

Kata As We Age

By Master Mike Branch

The older I get, the ease of mobility I once enjoyed seems harder to come by. Don't laugh, because it's probably true for you as well. If not, you just aren't old enough yet. I have trained horses for a number of years now. Plus, for many years I was a local tractor trailer driver. Both of these professions can be hard on a person's body and mine certainly reveals that. I had a visit with my primary care doctor not too long ago who said to me: "Mike, it's because of your lifestyle that you're in this much pain...but, it's also because of your lifestyle that you can still do the things that you do." He further told me I was simply not going to be able to do certain things any longer. Then, in an attempt to make me feel better I suppose, he began telling me what he couldn't do any longer either.

We're all getting older. We find ourselves taking Mobic for arthritis, a drawer full of pills and other stuff for triglycerides, blood pressure, etc. We are rubbing ourselves down with a variety of ointments or essential oils to try to help our mobility. We have to wear knee braces or ankle braces to help keep those joints sturdy. The list goes on and on. I have always been a physical guy who likes to do physical things. I have also been very goal oriented, trying not to let physical limitations get in my way. But the fact is, the longer we live, the more there will be things that come up to prevent us from doing the things we love to do. I hate that! And I try to fight it.

I am very fortunate to have Hanshi Mark Aycock as my sensei. As many of you know, Mark was very competitive as a young martial artist. He was definitely a premier and world class contender; a trend setter, perhaps ahead of his time. He opened many doors for things we now enjoy as competitive karate-ka. Having undergone many injuries, brain surgery and living with Meniere's disease every day of his life, Hanshi Aycock is very familiar with having to modify movement not only for his martial arts, but for his very survival. He has taught me how to "train around injuries.... not through them." As he and I train together, there often things that come up or certain moves in kata that I have trouble with. He is always there to encourage me to find a way to "make it mine." If I can't figure it out, he does it for me. He has said to me: "Mike, this is your

karate...it has to work for you.” I understand what he means. It has to work for me at the physical level I am at. It has to work for you at the physical level you are at too.

In my studies of the art of karate do, I came across a statement made by Shimabukuro Taro: a lifelong practitioner of karate do in Okinawa. He states; “kumite blooms until ones 40’s, but kata becomes one’s lifelong friend.” When I consider that statement, I further understand that if my karate is truly “my karate,” it has to work for me. We practice the art largely as a self-defense system, and we understand kata as a series of self-defense moves or techniques and study the bunkai and the many self-defense principles contained therein.

I consider that if I am going to practice how to defend myself, I am certainly not going to try to practice moves or positions my body cannot perform whether due to injury or age. I must practice what can be done quickly, efficiently, and effectively. I can only do that if I practice effective kata and bunkai that is within my range of motion. I often hear instructors, masters, or even grandmasters say things like: “I can’t do certain moves any longer,” or, “I don’t do Kusanku anymore.” When I consider those statements, I know and understand exactly what they mean by it. I know because at 63 years old, that is primarily where I live now. But I still do all eight of the Isshin-ryu katas. I do the katas, but I may do them slightly different than how I was originally taught because my body dictates certain vicissitudes. For instance: the “T” stance can be hard my knees. I transitioned from the “T,” to that of a “cat” stance, where the back foot is on more of a 45 degree angle rather than straight. The relief to my knee from that simple transition is amazing. It is still acceptable and taught in many dojos.

Fortunately, our practice is a style from Okinawa, and not a Japanese or Korean art that contains deep stances and flashy kicks. Seiunchin stance, for instance, is very deep in many styles (and maybe looks better in tournaments), but quite shorter in the Okinawan styles and much more natural. It is quicker and easier to transition to or from. Our kicks are not too complicated or showy. They get straight to the point of ending a fight. Shimabuku Tatsuo Sensei taught no kicks above the waist, so we don’t really have that struggle to contend with, but I have found the older I get, and especially after a total knee replacement, that a simple “sidekick” is not so simple anymore. It can feel as if my knee is wrenching off.

At the 2018 Isshin-ryu Hall of Fame, I saw a young man in the men's kata grand championship running the Wansu kata. When it came time for the two sidekicks, he, rather than what I have traditionally seen, twisted into a cat stance and did front snap kicks! I tried it at home and found that it was so much easier on my knees and still kept the traditional "feel" of an Isshin-ryu kata. I also think that if the other option is to do no kick at all because it hurts too much, that a front snap kick is better. That is, of course, providing it can be done without pain to the knee joint.

Before I saw the young man doing the front kicks in Wansu at the tournament, I had already needed to modify my practice of Kusanku because of going down so many times on the left knee (it was just too difficult, practically impossible, with the pain I was in). The adjustments I made were simple side blocks and strikes from a Seisan stance without the kneeling side-block to replace the first two kneeling side-blocks. Next, where we have the snap kick and backfist followed with a kneeling elbow strike, I found it easier for my body to follow the style of Chatanyara Kusanku and simply slide into a cat stance and elbow strike. This, along with another modification really relieves my knees and still allows me to run Kusanku kata.

There are other things I have had to adjust due to age and ailments. But the good news is that I can still do Isshin-ryu kata. Yes, some of them may have to look a little different, but the wonderful thing is: I can keep doing all eight empty hand kata...I just have to "make them mine." Keep in mind though, we are not forgetting about what our founder taught us; we are simply making sure that we keep his legacy alive by doing what is within our physical limitations and adapting to what we know that we can apply bunkai to, that we know we can do effectively in order to practice self-defense and be Isshin-ryu.

I can still teach kata the way we want our students to know and perform. I can teach them the way that our founder gave them to us. But unfortunately, some of the moves and techniques just aren't in my body for everyday use any longer. If you or I can't drop to the left knee any longer, simply try another Isshin-ryu stance and hand technique. If you can't kick any longer, put something else in there that still works with the kata, or just don't kick. But please don't quit the kata. To me, it's better than just not doing or teaching the kata.

No matter what, let me encourage all of us not to forsake the Isshin-ryu kata that taught us to be the martial artists we are today. We can train around injuries or age-related setbacks. I believe it takes everything we have learned and experienced to be the person we are today. We have a great foundation, too great a foundation to allow age or injury to prevent us from our kata. Keep training.

-Mike Branch