
Loose reflections on Budo, Karatedo and Wado Ryu karate in particular (2)

I started my Wado Ryu path in 1975. Subtract a few years when I was away from the 'Wado inner Circle' due to health and family reasons, then I may/can still look back on a good 35 years of Wado karate practice (I admit it would look a bit more illustrative if I could express my past practice in weeks or hours) 😊

Anyway, during its roughly first ten years, I and other contemporaries, had the good fortune of receiving instruction from a real Japanese sensei you all well known as the late venerable sensei Yoshikazu Kamigaito. Weekly (sometimes even 2 or 3 times a week), we were therefore put through a Japanese modulated training programme in which we were prepared from the lowest beginner level to the coveted dan grade (which I myself earned after roughly five years of dedicated practice). Personally, I practised -certainly for the first 10 years- about six to eight hours a week, which was my physical limit. After all, an unfortunate lifelong autoimmune disorder did not allow for much more energy to be spent (and on top of that, I also had a professional life and a number of other interests and obligations...).

I present this brief life sketch only in order that the reader would understand the experience I draw on for the present reflections on Wado Ryu karate. It should be added that I also had - and still have - a lively and practical interest in the Chinese 'Internal Martial' Martial Arts (including Taiji Quan and Yiquan), which undoubtedly offer a wealth of knowledge about the mental and internal bio-mechanical make-up of a martial artist. I will leave the latter aside for now and come back to it later.

Nevertheless, it is not without importance that I give you in advance some outlines on how I integrated Eastern metaphysics (Buddhism, Taoism, Brahmanism etc) in general into my personal 'martial path'. Pretty soon, Budo became an important element in my life and I felt the need to give my practice a metaphysical grounding.

Oddly enough, I found my inspiration for this not so much in the Japanese tradition, but more specifically in the Chinese philosophy of life, the Taoism. Under the motto of the legendary Lao Zi - "*A skillful soldier is not a violent one, a skilled warrior does not go on a rampage, a mighty conqueror gives no fight, a great commander is a humble man*"-at the same time, in the tradition of the great Taoist literary tradition, I decided to study those works of World Literature that might sharpen my view on humanity and human nature.

First of all on my starting point: no Westerner can approach the cultural depth of these teachings through pure reason, because they are primarily products of the deepest experience, especially that of a culturally embedded wordless **intuition** that even is no longer of this age.

So I can/could only draw **comparative** conclusions about the core values of the foreign culture from which budo in general draws in contrast with my own lived-through, cultural-western point of view. Conclusions that are necessarily subject to **misconceptions** and misunderstood assumptions. I am thinking, for example, of ethical values such as "**compassion**" "**honour**", "**harmony**", "**beauty**" as they are given meaning in Christian-western ethics juxtaposed to their valuations in Buddhism, Taoism or Hinduism...are they really compatible and can they be interpreted equally?

Put differently, when I handle a thoroughly Eastern cultural product, such as Budo is -or include Chinese martial arts if necessary-, I cannot do so without my own intuitive cultural bias giving it a distinct 'Western' colouring.

So my budo experience is necessarily a kind of eclectic Eastern-Western experience and I may do whatever I want, I will grasp a truly 'lived-through' Japanese budo in a superficially mode at best.

All this to excuse in advance the fact that my approach of Budo as reflected below is absolutely NOT an orthodox Japanese one.

But back to Wado Ryu karate, for an initial observation:

Contemporary traditional Wado Ryu, in terms of its exercise programme, or 'curriculum' so to speak, can definitely be called HUGE. One should not lose sight of the fact that Wado Ryu was intimately linked to Shindo Yoshin Ryu from its conception on. After all, Hironori Ohtsuka already possessed a 'menkyo kaiden', the highest teacher's degree, in this martial art. This style is perhaps less known in the West, but a branch of it (with very strong mutual affinity) is the '**Ohbata - Takamura**' branch. This is represented in the West by American gentleman **Tobyn Threadgill** (also a Menkyo Kaiden in Shindo Yoshin Ryu). Mr Threadgill, an authoritative individual in Budo circles, therefore has quite an affinity with Hironori Ohtsuka's Wado Ryu karate and I will therefore quote him below where it suits me.

