



PASCAL LECOURT

Pointing North

By Jose M. Fraguas

Pascal Lecourt is one of the late Sensei Taiji Kase's most dedicated and loyal protégés. For more than 30 years, he followed his teacher and was committed to following the 'Kase' Way of Shotokan Karate-do. In 2004 however, Sensei Kase passed away and Sensei Lecourt remember the last moments next to his master: 'I accompanied my Sensei in his 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'.

At age 26 Sensei Kasé said to him: "Pascal, since when you train?" And he said: "10 years Sensei" and he answered me "I see, if you continue to train like that, you will stop in next five years". This was like a bomb... an explosion in Pascal Lecourt mind. "He was right" Lecourt says, "because a few years later I had a lot of physical problems with my knees, spine and ligaments. So I started training differently, with greater fluidity. So I could be faster and more powerful without risk to my body. I changed 'my' approach to karate."

Through many years, Sensei Lecourt dedicated himself to train under Master Kase and gather as much as knowledge he could. Seminars, private training sessions, trips to Japan to stay with Sensei Kase in his little Dojo, etc became the 'tools' used to absorb as much as karate he could from one of the legendary teacher of our time.

Today Sensei Pascal Lecourt is working tirelessly to further develop and promote the teachings of Master Kase.

How long have you been practicing karate and who was your teacher?

I started karate in 1975, so I am in my 39th year. My first teacher was Sensei Gerald Dumont, himself a student of Sensei Kase. Sensei Dumont remained a year in my town and then moved to the West of France. I naturally turned to Seminars Sensei Kase used to give two to three times per month across France and then following him all over Europe.

How many styles have you trained in? Do you practice any other art in conjunction with karate?

Before starting karate I practiced judo for several years and later kyudo for a decade. Today, I practice karate only, because I consider it takes a lifetime of practice to under-



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stand the essence of art, I want to stay focused on the path of Karate Do Shotokan Ryu Kase Ha.

Would you tell us some interesting stories of your early days in karate?

During one of my first training with Sensei Kase, I was a white belt then, I saw one of the assistants of the master, breaking a makiwara with one gyaku-tsuki. I was 16 and I thought then that karate was all I wanted to do and nothing else ... Then Master Kase demonstrated with one of the highest level students there and all were trembling at the idea of being in front of him, because he could be unpredictable and so powerful. I was a teenager and therefore without financial resources, but I always found with my companions, a solution to travel hundreds of kilometers and participate in Seminars with Master Kase. Sometimes "hitchhiking" too! At first we had a tent, then we arranged a van to be able to eat and sleep even in winter. Nothing could stop us! It was the beginning of a long journey that I will start again if it was necessary!

“I was an impulsive teenager and not very flexible. My body was not very willing to adapt to the techniques of karate.”

Were you a 'natural' at karate – did the movements come easily to you?

I was an impulsive teenager and not very flexible. My body was not very willing to adapt to the techniques of karate. So I had to work a long time to relax my body and mind. Sensei Kase in 1989, while I was in his home in Japan, laughed at me about my inability to do what he asked me to in private lessons, in his personal little dojo. But I did my best, but his advice has pushed me to reconsider my practice.

Please, explain for us the main points of Kase-Ha and its differences with other styles like JKS Shotokan, Shito Ryu or Goju Ryu?

The Kase Ha School is primarily characterized by a freer style in its expression, which is why the "fudo-dashi" is the reference position of our style; it is powerful, low, fluid and free, allowing stability and perfect body control. He thought it was 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 center of gravity more carefully than Zenkutsu Dachi. Fudo Dachi is a free position without physical restraint. Energy flowing more easily through the entire body. Sensei Kase developed techniques with open hands, both defensive and offensive, based on the use of Katana "school of two swords" from Miyamoto Musashi. Our school also offers four major respiratory principles themselves broken down into different options. The Hente (attacks and defenses of the same arm) and different angles of blockages or different principles of "timing" in action amending the intervention or initiative in different contexts or kumite approaches, are typical of our school. The circular movements (Tai No Sen) are among the main principles of the Kase Ha Shotokan Ryu Karate Do. All degrees of rotation, pivot forward or backwards are studied, giving access to a full control of the space around us. Master Kase had a unique way of treating kata, including his study different aspects: "Omote, Ura, Go and Go Ura" and various application systems: Bunkai, Bunkai Kumite, Oyo and Oyo Kumite. 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". The energy and spirit of determination, essential in Budo as in everyday life, are the main roots of school of Sensei Kase. You can find the basic principles of the Kase-Ha school in my DVD. (www.lecourtpascal.fr)



Please tell us a little about your relationship with your teacher Sensei Taiji Kase?

I stayed alongside Kase Sensei from 1975 until his death in 2004. Very early he asked me to participate in the demonstrations during trainings he did. I considered him as a father, and his invitation in 1989 to spend a few days with him and his family, allowed me to discover in part the man he was, beyond the Master I knew. Throughout my life he was a reference, as Master of course, but also as a man.

