

Key Elements of Kata

Master William Scott Shamblin

Part 1

The primary purpose of this two-part article is to outline essential basic elements in the study of traditional kata that can aid the student in overall training and performance. The secondary purpose would be to give instructors and assistant instructors a brief guideline to go by in analyzing their student's kata; thereby pinpointing more accurately areas of needed improvement. Thus, the goal would be then to understand how kata may be used as an advanced tool for teaching. Part I deals with the concept of kata.

What we do is considered martial art. Why is this and what is so artful about it? *Kata* is the key. It would not be incorrect to say that the performance and evaluation of traditional kata can accurately be compared to that of any other form of art. Comparatively, kata is an external experience that produces an internal response, which in turn produces an external result. Great art in any form does this. It touches people in different ways; always giving back so much in the form of beauty, inspiration, education, and accomplishment.

Externally, when we see a painting, hear a fine piece of music, watch a ballet, or see an accomplished athlete in action, we generally can appreciate the technical skills involved. If done well, and with a sense of purpose and feeling (to which we can relate), then these things produce in us some type of an internal, often times emotional, response. Consequently, it doesn't even really matter if we agree with what the artist or performer is trying to convey. What matters is that the work itself invokes a personal reaction deep within us. This is the essence of any higher skill that can be considered an art form. If it is exceptional, and we have an appreciation for the skill that brings the work to life, then something special happens. If we can, without prejudice, acknowledge the effort that went into its creation, then we can allow the work to motivate us into achieving similar results. If we are perceptive, we can uncover the multiple layers of depth within the work or performance. Discerning these depths provides the impetus for all of us to achieve greater things. This is the reason why we have a tendency to attach

great value on exceptional works of art, or on performers and athletes whose skills have depth and transcend the ordinary. Great work and abilities tend to inspire.

How many of us have been inspired by the stories of the extraordinary skills of the karate masters of old? They were real people, like you and I. They came from different backgrounds, had different personalities, different skills, just like we do. The commonalities were that their ideas about martial arts came from a practical point of view; self-preservation. They needed to learn to fight, and they needed to learn to fight well. Without exception, they valued the functionality of kata (even the forms of kata that the Japanese jujitsu and schools of swordsmanship taught) above all else. Is it possible that they knew something that we do not? Perhaps we should listen to them. Our martial arts ancestors understood that learning fighting techniques alone was simply not enough; not if you wanted to survive. There had to be more. To them, simply being “tough” and able to fight well was a short lived skill. It was a start, but physicality alone could eventually get you killed. You have to learn to survive in everything that you do. Kata held value to them because it not only trained their bodies, but it engaged their minds in ways that nothing else could. I am not sure that we fully understand or appreciate that concept today. I agree that times and the culture are different - very different in many respects – but there is also much that is still the same. Human nature hasn’t changed. Without a full understanding of the rationale behind kata, it is irresponsible to say that it is outdated or of little value.

Technology aside, the human mind is still the greatest weapon. Why is this? It is because depth of knowledge gives us practical skills that can allow us to become multifunctional in any environment – that is, IF we are mature enough to discern and take advantage of it. This is what the correct study of traditional kata offers to us. Unfortunately, this is very difficult for some.

For many individuals, the usefulness of kata is limited by a very shallow understanding of it. Even after practicing for many years, the deeper concepts often elude them. The tragedy is, they don’t know, and don’t know that they don’t know, what they are missing. Kata is often extremely frustrating for them. Not always physically, but more often than not, intellectually. It is simply very difficult for them to reconcile the practice of kata with what they perceive as “reality”. They judge it purely on what they

see on the outer layers, eventually discarding it as useless. They may be sincere in their desire to get to the truth of fighting; they just don't know how to do it through kata.

Then there is another group; the tough guys. Kata is perhaps the most difficult for them. This is no accident...kata is supposed to be this way. While it is true that anyone can learn karate, not everyone should. Traditional karate possesses an intrinsic "weeding out" process. Aggressive or immature individuals have no place in karate...they never have. Most of the time these individuals will either mature or they will gradually drop out all together. Sometimes they gravitate towards arts and activities that they consider to be more physical or "realistic" in nature. Eventually, even in these activities, if their hearts are not right, time, age, and the abuse of their training, coupled with their hostile spirits, will catch up to them.