In between, here's a little rundown of the traditional Wado curriculum as promulgated by the Wado Renmei (and it's quite possible I may skip a section):

15 kata, 10 kihon kumite, 10 idori kata (paired kata practised on the knees), 10 tantodori (exercises against knife attack) 10 kumite gata (out of 36!), 10 Shinken Shira Ha Dori (against sword attack)...

And that is by which I, humble adept with 72 years on the age-counter, am faced.

By necessity, I have drawn up a small summary of what I still want to do and what I can do with Wado, ergo also what I am forced to **leave out of** my personal practice schedule. A schedule tailored to my strictly personal needs within the context of martial arts.

Fundamental question: how much time am I willing/able to devote to 'my' Wado today? Let me be modest and say that in one of my physically 'better' weeks, I can devote another 4 hours to it. So which exercises will I prioritise devoting that precious energy to, being aware that the total practical curriculum far exceeds my physical capacities?

The answer is logical: to those techniques with maximum effect and minimum energy to spend.

Starting from the fact that in the general karate curriculum, solo-kata is generally accepted as the elementary training method, so I definitely have to be selective herein too.

So the next question to ask myself is: "**How many kata (form training) do I still need to get the maximum Wado skills out of it?**"

Long ago, even the founder Hironori Ohtsuka recognised this problem by limiting the number of Wado kata to nine in number. He stated his reasoning as follows (see also Master Kamigaito's volume 'Pinan Kata'):

*"I adopt only these 9 KATAS. There are those who ask to learn numerous KATAS and imagine that it is an advancement when they have learnt many. However, this is a mistake. It is said that people used to 'know' only 2 or 3 KATAS, since that is how the techniques were kept secret. For another, it is very difficult to do full justice to even one KATA. Before memorising some KATAS, one should train oneself with a view to practising **lively** KATAS that can meet all the requirements of the application."*

(Later, as you may know, the then developing Wado organisations changed this again by including 15 Kata in the curriculum. I don't know the history behind this exactly, but I suspect that -as is often the case- this was a rather political decision, in order to better integrate into the totality of the Japanese karate culture at the time)

I myself take a conservative-realist position here, not at least because I learned quite early about the down-to-earth opinion of

my late master Kamigaito in this respect. The latter wrote a little reminiscence in his unsurpassed booklet "Higher Kata" about how he approached the pedagogical 'objectives' of Wado Ryu kata, and it sounded like this:

*"First of all, in WADO-RYU, the KATAs exist, **like a dance, independent of any sense or purpose**. In the end, it is you yourself who must give a purpose to each phase and thus make slight modifications to it, according to this purpose. I am only emphasising here a piece of advice from the founder himself, although he did not always hold this view. So it happened that I was mistaken about a detail of a KATA. The Master then asked me the explanation of my movement and I answered him. He then corrected me slightly according to my answer and completely different from the normal KATA. Especially in individual training, different techniques can be practised with more freedom and own initiative."*

Surely, here we read a striking definition: kata similar to DANCE! For some, this will come across as swearing in church, but still, this parallel is not as crazy!... Dancers and musicians in particular work with the memory of their bodies on a daily basis, and for most of them it is a well-known fact. Anyone who has practised a kata (or several kata) for years knows how true this is! Indeed, one can for ages skip the practice of a particular kata, even 'forget' it completely, yet after a few 'trial and error' attempts surrounded by a group of experienced practitioners, it will be recovered quit soon! Just as one never completely forgets swimming or cycling...

