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**PASCAL
LECOURT**

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Following the 'Kase' Way



Pascal Lecourt is one of Master Taiji Kase's most dedicated and loyal protégés. For over 30 years, he followed his teacher and was committed to following the 'Kase' Way. In 2004 however, Sensei Kase passed away. Here Lecourt states '*I accompanied my Master in death, I attended his last breath and I took his hand as he left for the afterlife, making him the oath to forward his work until my last breath*', and this in many ways epitomises the emphasis of this interview. Pascal Lecourt, along with the entire Kase Ha ShihanKai are working tirelessly to further develop, celebrate and promote the teachings of Sensei Kase. Here in this interview read about Lecourt's experiences with Sensei Kase, his path in karate, and his life long journey as the '*eternal student*'.

(Shaun Banfield) Can we please start by saying a big thank you for this opportunity to speak with you?

(Pascal Lecourt) Yes of course, and could you say why you asked me to make this interview?

(SB) Of course. Your dedicated study to the Martial Arts is fascinating, and your dedication is truly inspirational. Your long study with Sensei Kase also makes you a very important person in the keeping of his karate and approach alive.

You started your Martial Art training in 1975 with Gerald Dumont am I correct? Can you please tell us what first attracted you to karate and what made you want to start training?

(PL) Yes it is true, I began the practice of karate do in 1975 at the age of 16 years. This is the age of adolescence, often disturbed, and especially disturbing for most young adults who dream of freedom. I was a child who was "*instinctive*" and I needed action. After three years of judo, I chose to move to karate-do, which seemed closer to my aspirations. It is with Sensei Gerald Dumont, a student of Sensei Kase, that I made my first steps. The "*ground*" was already ready, the seeds of passion were sown, a lifestyle that would never leave me. I discovered through the practice everything I needed, realism in the action, control, discipline, learning and knowledge or recognition of itself.

Regarding competition, although I was asked very early to participate in the championship of France where I was very talented, I was very quickly diverted because the spirit of "*game*" that prevailed was far from the spirit of freedom and realism that already lived in me.

(SB) Can you please tell us a little about Gerald Dumont ? Who had he been training with, and what grade was he? What was training like with Gerald Dumont?

At this time Sensei Dumont was second Dan. In fact the training with him was really hard, without compromise. He was (*and he still is*) hard with himself and with others. He was young adult without a family and he worked very early in the French Navy Army (since he was *16 years old*). He began the practice of karate in 1968 and he met sensei Kase in his dojo in Paris for the first time in 1971.

(SB) From the grade of white belt, you started training with Sensei Kase on the courses he would hold. Thinking back can you please share any memories that you have from those early courses you experienced with him?

(PL) In June 1976, one year after I began karate, Sensei Dumont left Normandy, finally settling in Britain. Already at that time the karate-do of Sensei Kase was different from the Shotokan that grew everywhere in France and it was impossible to train as passionately as I wanted in the dojos of my city. So I naturally turned toward seminars that Sensei Kase gave twice a month in different cities of France, and those that Sensei Dumont headed in Brittany.

It's difficult to imagine the efforts made at the time, by a young person, to travel the country, sometimes with scooter or hitchhiked to go "*suffer*" for a few hours; but this was to be my destiny.

The choice of Master was obvious to me. Firstly because he was the master of my first teacher and it was his practice and teachings that I had already recognized as being more realistic, even if the karate-do seemed sometimes unreachable because efforts and constraints seemed insurmountable. It was primarily the Aura of the Master who fascinated me... a man straight out of the history of feudal Japan. And then our choices are often dictated by our destiny.

I have strange memories that have marked this period. First, the physical pain that I felt at every seminar, but also admiration for my "*sempai*", their power, their technique and energy and group cohesion around the Master.

I saw one of them to break makiwara during a training session. Sensei Kase was also coming to France with other experts as Sensei Enoeda, Sensei Shirai, Sensei Myazaki, Sensei Naito or other Japanese instructors from which we do not know where, when internships in Amnecy, Royan, Limoges, Tour, Fréjus or Paris... I went on from one stage to another, and training was increasingly hard with a great man who fascinated me more and more, day after day.

