

Reflections about Kata – Part I

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Kata and *kata* training can be seen in every culture and time, and of course in different fields of knowledge. In this article I would like to concentrate on some different aspects of *kata* within the Japanese *Budô/Bujutsu*¹ context and later on specifically in Shintô Musô Ryû.

What is kata?

“*Kata*” is usually translated as “prearranged form”. In the Japanese *Budô/Bujutsu* context it would be “prearranged combative forms”.

But *kata* is much more than that depending on how we want to look at it.

Kata was the preferred way to preserve and transmit principles and techniques relevant in combat among the *bushi* class in Japan. These techniques and principles, when obtained through revelations or mystic experiences by individuals who spent most part of their lives in pursuit of martial perfection, gave birth to the different *ryû*. But one doesn't want his enemies (or potential ones, which at the time of creation of the first *ryûgi* was pretty much anybody else not belonging to your group) knowing the tactics and techniques of the school, so normally *kata* was “encrypted information” where even every gesture and pause might have a meaning. This encryption was done through the ritualization of the contents in the *kata* thus becoming metaphors of the real combat. In order to understand it fully one needs a code which usually is contained in the *gokui* or the secrets of the school. This is not only



¹ *Bugei/Bujutsu/Budô*: literally Martial arts/Martial techniques/Martial ways. Although some authors have established a distinction between them and see them in terms of evolution the truth is that in spite of the trend of using the term *Budô* instead of *Bujutsu* from the Taishô era (1912 – 1926) older teachers tend to use these terms interchangeably.

specific of the *Budô/Bujutsu ryûha*, all the traditional Japanese arts based their transmission in a model that implies initiation in certain secrets unique to that school.

In that sense *kata* can be seen as a *koan*², presenting the student with a riddle to which he has to find the answer, being *keiko*³ the means to accomplish it. Only after a long time repeating the different sequences again and again one reaches the maturity necessary to grasp the teachings of the *kata*.

In the same line, the different *kata* and its series in a *ryû* can be also taken as layers that one goes “peeling off” until reaching the core, which is the inner secrets of that tradition. In reality, one often finds that he/she has been in fact learning those secrets all along while going through the different layers and that the *hiden kata*⁴ are the confirmation of it.

And yet for many others *kata* and its practice are just the means for self-perfection; a process through which one can achieve enlightenment. For the pioneers, probably such enlightenment was a consequence of their *musha shugyo*⁵, being pursuing the excellence as martial experts their main object, whereas later on for many practitioners this attainment of enlightenment or *Satori*⁶ became an end in itself.

In the purely physical sense, *kata* also serves to condition the body and to internalize movements that otherwise wouldn’t come naturally. This is extremely important in real combat since the fear that one surely might experience when facing death can produce paralysis⁷ and this can be a more powerful enemy than your own opponent. Through *katageiko* one acquires a few good response patterns valid for a wide variety of attacks or combat situations and teaches the body to react to them spontaneously and immediately.

But what *kata* shouldn’t be though is an empty dance like, aiming just at memorizing postures.

Let us take a look at the kanji used to write the word *kata*: there are two different ways of writing it: 型 and 形. They both can be read as “*kei*” in Chinese or “*kata*” in Japanese. In both instances it means “form”, “pattern”, “mold”... But only the second one (形) can also

² *Koan*: Zen riddles. Questions and answers created by zen masters.

³ *Keiko*: literally “observing/studying the old”. We use it meaning just “practice”.

⁴ *Hiden*, *hiden gokui*, *gokui*, *okugi* among other terms they all refer to the inner secrets of a tradition.

⁵ *Musha shugyo*: *musha* means “warrior” and *shugyo* refers to “training”, or “practice”. Since the term *shugyo* has a Buddhist origin can also be associated with ascetic practice. Therefore, *musha shugyo* can be translated as “warrior’s pilgrimage”. It is normally associated with the figure of a wandering warrior who tests his skills against other warriors, but also with warriors engaging in spiritual austerities in temples, shrines or other sacred places.

⁶ *Satori/gongyu*: Buddhist terms for enlightenment or awakening experience. They have similar connotations as the word “*musô*” which describes the dream or vision of a *Shintô* oracle.

⁷ Facing extreme situations like confronting death or any other danger produces three possible responses, the famous three F’s; fight, flight or freeze.

be pronounced “*katachi*” in Japanese, and this includes “mental state” and “spirit” in its meaning. For the late Nishioka Tsuneo sensei among other masters, this last one is the important one in *Budô*; a form or pattern along with the right mental state or spirit. And this comes from the proper understanding and appreciation of what *Shinken shobu* (fight to the death) is about.

It is primordial for the survival of Japanese classical *Budô/Bujutsu* to correctly transmit this to the next generations.

Many senior teachers believe that the new generations lack this right spirit and that they only do “gymnastic *kata*”, emphasizing competition over anything else or just being concerned about moving on through the *kata* curriculum in the *ryû* as if they were collecting prizes.