Even a philosopher like Henri Bergson (1859-1941) author of the famous book "The Creative Evolution", had figured this out pretty quickly when he stated, *"our life as human beings starts from our bodies and not from our minds as the rationalists claim. The body is the first to record experiences from the outside world. In the most basic living things (amoebas, for example), sensation equals reaction. The reflex follows immediately. The higher you climb in the hierarchy of living organisms, the more diversified the physiological response becomes."*

Sounds simple doesn't it? The body has a memory that, like our brain, needs imprinting! Bergson concluded his theory with the observation: *"Dance movements are repetitive acts of learned, neuromotor automatisms"*

The difference between (complex) dance (form training) and kata (similarly form training) is therefore minimal. Here we rub with our martial application closely against the purely aesthetic art of dance .

This is a historical fact supported by, for example, the fact that on

Okinawa itself, the line between 'martial dance' and 'kata/form' was considered quite blurred. Yet I will leave this aesthetic phenomenon further aside because it would lead us too far astray.

Which does not prevent that quite a few orthodox karate stylists will be standing on their hind legs, as indeed, the early '**Okinawa Te** adepts', largely approached classical katas as actual encodings or blueprints (bunkai) containing handed-down **combat sequences**. This in the assumption that whether an identical(?) situation would arise in the future, the practitioner's "body memory" would 'automatically' reproduce this sequence. Whatever, this is **NOT** the approach behind the **original concept of Wado Ryu**.

Though there is more . The preceding phrase "***Ultimately, it is you yourself who must give a purpose to each phase and thus make slight changes to it, according to this purpose***" sounds pretty hermetic to my taste.

A typical Eastern practice of "draw your plan, you'll find it out all by yourself ". But katas also contain -as is the case with many techniques in Japanese martial arts- overt (**omote**) techniques and secret, hidden (**ura**) techniques (of which the latter were only passed on to the most deeply initiated adepts in the art). To illustrate this, let us return for a moment to **Shindo Yoshin Ryu**. This art has a teaching method that includes some eight **Nairiki** katas, the purpose of which is **nairiki-no-gyo** or "**exercises for INNER POWER**" Allegedly, these typically Chinese **internal** exercises (in China they were called "celestial teachings of Inner Power") were introduced in Japan in the 17th century and were mostly kept secret. And still within contemporary Shindo Yoshin Ryu it is customary to keep these exercises out of the public eye, let alone making videos of them.

One more little brain teaser: In the well-informed Wado circles, the kata **Naihanchi** is also sometimes called "Wado's nairiki" or "Ohtsuka's nairiki" and it is easy to guess why Ohtsuka O-sensei himself, attributed so much value to this kata. There is no doubt in my mind that it is a kata practised for the development of "internal strength". How exactly one interprets it (e.g. as 'isometric' or 'plyometric' exercises?) I will leave that aside here because I am still pondering about it for myself.

In any case, it is true that the intention of 'nairiki' was mainly to deal with an opponent's incoming forces mainly 'internally' and counter them with minimal effort.

And whether one can also call katas like Sanchin or Teisho nairiki kata, I also leave further unanswered, but they are definitely 'internal' katas in my opinion...just as seichan kata contains 'nairiki elements'....

The Wado kata curriculum thus includes **nairiki-no-gyo** applications on the one hand, and multi-taskable, almost danceable 'movement patterns' and general dynamic principles in varied directions on the other; one practices movements based on centrifugal force, in conjunction with gravity, and one develops possibilities of simultaneous attack and defence that emulate a general principle, a specific style geared to multi-functional utility. This is also what the first grandmaster meant by **lively** kata. Their PURPOSE is, I repeat, **multi-applicable** details that lead to agile speed and establishes elegant, economical dynamics through thorough implicit-motor repetition. Next enlightening view of kata is also that of Tobin Threadgill:

"Another important aspect of our omote kata (that of Shindo Yoshin Ryu) relates to developing awareness of bone structure.

Good structural awareness enables the body to efficiently "rest" on its framework, requiring minimal muscle tension to remain upright. Structural muscle relaxation increases body awareness with the aim of increasing levels of internal sensitivity and connection to the base (ground). Once a practitioner can stand with a truly relaxed body, movement can be applied in a way that encourages and strengthens a more efficient relationship between the bone structure and muscular system. This creates the feeling of a truly connected body, feeling and moving in unison. When opposing forces are met by this body, it is able to feel and respond in a coordinated way that is a true expression of the body's unified capabilities. When an uncoordinated and unconnected body encounters opposing forces, isolated muscle tension is used, resulting in resistance without a solid or efficient connection to the base. As a result, one becomes easily moved or manipulated into a compromised position".

