Manabu 学

Issue 2

Welcome to your second edition of our newsletter!

We're back with more news, techniques, and event information to keep you connected.

Just like last time, we'll be diving into our three main sections:

YouTube Channel News: The latest videos, updates, and announcements directly from our new channel.

Events & Seminars: Information on upcoming opportunities to train and learn together.

Insights & Techniques: A deep dive into the principles and practices of nanbudo.

If you didn't subscribe last issue:

Click here to subscribe to new issues!

Heiwa YouTube channel updates!

Thank you to everyone who has already subscribed to our new YouTube channel! If you haven't had a chance to visit yet, we have three short videos ready for you to watch. See what we've been up to at the dojo and subscribe to be the first to know when we post new content!

Advanced nanbudo: Kaeshi waza - nanbu sotai take kiri kaeshi/ude garami

Buki practice: Bo kaiten nage

Ippon shobu experiments

Don't forget to like, share, and subscribe to our channel for more valuable content!

Upcoming nanbudo seminars led by Leo Rafolt:

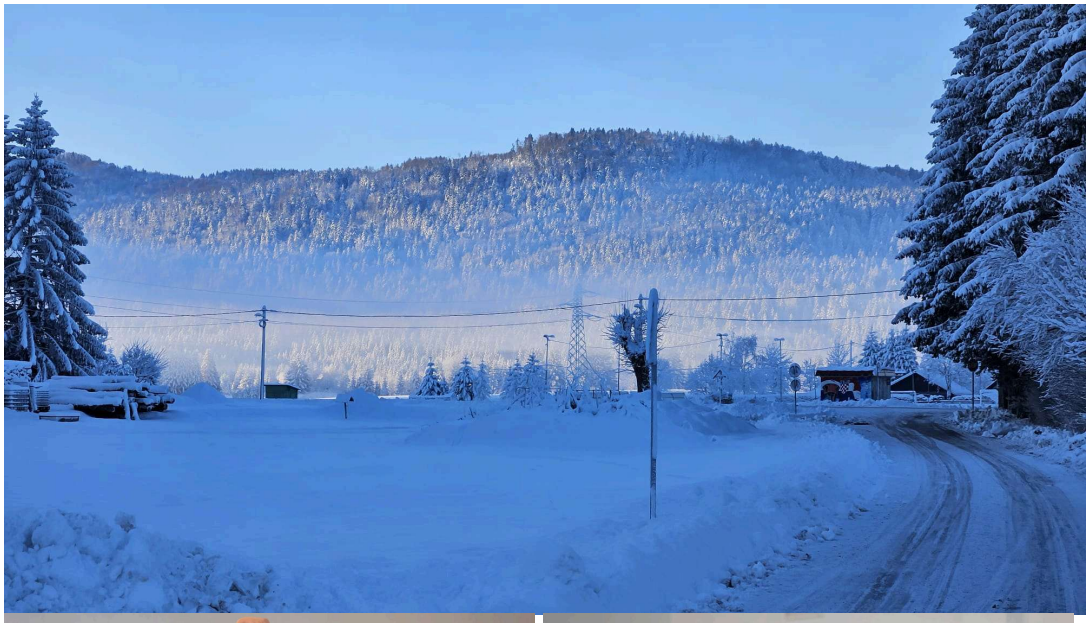
International Nanbudo Winter Seminar in Ravna Gora

Date: 9.1.2026-11.1.2026
Instructor: Leo Rafolt
Description: Held annually, nestled in the picturesque mountains of Croatia, the traditional Nanbudo winter seminar in Ravna Gora offers a unique opportunity for Nanbudoka to learn, and connect in a serene and focused environment.
Register by: December 1st at mihaelzupancic@gmail.com
Facebook event link

This seminar now replaces annual Zagreb seminar in December

Advance payment to confirm reservation of 30% to be payed before December 5th 2025.

Spaces are limited, so secure your spot as soon as possible!



Workshops:

Ippon shobu (一本勝負) u nanbudou

Date: 8.11.2025.
Instructor: Mihael Župančić & Luka Tokić
Description: The seminar will delve into the original concept of Ippon Shobu 一本勝負, as introduced by Nanbu Doshu, and its presentation as a development of tori.

