

## **Building a martial arts method XI**

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### **Communicating without showing**

In the major cities of Japan in the Edo period (1603-1867), there were numerous kenjutsu (sword art) dojos. By the end of that period, the country had registered over seven hundred kenjutsu schools. A school could also have branches, so the total number of dojos was quite large.

When a dojo was located next to a road or street, its windows were placed high in the wall so that passers-by could not see what was going on inside. That way, people could train without being watched.

Back then, seeing a class was the same as attending the class. One had to have permission to watch, but this only happened once a person had been taken on by the school.

In the history of the martial arts, we can find many similar examples: in jūjutsu, in tai chi-chuan and other currents of Chinese boxing, in the karate of Okinawa, to name a few.

Things were very different from the customs of our day, when we so often hear people say, “I don’t want to attend the class, I just want to watch.” Because watching seems to be of no importance and ought, according to many, to be free of charge.

People should know, however, that as soon as they ask to watch a class, it’s the equivalent of asking to attend it as a student. That said, however, it’s also true that there are training sessions and classes without importance where there’s nothing to hide...

But the essentials of martial arts cannot be conveyed solely by visible messages; there are also numerous subtleties of technique and energy that require a special kind of communication – messages that are non-verbal and very hard to see.

The techniques of martial arts involve special knowledge that has been tested and improved by experience, before being developed and handed down through time. If a technique is efficient, or much more effective than what can be accomplished by the simple, ordinary or habitual activation of the human body, this means that it necessarily involves a particular kind of know-how. That is, it involves more than a set of actions applied and executed based on ordinary logic. There must necessarily be a subtle, elaborate kind of knowledge involved.

In the words of a jûjutsu master whom I quoted earlier:

“If you really want to progress, you must think and reflect constantly. But you must realize that it is not at all certain that you will grasp the essential subtleties of the art, even if you are highly intelligent.

If you are only of medium intelligence, you haven't a chance. This is not a thing for people who can't help confusing effectiveness with brutality...”

If a technique were formed only by physical gestures, you would only need to copy these gestures well in order to learn them. But a technique must also involve a way of sensing the body and its surrounding space (including that of the adversary), of developing particular sensations, of activating internal parts of the body that we are not accustomed to moving, and also of seeing and sensing our opponent... We cannot understand all these subtleties simply by observing the external aspect of body movements.

For the truth is that an action worthy of being called a technique is made up of numerous subtleties that are the source of its effectiveness. Even though you begin by copying the actions that you see, you must also learn, once you've advanced to a certain point in your practice, to complete them by integrating the set of sensibilities that give life to the technique. A technique is not a simple set of gestures or actions.

Accordingly, in a valid technique, there is a visible part formed by gestures, but also a non-visible part composed of the subtleties of that technique. When a technique is being transmitted, the non-visible part needs extra explanation, which is usually given orally. After a certain level, such explanations become essential for learning a live technique. For the attainment of effectiveness depends on how well one has understood all the physical and energy-related subtleties involved.

The outstanding example is found in the notion of the aïki principle, on which aïki-do and certain currents of jûjutsu are based.

An aïki-do demonstration is spectacular and even aesthetic. How is it possible to throw an opponent so easily and elegantly? In most cases, such exercises are performed with the complicity of the two opponents. The one who attacks lets himself be thrown as agreed in advance, since it is an exercise that must be performed in this way. If a high-level opponent really did attack with determination, few aïkidokas would be able to cope as effectively as they do in an aïki-do demonstration.

But I do mean “few”, and not “all”.

Because it seems that there are a few rare masters that are able to do so. The aïki technique consists mainly of annulling the force of one’s opponent. If you could annul the force of your opponent’s attack, just like you can eliminate pencil marks with an eraser, you could effectively dominate your opponent, just as we see done in demonstrations. If you don’t have this capacity, your partner needs to be your accomplice, which is what happens in most cases.

So a question arises. Is it truly possible to annul the force of one’s opponent by scarcely touching him? If the answer is “no”, most aïki demonstrations must be the effect of complicity between opponents. If the answer is “yes”, without a doubt this technique would be up there at the supreme level of martial arts. And in this case, we could not disregard this phenomenon if what we are looking for is a better method of martial arts. So we must ask how it can be possible. With what physical and mental logic can we obtain this capacity? A new horizon is offered to us.

Personally, having seen a fragment of the phenomena of aïki, I continue to ask myself such questions during my research. For the moment, I still haven’t managed to find a satisfactory response.

In written documents, the essential part of a technique is not very apparent. Writing is important, but not very effective for explaining an action. If you have any doubts about this, try explaining a simple technical action over the phone to someone who’s never seen it. Or try, for example, to convey the first movements of tai chi chuan only with words and without making any movements. If you say, “Raise your hands”, the other person might well ask, “What do you mean? How should I raise them? How should I place my right hand with respect to my left hand? At what angle? How fast should I raise them? etc.” You would end up thinking, “Words are not made to convey movements”.

## Furyû-monji

In Zen teachings there exists the term “furyû-monji”, which means, “Not expressed in words”, meaning, “Essential communication is not established by the system of words”. This recalls the phrase “ishin-denshin”, which means “mind-to-mind communication”. Sometimes sayings are misunderstood, like the following interpretation: “words are not important for communication”. This would seem to jive with a certain way of thinking, but the true meaning is different, I feel. Contrary to such interpretations, the above terms stress the fact that words are so important that they must not be abused. Their correct employment is particularly necessary in the domain of the arts... If thousands of words are often insufficient to make oneself understood, occasionally it might be enough to emit a single sound, a single word, or even a single look, if

each were used at the right moment.