(SB) How would you describe the standard of karate in France when you first started? Who, before Sensei Kase, had been the main figure in French Karate?

(PL) At that time, karate was not very popular, but with Bruce Lee movies, people began to be interested in karate practice. It was probably bad for a while!

As at French practitioners level, they were the pioneers of karate in France and most still teach and are at the head of the French Federation of karate (such as our President Mr Francis Didier) or other organizations.

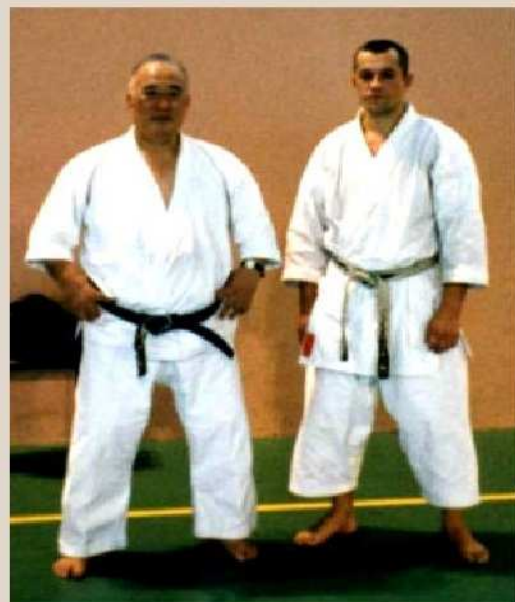
Many of them were in the French team karate and have won many championships. But as you know now, I was not very interested by the competition!

(SB) When did you start training with great regularity with Sensei Kase?

In fact I've never been trained in another school of karate other than that of Sensei Kase since I started in 1975. At that time Sensei became a dissident of the French Federation of karate, left his dojo of Paris, created the association "*France Karate Association*" and as I said earlier, led twice a month internships in France which I attended a few courses and abroad as at Crystal Palace.

(SB) Can you please tell us about some of the courses you trained on at Crystal Palace? Could you share your memories?

(PL) I participated in courses to Crystal Palace from 1979 to 1983; I was 1st dan. With some friends we had a camper van, actually a truck that I adapted inside with furniture bathroom, which enabled us to reduce costs during the courses. We took the boat to cross the English Channel and was a shipment because we were completely autonomous and had expenses of the cost of transportation and the training. I remember Sensei Kase, who saw the camper van, asked me to visit and he seemed impressed by our organization.



The training was very hard for me at the time. There had about 300 or 400 pupils and one year we were forced to go on the lawn. Sensei Enoeda held, during the break between two courses, Sumo fights between students volunteers.

I remember one year, during free fighting, the 1st and 2nd Dan were aligned in two successive waves that relentlessly attacked the senior. We were like on a battlefield! The grading examination were also very violent and we were in front of the masters: Kase, Enoeda, Shirai, Tabata and others Japanese Sensei who all impressed me.

Nearly thirty years have passed and I must say that the education we received at that time was essential to train our minds.

(SB) You were very close with Sensei Kase for a long time, would you be kind enough to share some funny and interesting stories from your experiences with him?

(PL) There are many stories to tell.

In Japan, seminars or in private during the past-uninterrupted 30 years with him, I had many stories of all kinds with him. The one that comes to mind to illustrate the definition of a man - spontaneous and rigorous - took place during a return of a stage in Portugal.

Sensei asks me what time was my flight back to Paris, then he tells me that my flight coincides with his and that we would travel together: "*lucky*" he said with a broad smile.

In the boarding lounge of the airport, we discussed the seminars that we have had and all sorts of things; life, men, practice... Then we talked about the kata Wankan that we had studied at the seminar and he wanted me to give a detailed explanation. When the moment of embarkation arrived, he continued to explain to me every detail into the bus, which drove us at the plane, all passengers came out and we were the two last passengers to go out.

