

The Act of Seme

Generally speaking, *seme* is explained with the teaching of *san-sappo* (killing the spirit, killing the sword, and killing the technique). In kendo it is often said "win, then strike", meaning it is at the stage of *seme*, before the strike, that you must win. Put plainly, *seme* is the process of searching for a means to break the deadlock of *kamae* in order to put yourself in the advantageous situation where an opportunity to execute a valid strike presents itself. Producing that opportunity means dynamically hunting for openings, searching for and creating that momentary weakness in your opponent. Passively watching for an opponent's shortcomings or movements is not enough, but rather *seme* is an active, progressive process of creating openings and striking opportunities.

An opening can be one that is manifest, that is it can have external form, such as a physical deterioration of *kamae*, or it can be internal and formless, such as a psychological weakness in *kamae*. External form and internal psyche are opposite sides of the same coin: form will influence the mind and, conversely, internal state manifests itself in outward appearance. If the opponent's *kamae* is steadfast and strong without any openings, then executing an attack will be futile. The opponent's *kamae* must first be broken or unsettled, creating the opening for attack. In other words, the opponent must be beaten before being struck.

The main factors in searching for a way to break the deadlock of *kamae* and putting yourself in a situation to execute a valid strike, that is, the substance of *seme*, are considered to be: Taking the lead by *ki* (spirit), dominating the center and adopting an advantageous *ma-ai* (distance). "Taking the lead by *ki*" can be thought of as "the concentration of will to win", that is, not winning by the strike itself, but winning in the moment prior to that strike. This is *kizeme*, winning by achieving *ki* superiority. "Dominating the center" involves keeping the tip of your sword pointing at the center of your opponent, whilst keeping his sword tip away from your own center. Maintaining strong control and defense of your own center can, in itself, destroy your opponent's center and open him up to attack. "Adopting an advantageous *ma-ai*" is key to seizing the advantage of the opening by being at the right distance at the opportune moment of attack.

-- Oya Minoru, "Central Issues in the Instruction of Kendo," [Budo Perspectives vol. 1](#), pp. 205-206.