Leo Rafolt

Maai (間合) and the Dynamics of Distance

Among the many concepts that define the practice and philosophy of Japanese martial arts (budō), the notion of maai **(間合)** occupies a particularly central position. While it is often rendered simply as distance or interval, such translations obscure the layered complexity of the term. In combat contexts, maai refers to the engagement distance between two opponents; yet it also encapsulates timing, rhythm, and psychological perception. As Karl Friday (1997) has argued in his study of medieval martial transmission, Japanese martial epistemology is fundamentally holistic, integrating technical, spatial, and mental dimensions into a unified framework of practice. Maai exemplifies this synthesis, operating simultaneously as a physical measurement, a temporal rhythm, and a cognitive orientation toward the other.

This article examines the theoretical dimensions of maai through historical, cultural, and phenomenological lenses. Drawing on classical sources such as Miyamoto Musashi's Book of Five Rings (1645), as well as modern scholarship on budō (Draeger 1973; Donohue 1991; Bodiford 2005), it explores maai as both a martial strategy and a cultural expression of Japanese approaches to space, perception, and relationality. The Japanese term consists of two elements: ma **(間)**, meaning interval, gap, or "in-between", consisting of doors **(門)** and the sun **(日)** as radicals, and ai **(合)**, consisting of a person **(人)** and the mouth **(口)** or communication, meaning "to meet" or "to harmonize", or "to correspond". Thus, at its core, maai signifies a meeting of intervals — the relational space between two presences.

The root term ma has broad cultural resonance in Japan. In aesthetics and philosophy, ma refers to the space-time interval that structures both physical presence and absence. It is the silence in music, the pause in speech, the gap between movements in Noh theatre, or the carefully arranged emptiness in Japanese garden design (Pilgrim 1986). When applied to martial practice, it does not denote a void, but an active, charged space — the potential field in which action unfolds. By adding ai, it emphasizes interaction and relationality. It is not simply the individual's sense of spacing, but the dynamic negotiation between two practitioners. The martial encounter thus becomes a site where subjective perception, physical capability, and strategic intent converge. Scholars and practitioners typically describe maai as encompassing four main components:

1. Spatial distance: the measurable gap between two opponents, shaped by body dimensions, weapon reach, and stance.
2. Temporal dimension: the cadence and time required to cross or maintain that distance, including the opponent's reaction speed.
3. Angular and rhythmic element: the lines of attack and defense, and the rhythm (hyoshi, **拍子**) or flow (nagare, **流れ**) of the exchange.
4. Psychological factor: mental readiness, intentionality, and perception, including the ability to sense openings (suki, **隙**) and to maintain "mental distance" (kokoro-no-maai, **心の間合い**).

From a phenomenological perspective, it can be understood as an embodied awareness of relational space. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (1962) concept of "intentional arc" — the body's pre-reflective orientation toward

the world — is instructive here. The martial artist perceives not only where the opponent is, but where they could be in the next instant, and the body orients itself accordingly. Thus, maai is both a metric and a horizon of action.

Classical martial traditions distinguish multiple types of maai. The most commonly cited are:

1. Tōma **(遠間)**: a long distance where immediate strikes are impossible, requiring movement to close the gap.
2. Issoku-itto-no-maai **(一足一刀の間合い)**: the "one step, one cut" interval, considered the optimal engagement range in swordsmanship, where a decisive strike can be launched with a single step.
3. Chūma **(中間)**: middle distance, enabling a wide variety of combinations and feints.
4. Chikama **(近間)**: close distance, where attacks can occur with minimal movement, but the risks of counterattack are heightened.

These distinctions are not rigid categories, but fluid zones within combat. As Donn Draeger (1973) noted, in koryū budō (classical martial systems), maai is constantly shifting, shaped by weapon type, body positioning, and psychological pressure.
The metaphor used in Shindō Musō Ryū by Shimizu Takaji is as follows: a string stretched between partners, neither too slack nor too tense — captures the delicate balance of tension in maintaining effective maai. At first glance, metsuke (**目付け**, gaze), maai **(間合い)**, and ma (**間**, interval) may seem like separate ideas, but in fact they are closely related concepts pointing to levels of perception (and the ability to manipulate the opponent's perception).

In koryū budō (**古流武道**, classical martial systems), distinctions include:

1. striking interval (uchima, **打間**),
2. close interval (chikama, **近間**),
3. working from long distance (tōma, **遠間**).

Closely linked to maai is the question of timing. The Japanese term hyoshi **(拍子)** refers to rhythm, cadence, or beat, and in martial contexts it signifies the flow of action. Control of rhythm allows one to disrupt the opponent's

timing, creating openings for decisive strikes.