He continued his explanations and to my great surprise, and while all the passengers were already in the aircraft and with the cabin crew waiting for us at the stairs of the aircraft, Sensei Kase began to execute the kata Wankan on the tarmac. I was at his side and I watched him perform the kata at the foot of the aircraft under the astonished eyes and smiles of passengers and crew. An unreal atmosphere emerged from this scene, I decided to show him the passage of Wankan he wanted to explain in depth, I was corrected, then we resumed the normal course of our journey. As if nothing had happened.

"The karate is life, the life is karate" he often said

(SB) Did Sensei Kase ever discuss his training in Japan? Could you tell us what he shared?

(PL) No, I've never really spoken directly with him on his training in Japan. But he spoke in internships and many anecdotes were recounted in this regard. Especially during the Second World War where the training was very hard, frequent and serious accidents. For example, from 1945 until 1952 he participated in real fighting. The kumite was very hard, students did real karate, touch and... kill, even with the blocks. The kihon was charged in series, for example Ten No Kata many times, and the emphasis was on long-distance, speed and timing. They were only rehearsals: 1000 mae geri, 1000 and 1000 tsuki strikes against the makiwara every day before practice. A senior generally was behind the makiwara and counted only when the tsuki was strong. The kata was practiced as kihon... not bunkai.

Sensei Kase told one day:

"We practiced sometimes in the evening in total darkness and Sensei Okuyama showed me how to recognize attacks in the dark. Once I had to sit outside of the dojo and watch the rain. I had to try to follow the rain that falls with me eyes. It was a reflex training for the eyes. Another example, I had to estimate distances to get a feeling of distance. My training lasted all day and the next morning I could not wake up so I was tired and Sensei Okuyama threw a bucket of dirty water to arouse my senses. After a while I stood up when he opened the door and therefore he stopped. I had to develop my instinct. "

(SB) Could you please be kind enough to share any memories that you have of any important lessons or courses that you experienced with Sensei Kase?

(PL) Each stage with him was a source of inspiration and motivation. Each meeting and every contact were moments of great intensity and real happiness. Even if sometimes, because the fatigue or for financial reasons, I had difficulties getting to training, to see him give me the energy to continue more. During the internships he very often asked me to demonstrate exercises that he proposed, and the confidence he placed in me, even if he hindered me a bit (*often. .. always!*) allowed me to show him my loyalty and gratitude whenever. I wanted him to be satisfied with my demonstrations. Each course was an unforgettable experience and an important lesson that is engraved in me as an indelible imprint.

But if I must explain a feeling through all of these years at his side and without interruption (*30 years!*) I was talking about the last stage that I made with him in Andorra in 2003 when, for several hours, he asked me to demonstrate various exercises on shock waves in attack or defence. Neither I, nor the students, nor Dirck Heene knew what he meant. After more than one year to try to understand what he meant (*but he was already dead*) I understood the meaning of his work. Therefore he has, to the end of his life, sought to develop karate and I think this is the best lesson in perseverance and passion that we can remember of him.

(SB) What was meant by this Shock Waves in Attack or defence? Can you please explain what you think he was asking for?



(PL) It is the shock wave produced by the contact of the foot (*front or rear, using the technique*) on the ground and used to use attacks or blocks. It is difficult to explain clearly in writing this mechanism. For example Sensei Kase asked me to produce this shock wave with the heel of the back foot to the moment where my blocking met the attack of the opponent. This course in Andorra was filmed and many students remember. It serves me very often to enrich my teaching and my work.

(SB) What was the most important things you learned from Sensei Kase?

(PL) Freedom! To keep control of our freedom, even if we have responsibility in organisation, federation or association,

keep our target and keep the true way. If you cannot keep control of your choice, then we must resume alone, his path.

One day he told me: *“Pascal, be careful of three things, politics, money and... women!!”* And I said him, *“I don't have problem to protect myself from two things: politics because I don't like that, money, because I haven't need for more, I found my financial balance and it's enough. But I have some problem for the third part!”*

Then he laughed.

(SB) In 1985, you travelled with Sensei Kase to Japan and stayed at his home there. Where did you train and with whom did you train whilst in Japan?

