



B.V.E. HYDE¹

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1574-143X>

Review of *A Pedagogical Approach of Kendo: Keiken Suru* by Stevie Roquelaure, Guadeloupe: Librinova, 2021. 115 pages

In the case of *kendō* (剣道), training (*keiko* 稽古) in Japan in comparison to elsewhere in the world, is like caviar (p. 15) – that is, it is the best. A difficulty that teachers outside Japan face is whether to replicate this experience and, if so, how? This is the problem that Stevie Roquelaure addresses in *A Pedagogical Approach of Kendo*. It is not an academic book, and cannot therefore be fully held to academic standards, but it is written by an academic and, seeing as there is little anglophone *kendō* scholarship, it is well worth considering.

The book seeks to provide a pedagogical theory specifically for the Japanese martial art of *kendō*. The author steers away from intellectualization or a scientific approach, advancing instead emotivity and a phenomenalist attitude towards learning. In his view, we need to think less and feel more: that is why the Japanese are so good at *kendō*, and that is what we must incorporate into our practice in the West if we are to catch up to them. He argues that practitioners should “live” *kendō*. In his view, *kendō* training, and *kendō* itself, consists of (1) the intellectual, or *visualization*, which provides meaning for the mind; (2) the physical, or *feeling*, which provides meaning for the body; (3) and the emotional, or *living*, which provides meaning for the heart (p. 18). This division is the most interesting thing about his proposal.

A prominent problematic in Western philosophy since at least Descartes (1641) is mind-body dualism in which one is tasked with explicating the exact relationship between a separate mind and body. In Eastern philosophy, especially in Japanese philosophy, one often speaks about ‘bodymind’ (*shintai* 身体), in which the body and the mind are not treated discretely, but

¹ B.V.E. Hyde is a researcher in philosophy at Durham University where he focusses on the philosophy of science. He also specializes in Japanese philosophy with an interest in Japanology and Eastern philosophy more broadly. He is currently writing a book of *Lectures on Japanese Philosophy*, in addition to a *Commentary on the Shōtoku Constitution* and a brief history of Japanese philosophy titled *The Tale of the Japanese Mind*. He can be reached at b.v.e.hyde@outlook.com.

as one. This is a theory most clearly accredited to Yuasa Yasuo 湯浅泰雄 (1987). Roquelaure seems to be bringing this understanding of the self into *kendō* education: an understanding which he may have developed indirectly vis-à-vis Japanese culture, as he is not a scholar of Japanese philosophy. *Kendō* is neither solely intellectual nor solely physical, but both, and when they are synthesized together, a new essential mode of understanding is created or realized: namely, *living*, which seems to be what Thomas P. Kasulis has called “intimacy” (2002) or “engagement” (2018). What Roquelaure is trying to say is that a crude synthesis of body and mind, physical and intellectual, or attention to just one over the other, ultimately leads to an incomplete education in *kendō*. It is through properly synthesizing the emotional, physical and intellectual that one unlocks the ability to really understand *kendō* through incorporating it into one’s life. And in the West, one tends to separate the self from its activity, whereas “visualization, feeling and living... are spontaneous and performed naturally within the Japanese *Budo* Culture” (p. 105).

For the sake of explanation, consider the cases of *debana waza* (出鼻技) and *ai-ki* (相気). Although not explicitly stated in Roquelaure’s work, these cases seem to be an appropriate extension of an idea that is there in its germinal form. Both *debana waza* and *ai-ki* are teleological consequences of looking for an opportunity to strike (*datotsu-no kikai* 打突の機会) and fighting to take the initiative (*sen* 先). Because both practitioners (*kendōka* 剣道家) are trying to perform a strike – they have as the end (*telos* τέλος) of their intention a valid strike – a tense situation may arise when both simultaneously intend to strike, which is called *ai-ki*. Because one knows that the other intends to strike, and because the moment of striking is an opportunity to strike oneself, the other will try to strike first, which is called *debana waza*. If *ai-ki* properly obtains, the result is likely that the two practitioners will perform a simultaneous technique (*ai-waza* 相技) rather than a single practitioner performing *debana waza* first. But what is important in this case is that the strike is not late, and the *physical* manifestation of the intention to strike – i.e. the technique (*waza* 技) itself – always comes after the intention itself. If a practitioner tries to perform *debana* by *looking* for something, then their strike will always come second, making *their opponent’s* strike *debana waza*. Likewise, if a practitioner takes the approach of *guessing* or *predicting*, their *debana waza* will always be unpredictable, and there may often be no opportunity to strike. However, if the practitioner *feels* the opportunity to strike, i.e. their intention to strike,

