

Random reflections on Budo, Karateo and Wado Ryu karate in particular (3)

Following on from the second part of these reflections, I would like to share with you my current views on the subject of **kumite** in Wado Ryu karate. (In which I wish to emphasise again that this is a personal view at this point in my life.)

We cannot, in my opinion, get away from stating that all solo exercises (kata, kihon waza, physical conditioning etc) are in function of kumite, and it was this latter element in particular that maximised its appeal to Westerners in the 1970s. This resulted in the fact that today 'sport karate' and multi-style competitions are the predominant focus within Western karate. (Incidentally, it is an identical phenomenon that occurred in Judo and kendo, except perhaps that most kendo organisations continued to place particular value on the great tradition of mental attitude).

In the post-war years, it was of geo-strategic importance for Japan to be able to showcase its socio-cultural values such as personal self-development, service to the collective, moral superiority etc abroad, and the vehicle for this was their martial arts, steeped as they were in a clearly positive Japanese value setting. Which was mainly expressed through a kind of sporting values one could perhaps refer to as the Olympic Thought à la Japonaise. In other words, budo gained a new driving engine: the sporting competition.

So it was inevitable that tournaments had to be promoted in which the best could prove themselves etc. I will not go further into the development of these systems, but I would like to point out that the Okinawa styles in general were not so keen on contests, because they considered the basic premise of budo, especially **goshin** (self-defence), unsuitable for something like competitions.

Consequently, Judo too shook off much of its 'goshin' feathers and proceeded with a limited palette of body-to-body fighting that were homogenised and adapted for the sports tatami, whereby specialised referees could judge the orthodoxy of the techniques used and award points accordingly.

And as for karate (and still today), it had a clearly identifiable 'Gestalt'. The competition system was modelled on that of Kendo in which the underlying principle of '**hikken isatsu**' (eliminating with one strike) would be all too realistic should one not be required to wear protective attributes in Kendo, among other things. The techniques of kendo, were simple yet exceptionally perfected, or even better: ritualised. One blow with the shinai properly

inflicted was considered final and might have been quite so were it not for the fact that kendo protective equipment was there.

On competition karate

Kendo's competition system was also imitated and modified (into an Ippon Shobu system). And the protective attributes of kendo were replaced in the karate shiai by the rule of '**sundome**', the abrupt stopping of the hand/fist just before the point of aim, immediately followed by a moment of vigilance, the so-called **zanshin** 残心 attitude, in which the fight was stopped for a moment. Logical for a punch from a shinai, but somewhat unrealistic perhaps for a fistfight, in which the initial idea of a 'final punch' is somewhat artificial (especially for those who have attended a top boxing match or similar, which are usually **not** ritualised -and therefore in these times often verging on the bestial)...

So it makes perfect sense that most Japanese sensei -the 'missionaries' of karate of the 1970s so to speak- came directly from mainly university karate clubs (which, like what Judo and Kendo clubs also were, a virtually social obligation within Japanese culture). These first sensei were schooled in shiai. Therefore, they could not be blamed for bestowing what they considered to be probably 'chaotic Westerners', with those elementary techniques, mental toughness and stamina according to stoic 'university' regime with which they were familiar. One trained mainly towards a shiai system geared towards overcoming an opponent provided a single decisive technique.

I will now stick to the elementary forms that make karate a competitive sport: There are obviously different angles of approach to these objectives depending on the style practised, however, we can say that in karate all kihon waza and the various regular kumites are geared towards the objective of attack (in the spirit of 'hikken isatsu'). This is an approach that is pretty much true for all karate style groups, and in this sense karate as 'multi-style' and 'sport karate' is quite defensible. The general picture one gets of a match is a 'large frame' fight based on a Sanbon shobu system or a derivative of it (important in a sports match, as 'large frame' kumite makes it easier for referees to make balanced judgements).

A limited set of hand and leg techniques ritually trained down to the subliminal level, a level that the body, free of consciousness, always manages to re-produce (which is, of course, a merit). As a rule, all techniques are straightforward and geared towards immediate scoring; retreating and fending off are simple defensive actions, usually disconnected from a subsequent counter-action. This is also quite often the stereotypical image that prevails in most contemporary karate schools. One notices it immediately when switching to jyu kumite during training: all these well-

sublimated stereotypes reveal themselves over and over again. However, this was also the picture of weekly jyu kumite in the earlier day dojos: reciprocal attacks over long to medium distances followed by retreating into the 'safe zone' of maai, then attacking back with punch or kick. Apart from a few sweeping techniques, no continuous series of clutching attacks over very short distances, no fine-motor attempts of destabilisation. And that's nothing I can take pleasure in anymore....