Therefore, reactive maai may be:

1. positive: including spacing, distance, and cadence;
2. neutral: the concepts of musubi (**結び**, binding) or awase (**合わせ**, blending);
3. negative: entering the opponent's space, for example in the concept of irimi (**入り身**, entering).

Equally central is the concept of sen **(先)**, often translated as "the initiative". Three primary forms are identified in martial discourse:

1. Sen no sen **(先の先)** or tai no sen **(対の先 / 待の先)** – initiative that launches an attack at the very moment the opponent reveals intent. Kōbō ichi **(攻防)** expresses that attack and defense are two sides of the same intention.
2. Go no sen **(後の先)** or machi no sen **(待の先)** – responding after the opponent's move, but also luring them in (semari, **迫り**).
3. Sensen no sen **(先々の先)** or kakari no sen **(懸の先)** – pure anticipation of the opponent's attack, or striking before they even decide. The phrase sen o toru **(先を取る)** literally means "to take initiative".

These temporal strategies underscore that maai is not merely about physical spacing, but about the timing of engagement. As Musashi observed in The Book of Five Rings: "In combat, by knowing the rhythm of the enemy, I can use a rhythm they do not expect, and thus gain victory" (Musashi 1645/1974).

Besides physical time, there is also mental time or duration – the opponent's moment of carelessness (suki, **隙**) or the moment of decision (kime, 決), when an opening in defense is perceived. Thus, beyond physical and temporal considerations, maai also encompasses the psychological dimension of combat. A practitioner may maintain correct physical distance, yet lose if mentally unprepared or deceived. Opponents may deliberately manipulate, creating illusions of openings, provoking premature attacks, or unsettling rhythm. The concept of suki **(隙)**, or "opening" illustrates this mental-physical interplay. A lapse in attention or a break in rhythm creates vulnerability that can be exploited. Conversely, kime **(決)** refers to the decisive moment of action, when perception, intention, and execution converge.

While deeply rooted in Japanese cultural contexts, maai has parallels in other martial traditions. In Western fencing, concepts of measure (distance) and tempo (timing) bear striking similarity. Yet, as Alexander Bennett (2015) notes, Japanese budō integrates these into a more holistic framework, where psychological state and spiritual preparation are inseparable from technical execution.

From the perspective of embodied cognition, maai can be read as an anticipatory attunement — possibilities for action perceived in the environment (Gibson 1979). In martial arts, these affordances are relational: the opponent's movement patterns, weapon trajectories, and emotional cues. Performance theorists such as Richard Schechner (2002) have also noted that martial training shares structural features with theatrical performance: both involve controlled timing, spatial awareness, and the manipulation of presence. Thus, it resonates beyond combat, informing practices of leadership, negotiation, and artistic performance.

The concept of maai embodies the holistic epistemology of Japanese martial arts, uniting spatial, temporal, rhythmic, and psychological dimensions. Far from being reducible to distance, maai is a relational framework — an ever-changing field of engagement shaped by perception, initiative, and intent. It is both technical and philosophical, concrete and metaphorical, strategic and existential. By situating it within broader Japanese cultural aesthetics of ma (interval) and relationality, we see that martial arts articulate not only techniques of combat but also ways of perceiving and structuring human interaction. As Musashi suggested, to master rhythm and space is to master the conditions of encounter itself. In a contemporary context, maai continues to offer insights into embodied practice, intercultural communication, and the phenomenology of relational space. Whether in the dōjō, in theatre, or the dynamics of everyday life, the lessons of maai remind us that presence, timing, and awareness are decisive factors in all forms of human communication.

Here are a couple of preliminary exercise to explore your own maai and discover it as a part of your own habitus (taikei, **体型**).

First exercise consists of two partners approaching each other in three different rhythms, with a tendency to be faster, whereas one is stopping

another when he feels he has entered his own private space. Same can be done using kamaeru position **(構える)**.

Another exercise exemplifies the same principle of the most intimate and personal space, but this time using bokken, or fukuro shinai, thus avoiding the position of “locking tsuba” when both having bokken, or tsubazeriai **(つばぜり合い)**. In both exercises you will feel how your own maai changes as a dynamic structure, as well as how deep it is embedded in your own taikei.










The following exercises involve pushing one's partner from the back, while it is important to preserve a continuous maai, where our partner does not feel "being pushed".

