refuel, sharing stories of our mutual journeys along the "way of the sword" (道 dō – path, 剣 ken – sword, 剣道 kendō). At one point in the conversation, I recalled an anecdote from my early days at the dojo, when I had just begun wearing bogu and sparring.

During a gigeiko (sparring match) with my master—the same one now beside me in this remote corner of Europe, teaching the sword—I was straining to attack with precision, yet achieving nothing. Each time I lunged, my master allowed me to overcommit slightly, then struck me hard from behind on the nape of my neck (a poorly protected area that stings sharply when hit) with his shinai (bamboo sword). After three or four blows to this nearly exposed part of my skull, I realized the lesson—taught not through words, only through strikes—was about zanshin: the unbroken awareness and readiness that must persist even after an attack.

In kendo, zanshin is not merely a physical stance but a state of mind—a relentless vigilance that refuses to wave even in retreat. My master’s strikes were a brutal reminder: to lower one’s guard, even for an instant, is to invite defeat. That night in Brașov, as we clinked beer mugs, he nodded at the retelling. The lesson, unspoken then and now, was universal.

Zanshin is the body movement that follows a strike during an attack. It consists of the mutual crossing of combatants: after lunging toward each other, they pass by one another, momentarily turning their backs, and then assume a "safe" position of mutual vigilance. In essence, from a frontal guard stance, after launching an attack toward the opponent, you continue moving beyond them until you are out of reach of their sword. Practically, zanshin demonstrates that the strike was executed not just with the arms but with the full-body thrust. Conceptually, however, it represents the state of alertness and readiness one must maintain after an attack. By turning your back, even briefly, you acknowledge an opponent who might still be alive; thus, after striking, you cannot pause—you must continue moving until you reach a secure position from which to launch another lethal strike.

That evening, by not performing proper zanshin—halting my attack too soon, leaving my back exposed to the enemy and their sword—my master made his point clear by striking the nape of my neck. In doing so, I failed to execute the strike optimally. Thus, that lesson on zanshin ultimately underscored the importance of every single strike, every single attack.

The spirit of kendo is not one of survival. It is one of death. Those who face each other, guided by the original feudal ethos, are fated to die. The loser dies, struck by the opponent’s single, lightning-fast lethal blow. But even the victor dies: after defeating an enemy, a samurai’s destiny is to perish in a subsequent duel or through seppuku before their lord. Neither duelist knows, when launching an attack, whether they will die in that clash or the next. Zanshin, understood as form—as the aesthetic completeness of the strike—is thus of essential importance. It embodies the fatalistic essence of kendo, where every movement must honor the inevitability of death Kendo conceals its very essence in the aesthetic perfection of the strike. When a practitioner attacks and realizes they are "dead"—struck by the opponent’s faster blade (as attacks are nearly always launched simultaneously by both duelists)—halting mid-movement or failing to execute their strike with full commitment betrays that essence... To die with the most exquisitely executed strike, seeing it through to completion even when it no longer affects the duel’s outcome.When first embarking on the path of the sword, conditioned by the world around us to measure every effort solely by practical, material outcomes, we believe that once preempted by the opponent’s strike, our attack becomes futile—the task finished, any further effort a waste.

In the dojo, during that sparring match with my sensei, I kept halting my attacks the moment I realized his strike had preempted mine. The proper attitude of a kendoka is the exact opposite. Among samurai, those who won duels gained the chance to refine the beauty of their strikes in future battles. Those who lost, by dying, had no further opportunities—they had to deliver their most beautiful strike in that final moment. It is precisely in defeat that beauty becomes essential. In the face of death, one must present oneself with one's finest attack: flawless to the last step of zanshin, beautiful until the very end.

An attitude, a mindset, a form of mental and spiritual readiness to push forward—even beyond the body of one's enemy. "A man's attitude. A man's attitude goes hand in hand with the life he'll lead," says the mysterious cowboy in Mulholland Drive, David Lynch's film, when, in the dead of night, he encounters Adam, who in mere hours has watched his gilded world crumble, losing all his material possessions. But in the way of the sword, this transcendence goes beyond the active, offensive attitude toward every difficulty, every obstacle (though this remains one of kendo's many indirect teachings). It is not merely the typically American drive to push forward—the gold rush mentality, Klondike pioneering, frenzied frontier expansion, indomitable Western gallops, compulsive conquest, the refusal to ever halt... The attitude of the sword's path is indeed courage and boldness, but without the need to anchor these traits to material purpose or the pursuit of tangible gain. "That attitude, motivated by material purpose, inevitably and inexorably concerns itself only with life—never engaging with, even banishing from all thought—death... And 'the samurai's vocation is death,' writes Mishima. 'No matter how peaceful the times, death remains the ultimate driving force for the samurai. In modern Japan, under a constitution that renounces war, those who regard death as their vocation should not, in principle, even exist. The democratic era is founded on the premise that the greatest good is to live as long as possible.'"

The spirit of kendo, then, is not one of pushing forward to improve one's life or ensure better survival. It is the spirit of death. Always and unequivocally, as my master taught me that evening with the painful strikes of the bamboo sword to the nape of my neck, he asserted—through weapons, not words—that the attitude must always be that of the attacker: one who advances and presses beyond, regardless of the final outcome; one who must deliver their finest strike in the duel because, in all likelihood, it will be the last strike of their life. "A few minutes before kendo practice began, while waiting for the others in the gym room, I looked around. A step class was about to start," writes Cristopher Ross, a kendoka who traveled to Japan years after Mishima's death to uncover the fate of the Seki no Magoroku sword the writer had used for his seppuku.

«A few minutes before starting kendo practice, while I was waiting for the others in the gym, I looked around. A step lesson was about to begin», writes Christopher Ross, a kendo practitioner who a few years after Mishima's death went to Japan to find out what had happened to the Seki no Magoroku sword that the writer had used to commit seppuku. «About twenty girls in brightly colored tracksuits and a solitary, plump man in soccer shorts and a vest, moved in a random manner and set up small wooden platforms. A woman dressed from head to toe in fluorescent pink, who must have been new since I had never seen her before, was listening to her Walkman and sporting a pair of pink sunglasses, enveloping her face like a ski mask. She stared at me, from behind the pink lenses, with eyes that seemed indignant. I returned her gaze, spread my legs and leaned on the hilt of the sword, my face inscrutable. The gulf between us was immense: hundreds of years, thousands of kilometers, a gap between different civilizations. She had come there to dance, to have fun, to show that she liked pink and to keep fit. I, dressed in the clothes of a Japanese feudal warrior, a member of a long-extinct caste, had come to learn to kill."

Federico Goglio practiced kendo for about fifteen years in a dojo, on the outskirts of Milan, of the Italian Kendo Confederation (a national federation affiliated with the International Kendo Federation, the only one in the world). A black belt, he achieved the third dan degree on June 9, 2013 in Modena, in front of a commission chaired by Japanese masters. He participated in the Italian championships for several years. He fought in several international competitions (Athens, Dublin, Stockholm East and Brasov) and Russia (Moscow and St. Petersburg).