

Embu 演武

Jean-Claude Hamel, April 2026

演武 - *Embu* – The Performance of War. This formulation, chosen on purpose¹, exposes in a very explicit way a paradox that is present in the concept of *Embu*, and constitutes its heart, its essence. This same fundamental paradox is also found in the concept of *Budō*, which it supports and that inhabits its whole practice.



Embu, Gyōsho style - Marie Ponsot

The two *Kanji* that form and become together *Embu*, taken with this meaning of – the Performance/ the War – reveal two notions both juxtaposed and opposite, called here in this specific exercise of *Embu* to correlate, to make space for each other.

Once this contradiction acknowledged, it is interesting to attempt to understand this antagonism and to elucidate the tension generated by the simultaneous presence of these two opposite poles, that together constitute *Embu*. This contradiction is used here as a starting point and an angle of approach to grasp the concept of *Embu*.

The meaning kept here for the Performance (*translation note*: “jeu” in French is a term which means “game” in its broadest use, but also “performance” depending on the context. It is the French word used in the original text to translate the first *Kanji* of *Embu*) is not the one associated with the verb to play, but the one that equivocates an actor’s performance and his/her investment in a predetermined role he enacts and interprets.

War is a combative reality between adversaries, with the presence of actual dead, wounded, violences – that most of us never experienced.

- . How to conciliate these two contradictory poles?
- . How to « perform war » with other *partners* and in the most credible way without ever falling onto the other side, the one of adversity, of confrontation and of forms of violence?
- . How to avoid the opposite pitfall of staying in a simple enactment of an actor’s performance, rigorous but comfortable, a *ballet*, a performance without stakes, a mock performance emptied of its martial meaning?

In keeping with this image of two sides of a mountain, I would say that we need to always stay on the side of performance (of the actor) here, while approaching the crest line that delimits the beginning of the other slope, the one of War. Incidentally, it is only on the

¹ The *Kanji* 演 alone could also be translated by “to demonstrate” instead of “to perform.” Here, in keeping the meaning of *to perform*, the choice is made to level with the *martial arts practitioners*, these being required to be totally invested in a situation as realistic as possible. For these practitioners, to demonstrate would imply an intention to show, which can only hinder a *detached* attention, the availability, the presence to the real, that are essential in the practice of *Embu*.

However, *to demonstrate* takes all its meaning when we are in the point of view of spectators who observe the performance of the “firing” of *Kata*, of expected but realistic techniques, of expressed combative principles.

slope of War, in the combative reality where the stake is life or death, that the concept of *Shinken Shobu* – a combat with a risk of death – so dear to Nishioka Sensei, could be fully lived.

However, any “vital” learning implies and requires exposure to dangers, and as a result involves taking risks. We should then get close to this formidable line, explore deliberately the varied adjacent regions, and acclimate to risks and situations involving getting in danger under all forms. It is a practice in getting outside our zones of comfort – without stress or with little of it. This corresponds to the familiar and secure space-time of regular practices in the *Dōjō*.

To take on the audacious role of an explorer of these exposed regions is to accept living through unsettling moments of uncertainty and doubt. It is also taking physical as well as emotional risks, while staying in the lucid and cautious time.

To avoid the risks of an unexpected shift of the Performance towards a warrior behavior, from the *partner* to the *adversary*, to cross this border, we have in *Jōdō* an effective guardrail. It is the existence and omnipresence in the study and practice of our *ryū* of the two formal and complementary roles of *Shidachi* and *Uchidachi*. In the same manner that they are used and valued during every moment of our usual training sessions; they must stay alive during the more realistic practice of *Embu*. Correctly inhabited by the *Embusha*, the role of *Shidachi* or the one of *Uchidachi* works well here as an efficient regulator.

. Why and what benefits bring *Embu* and/or *Shiken* (exam) to the *Budō* practitioner?