then there is time to move before they do and thus complete the technique before they do. This is *debana waza*. A typical ‘Western’ mode of explanation, then, does not capture how *debana waza* actually works. If one looks for something physical, or if one intellectualizes it, then it will be impossible to capture the opportunity before it disappears. However, a ‘Japanese’ explanation, such that one *feels* the opportunity, can account for the ability to identify the opportunity to strike – that is, the opponent’s intention to strike – before the opportunity physically manifests itself by which time, if you have not begun to move already, then you will be struck first and will therefore have missed the opportunity for *debana waza*.

Another meaning of “living” *kendō* for Roquelaure is to enculturate it by building it into native non-Japanese cultures. This supposedly helps bring *kendō* into the heart. This helps practitioners to live it rather than to just understand it physically or intellectually (p. 19 f.). However, it is doubtful that it is necessary for it to become part of one’s culture. Are the Japanese good at *kendō* because it is part of their culture? Or is it something in Japanese culture – i.e. the conception of bodymind and the emphasis on feeling – that accounts for this? The latter appears more likely. It is an ill-informed opinion that making *kendō* less Japanese would make non-Japanese better at it, and Roquelaure does not do any real work in his book to justify why enculturating *kendō* into a different culture would make one any better at it. In fact, if one is to understand the first meaning of “living *kendō*” as the necessity to introduce feeling therein, and this feeling is identified with Japanese culture, then one ought to urge non-Japanese practitioners to immerse themselves as much as possible in Japanese culture, to adopt the Japanese mind – or bodymind, as may be the case – rather than eschewing it for what they are themselves more comfortable with.

Roquelaure seems to be somewhat confused around this matter. It is common to identify *kendō* as something which in some way needs to be lived: one equipment (*kendōgu* 剣道具) manufacturer is famous for advancing this aphorism in the form of a hashtag: #kendoislife. The ways that this manifests, however, vary considerably. Roquelaure’s first interpretation, although embryonic, seems to me substantial and with concrete instantiations within *kendō*: as I applied it to the case of *debana waza*, it seems to be able to explain why the Japanese are so good at it in a way that other theories cannot. His second interpretation is an abnegation of the best qualities of his first and seems to confuse the source of the Japanese ability to live/feel in *kendō*, which is a cultural mode of understanding, not the fact that *kendō* is culturally Japanese. His third interpretation is the most

confused: he produces a Declaration of Men's Duties at the end of the book (pp. 107–109). This is just a personal ethic, and not something that will either help one with their *kendō* or that is obligatory for a *kendō* practitioner. One of the other ways that Roquelaure is confused about the source of why the Japanese are so good at *kendō* is his emphasis on passive learning. He says that in Japan practice is based on discipline, whereas outside of Japan “it is almost a tradition to question everything” (p. 17). He favours the former pedagogical approach, or what might be called passive learning. Certainly, one might properly engage in both the teaching and the object of teaching in such a passive approach, but this begs the question that one first and foremost understands the teaching. If one does not understand either what is being taught or the teaching itself – and it is not outrageous to assume that one does not understand at least the former, or else one would not be in need of the latter – then there is no engagement properly speaking. By passively absorbing the dictates of a teacher, at best what one can engage with is what one understands them to be saying, not with what they are actually saying, and in the end, one cannot learn from their knowledge, but from a facsimile of it constructed through misunderstanding.