As a definition, it is worth noting that one who practices a fighting art is simply a martialist. Anyone can learn to fight pretty well (especially while you are young); you don't really need kata for that. However, one who is able to create from that practice - in EVERY area of life - is a martial artist. Martial artists have the ability to react more effectively, more spontaneously and more appropriately with what they have learned, for the duration of their lives. To me, there is a big difference. One is limited by age and physical status, the other is not.

To be sure, kata is not magic – it is simply a discipline – and it is only what we make of it. So what really is the value? If kata were to be simply looked upon as a physical exercise, then I suppose Zumba would get you into better shape. If its purpose is primarily as an encyclopedia of fighting techniques, well, to be honest, the abstract nature of the techniques themselves leaves a little to be desired. Techniques in kata are very ambiguous in nature. If you simply want to learn fighting techniques alone, books, DVDs and now of course, the Internet, are a whole lot easier to study from. But neither of these things are what kata is really all about (although kata does contain many elements of both ideas). Kata develops a mind/body connection that is an essential key to martial arts mastery.

Kata is a combination of: fighting techniques, movement, breathing, internal energy development and transfer, body mechanics, kinetics, muscle control, fighting strategy, philosophy, conduct, memorization and advanced martial principles all rolled

up into one neat package! *Every* traditional kata has these elements! If kata is done properly, it helps us to channel our physical and emotional responses, and control them...not be controlled by them. Think about it; is that not the true goal of Isshin-ryu Karate?

Make no mistake about it, kata is training for self-defense...never forget that fact. Ultimately all of the benefits that we achieve through the practice of kata should, and do, relate back to self-defense. Balance, speed, power, focus, techniques and applications, all serve to foster self-confidence. This self-confidence comes through knowing that you are physically prepared for conflict. Real self-confidence (not false confidence or misguided arrogance), is the result of having done all of your homework, both physically and mentally. It is quiet, calm, respectful and unshakable. It is both passive and intense; steel wrapped in silk. It is what the Japanese would consider as true budo fighting spirit. For us, it would be akin to the great American resolve in times of crisis. Kata is an important tool we use to develop this fighting spirit. Fighting spirit identifies character, and character translates back to increasing your chances in self-defense and in life.

As with all things in the martial arts, there is often much complexity interwoven with simplicity. The complete study of traditional karate kata is a prime example of this truth. The on-going goal is to make the techniques found within these unique forms of training as simple and as straight forward as possible, thereby making them more effective for self-defense. However, in order to reach this goal we need to have specific guidelines of what is acceptable and what is not. Good (effective) karate does not just happen, it is developed. It is important to remember that good techniques are those that work when you need them - bad techniques do not. In many ways, it can be likened unto carving a piece of wood into a simple statue; one must eliminate the excess wood, sculpt what is left, and continue to polish it to perfection. What is left is either a work of art that has value, or a valueless chunk of wood that resembles "something". The same is true with kata. Wasted or unnecessary movements must be eliminated. Sloppy or incorrect movements must be corrected, and then continued, diligent practice to make perfect. By so doing, your karate can be considered effective. Only then can the result of your efforts be considered a live, functional martial art

Part 2

Having clearly defined criteria is essential in the correct transmission of kata. By understanding what is expected and why, the karate student has something tangible to strive for. For karate instructors, it gives more tools to work with in helping their students achieve their goals of martial arts proficiency. For all of us it brings us closer to developing skills that go far beyond the ordinary. This is the stage where physical skill eventually transcends purely physical movement alone. Kata becomes more of a unification of what we do and who we are. It is not merely an expression of kata, but rather an expression of self through kata. In other words, the art and the artist become one.

The word kata literally means “how one behaves”. How we “behave” is with the right thing, at the right time, without conscious thought. This is the concept of Mushin, or “mind of no mind”. As far as martial arts are concerned, this is our goal. Many Masters refer to this state as “coming out of the dance.” However, this concept must not be misunderstood. It does not mean that there is no conscious thought at all! What it means is that many hours of conscious, mindful thought has been put into it beforehand...many, many hours! So much so, that in time, should the need arise; your actions are truly second nature. It is that simple.

