

FOCUS ★ SCHOOL / CULTURE

LIFE IN NEW YORK CITY BY WAY OF THE SWORD

The beauty of New York City is that it's not just a place where you can find great Japanese restaurants, markets and the newest goods. Dig a little further and you'll find an established Japanese community, filled with authentic traditions and transported culture, from Buddhist churches to Ikebana floral arranging. One of the most indelible, yet best kept secrets in New York City however is the Ken Zen Institute in Tribeca – arguably the preeminent place to go to learn and practice the martial art of Kendo.

Founded in 1960 by the late Reverend Shunshin Kan, the Ken Zen Institute is indeed a piece of Japanese American history, one that I also had the chance to enjoy when growing up in New York City. Even thirty years later (!) I can still remember the sights, sounds and smells of the dojo – while I am sadly no longer practicing, I vividly recall the physical and mental challenges set forth during lessons, and would be hard pressed not to admit that what I learned still applies to parts of my life in a positive way today.

What is Kendo? Good question. It literally means, “The Way of The Sword” and is a practice that dates back to the 12th Century – at the height of the time of the Samurai. It is based on traditional Japanese sword fighting, known as Kenjutsu, itself centuries older than Kendo. In the 1700's, Kendo started to look more like how we recognize it today. Bamboo practice swords called ‘shinai’ were introduced at that time, as were the ‘bogu’ protective gear – opponents could now strike at each other without the fear of injury. By the 1800's, improvements like using a metal grille for the faceplate and thick cotton for extra protection for the hands and wrists made way for the look that remains even now - the ‘Men’ (helmet), ‘Do’ (chest protector), ‘Tare’ (hip protector), and ‘Kote’ (mitts) are still the major elements of the Kendo armor.

The most important element of Kendo however is neither the gear, nor even physical strength. It is the

philosophy and intense mental preparation. Kendo is ultimately a blend of the samurai tradition and Zen Buddhism – a way to synchronize and control the entire body, breath, and voice, as well as a way to achieve enlightenment by focusing the mind and shedding things like anger, fear and doubt. The ultimate goal is about self-study and understanding; a harmonization of the mind, body and spirit through grueling practice and execution.

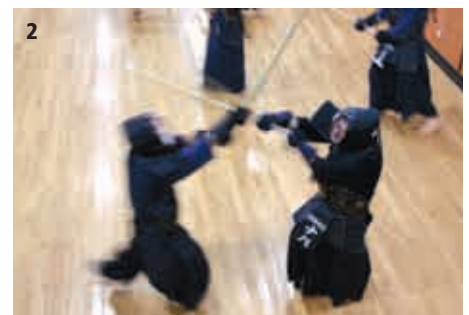
To the outside and untrained eye, it can be extremely difficult to grasp the subtleties of what is happening mentally and spiritually. Go to a national or international tournament and you'll hear the ‘Kiai’, the battle cry, and you can immediately be under the impression that it is a simple act of aggression. But a Kiai is much more than that – it is the vocal expression of when intent, technique and skill collide and merge into one action. If you wish to get a sense of everything that happens in one instant of a Kendo match, luckily you need only swing by 54 Thomas Street for a first hand experience.

These days, the Institute is run by Daniel Ebihara, who was once its star pupil and is now the sensei. The institute welcomes anyone to come see what they do, whether you are an avid sportsperson looking for a new challenge or just someone interested in Japanese culture. Along with Kendo, the Institute also offers laido – the practice of controlled sword techniques that are based on the actions of drawing and re-sheathing the blade. Whichever you choose, I'm sure you too will learn valuable things that will stay with you for a lifetime.

— Reported by *Nobi Nakanishi*

Ken Zen Institute

Kendo class: Tue, Thu, Sat 7pm-10pm, Sun 12:30pm-2pm
laido class: Wed 6pm-8pm, Sat 4pm-6pm
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New York, NY 10013
TEL: 212-406-9104
kenzeninst@aol.com / www.kenzendojo.org



1. Intimidating? Absolutely. You may think you're in a Tarantino movie at first - but Ebihara sensei is the real thing. 2. The incredible speed at which they strike needs to be seen to be believed. don't underestimate the bamboo sword either. 3. Man or woman, under the bogu we're all the same. There should be nothing keeping you from trying Kendo out and challenging yourself.