On the inner achievements of budo, karate in particular:

May I still prevent people from regarding me as an antagonist of shiai and emphasise that I fully recognise its real value. Targeted shiai training with the naked hand as a starting point gives very valuable developments in mental-offensive terms. It is therefore THE school for learning the ideal distance between adversaries ('maai'). One learns to intuitively estimate the value of an arm or leg length and with a lot of practice one also develops an essential feeling for '**hyoshi**', i.e. for the cadence and rhythm of an attack. On The writer and budoka, **Kenji Tokitsu***1 states the following about this:

"When we follow the distance between two campers in the temporal course of a camp, we see changes in the distance -sometimes large, sometimes small- and we can perceive a certain rhythm in these changes. No movement can be separated from a certain rhythm, both physical and mental. Even when we are clearly not mobile, our muscles tense and relax and we breathe. And it is this rhythm to which are attached the movements we make, or will make" and further the author states, "The impetus for movement (attack, defence, evasion) is simultaneously 'triggered' by ebbs and flows of muscle tension and breathing".

(I need not add that these, along with heightened visual perception for the most minuscule changes in the opponent's stature, are THE important attributes for a sen-no-sen sequence).

Ergo, learning how to play with '**maai**間合い' and '**hiyoshi** 拍子' during shiai is a valuable exercise, especially if one practices it under the pressure of relative danger to one's own physic (which often comes with tournaments).

However, we cannot escape the fact that success in **shiai** is age-related. The demanding reflexes, the physical effort, the mental pressure cannot be endured forever and that period comes to an end pretty soon. (I would like to refer here to Master Kamigaito's written legacy, also found on this site, how inevitable this process takes place).

Whatever the case, offensive techniques, especially tsuki, remain for me personally of elementary importance for solitary training. A specific kihon waza curriculum remains a 'sine qua non' for giving an evolving dimension to speed and acceleration of a punch (kick), which involves ever deeper

introspection and an expanding body awareness (kinesthetics). Trying out punches on bag or makiwara continue to hold their value. And maai and hyoshi will continue to be practised in modified kumite forms. And that brings us to the next important part

About ukemi and torimi:

Among the various types of regular kumite such as yakosoku kumite, ippon & nihon kumite, jyu ippon kumite, kihon kumite, kumite gata etc etc they all need one main attribute. More precise **two players**, **ukemi** (for convenience, the one who initiates the attack) and **toremi** (the one who undergoes and finishes the attack). The qualities of these opposing players cannot be appreciated enough. The way they work together is crucial. Both must be attuned to each other and play their roles with a minimum of mutual selfish interest because essentially any well-rehearsed kumite is practised in an atmosphere of **mushin** (無心).

So let us briefly redefine what this extremely important budo ideal encompasses: Mushin is achieved when one's mind is free of thoughts of anger, fear or ego during combat or in daily life. There is an absence of discursive thoughts and judgements, so that the person is completely free to act and react to an opponent without hesitation and without being disturbed by such thoughts.

This attitude is easier to approach between two like-minded antagonists and, at the same time, due to such a relaxed atmosphere, it forms also a certain guarantee for safety (especially if agreed attacks are carried out with full commitment). In essence, we should think of this cooperation as a game between partners, neither of whom wants/needs to outdo the other. In other words, true ukemi and toremi do not regard each other as mutual makiwara or punching bags. They consider it a privilege of being able to have a (permanent) partner with whom progress can be made in a constructive atmosphere. It is this orientation towards cooperation and game simulation that allows both parties to achieve those mental depths and skill that optimises the accuracy of the movement and its subliminal imprinting (see part 2 of my 'reflections' on this). The true uke/toremi is the counterpart with whom you can (and should) take risks when practising new dimensions in the art. Because when we open the element of goshin in the various kumites, a whole new world of challenges indeed opens up.

Entering the 'Ju' of 'Jujutsu' 柔術:

It's well understood in budo circles that 'jutsu' denotes the concept of 'art' or 'skill' and that 'Ju' denotes connotations like 'soft', 'supple' and 'compliant'...(it's the same Ju from judo). And jujutsu is an umbrella term best understood as 'close combat'. **And the key element here is that now**

alongside visual information, plenty of tactile sensations are also engaged. Specialised' receptors (sensory nerve cells, Rufinni's organs, the Golgi organs, etc) go into full action. The whole neuro-motor process is enriched and needs specialised training methods. Here, 'large frame' karate is replaced by the kind of combat best reflected in the **kihon kumite** and its derivatives: the kumite gata. These kumite are regarded by all Ohtsuka generations without exception as their primordial martial arts feature. They therefore define the image that Hironori Ohtsuka had in mind when he conceived his jujutsu kenpo.

