

Intermediary Movements in Kata

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In the study of the traditional kata, it should be noted that all movements are divided into basic and intermediary movements. Basic refers to those blocks, kicks, punches and various strikes that make up the offensive and defensive movements. These offensive and defensive movements are combined to form techniques, and these various techniques are strung together to form kata.

To the average person watching a kata, the basic punches, kicks, blocks and strikes are relatively easy to understand, but the intermediary movements may be quite a different story. While many are obvious, some intermediary movements are a little harder to explain adequately on a purely visual level. And honestly, some of the more “traditional” explanations that are sometimes given for these movements seem to fall slightly short of good common sense. Intermediary movements typically appear in kata as hand stacks, guard positions or sometimes as unusual blocking or “preparatory” postures. It should also be mentioned that depending on one’s interpretation, some stances could fall under the category of intermediary techniques; i.e., “hook” or “crane” stances being just one example.

In the physical performance of kata, the intermediary movements have several key functions. They connect the basics together in a cohesive fashion. They serve to allow the practitioner a momentary reprieve to control or regain one’s breath, thereby reducing stress on the body, and allowing for composure. They allow the karate-ka to begin and finish a technique with state of mental and physical preparedness) from technique to technique (a relaxed zanshin). They allow for—that is—they allow the practitioner to begin “positional coincidence” and finish the kata in the same spot. (Note: The importance of this is a whole other subject, which can relate to a strategy for self-defense, but more realistically is a training device that allows one to monitor proper stance, width, and footwork (half-steps) in kata. It is done just to make the kata look pretty: another article for not another time. But for now, it should be a matter of pride to “nail” that spot in each kata performance!) Finally, they allow for opportunities to develop a sense of rhythm in the kata.

On this last point, ninety percent of your intermediary movements are done at a slower speed than the basic blocks and strikes. This allows the tempo of the kata to be broken and not to run together. The timing and variation of speed in both the intermediary and basic movements allow for each karate-ka's own personality and skill level to come through. This really cannot be completely taught; it must be experienced and felt by the individual. If you watch a novice and a more advanced practitioner perform the same kata, one thing that you will often notice is that the "pace" of the kata is usually very different. The novice karate-ka will tend to perform the kata either in a choppy "one-two-three" cadence, or in a more "monotone" or "blended" manner, while the more advanced student will make much more rhythmic, or fluid, transitions, alternating between the slow and fast, and the hard and soft movements. This should not be done for the sake of "performance" or merely for ascetic purposes; rather, it should be done to simulate realistically the ebb-and-flow of actual combat.

To me, the most enjoyable part of kata study is the interpretation of these intermediary movements, as they apply to fighting. The stacking techniques, the odd postures and unusual stances all serve some very important functions. Some of the more exotic stances are often used as transitional maneuvers, often used to move from position to position for a specific reason, or to transfer weight into particular techniques. Other times some stances may be used as what the Chinese martial arts refer to as "leg-maneuvers"; that is to say leg techniques that are designed to break or disrupt an opponent's balance. Hand movements are often considered simply preparatory positions, but sometimes they can be used effectively as grappling, or tuite techniques. Tuite may be loosely defined as "joint levers" or "joint manipulations". While many of these joint manipulations are effective techniques in and of themselves, it is important to remember that in Isshin-ryu most of the time they are used as set-ups for striking techniques (both basic and advanced striking). This concept balances the art between grappling and the kyusho, or "vital point striking". It is important to note that Isshin-ryu karate is not a "grappling" art; it is a striking art. At the same time, it is essential to understand that a martial artist must be able to do both. When it comes to fighting, the master does not

view these two elements as separate functions, but simply as natural transitions in the flow of combat.

Secondly, many intermediary movements allow for body positioning (Tai sabaki) for either yourself or your opponent. Some intermediary stances allow you to angle your body in such a way as to allow an opponent's attack to slip by. As previously mentioned, some stances actually enable the practitioner to attack the opponent's lower extremities, either directly or by simply breaking their balance, whereby allowing the hands to do damage independently. Intermediary hand movements can range from simple grabbing and pulling techniques (hikite), to "hand checking" of the opponent's arm in order to off-balance and nullify their ability to strike with anything else. What we refer to as "guard positions" do a great job in this area. Guard positions can be used to strike the opponent directly, or to simply "stick to and control" (with a feeling of "heavy-handedness") the opponent's arm (or leg in the case of kicks). This concept is referred to as muchimi. In most cases, it puts your opponent out of position and buys you a second to throw unanswered strikes.

