

Kata - Why - When

Right, so we are accustomed to the practice of Kata being synonymous with training in Karate; I think we can all agree on that.

However, with the proliferation of the number of Kata now taught in many styles, and the generally standardised manner in which they are taught and demonstrated, a number of - if not problems - then questions arise.

Were Kata and their training always like this? What was the original purpose of Kata under the master sensei in Okinawa? Leading, naturally, to then asking: If they changed, why so, and did the manner of using the Kata and training in them also change?

To be clear, these are questions which I have addressed over some 60 odd years of consistent and often punishing training with very highly regarded Sensei and Dojo members. As well as being a consistent member of Asano sensei's British Championship-winning team, I have also gained medals in Kata, so I have from the early days had a deep involvement in the training given by the very best Japanese instructors.

All that said, most people who know me, have read my books and articles and seen my videos, will be aware of my sometimes controversial statements about some Kihon, and of the uselessness of most of the Kata applications as taught in many Japanese-influenced Dojo. Right back in the day, in the pages of national karate magazines, I stated that most so-called 'Traditional' Dojo practised what I termed as 'Children's Karate' and 'Alphabet Karate' because of the low level of the value of reality in teaching Bunkai, and because of the slavish demands that students often spend hours in practising useless combination drills which did not reflect the actual type of attacks in reality. I devised the quote - 'Ritual over Reality' to underline the absurdity of such practises.

OK so let's consider both the Where and the Why of original Karate training.

Right from the start, Kata did NOT take precedence over training in effective defensive techniques. In fact if you were training in a very small group under the direct supervision of your sensei, you would not need anything except perhaps a few Kihon drills to perfect the execution of a technique.

The training was very 'hands on' and the 'meaning' of a particular technique was explained and shown in direct attack - defend scenarios (predecessors of Kihon or ippon Kumite) to explore in depth the strengths and weaknesses of the waza.

Bear in mind, the master would usually have only a few regular students all of whom were corrected directly by Sensei.

Changes began to emerge when the High School system in Okinawa began the teaching of Karate to the younger students and the larger numbers necessitated a different - less personal - style of instructing with Sensei standing in front of the class to demonstrate the techniques. Thus the immediate feedback found in a small group began to be lost.

During this early period in Okinawa the 'toolboxes' of defensive techniques available to both the Sensei and the students included teaching the fundamental 5 elements of Combat:

1. Ne-waza - Groundwork, grappling
2. Nage-waza - Throwing techniques
3. Atemi-waza - Vital point striking
4. Shime-waza - Choking techniques
5. Kansetsu-waza - Joint Locking Techniques

Frequently, the basic use of available weapons - from Tonfa to Steel Hair Pins - was also taught, as was the importance of striking / manipulating the weaker areas of the human anatomy. (Kyusho / Qin Na).

Naturally there were no excessive low stances and the ethos was that of realistic defences combatting commonly occurring attacks.

However, when - under the main influence of Master Funakoshi - the transfer of the art from Okinawa to Japan was underway. (Given that others Choki Motobu for example were in Japan earlier, but had made little headway in establishing much of a following) When he introduced his new art into Japan, he ensured that he did not, figuratively speaking, step upon the toes of his major sponsor Master Jigoro Kano, who was in the process of introducing his new art of Judo, which he had derived from Jujutsu.

Master Kano had seen the art of karate demonstrated by a number of the masters, including Master Funakoshi, whilst on a visit to Okinawa.

He was so impressed by what he saw that he eventually became the major sponsor, encouraging Funakoshi Sensei to go to Japan and establish the art there.

However, Funakoshi was aware that in the new Judo sport, Master Kano had relegated the defensive aspects to a very minor position. For example, the self-defence against firearm, edged weapon, and stick or baton was now more or less confined to only Kata practise; the emphasis being placed upon the sports aspect under specific rules.

To ensure that the art of Karate did not seem to be in any way in opposition or competition to Judo, Funakoshi actually went to great lengths to remove the throwing elements, the ground fighting elements, the choking and strangling, the striking to vital points, and so on from the art and decided that the emphasis would be placed, not upon actual combat, but upon more esoteric aims, such as development of spirit and of transcending ego. (Interestingly, in his very early books Funakoshi actually demonstrates a number of throwing techniques which he later eliminated from the system).