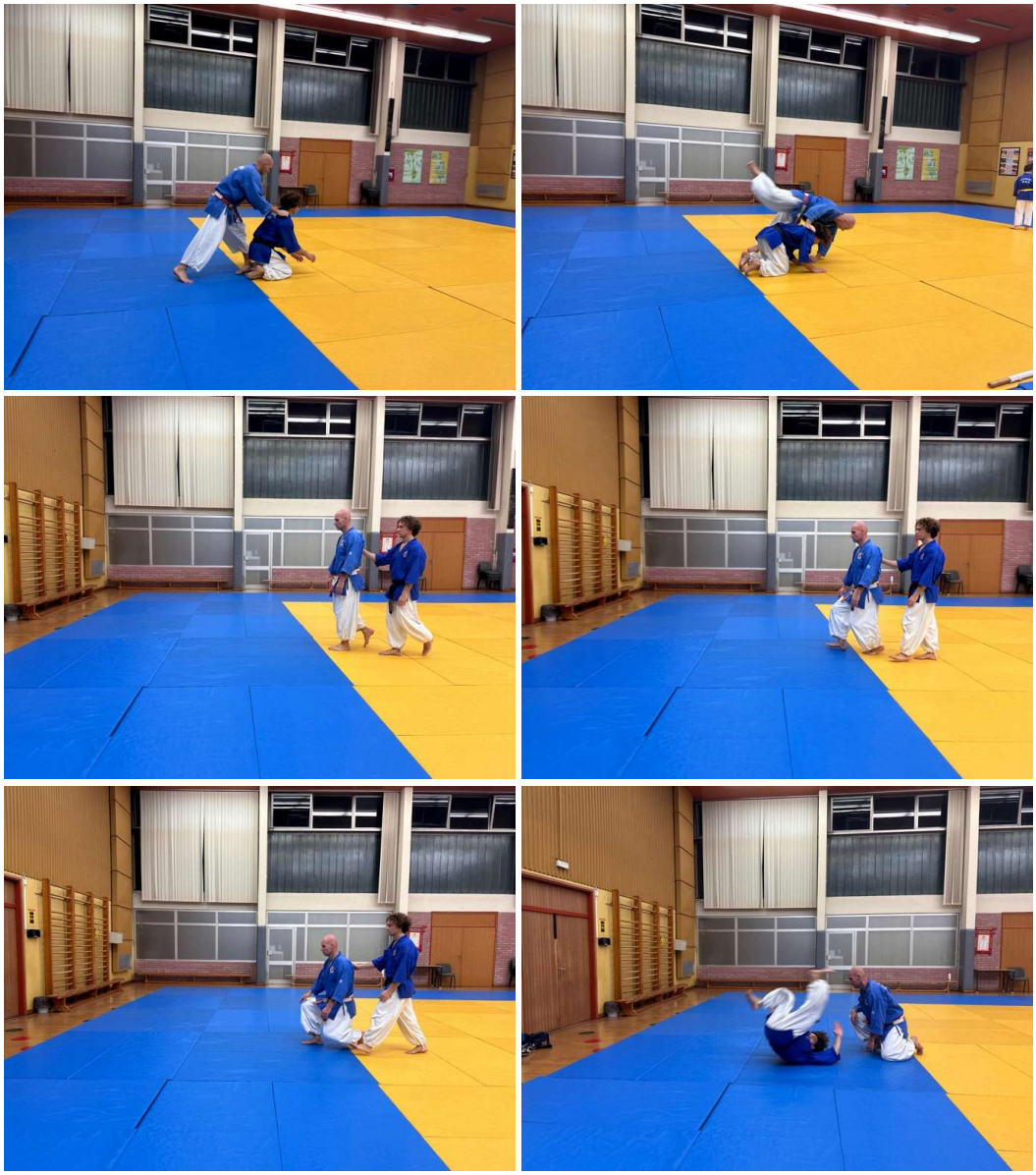



Same can be done from the back.



We can also change roles, in order for uke to use this “absorption distance” to perform a technique.



For example, in Nanbudo version of sumi gaeshi **(隅返)**.





Or kasumi nage **(霞投げ)**.



There are various aspects of Nanbudo that manifest these maai-nuances, the most obvious being the last technique in randori san no kata (乱取り三の型), where uke breaks tori's stance by employing sen sen no sen logic with jun zuki **(順突き)**, followed by furi uchi **(振り打ち)** and ashi barai **(足払い)**, which is actually an elaborated version of Nanbu Doshu's famous do gaeshi barai **(洞返払い)** technique. Another example occurs in nanbu sotai (**南部相対**, or chokusen, **直線**) awase or irimi principles, as well as all of the techniques that stem from it, where negative maai is created using "absorption". But these are the topics for the second sequel of this article.

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We look forward to seeing you on the tatami!

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