Let it just be that this is very much in line with the elementary qigong 气功 (energetic labour) of contemporary Chinese TaijiQuan and Yiquan, where I got some of my personal mustard, this by the way without any prior knowledge of Shindo Yoshin Ryu.

Again, the important key here is a necessary MINIMAL tension. And don't misunderstand: the goal here is not TOTAL body relaxation -because that would mean simply bodily collapsing due to gravity. It may become clearer through a simple practical example:



If, as in the most basic 'qigong' exercise, one simply stands upright and fixed, then one can only learn to do so **accurately** by engaging those stabilising muscle groups that **NATURALLY** and **WITH THE MOST ACCURACY** keep your 'stature' (or standing stature) upright.

Simple right ? 😊

(Standing for a few minutes will probably do for everyone, but an untrained person is guaranteed to be shaking and trembling with muscle weakness after, say, half an hour! Try it, if you've never done it before...)

And that's because one usually does not employ only the '**postural**' muscle groups to stand (as it should do naturally), but employs rather the '**movement muscles**'; which in turn are **NOT** useful for this purpose and physically/biologically much faster

become exhausted! So by 'learning to stand' via the correct -of course internally/mentally controlled!- method, in such a way that only the aforementioned muscle groups are addressed, will allow one to bring his/her total body under a neutral relaxation while standing. A kind of relaxation that, through further developed exercises, continues to expand into broader movement and activity. I will not elaborate on this as it is a separate subject. Suffice it here to say that this **degree of relaxation** means that energy savings on muscle work can be reduced by 20 to 30 per cent and the speed of movement can be increased inversely ... and isn't that a nice bonus for older martial artists whom should act parsimoniously with their physical abilities?

A second important key is '**intention**'. Intention, in Chinese Yi (意) is a key concept in the internal martial arts from which Taiji Quan (太极拳) Xing Yi Quan (形意拳) and Yi Quan (意拳) draw deeply. 'Yi' in Chinese, (as is very often the case in that language) is a multi-layered term, but in context of martial arts, it can be defined as

"the idea of using his mind and his imagination to make his direct actions in a fully coherent manner and with great utility."

I conclude this by noting that, for example, Yiquan (intention boxing) developed valuable methods to achieve better combat outcomes with the use of Yi...

But back to our Wado katas to see how here, too, the use of imagination, Yi, allows maximum effect to be achieved here.

I take the most basic kata of our style, the '**kihon kata**' as an example (there are of course a lot of applications in the totality of all the kata together), and I isolate from it the technique **gedan barai** as an example.

Anyone who is somewhat advanced in the Wado style already knows by now that this technique does not actually have any '**block**' intention, so certainly not a confrontation of diametrically opposed hard-against-hard forces. But on the contrary a technique that is subject to the principle of **inasu**, (leading away or diverting the incoming force, with the aim of the executing hand/arm, for example, to be able to immediately use it again as a possible counter-technique).

In solo performance (i.e. both in kata and kihon, since the boundary between the two is, after all, thin), we employ **Yi** (意) in such a way that the intention/imagination literally generates the **physical-kinesthetic** feeling of this sweeping technique. **A feeling(!)** that gets stored in the subconscious after many times of laborious repetitions. So we learn to imagine what **gedan barai** will **feel like** in a material situation, that is: **an elegant, flexible, almost careless sweeping movement, as if one is sweeping a speck of dust off one's clothes**. Thanks to repeating it over and over again and reawakening the **feeling** of it, this movement becomes integrated into the neuro-musculoskeletal system. In this sense, it is somewhat regrettable that in the Wado curriculum we have rather few or no exercises in sensitive body contact in contrast to Chinese internal styles that employ their **Tui Shou** (Chinese: 推手) 'pushing or touching hands' in their training method. This is with the main aim of optimising physical-kinesthetic intelligence.