As a general overview, I believe this is accomplished primarily through three ways, which are then broken down into sub-categories of each. The primary considerations* are:

1. Mind – Mental intention and direction, awareness and self-control, and knowledge
2. Breath – Correct breathing and the development, and use of the body’s natural energy.
3. Body – Proper mechanics, natural body positioning and physical / technical proficiency.

*Important Note: NOT Body, Mind, and Spirit, as is commonly taught. That application is incorrect. The correct sequence of Mind, Breath and Body is very import.

I firmly believe that there are (at least) 15 important basic areas that a karate-ka should pay close attention to in developing meaningful kata. I also believe that these areas are good ones for an instructor to focus on in analyzing a student’s kata

performance. It is important to note that in this article I am not concentrating on the specifics of body mechanics, or the detailed study of the physics behind the techniques themselves.

What I am dealing with here is much more general, but is of equal importance. The reader should remember; the most important lessons in karate often extend far beyond physical movements alone. The 15 basic areas are as follows:

1. Bow / Salutation: The bow (rei) and salutation is the physical beginning and ending of your kata. You should never rush the bow, or merely nod your head. Not only is the bow a symbol of respect, it is also a symbol of control over one's self and actions. The salutation offers astute philosophical lessons that are relevant to us today. As a matter of fact, there are entire lessons on conduct and life that can be taught and learned from both of these simple actions. *Q: Is there morality in karate? Can it co-exist with our faith? What are the philosophical ideals behind what we do? What does it all mean to you?*
2. Hand and foot positions: Make sure that your fist is properly made, open hand formations are right and your foot positions on kicking techniques are correct. If one cannot make a proper hand or foot position during kata, then you sure don't need to strike or kick anything solid. This relates to the mechanics and basic principles of our style; it is not just about hands and feet. *What are the basic principles of our style? Q: What are the basic principles of your life? What, if anything, do you stand for?*
3. Hand on hips: This refers to the "with-drawing hand" (hikite), or "chambered position". In kata, the hand that is not being used (i.e., punching, blocking, checking or in a guarded position) should always be kept on the side of the hip - never near the knot on the belt. The elbow should always be pulled back against the body. It should never be allowed to "fall off" during kicking, or simply hang loose. This is about self-discipline. I will say this: your instructor should not have to keep reminding you of these kinds of errors. If, after your instructor brings mistakes to your attention, you continue to make them, well then, shame on you! At some point - the earlier the better - each karate-ka must become "self-correcting"...that is, the ability to remember corrections made by your sensei in class, and to implement

them on your own! Q: *Can you correct your own mistakes? Can you admit them? Do you hold yourself accountable?*

4. Stances: One cannot build a strong building without a strong foundation. Stances should be perfected, for they truly are the foundation of kata. Stances should be done properly every time. The transition from stance to stance should be smooth and even; keeping the knees bent and the head level the same (don't bounce up and down). All movement should begin from the hips first and not the feet. Good stances are essential. One cannot have good kata without good stances. It simply cannot be done. Q: *Do you have a firm foundation in things that you believe in or do not believe in? Do you have balance in all that you do, or are you extreme in some areas, and weak in others? Are your basics of life strong?*
5. Knowing all of the moves correctly and to completion: This should be a no-brainer. One cannot play a song on a piano unless one knows all of the notes and plays them correctly. That is, not if it is expected to sound right. Similarly, one cannot leave out movements or change the direction or intended path (embusen) of the kata, and hope to reap the full benefits of it. Each technique is placed in the kata, exactly the way it is done, for a reason. Don't goof it up! I always tell my students that I do not expect their kata to be perfect, but I DO expect it to be right. Q: *What are your standards for yourself? Do you believe that if something is worth doing, is it worth doing right? Do you have good work ethics?*
6. Eye contact: During kata practice the eyes should remain straight ahead at eye level, never look down at the floor. You should learn to "feel" your stances in order to make sure they are correct. This is to develop body awareness. Looking down also shows poor concentration, as if you are trying to "think" your way through. One should keep their eyes on their opponent at all times (real or imaginary). If someone is watching you perform your kata you should not look directly at him or her, as if to ask, "Am I doing this right?" You look at whom you are fighting - and remember, in kata you ARE fighting! You are not fighting your instructor, tournament judge, an on-looker, etc. You are fighting someone who is trying to harm you or a loved-one. To blink or not to blink, that is the question. Traditionally it is taught that one should not blink from bow in to bow out of a kata. This is correct. Each instructor has his or her