There was a moment after the death of Nakayama Sensei that many people look at Sensei Kase as the new leader of the JKA. What happened?

I really don't know because I was very young but 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 that position, he should exchange his kimono for a pen!

How do you remember him?

I remember him as a good man, listening to others, patient and tolerant. He loved people and regarded his students as his children. He often said that we were his family ... Each stage with him was a source of inspiration and motivation. They were moments of great intensity and 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 going forward. During some seminars he asked me to demonstrate exercises that he proposed, which allowed me to show my loyalty and gratitude. 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. He was truly a free man. He wanted above all to convey the story of his art and his research but without political concessions. The legacy of a master is the transmission of his school and his research. That's why he left all official organization, and created his own academy. But the person who can speak more deeply of him is, of course his wife. Ms. Chieko Kase. She has very kindly agreed to talk about her husband during an interview she gave me in my DVD about Kase Ha Shotokan.

Karate is nowadays often referred to as a sport... would you agree with this definition or is a martial art and what it was Sensei Kase's perception of the sportive aspect of Karate?

What is defines a sport? Is it the technical or the spirit which animates it? Kyudo, Aikido, Iaido and others, cannot be sports, because they rely on the spirit of Budo, a life-style that connects people and not in a spirit of competition. Karate can be practiced as a sport or an art. But I think that these two approaches are not mutually exclusive. Many practitioners have to first practice as a sport and then, over time turned to the research of the art. Sensei Kase said that the competition is technically and mentally reductive. Technically because very few techniques are used, and mentally, because the protections and especially the rules, alter the approach of the element of fighting.

What are the most important qualities for a student to become proficient in Sensei Kase method of karate?

Perseverance in the effort, patience, selflessness, openness, humility and sincerity.

As a teacher of the art of karate – what is the most important element of your teachings?

The respect of the different steps or phases that all students must pass in their progress, without haste, because each of them at a different rhythms which are a function of age, morphology and personality, but with serious discipline.



“Karate can be practiced as a sport or an art.”

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“Traditions are the roots of our civilization.”

Kihon, Kata and Kumite, what's the proper ratio in training?

For me, the training of these three themes should be equal. Each is important and interacting with the other two, inseparable. The harmony of three reveals the entire practice.

How has your personal expression karate has developed over the years and what is it that keeps you motivated after all these years?

My motivation is intact, I would say it is enhanced with the passing of the years. Exploring for nearly 40 years the richness of this art, I discovered its benefits on my personality, but also that of my students. I teach in many countries in Europe and elsewhere in the world and I can say that across cultures, the personality of all everyone is enriched by the practice of Karate. As an unstable and impulsive teenager, I grew up and became capable to controlling the bulk of my being and my life and destiny, and it is a privilege that I wish everyone.

How important is competition in the evolution of a karate practitioner?

I'm not sure that competition is essential in the development of a practitioner. The competition must be considered a game, nothing more. There is therefore, in my view, no practical impact in the Art as such.

What really means “Ikken Hissatsu” and how it applies when used in Kase-ha Karate?

“Ikken Hissatsu” means defeating or killing in one hit. To achieve it, we must bring together various principles such as the speed, power, accuracy, and a willingness to strike beyond the impact, called “Atobaya” and expressed physically by the depth of movement beyond form. All these features are worked in the school Kase-Ha. 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.

How do you see the art of Karate evolve in the future?

Traditions are the roots of our civilization. They often remain confidential, but essential to the stability of the world. The whole evolution of humanity is based on these foundations. This is why I do not see changes in the future, but continuity. I also sincerely hope that the Kase Ha School can also be taught in the U.S. and if the opportunity presented to me I will be happy to lead Seminars.

Do you feel that you still have further to go in your studies?

Yes! Sensei Kase said: “Karate is for a lifetime.” Life is not over, practice, research and progression remain my goal ... When the body loses his youth, we must turn to a more internal practice. But the time is not coming yet for me, and my body still needs to develop and use its energy!

What advice would you give to students on the question of supplementary training?

Karate is a great wealth and contrary to other practices it is very complete. I do not think there's any additional training to have. However, I would say it is necessary to have regular and balanced training program, daily in the dojo, but also seminars and personal

training. These three forms of combined training are essential to fully explore our art.

What advice would you give to the instructors whom are struggling with their own development?

Our students progress constantly. The instructor must always evolve too. A true teacher cannot stop their progression, He shall be in search of his own development. My advice to them would be to continue their practice with sincerity and honesty with their research. His determination and passion for teaching must be strong and intact. And humility is the requirement to transmit with sincerity.

Have been times when you felt fear in your training?

Sincerity in realistic training environment leads inevitably to a feeling of fear. But it is through this kind of emotion that we learn about ourselves, our personality and to improve our behavior. Fear can be useful when tamed and controlled. Anyone who is never afraid is dangerous to himself.

Do you think that Olympics will be positive for the art of karate-do?