Tobin Threadgill did also understand this again very well when coöperating with Taiji experts: *" the Chinese-originated Nairiki kata has led to a significant expansion of the understanding of pushing hands partner drills. After all, it is about much more than "inner strength"! The "outside-the-box model" refers to creatively dealing with the opponent's intentions without resisting. The "Ju methodology" of flexibility and looseness (relaxation) combined with "Musubi (connectedness)" and optimised body structure (structure/posture) is of great benefit. Especially in "Free Pushing Hands, according to Toby Threadgill, feeling the partner must feel "like touching silk". This expanded understanding of pushing hands also includes Wado founder Hironori Otsuka's "quantum leap" innovation of extending Okinawa-Te solo forms to free partner exercises. The "revolutionary thing is the maxim of not using force against force."*

Yet another example is the **jodan nagashi uke**. The technical importance of this was irrefutable to the Wado Ryu founder (see just the fact alone

that he used this technique every time as an introductory action for 'torimi' in the 'kihon kumites')

I myself 'rediscover' it again and again with pleasure in **pinan yondan kata**, (among others), in which I practice it instinctively as an 'inasu action' in which my opposite arm also descends as a 'sweeping' low defence ready for next action. At the same time, I generate a felt **inclination** to place my body minimally but altogether out of the 'centre line' of the **imagined** attack, otherwise stated an emerging intention to simultaneously instigate 'tai sabaki'...

Similarly, I could cite numerous examples of how I personally handle kata broadly as a tool to the so-called 'sensory motor integration' which is quite widely accepted in broader neuroscience (The effect of sensory signals coming from skin and other sensory nerve fibres that conduct impulses to the central nervous system, thus to the neo-cortex and further to deeper brain regions)

I am obviously no neuroscientist, nor do I feel like coming across as needlessly 'professorial' here, but I can only testify for myself that the method works perfectly for myself and is not based on some woolly-mystic theory.

Whatever the case, in the tradition of internal martial arts there is the saying "Yi (意) leads and Qi (or Ki) 氣 follows".

Briefly:

the intention precedes the energy (the technique/action so to speak)...

In any case, if one integrates this principle in **all possible solo exercises**, one will understand that a whole new dimension is then created in the **meaning of solo training**. In addition, this creates a fruitful cross-fertilisation between martial arts and **mindfulness!**

(A mindfulness that, like yoga and taijiquan, is fully engaged with the body with its many sensations and neuromotor feedbacks)

Here we also return on the track of **zazen practice**, which has always been promoted in orthodox circles as part of classical Budo training. (Personally, I have practised zazen -sitting meditation- a lot and regularly, but with rather poor results in terms of the mental relaxation I was trying to achieve. **Ritsu-zen** -standing meditation- on the other hand, with its completely different mental focus was a game changer for myself in this respect)...

So as far as my personal path is concerned, I have already drawn my conclusions regarding the practice of kata.

I answered the question for myself:

"What skills do I want to draw from kata dynamics today that I consider important and appropriate for my further personal sensory-motor integration? In other words, practising of movement patterns that at further stages will reproduce spontaneously and reflexively in paired techniques (kumite forms)?"

In this sense, I have made a quantitative selection for myself from the nine kata as once advised by Ohtsuka o-sensei. I still occasionally practice them pro-memory in their totality. But I have isolated my preferred techniques from them for more intensive personal use and then consider some of their other sequences less relevant to myself.

In contrast, it becomes more interesting for me to practise the paired kata in **solo form** in the absence of a practice partner, thus **internalising** all the registers of 'tai sabaki', 'inasu', 'nagasu', 'nagashi tsuki', 'sente' in solo application. All this without being too much bound by the rather limited straight-line movements (embusen) of classical kata.

On a future occasion, I hope to list a few more things regarding two- or multi-person kata or, more precisely, some loose reflections on kumite....

Jan Houblon

Author: Jan Houblon

01-06-2023