Embu like *Shiken* is an integral part of the study and practice of a *Budō*. Next to the usual practice sessions at the *Dōjō*, there are two complimentary forms of experimentation and learning that coexist in our martial arts disciplines. Here, the practitioner is not in a traditional and usual situation in a regular practice session anymore, where he repeats movements, where he works with personal guidelines or the ones given by an instructor, where he tries to understand and better his technic. *Embu* and *Shiken* are punctual events and often remain memorable in the martial life of a practitioner. *Embu* and *Shiken* are two specific forms which let the practitioner live an in-situ experience not *real* but *realistic*, as well as an exposure to the gaze of another, most often a comrade in discipline. During these events, he must get out of his routine and venture into uncharted land, accepting to confront himself with an array of disruptions, ranging in intensity and coming from stress from the outside to his own difficulties and interior demons.

Each one of these in-situ experiments is often precious for the martial progression of the practitioner. They act as personal tests at precise moments, and they often are sources of personal enrichment. Furthermore, by their repetitions, they allow us to get better acquainted with our own affect, our problematic repetitions, our recurrent blocks, and in the long run, to tame our mental and our emotions. In our *Dōjō* in Nice, an *Embu* of five to fifteen minutes is a relative common practice to start or finish a training session.

In the end, we can say, especially through this demanding practice of *Embu*, that we recognize and better learn to identify our unique and true *adversary* in the practice of *Budō*, ourselves.

. What are the necessary ingredients to the practice of *Embu*?

- . What state of mind is required to practice this risky performance?
- . What setting for an *Embu*?
- Trust the event, accept fully the reality of the moment and what is happening in the present. Say “yes” to the experience. Don’t expect. Don’t wish for anything.
- Be available and call on your ability to adapt.
- Create favorable conditions for the desired state of being mentally available. There are two main mental obstacles in the moment, the hyper-intention – tensing around the aim to attain – and the hyper-thinking – an excess consciousness of the self, that prevents spontaneity.
- Welcome, listen, observe. The more there is an intention, the more I lose my sensibility. At its extreme, I cannot “do” and “listen” at the same time.
- Give a “detached”¹ and involved attention to a continuous presence to the real; the intensity is adjusted here intuitively and at every instant on the personal cursor.
- Solicit the mental as least as possible and let the lived experience of the body speak.
- Breath. Breathing is intimately linked to our emotional state. It is an efficient anti-stress tool which we can solicit through diverse exercises – amplify the expiration phase, localize the breathing in the belly, “visualize the breathing wave that calms and cleans the depths of the body, and allows it to be available for what it must do in the present moment.”²
- As a collateral benefit, through the availability created, the conditions of my own perception changed, and my perceptions became more refined.
- Three main survival mechanisms can be kick started when facing a situation perceived as dangerous or stressful: *Flee, Fight, Freeze*. Avoid. *Freeze*.

It is within this formal and benevolent setting that these in-situ experiments – often real emotional laboratories – must take place, offering to curious and responsible *Budōka* a form of realism and martial intensity.

The exercise of *Embu* allows us to « form our perceptive and affective power to taste the intrinsic value of the experience. The immanence is wholly summarized in this trust in the exactitude and the rigor of an attentive experience.”³

¹ The following text excerpted from *Attente de Dieu* (1950) – a collection of letters written in 1942 by Simone Weil –, highlights this « detached » attention, vital in the practice *Embu* or of *Shiken*, which consists in clearing the mind instead of filling it.

“The attention consists in suspending the mind, leave it available, empty and penetrable to the object, in maintaining in ourselves close to our mind, but at an inferior level and without contact, the diverse knowledges acquired that we need to use. The mind must be, to all specific and already formed thoughts, like a man on a mountain, who, looking ahead, see at the same time under him, but without looking, a lot of forests and plains. And most importantly the mind must be empty, in waiting, looking for nothing, while being ready to receive in its naked truth the object that will penetrate it.

² Excerpt from *La vague et le sabre* (1998), by Christine Sionnet.

³ Excerpt from *Pouvoir et puissance* (2025), by Sébastien Charbonnier.

All counter senses in the versions, all the absurdities in the solution to geometrical problems, the style awkwardnesses and flaws in the succession of ideas in the obligations of French, all of this becomes what the mind rushed on, and being prematurely filled was not available anymore for the truth. The cause always is that we wanted to be active; we wanted to look for something. We can verify this every time, for every mistake, if we go back to the root. There is no better exercise to verify this. Because this truth is of the kind we cannot believe in except by living them a hundred, a thousand times. It is true of all essential truths. »