The right situation is essential for communication. Even if you yell very loud, someone who is far away will fail to hear you, even if you do so in his ear, whereas someone who is near by can hear you even if you only whisper. The way aural comprehension depends on distance from the source of speech is similar to how technical comprehension depends on a person's level of practice. The message can only be understood by those who have come within the right distance. The right moment for communication depends on the balance between distance and vocal strength.

The same thing happens with calligraphy or Chinese ink painting. The blank spaces on the paper are just as important as the black strokes formed by the ink. The action of drawing lines has the same importance as that of leaving blank spaces. The right moment of communication is similar to this type of balance.

Words are so important that they must be pronounced with care. If they are said at the right moment, the essential message is understood even without forming a sentence. So it is necessary to form this space-time of communication. In my case, this is how I understand the meaning of *furyû-monji*.

In the tradition of Japanese martial arts, oral teaching was so selective that it was forbidden to jot down notes. Everything had to be kept in one's head. A mediocre student might take lots of notes in order to look serious, whereas a brilliant one will resort to them very little, since he can keep the essentials in his mind... Words are important, so important that the meaning of a single word spoken by the master can change the entire content of what we are learning – as long as we are at the right distance to hear and understand him.

That is, the appreciation and degree of comprehension of art may vary depending on the angle of vision of what one sees and, especially, on one's level of practice. Compare the points of view below:

A reporter said:

"Most of the martial arts spectators who come to the Bercy facility are connoisseurs. They know how to distinguish good technique from bad. You just have to hear how hard they clap."

A sword master said:

"The eye of an amateur can't perceive the technique of this art. If fans applaud when they see your technique, it must be because they don't understand it, or because your technique is so mediocre that even they can see it."

A physical education researcher said:

"By gathering the results of all the examinations and analyses that we have undertaken, we will be able to establish a methodology that is applicable to athletes of different levels...."

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A jûjutsu master said:

"Even if you could set out all the scientific discoveries and theories in the world on the surface of a low plain, you could never obtain a single view of the space encompassed from the summit of a high mountain."

Let us continue with our reflexions on the formation of what is called the secret, which has many different facets. Here is a succinct analysis.

### **Attitude towards practice** **Kié and shugyô**

When confronted with some special knowledge, such as a secret, people's attitudes differ. The Japanese concepts kié and shugyô (terms of Buddhist origin) will help us to understand people's attitudes to knowledge that is sometimes hidden.

Kié means: to have faith in Buddha and to follow faithfully the Buddhist doctrine. By extension, the word kié denotes a certain attitude, that of being dependant or becoming dependant on a teaching or dogma. When this word is used as a verb, it means either becoming attached to this belief, or becoming dependant on it.

Shugyô means: to practice for oneself the way of Buddha. This concept has become impregnated in the practice of Japanese martial arts to denote the act of persevering to further one's technique and mind.

Based on these notions, the expression kié-ha denotes the tendency of a group of people to depend on the teachings or dogma established by a guru or a master who directs them. The suffix "-ha" means current or tendency. For kié-ha of whatever Buddhist current or school, Buddha is like the God on whom they all depend. By extension of this meaning, these kié-ha consider their Master or their Guru as a sacred being whose level they can never attain. The Master or the Guru is the only holder of the truth. The rules that He has laid down are the manifestation of his expression of truth. These people are, therefore, faithful to these rules.

Shugyo-ha denotes instead the tendency of those who seek to form themselves through their own practice. A shugyo-ha in Buddhism tries to follow the paths of Buddha on his own, even if he progresses only a little. I acknowledge that I was inspired by this concept when I defined the attitude and position of my practice in martial arts as being that of Jisei-do: the way of forming oneself through one's personal practice.

To explain what I mean, let us refer again to the story I presented earlier (see Essay no. 11 of this series):

### **The kié-ha**

The story might continue as follows:

You own the object and cherish it as a treasure. You still don't know its composition, but it doesn't matter, because the object comes from the Master, who guarantees its great value. So it is a treasure for you as well.

You'd say: "Since the Master guarantees the great value of this object, it has to be authentic." Similarly, kié-ha people will obey the rules in their practice, since they refer to the ones laid down by the Master. Such rules are essential to them, because they could never achieve the final aim of their practice on their own. But they are related to that end because they observe the rules connecting them to it, as the Master has guaranteed. They participate in and of the truth by proxy.

Kié-ha people consider from the outset that understanding the composition of the cherished object is not within their grasp. But they do not need to understand it; indeed they're not even equipped to understand it. It suffices that the master, having understood it himself, assures them of its value. His words are what guarantee the value of their practice. So it is enough if they simply follow his teaching.

Accordingly, kié-ha people see the truth through the Master. That is, they need a reference to guide their behaviour. You train in the discipline of the school of the Master as if you were reciting a sutra. You don't need to know the meaning of the words or of their sound, since the act of reciting is sacred in itself, and therefore effective, since it is the Master who says so.

Hence, by observing the rules, kié-ha can walk the true path connecting them to the truth. Even if they know in advance that they will never reach their goal, their conscience is protected, because they are linked to the truth. They say to themselves, "I am on the true way, for I form part of the current running directly back to the teachings of the Master, who grasped the truth." If you are a kié-ha, you will believe that there are secrets in the discipline that you practice, but that you do not need to understand them. The Master alone knows the secrets. Since you practice the method of the Master, you are practicing a true discipline. This is how a Master is made sacred.

Similar attitudes can be seen in different activities, especially in the world of the martial arts.

To be continued...