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Below the Surface: Deeper Insights into Wado ryu and Shindo Yoshin ryu

Wado Seminar with Toby Threadgill (USA) and Robbie Smith (New Zealand) in Berlin on 22nd and 23rd February, 2014

140 participants, among these numerous guests from Denmark, the UK, Finland, France, Portugal, Sweden, and Spain, trained for two days under the instruction of **Toby Threadgill (Menkyo Kaiden, Takamura ha Shindo Yoshin ryu Jujutsu) and Robbie Smith (7th Dan JKF Wado-Kai)** in Berlin. At this traditional Berlin Wado seminar, national and international contacts could be established and the friendship between Wado karateka and TSYR practitioners could be renewed. It was a great honor and pleasure to also welcome Shuzo Imai sensei, 8th Dan Wado ryu, as a guest.

Toby Threadgill and Robbie Smith taught the principles of Atemi, Kuzushi, Tsukuri, and Kake, as well as the concepts of Sente, which are of great importance for fighting and partner exercises, at this seminar. Robbie Smith used partner exercises and drills, including Wado Kumite gata, to put across these principles. He showed that the concepts of Sente, i. e., initiative, may not only be considered to be essential for Hironori Ohtsuka's¹ budo but are also important features of Wado and refer to the latter's roots which are, above all, in Shindo Yoshin ryu, i. e., in classical Japanese budo. Referring to this very past of the samurai, Toby Threadgill explained the application of these principles and this fighting strategy to Japanese sword fighting and jujutsu. Both Toby Threadgill and Robbie Smith convinced the participants with their clear didactic concept and their impressive skills by demonstrating and explaining these things in a masterly fashion.

The principles of Atemi, Kuzushi, Tsukuri, and Kake

Atemi, Kuzushi, Tsukuri, and Kake contain the basic principles of all Japanese partner kata. Toby Threadgill explained at the beginning of the seminar what characterizes Wado: The origin of Wado is in Japan, unlike Okinawa karate. Okinawa karate is based on self-defense whereas Wado is based on attack and initiative, Sente. "When I watch Wado I see Shindo Yoshin ryu ... I see the pedagogy of classical martial arts." said Toby Threadgill at the Course. Shindo Yoshin ryu and Wado are, thus, based on the very same principles and concepts. What do these four principles now signify?

Atemi marks the beginning; it may be active or passive, mental (e. g., by exerting pressure on the opponent or by intimidating or frightening him) or physical (e. g., by striking or punching sensitive points on the opponent's body). The opponent is then unbalanced, that is Kuzushi is achieved. Tsukuri means getting the opponent in a position in which he is no longer able to act or defend himself. Kake signifies that the opponent is finally controlled, oneself is safe and has several options to counterattack.

¹ Wado Ryu was founded by Hironori Ohtsuka (1892 – 1982) in 1934.

Toby Threadgill used various partner kata from Takamura Ha Shindo Yoshin ryu to illustrate and teach these principles. Characteristic features of his approach to teaching were, as in prior years, very precise demonstrations, explanations, individual guidance and corrections. Robbie Smith used Kumite gata 1 – 12 to convincingly convey that they are means to learn and internalize not only the above principles, but also Enbusen, Ten I, Ten Tai, Ten Gi, as well as timing and smooth and flowing movements. These principles and movements are important for fighting and should be put in relation to one another.²

Sente – Initiative and Attack in Japanese budo

Toby Threadgill emphasized that the concepts of initiative reflect the mindset of the Japanese martial arts: Okinawa karate is based on self-defense, Japanese martial arts, however, on combat, on war, and this has nothing to do with self-defense. Toby Threadgill and Robbie Smith explained and demonstrated that both the attacker and the defender have a strong mindset and that they act with an offensive, by no means defensive attitude. Sente means initiative, attack, the resolve to reach an aim directly: Kakugo. What is also important is the timing of the attack. A distinction is made here between Go No Sen (reacting timing), Sen No Sen (simultaneous timing), and Sen Sen No Sen (pre-emptive timing). In Toby Threadgill's session, the participants had numerous ways of practising these types of Sente using classical TSYR kata – such as some Idori whereas Robbie Smith used Wado Kumite gata for this purpose.

Another concept of Sente is sensory deception. Toby Threadgill explained that, in contrast to partner exercises where the purpose is to learn from one another and to cooperate, the point in Shiai (combat) is to get the better of the opponent. The purpose is to gain control and to identify the point where to start. To accomplish this sensory deception is used to intentionally distract the opponent's senses and mind. "This is mental distraction." as Toby Threadgill put it. He demonstrated this to the students with impressive sword techniques and kata.

Both Toby Threadgill and Robbie Smith explained that repetitive and correct training will develop technical skills and the mindset to such a degree that spontaneous action becomes possible. In the very best case the state of Mushin may be attained: Acting and reacting to the opponent is instantaneous and quick, without any hesitation, and movements and techniques are executed intuitively without any involvement of the conscious mind.

Robbie Smith underlined that it was Ohtsuka who taught this tradition and these principles with Kumite gata and who made it possible to apply the principles of Kumite gata to free fighting and to, thereby, develop intuitive action through intensive and correct training. This is the basis of Robbie Smith's well designed and structured training where he not only teaches the correct form of Kumite gata but even enables the students to apply the latter to semi-free sparring at the end of the seminar.

² See Shoden and Okuren: Although all areas from the Shoden level must be practiced individually they are related to one another. If all areas from Shoden are continuously and correctly practised Okuren will also develop at a higher level.

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This seminar reached its ambitious targets: Toby Threadgill and Robbie Smith allowed the participants to gain deeper insights into Wado ryu and Shindo Yoshin ryu by focussing on the great importance of partner kata and the principles and concepts of fighting. It was a course about a tradition which is still well alive and about the links between TSYR and Wado, founded by Hironori Ohtsuka and passed on by Toby Threadgill and Robbie Smith, thereby becoming directly available also to us.

We are looking forward to another seminar in 2015 and invite everybody who is interested in martial arts to join us again.