I am, of course, somewhat simplifying this for the sake of brevity, but I'm sure the point is obvious, neither of the 'new' forms were suitable for real defense, but could be suitable for both sexes, young and old to practice safely.

Let's return to Okinawa for a moment to look at what the situation was originally. In their training, the students followed closely the master's instructions and practised on each other a lot of different forms of defensive techniques, which included the whole gamut from throwing, strangling, choking, ground fighting, the application of Qin-na, the use of Kyusho Jutsu, and so on. From the history of Okinawa, we can see that it didn't just stay under the gaze of the master. Often the students and sometimes the masters themselves would be put to the test by being challenged by someone from outside of the dojo, or indeed defending people in their nearby villages and streets, using the techniques, of course, that they had spent their lives practising.

All of which served to emphasise the need for serious hard training and testing of techniques.

Another factor to consider is that some of the masters actually became responsible for the guarding of the lives of the various kings of Okinawa as royal bodyguards. Soken 'Bushi' Matsumura, (Bushi = Warrior) a famed teacher, was responsible for guarding 5 kings over time. In his life Matsumura was reputed to have never been defeated in a duel, though he fought many. True or not, it underlines the fact that 'extra curriculum' combat did take place! Certainly these were not martial artists who were interested in any form of sport!

So, in Japan, Karate shifted from a defensive art to a sporting system, and this brought about a number of important changes.

In Okinawa the whole ethos was based upon close-range powerful and effective methods of stopping an enemy with a variety of techniques and generally from short and upright stances. An immediate change was brought about under the influence of Japanese Budo arts such as Kendo, and the stances were lowered and widened, making them inherently less mobile than the former stances.

Originally, Kumite in the form of Shiai was frowned upon, and emphasis placed upon character development. The training was hard and discipline rigidly enforced as students were to conform to the Budo concepts. 'The nail that sticks up must be knocked down!'

A quote from the renowned martial scholar Donn F. Draeger may shed some light here, from 'Modern Bujutsu & Budo' p.133: *'Okinawa karate-jutsu was in no sense viewed as a sport until it succumbed to Japanese influence.'*

Eventually, in spite of initial opposition by Master Funakoshi, demand from some students in University Dojo forced the creation of 'free-sparring (Ju-Kumite)' which allowed students to practice attack and defence but under carefully controlled rules and not using the prohibited Okinawan original defensive waza. Significantly, the very karate-ka selected by Master Funakoshi to aid him on his demonstrations (Hironori Ohtsuka, already a master of Shinto-Yoshin-Ryu-Jujutsu) became disenchanted with this concentration upon form - Kata and Kihon - and the lack of sparring to test the effectiveness of a student's technique. This led him to end his relationship with Funakoshi and develop his own 'Style' incorporating sparring, later known as Wado-Ryu.

To underline the character-building basis of the new art, I give here an example of the maxims to be found displayed in the Japan Karate Association Headquarters Dojo:

1.Character 2.Sincerity 3.Effort 4.Etiquette 5.Self-control.

Not a word about the importance of the defensive effectiveness of the techniques!

None-the-less, overtime, the sport form of Karate achieved a number of its objectives, building strong fast spirited students, formidable in competition, and, in some circumstances, also in the street.

So, what is the problem?

Well, in the first instance, what these sport form students are invariably taught is how to attack and defend against an opponent also trains in the same style, using characteristics ingrained in the Dojo, but with no resemblance to the dangerous reality of personal attacks outside the Dojo which could maim and even cause the death of ill-prepared students!

To make this clear - How many competitions are based upon a female surviving an attack by a larger male? How many against an attack from the rear? How many against multiple attackers, not to mention attacks from knives, guns, clubs and even from a prone position, strangulation and choking attacks and so on?

There are no such Shiai, and therefore as the majority of techniques which would be effective in such situations but are banned from regular Shiai, they are no longer taught or practised in regular Dojo training. No kicking in the groin, no jabbing in the eyes, not applying locks to arms of fingers, no slapping. No head butts, ...and the list goes on, including (until fairly recently) no major throwing techniques! Winning the trophy has superseded going home alive!

Unlike Shiai, a real attack situation is sudden violent mentally as well as physically and there are no referees in the street! The objective of the encounter is simple - the attacker has simple motives - to hurt you, rob you, rape you, kill you! So, in essence, where does that lead us?

