

## Competition Kata or Dojo Kata

By Master Mike Branch

There seems to be some debate these days about what people are calling “competition kata” (or tournament kata) versus what, really, I don’t know. I can only assume they mean: “dojo kata” or basically the way kata is run at home or in the dojo. While admittedly, I have used the terminology “competition kata,” I would like to say upfront - there should be no difference.

From my point of view, “competition, or tournament kata” is simply the kata I think best suits my physical abilities. It is the kata that seems to flow with my character and that I feel more at home with than perhaps some of the others. With that being said, it would be the kata I would choose to perform in the competition arena.

As far as what people mean by any other definition for kata (i.e. dojo kata or the like); I can only guess because I try not to use that particular vocabulary. However, I “think” I know what they are trying to say. Since I cannot read the minds of others, as far as what the difference might be, I will simply try to write what I believe kata to be whether in the competition arena, the dojo, or the garage at home. But first please allow me to explain a little of my personal history and philosophy on the subject.

In the 1970’s, when I first began my studies in Isshin-ryu, I tried to run through my kata as fast as possible with no thought of slowing down unless there was a point in the kata where we felt sanchin should be inserted. My kata practice has changed over the years and I no longer feel that is the way kata should be studied or “always” performed. With that being said, let me say that running a kata as fast as one can may not have been the way it was supposed, or even intended, to be taught at that dojo even back then. I am however saying, “that is the way that I perceived it personally at the time and with the limited knowledge, and experience I had.” Time is a great teacher, and among the many vicissitudes of life, if we are not growing and learning in knowledge with the passage of time, we will get left behind somewhere.

To me, kata is the “art” in martial art. I see so many possibilities within each one. I see something that could be both beautiful and lethal at the same time. I have seen kata that had beauty without what I would consider deadly force or technique. Likewise, I have seen kata that, although exhibited deadly force (maybe), was performed in such a

way that the exactness of form, balance and technique was disregarded, thereby reducing the possibility of true deadly force or the effectiveness of the techniques being displayed.

I have heard it said: “kata is not a performing art.” While there is some truth to that statement, I do not believe it to be entirely true. I suppose I would have to challenge that statement by saying: “while kata may not be a performing art, the way in which a person performs the kata shows how well they really know their kata.”

So then, how is it that I feel kata should be performed? I made a statement earlier about if I were going to compete with a kata, I would choose the ones I felt suited me and my physical attributes best. I would make that kata mine. In short, I would personalize it to what I know I could execute and perform with speed and proficiency while maintaining feel, balance, and timing. You could think of kata as a canvas, or better still: a “paint by numbers” picture; the drawing is there with the correct technique and form, but you get to choose the colors of paint.

Now then, come to think of it, can I not do that with every kata? Sure, I can. As an Isshin-ryu stylist, I can find things within every kata to make it my own and still stay true to form. There are places for pauses, posturing, offset timing, and so forth. After all, if I am forced to perform kata like a robot, how in the world will that principle help me if I encounter a situation where I have to use the applied techniques in a self-defense situation?

In January of 2020, Grand Master J.C. Burriss held his annual kata clinic for IIKA members. That year’s kata was “Wansu.” When GM Burriss began the clinic, he said he was going to set a stop watch and we were to run through the kata as fast as possible, with the implication that the first one finished would be the winner. I thought to myself: Yikes, is that how we are going to do this kata? When we all finished (I think I probably came in last), he explained to us how when he began his study of martial arts in the 60’s, that was how they ran it and that is the way they primarily scored it. I was beginning to feel like a fish out of water. Then he changed direction and told us that all changed after Grand Master Tatsuo Shimabuku visited the United States in 1966. They then began practicing “slow-motion” kata with awareness of individual technique in order to stop the “run-together” appearance. He further instructed us to “make the kata

our own” (Yes, you can do that and still keep the Isshin-ryu kata). I was now quite relieved. Thank you, Grand Master Burris.

I will admit that I do practice kata several different ways. I will practice kata very slowly; we call it “yen.” I will also practice it very fast without any breaks (I do that simply to build stamina and endurance). I also practice it slowly and with fluidity, never tightening a muscle, almost as if my body was constructed of rubber. I call the latter: “gomu-jo,” Japanese for “rubbery.” However, my primary concern for the practice and study of kata includes the following principles and techniques. This will not be an “all-inclusive” list. My point is to ask if they are only for “competition,” or should it also be what we practice at the dojo.

