

"Master" and student

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In his little book "Zen in the chivalrous art of archery", Herrigel¹ talks about the three conditions expected of a student in the Japanese tradition: a good education, a deep love of the art she wishes to learn and a veneration of the person she chooses as a master "who excludes all criticism" (sic). In our world this last point is almost scandalous.

Mr. Kamigaito speaks in his book Wado² of the double shock that was for him the discovery of what we called karate and what had become of the Japanese masters. Our karate had nothing in common with what he knew and the Japanese masters were quickly asphyxiated by "the lack of oxygen necessary to survive" (sic). What the hell did he mean by that?

In our time, many people are looking for a "master" (whatever the name is given: "guru," "sensei," "sifu," therapist, shaman...). But what do we expect from such a personage? As far as I can see, he is a being who lives on certainties, knows how to reassure and make dreams come true, and makes a happy and infinite future dream; he is peaceful, serene, confident in himself and the road to follow; in short, the master would be able to give us the keys to life and thus ensure us a long carelessness, tasks that traditions once attributed to Heaven and its inhabitants.

Is that still possible? Does this kind of personage really exist? And what to do with it in our time?

Two of the values we live in today are individualism and critical thinking. For our happiness and our misfortune, for everything is ambiguous.

The individualism that has been established almost on its own, has made us all, since our infancy, accustomed to separating our "me" from others and the world. We have learned to see humans as independent, isolated and airtight beings, unless they decide to communicate. Yet things sometimes go differently. In other cultures, humans live like the grains of the same sand of the same dune; The boundary between people is blurred; men, beasts and nature communicate almost by osmosis, without being surprised, or even realizing it; in their eyes, it's all natural! How can we live any other way?

The other fundamental value we live in is critical thinking. But what is "critical thinking"? Is this the way to make choices that correspond to our being? Or the indispensable discernment in the decisions we are led to make to lead our lives? Or is it the right to criticize anyone, in any way, when we like, and to revolt when we have to bear the consequences?

¹ Eugen Herrigel (1884-1955). Professor of Philosophy at Heidelberg in 1923. From 1924 to 1929 he taught at the Sendai Imperial University in Japan. From 1929 to 1948 he taught in Erlangen (Germany). Considered as neo-Kantian.

² The Wado booklet was first published in French by ASBL Wado Kamigaito Belgium VZW in 1981. The Dutch translation was published in 1983.

If we know that the word critical comes from the Greek κρινειν (which means to judge, evaluate, discern), it goes without saying that one must know how to use one's critical meaning; it is one of the elements to which the adult would distinguish himself from the child.

So what about the attitude of young Japanese people who want to learn an art from a "master"? Would they renounce any critical mind? Of course not!

When a young man or girl expresses a desire to learn an art, they usually ask the adults around them to guide them in their choice. It is up to them to use their judgment, their common sense, their critical mind to help them. Once the choice is made, the time of the critical mind has passed. It is no longer all about work and attention; you don't easily enter an art and you don't have too much of its application.

What is true of art and the means to transmit it, is therefore also true of the person of the "master". As soon as one has made the decision to follow him, one is attached to the study of his art and one leaves it the care - and the burden - to guide. Indeed, when teaching, he takes on a responsibility and takes the risk of exposing himself, because what he teaches far exceeds the technique; he delivers perhaps the most intimate part of himself, namely what his art has made of him. Through his observations, his reflections, his memories, his researches, his hesitations, his shortcomings and his flaws, it is he himself that lays bare. At the risk of disappointing, for it must be said: a "master" is not a god.

Would he be power-hungry? In fact, he knows he's human, so fallible. In contact with an older "master" who opened his eyes, he lost many illusions; his own doubts and wanderings made him aware of his weaknesses. And if he feels in a student lightness, malice or ambiguity, he will avoid committing or will withdraw. From the "master's" point of view, the student who criticizes him, is ironic about him or thinks he knows more, has broken the moral contract that binds them.

But there is what is too little talked about today: the student's attitude.

Contrary to a widespread habit, even in science, critical thinking applies to judgments, events, behaviors, not people: criticism is not suspicion. Although it goes without saying that no one is perfect and that it is impossible to agree with everyone: affinity is not unanimous.

In a teaching relationship, discussing everything, criticizing everything, submitting everything to the opinion of a third person, is a leak, and therefore a refusal of teaching. Learning (ad-prehendere: taking to oneself) means accepting to inherit from others instruments that were used to become themselves. If a student feels it is necessary to do so, it is because he/she is aware that he/she lacks the necessary knowledge and experience and that he/she needs the elders. If then he/she criticizes his or her suggestions, his ideas, his way of being, in short if he avoids engaging, the student gives the impression of knowing what is good for him/her; so he/she no longer needs teaching. That's his right. But then what right can he/she still ask an elder to continue to expose himself if he/she jealously watches over his or her self (the famous privacy of which we

are being re-bated) or also ask to help him to change while avoiding any opportunity for change?

In this relationship, as in all the others, it is one of things: either the two parties expose themselves, and the richness of the relationship exceeds all that could be hoped for; either protects itself, and there is no relationship.

By the expression "which excludes any criticism", Herrigel does not mean that the perfection of the "master" places him above all criticism (which would be false), or that the student has no right to ask questions, even incisive (they are part of a teaching relationship), but that it is impossible to learn from those who are viewed with a critical eye, without respect or benevolence, no commitment.

What is asked of the "master" is to work with authority, a human task if any. Authority comes from "auctor" (the one that increases, which increases); it is the quality that is expected of the one who teaches how to become oneself. Despite a frequent suspicion, a "master" is not interested in power. The force and compulsion, which are the usual means of it, are the opposite of his methods, even if he may sometimes use them. He takes it upon himself to help the one who asks him, to become a free being, even if he kicks him in the lower back, if that is the only way he has left. And it is from this responsibility that his authority derives.

After reading Herrigel's book, Mr. Kamigaito told me: it was the student who had talent. When Paul Ricoeur³ was asked how he had become what he was, he replied, "I did not protect myself." Master's word, for sure!

Did he find many students who had his talent? I'd like to know for sure. But by the way, wouldn't that be a bit of the asphyxiation that Mr. Kamigaito was talking about?

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This article was published first in the journal WADO-RYU KAMIGAITO BELGIUM VZW August 5, 2005

**This electronic edition is realized in february 2022
for the website www.wado-kamigaito-ryu.be**

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³French philosopher, who died on May 20, 2005, of Christian and humanist inspiration. Very concerned about ethical and interpretive issues.