Additionally, I would like to make reference to the terminology of some of these intermediary movements. Most intermediary postures, while they can be utilized as techniques, are sometimes referred to as Kamae, or "attitudes." In other words, certain postures have a specific mind-set that goes along with the physical actions. In this there are no specific techniques as such, there is only strategy. This relates to the brilliant concept of; if you know one thing well, you know a thousand things. For instance, the open-hand on guard position we previously mentioned is referred to as Sagurite No Kamae, or "searching hand fighting attitude". It is used as we talked about; to prevent an opponent from launching a successful attack, but that may not be its only function. Its idea is to preemptively shut down an attack. That concept may physically take many different forms, some of which may not "look" like the guard position demonstrated in the kata at all! The movement is teaching an idea (attitude); not a technique.

Another example from Kusanku and Sunsu kata is the posture where we step back into a "T" or cat stance and extend one open hand (palm up) in front of the forward leg while the other is positioned (also palm up) on the hip. This posture is referred to as Ryu No Shita No Kamae, or "the dragon's tongue attitude." It is said that this position

allows for energy to flow in order to have a quick response with the hands, but it is realistically considered to be an invitation to attack - a drawing or baiting technique, if you will. In other words, a “set up.” That may take many forms, such as feinting an injury, or verbally enticing an opponent to commit. Another interesting one from Sunsu kata is the posture at the beginning of the kata where we turn to the side in a Seiunchin stance with both hands high and turned palm out. While some interpret this as a choke hold break (Which it can be!), it is referred to as Suirakan no Kamae, or the “drunkard fighting attitude.” It is to give the impression of an unwillingness, or inability to fight—a defenseless position. The elbows are held in such a way as to be able to drop quickly to protect the body and follow up with strikes, which is exactly what happens next in Sunsu kata. It is another “drawing” technique.

In the kata Wansu, right after the first nukite, when the back foot moves behind into a hook or crane stance, this is called Tenshin No Kamae, or “body shifting attitude”. The idea here is to allow the opponent’s attack to move on by. Wansu kata follows up with a punch, but in reality, your next response could be anything from striking your opponent from behind, to tackling them to the ground, or to simply getting a good head start on running away. This can be found in many other kata as well.

Finally, in Sunsu kata, this stance is accompanied by a closed fist high/low blocking posture. These hand postures are referred to as Hotoke Kamae, or “Buddha hand attitude”. The hook or crane stance, and the high and low closed fist positions are the key to the “mind-set” that this particular set of movements are trying to teach. The idea is that you should avoid aggression, deflecting it if necessary, which is signified by the evasive body movement of the hook stance and lower hand block. The closed fist held high and behind does not strike, instead, it suggests that it is ready to block or aggressively strike the opponent only if necessary. It is offering a moral choice, and one that must be rightly determined quickly, as the situation dictates. However, then the kata demonstrates something totally unexpected and incredibly effective – a lower body kick! It introduces the concept of, if need be and at the right time, the element of surprise. If I had to paraphrase the concept that this sequence is trying to teach, it would go something like this: Avoid trouble if you can. Be ready to block or strike hard if you have

to. Distract your opponent if possible. Do the unexpected to win. Keep in mind; the real world application of this may take many forms.

In conclusion, I would like to say that it is this exploration of the basic and intermediary movements, techniques and concepts in our kata that makes the study of Isshin-ryu a fascinating adventure. Kata can be viewed as an archaic ritual used only for the next belt-promotion. A necessary evil of sorts, that has very little relevance to real fighting, or it can be viewed as a life long pursuit towards something much, much more fulfilling. Kata can teach practical tactics for self- defense as well as wise strategies for dealing with difficulties in every day life. It can be practiced well into your golden years, improving your health and keeping your mind sharp. Kata can be whatever you make out of it. That is entirely up to you.