

KENDŌ forum

by Roald Knutsen

PART TWO

Imagination in Kata

Kata are the bones of all the true martial arts. They are the framework upon which skill and understanding are built up and filled out. It is quite erroneous to say that we should not regard *kata* as workable technique but only as a stylised vehicle by means of which we may come to understand the esoteric meanings or super-theory of Budo.

If we judge *kata* by the late forms of Budo, by those systems that developed after 1700 as an arbitrary date, then we may well find that the techniques have developed away from reality for the very reason that many *ryu-ha* of the classical Budo sought to bring out more in their studies than purely effective technique. We may even speculate on the precise evolutionary position that modern *kata* in, say, Karate-do or Aiki-do may have reached in relation to the fully developed *kata* of the classical systems with some centuries behind them? It must surely be very difficult to examine *kata* critically from the standpoint of solely modern disciplines since all three of the "popular" modern budo systems are not Budo at all and are heavily influenced or motivated by sport concepts.



An illustration from a licence *densho* of the *Taisha-ryu* dating from about 1680 although the *ryu* itself is much older. This shows the use of the draw to surprise the opponent by closing distance, a characteristic of several very old styles whose *Bujutsu* are based on *heiho*, or tactics. The overt movement causes surprise in an attacker and creates an excellent chance of gaining the initiative.

To understand *kata* at all we must metaphorically stand back and view it as a whole. This was the advice of the late Koshikawa Hidenosuke *Hanshi*, 9th *dan* Kendo. I don't think he merely meant to view the technique alone but to examine objectively the development of *kata* so far as we are able, from the classical *bujutsu* down to the general standardised forms of the present day. It is important to go back and look at original *Bujutsu* if one is able. In the *ryu-ha*, or styles, that originated in the 16th century or before we have the strongest forms that received almost wholly a baptism of fire. Quite simply, unless they were effective then these systems would not have survived the Age of War. I don't think it is a defective argument to maintain that if this is the case then the forms of the early *kata* were eminently practical fighting techniques. But I do see the early *kata* in at least three levels of meanings. Not only are they the physical forms to be used in combat but they illustrate the original theories of *hei-jutsu*, or war tactics, on the part of their creators, and they contain the deeper underlying meanings of Shinto. From the end of the 16th century onwards the Budo super-theory became deeply influenced by Buddhist, Zen-Buddhist, and especially Confucian concepts. Perhaps it is true to say that the super-theory of Budo is the product of the Edo period. We have an example of this in the proposition of Bushido by several late writers and chiefly Dr. Nitobe, when, in point of fact, Bushido was not even conceived by the warriors of the classical periods. It is wholly an artificial thesis that conforms to 19th century ideals of what the past should have been.

That *kata* of the very old schools are based entirely on realistic conditions is very easily demonstrated by reference to the illustrations in surviving *densho*, or licences, of those *ryu*. In the *Taisha-ryu* (c. 1550), for example, the drawings show the *kamae* and indicate the theory for

dealing with a wide variety of attacks from assorted weapons. Can we assert that the forms of *Batto-jutsu* are not practical when the very definition of *Batto* is contained in its name — "combative drawing-sword"? The problem of understanding *kata* lies in the correct interpretation of what you see. In the tradition of *kobudo* you may "see" many *kata* demonstrated at various Budo tournaments and meetings but unless you have actually practised within these *ryu* the forms that you watch, you cannot possibly grasp more than a superficial understanding of their real meanings. These really old *Bujutsu* forms may be



A very low crouching posture in a form called "*Shiba Kakure*". This form was suggested by fighting in the dense long coarse grass of Eastern Japan and here the swordsman crouches right down low then launches a devastating thrust right through his enemy who has little or no chance to evaluate relative distance. It is an inspired use of imagination in swordsmanship. The swordsman in this photo is Gunji Takeo *sensei*, one of the masters of the *Kashima Shinto-ryu*.

practical but they are also based very firmly on well-tryed principles and often the extremely original combination of tactical concepts. It would be quite wrong to say that these forms have lost their effectiveness by becoming too clever by half; they remain fully effective but they contain teachings matured by generations of keen thought tempered by constant re-appraisal in the dojo. It is impossible to view such techniques even a few times and dismiss them as an outmoded expression of old Budo mumbo-jumbo then go back to the dojo with little or no thought for *kata*. If you are trying to understand *kata* then first you must train the body to perform efficiently and next the mind. But the meaning of the *kata* form must first be clearly and simply explained so that the student sees something of his objective ahead. Simply to practice form for techniques' sake alone is not enough.

One of the keys to *kata* rests with the meaning of *kamae* and the vital need in actual combat to be able to "shape" the enemy by interpreting his posture, or in the larger sense, his order-of-battle. *Kamae* is the first contact one has with the enemy from

which one can have some advance information about his possible intentions. *Kamae* is also your posture or attitude towards your opponent and is closely linked with distance and awareness: *maai* and *zanshin*. No Budoka worth his salt can afford to overlook these matters. *Kamae* is, in broader terms, the deployment of forces, the appraisal of terrain, the study of weaknesses and strengths, the very essence of generalship. In the art of war there are no fixed rules; action can only be worked out according to circumstances, but *kamae* in *kata* represent in *kobudo* theory the actual disposition of men on the field of battle. *Kamae* are the only tangible facts to go on at the outset of combat; they are like the opening gambit in chess; everything depends on their correct evaluation.

In proper Budo, *kata* is the developed theory which the student must grasp and thoroughly understand; free practice, if it exists, should be aimed at making the body and mind flexible, sharpening reflexes, and generally improving the physical ability of the student. But *kata* is the framework without which the whole system collapses.

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