(Tellingly, the Ohtsuka family registered the name "Wado-ryu jujutsu kenpo" as a 'classical' Japanese jujutsu style. From 'Japanesewiki'*2 I note the following clarification: "Hironori Ohtsuka, the founder of Wado-ryu karate, also founded Wado-ryu jujutsu kenpo, based on Shinto Yoshin-ryu (Shinto Yoshin school of jujutsu) and Iga-ryu (Iga school of jujutsu) which he studied; however, Wado-ryu jujutsu kenpo joined the Japanese Classical Martial Arts Association as a school of jujutsu, so it is not classified as the modern martial art, but as the classical one. ")

This inevitably changes the whole phenomenological view of Wado compared to that of other 'modern' karate styles. The various 'kumite' get dimensions added from especially other angles of attack; instead of 'hikken isatsu' and the concluding zanshin 残心 stance, small individual actions now follow. Steps become small sliding movements and subtle tai-sabaki follow one another. Seen from the outsider's eye, they are accomplished as one seemingly obvious flowing movement (which, however, they are not quite, because we are still talking about a successive series of tension and relaxation of various muscle groups, sometimes in unison, sometimes separately. See the explanation for 'hyoshi' above).

Technically, then, these regular kumite contain three, four or more actions to be accomplished in a maximally fluid movement with a minimum of energy, by making maximum use of all the biomechanical elements available to the human physical (flexion, re-flexion, rotation, gravity etc. etc).

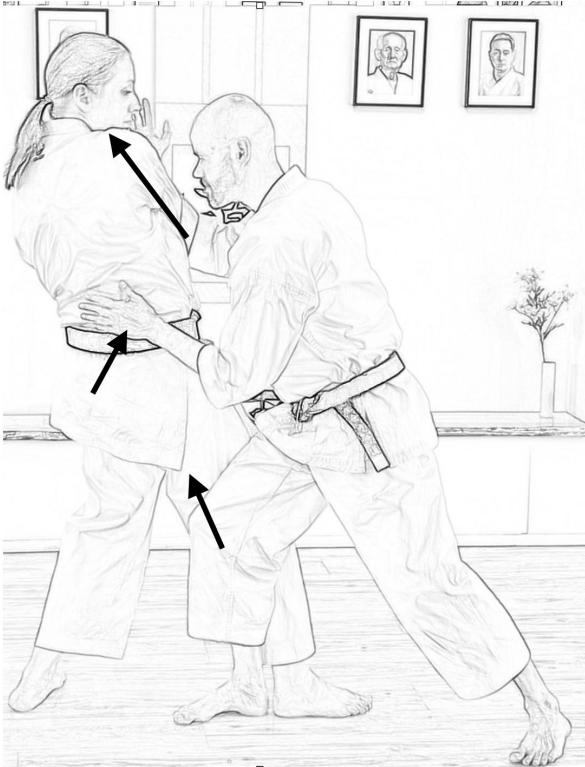
A separate metaphysics is employed, attack can become defence and vice versa; core principles like 'noru' 'inasu', 'nagasu' (see previous writing) are incredibly rich in meaning. Evasion becomes a core principle and excessive technique is avoided. The image of a widely spread technique (large frame) becomes smaller (small frame) and sometimes even almost imperceptible. Subtle techniques of destabilisation of the opponent (kuzushi 崩し) and mastery of his midpoint (irimi 入り身) take their place in the curriculum.

Conclusion:

<https://wado-kamigaito-ryu.be/en/home/>

With this, the future challenges for me personally on the Wado level have been showcased and packaged. In, say, ten kihon kumite and ten kumite gata. Of course, this is an arbitrary number because I will have to make choices between these twenty or so exercises, just like with the kata. (After all, within this series of kumites are the possibilities of 'omote' and 'ura'

performances and the choices between go-no-sen and sen-no-sen mode).



Without even mentioning the biggest challenge then, namely to be able to test out this technical area in the jyu kumite modus. Because free fighting is still the icing on the cake; at least that is the idea I took away from my late master Yoshikazu Kamigaito. In particular, that all 'regulated' kumite should also be applicable in free form. So it should be possible if I can ever find the like-minded ukemi as described above...For the rest? I will continue to flow for a while until I will finally silt up. The Wado stream on the contrary will flow quite a bit further into time....

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*1 Kenji Tokitsu: "The Inner art of karate"

*2 [https://www.japanesewiki.com/culture/](https://www.japanesewiki.com/culture/Jujutsu%20(The%20traditional%20Japanese%20martial%20arts).html)

[Jujutsu%20\(The%20traditional%20Japanese%20martial%20arts\).html](https://www.japanesewiki.com/culture/Jujutsu%20(The%20traditional%20Japanese%20martial%20arts).html)