

KENDŌ forum

by Roald Knutsen

Imagination and Kata

In the past few years a great deal has been written about *kata* in modern Budo; some of the arguments are good and some so abstruse and removed from reality as to lead one to question whether the writers belong to a dojo or to some college of theology! Writing from the purely Kendo and Iai viewpoint I shall once again enter the fray.

It is an inescapable fact that in all but one of the classical systems of Bujutsu and Budo, the physical, mental, and to a greater or lesser degree the intellectual teachings were communicated by the disciplined study of formal series of forms. In the one exception, the original school of Miyamoto Musashi, there was an avoidance of formal technique, but, nonetheless, a close attention to posture and tactical meaning. Even this style is now developing *kata*.

With respect, I can see no possible way for any student of traditional, or proper, Budo to avoid facing up to *kata*. Even if the leaders of the dojo or organisations do not practice formal *kata* they must still practice with attention to good form and posture. Exercises like *kirikaeshi* and *uchikomi* are only *kata* under stress. *Suburi* is *kata*. Practically everything is *kata* in this wider sense, even *shiai* or contest practice; or it should be. If we claim Budo to be disciplined then we must apply control to our practice. Without discipline Budo is nothing and cannot progress. With

out *kata* Budo is nothing, not even sport; it is without structure and without meaning.

All too often we see poor *kata* in Budo but I don't think the blame lies with the student for not really grasping the purpose of what he is doing but more with his teachers who will not or cannot understand themselves. It is, of course, a chain of cause and effect but as the links continue down the line from master to pupil who eventually becomes a master and teaches, so early weak-

In old swordsmanship and iai-jutsu there are many *kata* forms that demonstrate *kasumi*, or mist, techniques. These are postures that deliberately make it very difficult for the enemy or opponent to evaluate or anticipate your intentions. Imagination quite definitely needs to be used when opposed by such forms.



A group of the Renmei yudansha at the 5th Training Camp held in Sussex from the 3rd to the 5th September. The main emphasis at this camp was placed on Kendo and iai *kata* in relation to space and ground. Thirty-three students attended.

ness becomes magnified and error is overlaid by error.

In order to practice *kata* properly, that is not merely reproducing the physical forms, it is mandatory, essential, that the student has explained to him the close relationship between the form and reality. Without this understanding the forms may have some interest at the beginning for their inherent technical difficulty but in the course of time this interest will evaporate and the practice will become stereotyped and eventually boring. The nature of *kata* study is repetition of forms in endless and constant series. It is very easy to see how the majority of Kendo students, even many of those in high *yudansha* rank, find *such* practice tedious, even irksome, and often put it aside quite easily in order to practice with the *shinai*.

Shinai-Kendo may often be hard but it is rarely dull, quite the opposite. However, *shinai-Kendo* tends to lead the student away from true swordsmanship. If we wish to become real swordsmen and by that I mean if we want real depth of understanding not just superficial gloss of technique, then we must study *kata-Kendo*. If we are to do this well then we have to bring our imagination in to play and really see the meanings and bring them to life. Theory in swordsmanship must be made to live and it is essential that there is vitality not only on the part of the master but also on the part of his students.

It is very difficult for most people, surrounded constantly by the prosaic, even within the regulated controlled, artificial domain of the dojo, to visualise actual fighting conditions

and to be able to conjour up these images at will whenever required. Years ago I remember the great difficulty that Japanese and English Judo masters had in teaching *kata* where *Uke* was required to make a simple direct punch at *Tori's* face. Simple matter, surely, just to make a straight punch, but just how many students continually make that punch *past Tori's* ear, or make it roundhouse, or something equally perverse or odd? And all this despite demonstration, correction, pleas entreaties, and eventual despair on the part of the teacher. It is most difficult to make a realistic attack against an unarmoured opponent in artificial surroundings and by this I mean really attack as though you mean business and not do something fast and well-drilled but which is vaudeville.

There is a world of difference between reality of true life and death situations in Bujutsu *kata* and the make-believe portrayal of combat in the cinema and television. Through the expert use of camera technique, film speed, lighting, and above all, editing, even a mundane budoka-cum-actor can be made to look really good-on film. Witness the enormous vogue over the past twenty years for the Japanese 'Western' (*chambara*) and the cult of the dreadful Chinese comedies. Not only this but look around at the effect most of these films have collectively had on the fringe of the modern Budo field. But all is not completely bad in the selective study of good films. The Japanese director Mizoguchi Kenji, for example, made a deeply sensitive and accurate film about the famous *Ako ronin* entitled the "*Genroku Chushingura*" in which during the course of nearly four hours there was an almost total avoidance of violence. This film

was made in 1942 with the aim of bolstering Japanese morale which it may have done, but it also had a deep influence on the developing understanding of *bushi* thinking here in England during the very early days of Kendo development. This sort of film that is really faithful to its period and which is meaningful both to the past and to the present is known as *jidai-geki*. Such cinema is, to my mind, important in creating the right background for *kata*. Another such film was the superb "*Shichinin-no-Samurai*" (Seven Samurai) made in 1954 by Kurosawa Akira. Here is fine entertainment but also excellent in evoking the period and feeling of the late middle ages in Japan. This film came very close to accurately portraying true Bujutsu in a very wide sense and I think there can be no doubt of its value in illustrating the backcloth from which the developed Bujutsu and Budo were emerging.

My point is that the reality of the classical martial arts was born of the grim fact of warfare and not of any fictional escapism or need for recreation, but since it is sometimes impossible for people who have not experienced combat to understand or grasp this then the visual images presented by only the very best films can help in stimulating the imagination. Beyond this point and especially into the field of actual technique it is unsafe to go even where the films have been made with the greatest attention to detail and martial accuracy on the part of experts from the Bujutsu groups. But if we apply this concept of realism to *kata* then we can move our *kata* forwards within its disciplined framework and gradually gain great depth of interpretation.

(To be continued)

FOR YOUR CLUB OR AREA EVENTS