own opinions on this matter. Some say that you should never blink; others say that it doesn't matter. However, there are some people, because of dry-eyes etc., who just have to blink at some point during a kata. My advice is this: if you have to blink do so, but try your very best to keep the blinking down to a minimum. *Q: Can you keep your eyes on your goal? Can you keep your focus on the task at hand? Do you ever "blink" in your decisions or actions? Are you a deliberate person?*

7. Good form: This is the elimination of any "sloppy" techniques. "Sloppy techniques" are low-level efforts that waste your time and that of your instructors. Techniques should always be performed to the best of one's ability. Kicks should be re-chambered before returning to the floor; blocks should be done with the elbows close to the body. Punches and strikes should always be clean and sharp. Excessive movements of the body prior to or after a technique is delivered, should be eliminated entirely. Here again, we are talking about proper body mechanics that result in effective techniques. Remember: Form first, then speed, then power! *Q: Do you take pride in doing your best? Are you detail oriented? Are you keenly aware of your actions at all times? Are you self-correcting? In an emergency, could you be your own instructor?*
8. Speed: This refers to the speed of the techniques themselves, as well as the rhythm and pace of the kata. Most striking techniques in kata are done with great speed, but the flow of the kata itself may speed up in certain places or slow down in others. Typically, as long as the blocks, strikes, stance transitions and techniques are done with proper speed, power and focus, one cannot go too slow with the pace of a kata. This is largely up to the individual; however, one can go too fast by running techniques together without fully coming into focus on key points. *Q: Do you ever go too fast with anything? Ever leap before you look?*
9. Power: For the most part, speed, proper mechanics and correct breathing all combine to generate power. However, there must also be a certain amount of "umph", or physical effort, behind the techniques to make them effective. We never want to "muscle" our movements, therefore we have to learn to relax, tighten up and then relax again, at the right time. Sanchin kata teaches us this. Keep in mind, Isshin-ryu has elements of both hard and soft techniques. There is power even in

soft, deflecting movements. During kata practice, honestly ask yourself; "If I were to hit someone with one of these techniques, would it stop them?" If the answer is no then do it again - do it right - but this time do it HARDER. Remember: Practice your kata as if you mean it! *Q: Are you honest with others? Are you honest with yourself first? Are you willing to do what it takes - easy or tough - to become REAL*

10. Placement: This aligns with accuracy of the techniques to the right targets. If within your kata, a kick is supposed to go to the groin, don't throw it head high. If a punch is targeted for the solar plexus, put it in the solar plexus every time! Targets on your imaginary opponents correspond with your own targets. Blocks should be accurate as well; if you are using a middle level (side) block, don't swing it wide and far out side of your own body perimeter. Most techniques should come into concentrated focus (kime). This means that there is a place where all of your weight, energy, speed, power and mental intention concentrate. It is like an explosion at the apex of the technique. *Q: Do you often rely on "luck?" "Luck" is the hopeful language of those who are not fully prepared. The sure-fire way to miss a target is to not have a target. Have a goal and then train yourself to be a sharp shooter!*
11. Kiai: this corresponds somewhat to kime, but in this discussion we are talking about the physical sound. Kiai should come from down deep in the diaphragm; it is a coming together of the mind, breath and body. Kiai should be loud, abrupt and powerful. Like one of those powerful "sneezes" that unties your own shoe-laces! Many karate-ka never learn to kiai properly, or they are too "embarrassed" to kiai with any authority. If that is the case, my question is, "Are you too 'embarrassed' to keep someone from killing you?" How many times have you heard a fellow student perform a "weak" kiai during training? There is no half way with kiai (or anything in karate for that matter). You either do it right or you do it wrong. It is better to not kiai at all than to do one half way. A weak kiai is useless. Remember: Kiai is about focused, mind / body intention! *Q: Are you often indecisive? Are you committed to seeing things through? Like Mr. Miyagi said, "If in middle of road, 'SPLAT!! Squashed like grape!"...or something to that effect.*
12. Concentration: Simply put, don't let your mind wander during your kata practice. Visualize your opponents. Don't stop and think about what move comes next, just let

it flow. Ignore distractions going on around you. Keep your mental focus. Direct your attention to a single target. How do you accomplish all of this? Practice my friends, mindful practice...and repetition, repetition, repetition. There is no other way.