(PL) Actually, I had some particular lessons with him in his personal dojo that he built just after the second war. At this period I was 26 years old and Sensei Kasé said to me: *“Pascal, since when you train?”* I said: *“10 years Sensei”* and he answered me *“I see, if you continue to train like that, you will stop in next five years”* and he left the dojo laughing. For me, it was like a bomb... an explosion in my mind.

Actually he wanted to explain me that my training in karate was too tense.

He was right because a few years later I had a lot of physical problem with my knees, spine and ligaments. So I trained differently, with greater fluidity. So I could be faster and more powerful without risk to my body. Now and after 34 years of training, I can say that I did not have any serious problem or surgery.

(SB) While being with Sensei Kase in Japan, how did the students there respond to him? Were they awed by him?

(PL) As I have already explained, I had the privilege to attend private lessons with Sensei Kase during my stay in Japan. So I have not had any contact with students.

My second trip to Japan was devoted to the study of Kyudo (*traditional archery*), a profound art that I studied for 10 years.



(SB) Budo and the samurai mentality to training was central to Sensei Kase's karate. Can you please express to us what you learned about Budo from him?

(PL) Sensei Kase said: *"karate that's life, life is karate"*

But he also said that we must approach karate as Budo and not as a sport.

The spirit of Budo is the improvement of human qualities of its practitioners. The training of Budo must exclude any form of competition, because competition is a game whose main objective is to win over others, which reinforces our ego. The competition also depends on precise rules built to ensure the physical integrity of practitioners and the media coverage of practice for the purpose of seduction. We can therefore say that the competition is so artificial and only for some time, the athlete in a world built for the needs of society. Human values are thus obscured the benefit of social values, which limit the impact on the identity of the man.

The Budo about him is the school of life and it is practiced all over our existence is like... eating or drinking. It nourishes our spirit.

The Budo met the practitioner in front of his reality. Our strengths and our faults are highlighted in order to bring us the self-knowledge in an objective of physical and psychological balance. Then it gives us the weapons to correct our weaknesses and encourage our qualities to enrich our lives for ourselves. The Budo has no other rules than those that guide us in life and emotional mechanisms on which they are based are also those that are found in the practice of Budo: honesty, patience and perseverance, self-respect and other. This step refocuses man and it leads us to discover and accept others, because it reflects what we learned about ourselves. But the adventure of Budo does not stop there, it goes much further and far beyond what we can imagine, but this experience is a personal journey that would be very difficult and too long to explain here. The path concern of humankind, the path that leads belong to us.

(SB) There are many wonderful stories where Sensei Kase would get into Fudo Dachi and ask groups of people to see if they could move him...but somehow he wouldn't move an inch. What was the key to his ability to root himself in this way do you believe?

(PL) Sensei Kasé often said : *Ten-chi-jin (universe-earth-human)*

Also *"faster, lowest and stronger"*

He always insisted on rooting in the ground and he wanted for us to always have the back heel in contact with the ground. *"Take energy from the universe and keep contact with the ground, be fast and strong and still have deep technique"*. Nothing irrational in his training - only working, day after day, and still more

(SB) From Fudo dachi, he would move with lightening speed. What was the key to his ability to move in this way do you think?

(PL) Everybody knows that Fudo Dachi is the specificity of Kasé Ha style.

I think it's a better position for fast moving in all directions because we don't stretch our back leg and we are ready to move all around ourselves. Moreover we can be able to push down our centre of gravity more and more carefully than Zenkutsu Dachi. Fudo Dachi is a free position without physical restraint. Energy flowing more easily through the entire body.

(SB) Can you tell us a little about Sensei Shirai, and your experiences with him?

(PL) For me, Sensei Shirai embodies discipline, precision, aesthetic movement and fluidity. His body moving like a cat.

I learned a lot from him, especially when I was looking to change my practice when I was 30 years old. I have always believed that power, speed and freedom in the karate of Sensei Kase united to the karate of Sensei Shirai was complementary and I wanted to bring both in my practice.

(SB) In what ways was Sensei Shirai's karate different to Sensei Kase's karate do you think? How did he help you change?