Passivity is the father of dogma, and it is through passive acceptance of a senior's claims that falsities abound unhindered. Even if the original teacher understood the object of teaching superbly, if his students fail to grasp it, repeating misinterpretations to their own students, who then further warp the teaching, the end result is an entire tradition propounding falsely something that even early teachers were not mistaken about, and thus there is regress instead of progress. In *kendō*, a classic example of this is through the use of the term *zanshin* (残心). All *zanshin* means is a state of alertness, or an awareness of one's opponent. This need not be following a strike: the tension between two high-level practitioners is on account of their constant *zanshin*; their unbreaking concentration on their opponent. However, one often hears teachers in the West insist that, following a strike, one must move forward through their opponent and keep moving away from them, their back facing their supposedly vanquished opponent. This might be charitably interpreted as an exhibition of good posture and high spirit, both being criteria for a valid strike (*yūkō datotsu* 有効打突), but it is wrong to call this *zanshin*: if they are not even looking at their opponent, how can you say that this is proper awareness? And when practitioners perform a strike, pass through and turn to face their opponent as they do so, moving away from them backwards, some teachers insist that this cannot be awarded a point (*ippon* 一本) on account of improper *zanshin*. But again, it cannot be *zanshin* that

is lacking when a practitioner is staring at his opponent. This is a classic example of even well-established students, themselves on the route to becoming well-established teachers, failing to critically and actively learn from their teachers. If it really is the habit of Westerners to question so much, then this is at least one advantage that we have in the West over Japanese who are, ostensibly, passive in their reception of *kendō* instruction. The fact that it is in the West and not in Japan, however, that this misinterpretation of *zanshin* abounds, suggests to me that Roquelaure is not quite on the mark about Westerners questioning so much.

Aside from his general pedagogical philosophy, Roquelaure makes numerous observations about the ways of understanding and of visualizing aspects of *kendō*. He argues that the fundamentals are (1) fluidity – associated with rivers (*kawa* 川); (2) movement from the hips – associated with mountains (*yama* 山); and (3) intensity – associated with fire (*hi* 火). For each he offers practical methods of visualizing, feeling and living these fundamental principles. This is his interpretation of *ki-ken-tai-itchi* (気剣体一致), which (supposedly) applies to everything in *kendō*. This is quite a unique understanding which diverges considerably from the classic view that the synergy of the spirit (*ki* 気), sword (*ken* 剣) and body (*tai* 体) is materially instantiated in shouting (*kiai* 気合い), striking (*datotsu* 打突) and stamping (*fumikomiashi* 踏み込み足) at (roughly) the same time (or, more correctly, *in unison*, which does not necessarily mean simultaneously). The result may be a more *elegant kendō*, but it is questionable to what extent it can be said that fluidity and intensity are really *fundamental*. Movement from the hips is undeniably essential, but one might think that fluidity and intensity should be focusses for more experienced swordsmen (*kenshi* 剣士).

Roquelaure also puts a lot of store in the pictographic nature of *kanji*. He argues that *kanji* are sensuous in a way that the Roman alphabet is not. It does not separate the intellectual from the emotional and therefore allows the Japanese to more deeply understand (live) *kendō* (p. 24).

Roquelaure associates a number of modes with the components of *kendō*. For the physical there are (a) natural, (b) large and (c) small motions. For the heart, mind and body there are (a) strong, (b) weak and (c) gentle states (pp. 32–36). It is how one personally balances these modes that constitutes one's style of *kendō* (p. 84 f.). Roquelaure starts his *kendō* education with the individual, which is why he says footwork must begin with what is natural, followed by performing large movements, and then small (p. 49).

He does not commence with what is ideal and thus most abstracted from the individual, but what is most natural to him, which is then moulded into what is ideal. The substance is idealized rather than the ideal materialized. There is certainly something commendable about this method: it is less demanding and more accessible. But an alternative view is that, for special individuals, they ought to aspire to the ideal and materialize it through their own power; it is only the average man who is permitted to set the limit of his own development in line with the limit of what he is naturally capable of. The truly excellent do not base their pursuit on themselves – they selflessly pursue the beautiful, making themselves beautiful, rather than trying to attain to the beautiful with the ugly substance they begin with. Roquelaure's pedagogy is much more realistic than this idealistic attitude, but he might be criticized for being too pessimistic, limiting the potentially rapid development of certain naturally talented individuals.