Remember: Isshin-ryu means “one heart method.” The word itself refers to single-minded effort, or “concentration”. *Q: Do you jump from one thing to the next? In this lifetime, to perfect ONE thing is a noble goal. Concentration of ALL WE ARE is what Isshin-ryu Karate is all about! What does that mean to you?*

13. Breathing: We could discuss breathing in kata forever. Correct breathing is THE most important consideration in kata practice. Proper inhalation and exhalation must be timed with the techniques and movements of the kata in order to make it the most effective that it can be. Your ki, or internal energy, begins with your mind, follows your breath, and then manifests itself through your body and beyond. There are different types of breathing patterns that may be used in any given kata. As a very general rule, types of breathing patterns that may be used in any given kata. As a very general rule, inhalation is done through the nose at the beginning of a technique, and exhalation is done through the mouth or nose with (or actually very slightly before) the technique. Avoid holding your breath during kata, fighting or anything that you do. This is detrimental to the body and restricts your energy flow. *Q: How often do you hold your breath when you do something? Your goal should be to control your breathing and eliminate excess tension from your body and mind. A clear mind and relaxed body allows you to think properly and re-act much more quickly.*

14. General knowledge: Know all about each kata that you do. Learn its history and background. Know who developed it, what its name means, and what you think it is trying to teach. Know the mechanics of the techniques and be able to explain them to others. If lower ranked students ask you questions, be able to give them good answers! Don't make things up, KNOW the right answers! It is not just about learning kata history; it is about ultimately understanding why things came to be. In doing so, perhaps we can come closer to understanding exactly how and where the kata are trying to take us right now and how we can use them for our benefit. *Q: Are you truly an expert in your art, or just an imitator of movements? Consider the*

wisdom of Matsuo Basho who said, "Don't (blindly) follow in the footsteps of the masters of old, but rather seek what they sought."

15. Bunkai: This is the application of the techniques found within the kata. Kata techniques should be broken down and studied to determine how they may be used. Then they must be practiced with a partner to be able to actually use them in self-defense. Bunkai is the unification of form and function. When you practice kata solo, you should always visualize your opponents in detail. You can only do this if you have at the very least a rudimentary understanding of the purpose of the techniques. By doing so, you are conditioning your mind and creating a sense of "muscle memory." As a side note, if you are truly "living your kata", anyone watching you demonstrate it should be able to "see" your opponents as well. There should be a physical manifestation that is undeniable! However, know this: It is important to realize that there are some things that you simply cannot learn through kata practice alone; one is to develop timing against a live, unpredictable opponent. The other is the ability to re-group when the unexpected happens, you get hit, or injured in some way, and things begin to go horribly wrong. This is where all of the various forms of kumite come in. Kihon (Basics) are the foundation for developing your skills. Kata is the formula for developing and ingraining your skills, but Kumite (which includes Bunkai practice) is the application of those skills. It is the glue that binds everything else together. *Q: Who was it that said, "Knowing is not enough, we must do."? I forget. It was either Yoda or Bruce somebody, I think...*

These items are what I feel to be universal, regardless of style or system. Each item here is also a lesson in and of itself. They are not simply about the basic physical details that are briefly mentioned; but they are also intended to be lessons that relate to everything from propriety in life to becoming "self-correcting" through personal accountability and discipline. None are limited. What does each one mean to you?

The purpose of this article was not to teach these items as gospel, but rather to categorize them as an aid to kata performance, evaluation and as teaching tools. All of this is purely for your consideration only. Remember that the final authority on the specifics of each item should always lie within your self and with guidance from your sensei.