

Kata: The Heart of Egami Karate-Do

Bodhidharma is a Buddhist monk of the 5th century who introduced Zen Buddhism to China and is universally recognized as the founder of Eastern martial arts. He indicated to his followers, as a way to achieve the purification and pacification of the soul, also physical activity, being soul and body inseparable. Physical training consisted of learning combat techniques: 18 hand self-defense techniques. If Zazen meditation is a cure for the soul and mind, then body training is Dōzen (moving meditation).

It is an apparently difficult method to explain, by a Buddhist monk, from whom we would have expected attention concentrated on the care of the spirit and the renunciation of any worldly desire, for the achievement of peace and happiness. Indeed, Bodhidharma could never have taught his disciples a mere art of war: we must therefore deduce that the study of combat techniques had a deeper meaning for him, the result of reflection, or an intuition on the limits that human beings often do not know and therefore cannot overcome.

Perhaps, through this method, Bodhidharma intended to answer questions such as: Is it possible to manage the natural aggressiveness of the human being? Where does it come from? How can we govern and appease states of mind such as anger, resentment, hatred, fear? How can we sublimate these hostile feelings by transforming them into compassion and love? The anger, hatred and fear directed towards others immediately return against those who experience them: this becomes evident through the training of fighting techniques.

Perhaps it is precisely to answer these questions that he decided to teach his followers fighting techniques that could expose the true nature of the human being and overcome internal conflicts to obtain true harmony and therefore experience peace of mind; at the same time this method instilled fear and repugnance in the face of the idea of being able to cause suffering or even death to others.

Bodhidharma therefore chose combat techniques as a tool for understanding human aggression, because the study of these inevitably turns the spotlight on the inner conflictual world in which man is constantly immersed and on the aggression that derives from it. He therefore introduced a defense method based not on the will to subdue and dominate others, but on the ability to defend oneself by taking care of them.

In light of all this the Karatedo of Funakoshi Sensei and Egami Sensei no longer appears as a method of combat, but as a way to concentrate, unify and appease the senses and become one with one's spirit and with the opponent breaking free of his own ego; a path that leads to Heiho (the method of inner peace).

There is no doubt that the Kata result as a set of fighting techniques: but when we perform a Kata as a whole, it must appear bright and magnificent (as Egami Sensei says) and must have an aura of naturalness and beauty: in fact it is the expression of a world of harmony with a sublime sense of rhythm that transcends the conflicting world. From the origins of karate by Bodhidharma onwards, different Masters in every age have created Kata, and these are the magnificent testimony and expression of their art, as are the scores of the greatest musicians, or the paintings and sculptures of great artists.

The execution of a Kata should be, as we have seen, "bright and magnificent", and should not express aggression, but rather vital energy. Every movement and every technique should release and express maximum effectiveness through harmony. This path leads the practitioner towards an inevitable and deep reflection on his inner conditions and on the quality of the human relationships he has with others, helping him to search within himself for the best answers through the calm of the mind.

"The rhythm of the movement of the body is music. The lines drawn in space are a painting. It is art, and its canvas is the universe" (Shigeru Egami).

Originally the Kata was the fundamental element of practice, while kumite had a secondary importance: Funakoshi Sensei himself often stressed this aspect. There is even news of Okinawan practitioners who were turned away from the dojo because they preferred kumite during training.

It is no exaggeration to say that training in karate consists only in the study and practice of Kata. In the Kata, one does not train to fight a human opponent, but to understand and confront a superior universal force: and if there is a conflict, this is to be sought in oneself. It is with ourselves that we must confront and constantly try to agree with. The efforts made by Funakoshi Sensei to transform karate into "do" clearly express his great vision. In fact Karatedō means "Way of Karate" where "dō" means a path of spiritual elevation according to the principles of Zen.

The Kata encoded in the Egami Karate-do are sixteen: Taikyoku no Kata, the five Heian levels, the three Tekki levels, Bassai, Kankū, Jion, Jitte, Hangetsu, Enpi, Gankaku levels.

During the "yoi" and the "yame" the posture corresponds to a phase of physical immobility during which, however, the spirit must be in movement. During the execution it is necessary to keep a calm (immovable) mind, even during the most energetic physical movements, trying through a mental quiet to move a large amount of circulating energy.

In the event that the Kata is performed individually, one must move and think as a whole in union with the space around oneself and with the universe; if it is performed

together with other people, one must connect through one's body and merge into one another. The essential is to perceive a world of harmony. Kata is not simply a method of training physically: instead it means concentrating the spirit and pursuing the state of mental calm and experiencing the relationship between human beings and between the human being and the cosmos through one's own body.

By studying different Kata, it will be understood that we are more inclined for some than for others: but we must not be satisfied with this observation. We have to realize that it is we ourselves who convince ourselves that we are not inclined to a certain type of Kata; with the right amount of exercise and study, however, we will be able to master them all equally. The same also applies to kumite with the most difficult partners, or in daily life in interpersonal relationships with individuals with whom we are unable to relate. Striving to understand why we do not like some Kata or some people, and what drives us to consider them in this way, we will understand what their positive sides are. We must therefore dedicate ourselves to training to free ourselves from our prejudices and from our internaconflicts, which generate the idea that there are Kata and people for whom we are more or less suitable.

Before and after the execution of the Kata, the greeting (rei) must be imperative. The hands are naturally extended at the sides, and the torso is slightly bent forward. It is essential to calm the mind and clear it of any thoughts; remember to relax the shoulders and take the position by concentrating the energies downwards in the abdomen; do not overstretch your legs. The center of gravity must be in the center of the sole of the foot. The position of the yōi is also part of the Kata, so you have to think that with the yoi the execution of the Kata has already begun.

From the yoi (a state of "motionlessness in movement" in which the body is stationary and the mind calm, immersed in a flow of circulating energy), one passes to execution (a state of "movement in stillness", a state of great physical mobility in a quiet and immobile mind), to then return to the "yame": a state of "motionlessness" (in which the body is again still and the mind always quiet). This is the execution of a Kata: a silent mind together with the body, immersed in a flow of great vital energy.

As we have said, the Kata begins and ends with "rei". Any lack of observation of the etiquette is to be firmly disapproved. It is said that once understood how to correctly perform the "rei", the execution of the Kata can already be said to be initiated towards perfection.

(Enzo Cellini, January 23 2020)