

SHIHAN-TE

The Bunkai
of Karate
Kata

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Contents

Dedicationxxx
Acknowledgementsxxx
Chapter One The Bunkai of Kataxxx
Why Write About Bunkai of Kata	
To Disassemble Kata	
Historical Context of Karate	
Kata Today in the Twenty-First Century	
The Triangle of Teaching	
Chapter Two Traditional Kata: The Lost Soulxxx
The Source of Kata	
The Secrecy Demanded of Kata	
The Oral Tradition of Karate Kata	
The Two Schools of Karate: Exhibition and Traditional	
Chapter Three Some Know Betterxxx
Everything in Life is Kata	
The Modern Teaching of Old Ways	
Boxers and Ballerinas	
The Creeping Effect of Novice Teachers	
Kata's Staying Power	
Language, Translation, Misinterpretation and Ignorance	
Bunkai, Oyo, Henka and Kakushi	
Zanshin Finishing With Attention	
See the Light or Feel the Heat	
Chapter Four The Four Elements of Kata: Bunkai, Oyo, Henka, Kakushixxx
Bunkai, the First Element	
Oyo, the Second Element	
Henka, the Third Element	
Kakushi, the Fourth Element	
Capturing the Intended Sense	
Chapter Five Demonstrating the Four Elements of a Kataxxx
Demonstrating Bunkai	
Demonstrating Oyo	
Demonstrating Henka	
Demonstrating Kakushi	
Conclusion: The Practical Application of Bunkai	
Chapter Six Waza Descriptionsxxx
Chapter Seven An Introduction to Kataxxx
Glossaryxxx
Indexxxx

CHAPTER TWO

Traditional Kata: The Lost Soul

*"Kata is the mother of karate and the bunkai is her soul."
(Choki Motobu)*

*"The soul, I fear, has been largely lost."
(Darrell Craig)*

THE SOURCE OF KATA

Kata is said to be the “mother” of karate. Kata are the prearranged and choreographed dance-like forms used in every martial arts style to convey the intricacies of the particular style to the practitioner. In a sense, they are a physical form of oral tradition, a body of knowledge transferring a tradition most historians believe extends from several thousand years ago. Kata are a living record and are not unlike folksongs and dances reverently handed down from generation to generation. They are considered to be the distilled concentrated wisdom, understanding and experience of hundreds of karate masters from centuries of practice. Kata are the basis from which modern day karate techniques have developed and are considered the “textbooks” of the martial arts.

While every martial arts style does kata, few practitioners understand or comprehend their true purpose. The vast majority of karate students just quietly and obediently do kata as part of their instructor’s curriculum. To some, kata are viewed as a necessary evil, required to advance on to their next rank. Unfortunately most martial arts students have never been, as one unknown writer said it, “blessed with the inspired tuition of an enlightened teacher, whose solid hand so generously has led to them among a golden path of kata.” The richness and beauty of kata have never captured these students’ minds and inspired them to practice and perfect these condensed masterpieces of martial secrets and principles.

In order to properly set the stage for the following discussion, we have to go very far back in time and to a very distant place: hundreds of years ago to Okinawa. We could go back even farther, but there’s no need to start all the way back at the Fukien Shaolin Temple because the Chinese form of empty-hand fighting, worthy as it is, is a significant step removed from the form it finally took

in Okinawa, and then later Japan. So it is in Okinawa that we will start.

Okinawa is an island lying some 750 miles from the Japanese home islands. Centuries ago, the Japanese conquered Okinawa and thus the Okinawans became a people subservient to the Japanese and their culture. After their defeat, the Okinawans were never viewed by the Japanese as their equals. There has been some historical confusion about this. I believe this stems from the word *bushi* that was used by both cultures, although with vastly different meanings. To the Japanese, the word referred to a class of samurai; to the Okinawans, however, it meant someone who had mastered karate kata. Thus, never when referring to an Okinawan did the term signify to the Japanese that the person was of samurai class because there were no Okinawan samurai.