Types of *kata*

The creation of *kata* varied depending on social, political, geographical or cultural aspects. Certain techniques weren’t practical in a given historical moment but they were in some other. For example, for a *Sengoku jidai* (warring states period) warrior who would be fighting in *yoroi* (Japanese armor) and on an irregular terrain it would have been of little use to learn how to kick his opponent’s face. Therefore, you don’t see many of such moves in the curriculum of *ryûha* originated in those times. Cuts in *shômen* (vertical straight cut to the center of your opponent head) also would be not very practical in a battlefield because of the *kabuto* (Japanese helmet), or walking with sliding steps since that would be pretty difficult (unlike in most modern *Budô* dojos nowadays) because of the irregular terrain where warriors of old had to fight in and the footwear they used.

In general, from a certain point of view I would say we could divide *kata* in four types:

- 1) Those *kata* based on real combat experience; these are likely to be the oldest ones, like the *Gokui*, presumably the revelations of the founders. Usually codified in a small number of forms.
- 2) *Kata* created to explain or deepen in the previous ones; these were probably also created at the beginning of the *ryû*’s history, in times when the use of the weapons taught in that school was still in full swing.
- 3) *Kata* created in times of peace by people with no experience in fights to death; from the beginning of the 17th century with the “Pax Tokugawa” the necessity to resorting to violence decreased (and therefore the chances to get involved in fights to the death)). Actually, most *ryûha* were created and flourished during this period of Japanese history.
- 4) *Kata* created to explain or deepen in the third type ones; these surely are the most recent additions in any *ryû*.

I guess most *ryû* nowadays have *kata* of these four types in their curriculum, given the natural evolution and the adaptation to the times of these entities, but I think is relevant to know the historical period in which the different *kata* originated.

Dangers of *katageiko* and *kata* transmission

Like everything, *katageiko* also has its downsides.

The first and most common mistake when concentrating in *katageiko* is the unavoidable tendency to mechanize. Especially at a beginner's level, which is normal and expected, but surprisingly not only. The problem is when advanced people get stuck at this level and when practicing they don't seem to be bothered with whatever the opponent does, they just follow their own agenda. In reality, this shows that the practitioner doesn't have yet a clue of what *Shinken shobu* is about. I guess some people only care about becoming the coolest of the graveyard...

Since the *ryû* are living entities, they keep somehow evolving and adopting changes that can help the *ryû* to survive, but some changes can be dangerous. Which ones? Obviously, the ones that affect the essence of the *ryû*. We really have to be careful here. Often when an instructor faces a question to which he doesn't have the answer he comes up with one "invented" by himself (probably with the best of intentions). Since everything can be justified somehow, this process can potentially be very dangerous for it can lead to arbitrary and harmful modifications that might be perpetuated by successive generations of students who in turn eventually become teachers and transmitters.



Then, should the *kata* be periodically revised and eventually changed, or should be kept as it is forever? Well, here I think we should remember the words of Heraclitus, the Greek philosopher who around 500 BC said: "The only thing that is constant is change". I mean, changes are going to happen whether we want it or not. This said, from our point of view (*koryû Bujutsu* exponents) if someone has any right to change things purposely in a given tradition that would be a *Soke*, a

Menkyô kaiden or someone at that top level of legitimacy. Only them, for they are the ones who at least in theory have the full experience and knowledge of the school.

But in my opinion, even *Menkyô kaiden* holders have to be careful. I believe that certain sets of *kata* like for example the *hiden gokui* shouldn't be touched since are the direct expression of our founder's experience in real combat. Probably the best and safest approach to it is that a qualified instructor can take any *kata*, undo it, play with it, investigate it, etc. but when it comes to transmit it he or she should put it back together in the original way again before giving it to the next person.

Another danger lies on the opposite side of the spectrum. It is when, as a good friend and *menkyôkaidensha* (*menkyô kaiden* holder) himself puts it, one becomes "prisoner of the *kata*". We all have been told at one point that this or that movement has to be done in this specific way, in this specific angle, with this specific footwork etc., kind of implying that there is only one correct way of doing it... The *kata* then becomes something very rigid and stagnant. Of course, this is fine and necessary when one is at the beginner stage but from certain moment onward this can be an obstacle to one's progress in the art. It is often a matter of what to stress; for example, when "experts" discuss whether the next strike is while advancing or retreating instead of focusing on what is the target and then adjusting the footwork to reach it the best way. It is when one becomes more "papist" than the pope. You don't have to think too much to see that this is closely related to the very first issue mentioned earlier (the pure mechanization of the moves).

It is important to remember that *Shinken shobu* will never be like in the *kata* we practice, so one has to be always flexible. Therefore, the over-ritualization and embellishment of the movements in the *kata* (*kahô*) should have limits.

More dangers: getting a swelled head. It is easy to start thinking that, because I know more *kata* than my fellows, therefore I have a higher level. This converts some people in mere "*kata* chasers". There is an old saying in *kyûjutsu* (the art of Japanese bow shooting) that states "One hundred hands, one hand; one hand, one hundred hands". As Saito Chobo shihan, a well-respected *Kyûdô* teacher of the Ogasawara tradition from the last century explained; "One hand means a pair of two arrows. Two hundred shots done carelessly are inferior to two shots done with care". So, it is not about knowing more sequences, but knowing them in dept.

The truth is that at a beginner's level we all tend to think that we know more than we do in reality. On the other hand, it is also a classic of every time and place to think that any time past was better (or that people in the old times knew better).

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