Probably one day, karate will become Olympic. The traditional karate as Budo will become a little more confidential and personal then. But the media will be more important and there will have much more students in the dojos.

What are your views on kata bunkai? Is it bunkai really important?

It would probably take me many pages to talk about the importance of bunkai! There are actually different types of applications and different steps that are the result and mark the progression of the practitioner: bunkai, bunkai kumite, oyo and oyo kumite which is the ultimate expression. And the large variety of options that explain each theme of each kata, enriches the understanding of the practitioner. Without forgetting the training to omote, ura, go and go ura, that facilitate and justify the applications, and they are essential in the practice of karate.

How important is for a Kase-ha Shotokan practitioner to know all the Kata of the style?

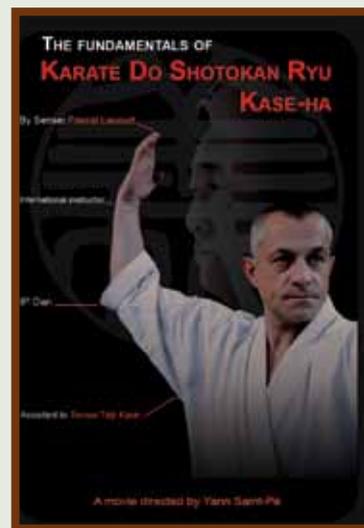
The extent of the knowledge acquired through all kata and different ways to study, make that all kata are indispensable. They bring together all the techniques employed and allow to the practitioners to study all. Master Kase has also created others, as the "Heian Oyo" kata, which is the synthesis of the all Heian kata, and that you can find it, in my DVD of the Kase Ha School.

How do you like to train yourself? Has this changed over the years?

When I was young I was looking for strength, but I was too slow, I then had to work the speed, but I lost strength. I realized that I was too contracted and stiff, which slowed me and brought me a relative strength. Then when I got older, I could not work under constant tension. So I searched the flow and availability of the body, freedom techniques to find technical spontaneous vibration. And it is through the work of the hips, the internal energy, breath, I focused my training. Anything that helps to release the tension became my daily work, my research and teaching...

Shotokan, Shito Ryu, Goju, Ryu etc...How do you think the different styles affect the complete art of Karate?

Styles exist in their specificity and the interest they generate. I think that in all things, diversity is an asset, it does not affect the art in any case, I think on the contrary, it enriches it. This is the case in the art of painting, floral art, music, etc.... I am convinced that the arts have the interest it generates by the different approach they propose.



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Do you think Kobudo training is beneficial for a Karate practitioners in general?

There are similarities in the techniques of Karate and Kobudo, which can be complementary. Budo practitioners often have a look interested in other close martial arts. However, when I was practicing Kyudo, and at my request, Master Kase told me one day that two arts can be compatible only when they develop different energies. Internal for one, and external for the other.

What is your opinion about the “Shobu Ippon” division in Karate competition?

Before to be a game, karate is a fighting art, and “Shobu Ippon” reflects the fighting spirit. I think it is very unfortunate to move away a little more of the values of our art, forgetting that originally, one blow would be fatal. But competitive sport is generally deaf to traditional values in favor of the media.

What are the most important points in your personal training these days?

The work of breathing is essential in my practice, it often reflects our feelings, expressing our determination, our energies and frees our tensions ... Shortly before his death, Master Kase sensitized me to pursue this research, he spoke also very often during internships, private trainings and seminars.

But I also have different forms of training on the mechanisms of the hips and repercussions in the techniques and movements. And this particular research on what Master Kase called “Ten-Shi-Jin” and the fusion it generates...it really fascinates me.

What karate can offer to the individual in these troubled times we are living in?

Now you know that karate Kase-Ha is an access to the energy development. This is the spirit of determination, willing and passion that lead to this research, and it is in my opinion, what the individual needs to believe in his destiny and will achieve its objectives. Life is a battle that must be won, and this is not a game, this is our reality and we need to develop and believe in our strength to rise to the hope that this ‘energy’ is the key to our success.

“Life is a battle that must be won, and this is not a game.”

After so many years of training, what is it for you that is so appealing in Kase-ha Shotokan and why?

A lot of things, but I'd say, the emotion from our body, transmitted through the techniques and through it, our history, our roots and what our human existence wants to express. Also the quest for a “bright, intelligent” karate, I mean constantly changing. The “Fudoshin” the harmony of body and spirit which makes it a real Art... and so much more!

Finally, what advice would you like to give to all Karate practitioners?

Continue the practice, whatever happens! Sensei Kase said: “Karate... that's life, life is karate.” So we have to think of “karate for a lifetime” to discover all the intricacies of this art so rigorous, but so exciting and so rich, which leads man to the depths of his being and the quest to find himself. Kase Ha Karate-do is more than a sport, it's a lifestyle. There is a little of Sensei Kase in each one of his students! 

You can find more about Sensei Pascal Lecourt on his website: www.lecourtspascal.fr