### **Lowering My Center**

Lowering my center is going to determine my balance, and center of gravity throughout my performance. This will enhance my ki and also aid in the fluidity of technique.

### **Fluidity**

Just as water is soft, yet it is also powerful. It smooths rugged rocks as it flows seamlessly down mountains and through valleys. It gives life and brings refreshment to the thirsty. A fluid kata is like poetry in motion, reminding me of the serene sounds of a placid babbling brook in the mountains. Kata is also like listening to a beautiful song. Music requires a constant rhythm in order to flow and to be something people like to hear. Your kata can become a symphony or it can become a deafening cacophony.

### **Pauses**

Just as a music score contains certain places for a “rest,” even so kata will have places for a pause or rest. We have all witnessed (and probably performed) kata that was just ran through without a moment of pause. Sometimes this type kata is performed with good technique, oftentimes however, they are not. I like the music score reference because if you look at a sheet of music you will find several “measures.” These measures, when put together, make up the song. Within each measure you will find whole notes, half notes, quarter notes, rests, etc., yet it all flows together, keeping time or rhythm and producing a beautiful sound. In order for the sound to be correct, each note must be performed exactly as intended.

## **Posture**

It can be hard enough to maintain proper posture throughout your kata. It can be harder still to maintain good posture in techniques that are rushed together. Make each technique count for what it is intended. After all, if the technique hasn't done its job, what would be the point in continuing on to the next move?

## **Relaxation**

I teach my horsemanship students to "relax with energy." Sometimes that can be hard to explain to someone and I am often asked; "how do you relax and still maintain energy?" That will be for yet another article as the explanation could get quite lengthy. For now, I will just say: keep your flow strong, fluid and in rhythm. Also keep your muscles strong but not tight, and don't forget to breathe.

## **Speed**

Speed is power. I do not mean speedily running through a kata. Rather, I mean executing speed through each individual technique. You can do this through the example given in "relaxation." I might ask: what gives a bullet its destructive power? It is not simply the weight of the bullet, nor is it the firmness of the shell that contains the bullet. If you were lying on the floor and I dropped a bullet on you, you would feel it, but it wouldn't kill, or really even hurt you. However, if it were loaded into a gun and someone pulled the trigger, an explosion would happen. The explosion behind the bullet would send it through the barrel of the gun at lightning speed, and that, that is when the damage would be done. The bullet did not wind itself up. It did not clench a fist. No, rather it was just a bullet propelled by a powerful explosion. Cause your individual technique to be that bullet.

## **Stances**

Stance is the foundation of the technique being performed. I encourage you to check your stances often when practicing kata. I have even practiced kata only by doing the stances. That's right - doing a run or two simply by walking through the stances. You will be surprised at how it can help you.

## **Transitions**

In horsemanship, we have a saying that goes like this: "Prepare to a position for a transition". Someone may ask: "What is a transition?" A transition is any change of

direction, speed, balance, or gait. Hmm, sounds like a karate kata doesn't it? We must know our kata well enough to be thinking of the next transition a split second before we get to it and prepare our body for the move that immediately follows the execution of the move we are currently doing. This will increase our flow and cause the movement to be stronger than if we were just performing move-after-move like a measured strobing effect.

Have you ever observed a bird in a cage? Have you ever noticed its movement from one perch to another? Allow me to encourage you the next time you see a bird on a perch to watch closely how it moves. Is there a warm up? Is there an observable tightening of muscles? Is there even a spreading of the wings. The bird makes the transition from one perch to the other almost unnoticeable. One second it is perched here, and a split second later it is perched there.

I am definitely not saying I can transition like that, but it is something to consider. If we are not trying to emulate something similar, how fast will we ever be able to get. Should I leave any of these things out of my kata practice? I think not. In fact, the list could go on much further, but that is not my intent. My goal is to make us aware of kata and its practice and/or performance, and to ask the question: Is there, or should there be a difference in my kata performed at the dojo versus the way I perform in the competition arena?

There are many other things I would like to point out, but that would certainly make for an extremely long column, and this is not intended to be an all-inclusive list of things to consider. I would suggest that if you have other questions or concerns to go to your sensei. Your sensei is the one to direct you on the path that he/she feels kata should be practiced by their students; not me.

This article is just a little of my thoughts on kata. Should I practice my "competition kata" like I practice my "dojo" kata, or should I practice my "dojo kata" the way I would practice my "competition kata?"

Best wishes to you,

Mike Branch