There is no doubt that regular training in a well-run Dojo can be extremely beneficial to the physical and mental well-being of students, and, if you enjoy the thrill of competition there will be accrued positives: Courage, fitness, speed, determination and so on. What you will not receive is a strong grounding in all-round self-defence which was the original purpose of Okinawan Karate!

The regular practice of Kata can develop balance, athleticism a sort of concentration and so on. Remember however, knowing the moves of the Kata and 'looking good' is not in any way the same as understanding the correct use of the variety of tools in this toolbox. The demonstrations of competitors in extreme low stances, inordinately long dramatic pauses and loud shouts is a million miles away from the true heart of Kata! Ritual replacing Reality!

So take your pick. But! If you decide upon choosing a Sports orientated Dojo, be very careful to look hard at the suggested applications demonstrated by the Sensei. If they are from long, low stances, and have the attacker standing still with the attacking arm kept extended whilst Sensei performs his or her 'magic' just ask yourself if this looks anything approaching the reality that you will certainly have seen if not personally experienced!

In my more than 65 years of training and the many years teaching Protection and Control of Police Officers, Airline Staff, Bodyguard Groups as well as personal defence classes I have always found that the Kata toolboxes do provide the techniques necessary to do the job. On the other hand, I have never seen them

effective if performed without the concomitant experience and knowledge of correct strategy and tactics, and absolutely never if executed in the imposed stupidity of low stances and reliance upon 'classical' JKA - type unrealistic fashion.

Yes, training in the delivery systems of basic kicks and strikes is vital but training in scenarios which approach real-life situations and conditions is paramount and seldom if ever found in the Funakoshi inspired Dojo.

I could continue here with questions about why so many Kata are in the training syllabus of so many styles?

In Okinawa it was seldom that any student was expected to learn 20 or so Kata. No, rather the Sensei would judge which Kata would be more able to give the individual student what he or she needed to improve their combat efficiency. Then the student would practice that Kata - sometimes for years - before the Sensei judged the student ready to move on to another.

Sounds familiar to you? No!

Students are pressured to learn Kata at a very superficial level often in order to gain grade advances, not at all to dive deeply into the meaning and application of the techniques within the Kata. It is a little like giving a toolbox filled with a variety of tools to a plumber and showing him only how to use a hammer! And, if all you have is a hammer, then everything else looks like a nail!

I remember chatting to a very proud competitor who boasted to me that he had won many national Kata championships. When I asked him how many real applications he knew using his favourite trophy-winning Kata, he looked bemused and said: 'None -what's the point of that?' I politely told him that he was exceptionally good at demonstrating things he knew nothing about!

When I met him again some time later, he confessed he had been troubled by what I said and now was looking to study not just the outward form, but the use of content!

Gratifying for me, perhaps, but; look around you at what you are training like in your Dojo. Which type of Karate are you practising, Ritual or Reality?

Vince Morris (c) 2026

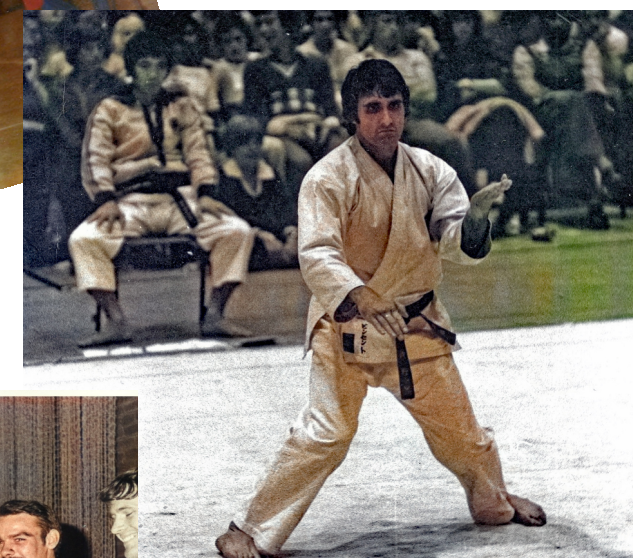
Stages in a life of Karate



Police Academy -
training instructors
and special group



Shiai championships
Kumite
and Kata



With Asano sensei and winning
British Championship team.