Etiquette is also, in Roquelaure's view, integral to development in *kendō*. It is a common teaching that *kendō* starts and ends with etiquette (*reigi* 礼儀), but it is a subtly different matter as to the efficacy of etiquette in *kendō* education, and an empirical question as to whether the best-mannered practitioners are the most skillful. This too might be ill-conceived, but Roquelaure demonstrates a connection between the two by virtue of the socio-political hierarchical nature of the *dōjō* (道場): “if you do not put your time and effort in for yourself, no *sensei* is going to spend his time and effort on you” (p. 43). He makes the usual points about the necessity of etiquette too, but makes an interesting point with regard to striking at the target located over the throat (*tsuki* 突き): “*Tsuki* is malice, nastiness and disrespect. Find and observe these feelings inside yourself to understand the inherent psychological violence in the *tsuki* technique” (p. 68). This is an uncommon view today, and one which reflects the martial history of *kendō* in which malice and violence had a place. Arguably, they still have a place – and not only in police *kendō*. Some of the most beautiful *kendō* involves plenty of pushing and shoving, but it is a fluid and graceful violence that is controlled, not unbridled violence and mere rough and tumble. Many of the most successful practitioners, both champion competitors (*shiaisha* 試合者) and, especially, senior teachers (*hanshi* 範士) can be quite malicious, particularly in their training (see Bennett 2015: xxi). It is their malice and willingness to exert a kind of violence upon their opponent that gives them “pressure”. Does Roquelaure agree with this assessment? Perhaps. He makes a comment about how one should not *tsuki* a teacher or else it will result in a “rough lesson” (p. 67). However, he does not seem to advocate

for either malice or violence, which is both reassuring and reflective of the more sporting and less martial nature of modern *kendō* (see Bennett 2015, ch. 5). He propounds the ability to “find and observe these feelings inside yourself” though. What does he want one to do with them when they have identified these feelings? Master them, presumably. But then what? Exert them, or suppress them? He does not say, and perhaps this is an oversight in the book.

The actual techniques of *kendō* do not feature until the end of the book. The main focus of the book is pedagogical, but when it comes to explaining the theory behind certain techniques, Roquelaure makes a few errors. The biggest is perhaps where he describes waiting for the opportunity as preparedness (*tame* 溜め; p. 75). This is not true. Most *kendō* players – most martial artists in general – would be immediately concerned to hear him advocating waiting. One must *create* the opportunity (*seme* 攻め). The *readiness* to seize the opportunity created is *tame*. The mental readiness is called *zanshin*; the physical *tame*. *Tame* and *seme* go hand in hand: one does *seme* to create the opportunity and has *tame* to be able to take advantage of the opportunity created – which Roquelaure seems to recognize (p. 76). I suspect by “waiting” he really means to refer to *patience*, which is quite different. One can patiently and gradually command a situation, but waiting means that they are waiting for the other person to take command. Those that wait work under the assumption that when the other takes command they will slip up and present an opportunity, which is not often the case with stronger practitioners.

Roquelaure ends the book by returning to its central premiss of living *kendō*. In his opinion, the essence of all technique is that it must be lived. Hence his explanation of the book’s subtitle: “*keiken suru* means being able to make the experiment through life, to make the experience of your art through practice” (p. 103).

There are not many anglophone books on *kendō*. The most respectable are on its history (e.g. Bennett 2015), and good books that address the actual techniques of *kendō* are exceedingly rare. Rarer yet, though, are books that address how *kendō* is actually taught. Roquelaure’s contribution to this slim body of scholarship is an interesting one: he does not simply reel off the standard talking points but brings his own perspective to the lifelong challenge of practicing and teaching *kendō*. In doing so, he has started to address the enormous open question all teachers face, especially in the West: Why are the Japanese so good at *kendō*? To answer it fully, though, more

work is needed, and perhaps the study of Japanese philosophy might provide further direction.

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