The karate of Sensei Kase was influenced by the art of the samurai sword, it comes from the history of feudal Japan and his karate is very different to the modern karate as practiced in the JKA. This practice requires of us the power and spirit, as he said *"to kill an enemy with a single attack or break those of our opponent by a single block."* We see here that the sport aspect of karate, of Sensei Kase is far from what is practiced today in most schools of karate.

Sensei Shirai, a more technical karate and richness of his teaching, lies in respecting the form and aesthetic movement, which does not exclude some effectiveness.

I always thought that the combination of the two schools was not incompatible and that to reconcile the two could preserve the spirit of Budo while making it accessible to all.

(SB) There was a very close bond between Sensei Shirai and Sensei Kase. How would you describe this relationship?

(PL) Sensei Kase was more than a Master to Sensei Shirai, he was his friend. Sensei Shirai is the only real Japanese expert living in Europe who came to the funeral of Sensei Kase. If I am wrong, it is that my tears had drowned my conscience.

They was much more than respect between them ... There was complicity.

It is not uncommon of Sensei Shirai to talk about Sensei Kase when he heads internships. He shows even some programs that Sensei Kase loved.

I have great respect for Sensei Shirai as a man and as a practitioner.

(SB) It is commonly known that when the JKA had problems, Sensei Kase would be called to deal with them. Why was he chosen to take care of such problems do you think?

(PL) I don't know.

However we can assume that the Master was one of the oldest (*which is great value in Japan*) and then lived in Europe, which placed him easily as arbitrator. In addition his extensive knowledge and long experience associated a freedom of spirit and a great wisdom, gave him great insight.

Finally he disliked and distrusted politic power, which gave him great credibility.

(SB) What relationship did Sensei Kase have with Sensei Nakayama do you believe?

(PL) When Sensei Nakayama passed away in the early 1980, I was 22 or 23 years old, so I was too young. And then he has never talked afterwards, at least not with me.

However, in 1985 in Japan, when I asked him if he would become the head of the JKA, he looked at me with an amused smile and he said that if he took this seat, he should exchange his kimono for a pen!

(SB) After Sensei Nakayama's death, Sensei Kase left the JKA. What were his reasons for this do you think?

(PL) I believe that he didn't agree with the politics of JKA. This organization developed a "modern" karate access exclusively to the competition, karate too far from the spirit of Budo. And then he had already waited too long to develop the Kasé Ha school, whose roots were those of Yoshitaka Funakoshi and feudal Japan.



But this is my personal analysis.

(SB) In spite of Sensei Kase's very sad passing, the Kase Ha ShihanKai seems pretty much still strong together. Very often when the figurehead of an association passes on, the group splinters and falls apart. Why has this not happened with Kase Ha karate do you think?

(PL) Sensei Kase has not only created an organization, but he gathered around him a big family. He said sometimes that we were his children. There are often conflicts in families after the death of parents because there is always an inheritance. The legacy of the Master is the transmission of his school and his research. A search that we owe it to our turn to grow. Members of Shihankai all come from different countries and we are all very united by one thing: the love of a disappeared leader that we loved as our own father.

There is no money, no political power in our organization, only the desire to convey. And even if our respective cultures change, a bit, our vision of the practice of Kase Ha, this is only better to enrich it. The spirit of Kase Ha remains intact.

Finally, none of us has sought to take his place because we were sure that we would be stronger together.

(SB) Who do you feel is the closest example of Sensei Kase's karate?

(PL) When several people climb atop a mountain on different sides where there are different challenges to different heights, it is difficult to say who is closest to the top. There is a little of Sensei Kasé in each of us!

(SB) How much significance did Sensei Kase place on kata ? What role did it play in his karate, and what role does it also play in yours?

(PL) Sensei Kase said:

"The kata must be practiced by way of Budo. The form is not sufficient, the kata should be practiced in the 4 directions, omote, ura, go and go ura, and the study of bunkai of course. Thus we can study the kata in more depth and understanding "

We studied most kata in ura kata and go no kata. This allowed us to develop these techniques into all aspects of combat. For me, the kata contains all the elements of the art of combat.

Each kata has a specific output or speed, low or high positions, wide or short positions. Breathing slow and deep, or dynamic. Open hands or fists closed. Linear or directional combinations...

Sensei Kase has also taught the study of kata oyo (*free and instinctive interpretation*) that creates a link between the kumite and kata. Moreover, the emotional aspect that reflects our personality can be expressed through the kata. And it is an excellent medium for working the harmony of body and mind. I sincerely believe that the kata is, what the meditation is the practice of Zen.

The kata is the source of karate.

(SB) What is your favourite word and why?

(PL) Freedom! Because it embodies the values of the spirit Kase ha that we must preserve, but also those of the human that we still should seek.

This word is a challenge that fascinates me.

(SB) How significant is Ten No Kata do you think? Why is it important?

(PL) Ten no kata means "*the kata of the universe.*"

It is used to train students from beginners to the study of kumite. The first part (*backward*) for the attacks, and the second part (*forward*) for the defenses.

(SB) Do you know who developed this kata?

(PL) Ten no kata was created by Funakoshi Sensei at the same time as Taikyoku, one as an introduction to kumite and the other as an introduction to kata.

(SB) Many instructors, like Asai Sensei, developed their own kata. Did Kase Sensei develop his own kata at all? Can you please explain what they were like if so?

(PL) Kase Sensei created the Kata Heian Oyo, in which there is a certain proportion of Heian Nidan, Sandan, Yodan and Godan, with some forms of Go No Kata and a few specific techniques. He also created the Kata Tekki Oyo, which includes all three Tekki

(SB) In your own club, you keep your students wearing white belt until they get to brown belt. Can you please tell us why you chose to do this?

(PL) I kept this method because it corresponds perfectly to the traditional spirit of Budo. The white colour determines the start of practice. In addition, a dojo has to be stripped. The concentration of practitioners should not be diverted. There is not any colour on the walls. Students not distinctive, no perfume. The aim is that the senses must be exclusively oriented on practice.

(SB) Sensei Kase's footwork was particularly interesting, could you please tell us about the way that Sensei Kase would move? Did he develop any different kinds of movement?

(PL) One of the characteristics of his school is movement in all directions. To control and intervene in the space around us, in attacks like the defenses, characterized his work.

A considerable variety of moving is impossible to explain here.

An example: Kae ashi and Tsugé ashi to 45 ° with gyaku uraken in attack and Fumikomi which allows the use of the shock wave produced by the contact of the feet on the ground.

Regarding the kicking he has invented Kaiten Geri, a form of Ushiro geri with the front foot by pivoting on the back foot outward.

(SB) Sensei Kase's speed, particularly that of his arms, was awe-inspiring. Could you please tell us how he developed that kind of speed and relaxation?



(PL) It was very impressive to see him use his arm with speed, precision and power, particularly in the circular movements. He often said that the contraction and power should be placed at the time of impact. The body has no coercion before impact, it is longer available for the execution speed of movement. Only work in finding a natural movement allows efficiency.

(SB) Do you have any final thoughts or anything else you would like to share with our reader?

(PL) I accompanied my Master in death, I attended his last breath and I took his hand as he left for the afterlife, making him the oath to forward his work until my last breath. Not for myself but for future generations, to continue, in turn, which for me is the essence of life, ie ... Life itself.

Sensei Kase was my spiritual father and his karate has guided my life. My practice and my teaching is exclusively directed to this school of life. I teach in many countries in Europe, and I also taught in Israel and I'm still in Australia regularly. Everywhere I go I convey school of Kase Ha because my mission now is to convey the spirit of Budo as a way of life.

But beyond the faith that motivates my passion, I hope deeply that karate practitioners of any style, and more generally, all practitioners of martial arts, continue their practice with passion, honesty and perseverance throughout their lives, they seem to mind a lifestyle ... The Adventure of Budo is a long way but that should be fully lived.

(SB) Can we please finish by saying a huge thank you for your time and may we wish you every success with your future.

(PL) I leave you to conclude and thank you for allowing me to express my passion for a school and the love of a man who was exciting: Sensei Kase.