THE SECRECY DEMANDED OF KATA

One of the consequences of their defeat is that the Okinawans were forbidden to possess, much less carry, weapons of any kind. As is frequently the case, this in effect became a cause for further effects. Okinawans, forbidden to possess traditional weapons, developed a system of weaponry using everyday farm implements such as the *sai* (a tool used to turn the soil), the sickle (a tool used to cut grain) and the *tonfa* and *nunchaku* (tools used to grind or crush grain). There were others as well, and they led to the development of a whole weapons system of martial art called *kubodo* which is beyond the scope of this book. Another effect of the prohibition is that it forced the Okinawans to develop a fighting system completely independent of any sort of weaponry, one that relied exclusively on their hands and feet. This, of course, was a huge disadvantage for the unarmed Okinawans who often found themselves in hostile encounters with armed aggressors. Thus, to protect themselves, the Okinawans developed fighting systems for their own private use. The systems were taught within family units, generally at night and in secret. They were closely guarded from outsiders.

The notion of teaching and practicing in secret was not unique to the Okinawans; the same tradition had existed in ancient China. In fact, in ancient China, the masters often had what could be viewed as a dual-track system; they taught the same kata in two slightly different ways. The outer circle of students, those not yet entitled to the master's secrets, would be taught a kata with certain critical details and principles omitted; the inner circle would be taught the same kata, but with those details and principles included. To the untrained eye, the difference might be undetectable. Often the difference involved only forming the hands differently, or attacking at a slightly different angle to reach a different target, or altering the footwork and thereby altering the timing of a particular move. However, the difference was paramount, because the subtle alterations were the difference between a proven, effective waza and one that was only superficially so. Those students who had failed to earn the master's trust, even after years of following in his footsteps, were never admitted into this secret society and thus never

became true masters themselves, no matter how much they may have appeared to the untrained eye to be so.

Because the Okinawans were fighting against armed aggressors, the empty-hand systems had to be instantly effective. Subsequently, the systems that developed contained the ability to take a life with one strike. This philosophy, mentioned earlier, became known as *issen-issatsu* or “one strike.” The physical ability to take a life with one strike was practiced in *waza* and *keiko*; the psychological ability was practiced through *kata*. It came to be said that, while the Japanese ruled by sword during the day, the Okinawans ruled by fists and feet at night.

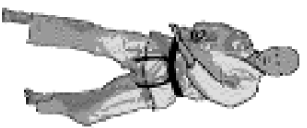
The necessity for training in secret from prying Japanese eyes formally ended around 1875 with the withdrawal of the Satsuma Samurai and the recognition that Okinawa was a part of Japan. Thereafter, Okinawan karate began to be identified by specific styles. However, it was not until the early twentieth century that karate became generally known through its introduction as a physical education requirement in the Okinawan public schools. Even though karate was taught in public schools by the early part of this century, it was also still taught within family units in a private setting. In them, much of the tradition of karate was passed on to the younger generation orally. Interestingly, even though the Okinawan culture is over one thousand years old, there is virtually no written history of its fighting systems. This could be due to the great destruction that was visited upon Okinawa in the Second World War. More probably, however, it is due to the fact that, when the Satsuma clan banned weapons in Okinawa for the second time in 1609, the fighting arts had to go underground and be practiced and transmitted to succeeding generations in utmost secrecy. This required that the fighting arts be transmitted orally, and not in writing.

THE ORAL TRADITION OF KARATE KATA

What we know today as Okinawan karate is over a thousand years old. Yet it has no written history. How did this happen? How was an art like karate handed down from generation to generation in secret? The answer lies in *kata* and the hidden secrets of its *bunkai*. It also lies in an additional reason that they developed and continued to study this special art. There can be no doubt that the original and primary reason that Okinawa Te was developed and studied was for self-protection. Yet, in time, it became clear to the Okinawan masters that there was an additional, and perhaps deeper, reason to study the art. They realized that the mastery of the *bunkai* hidden deep within the visible moves of the *kata* went hand in hand with the mastery of one’s self, that discovering the secrets held by the *bunkai* was secondary to the mastery and perfection of one’s own character. This is why the old masters insisted upon the discipline of the *kata*.

In the late 1920s through the 1930s, there was a famous karate dojo in Tokyo called the Ryobu-Kan. Translated, the name meant “The House of Martial Arts

Waza 3.



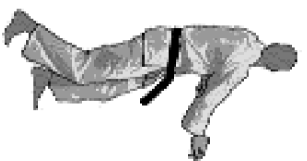
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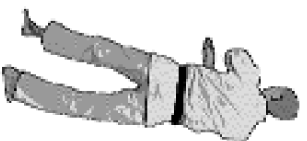
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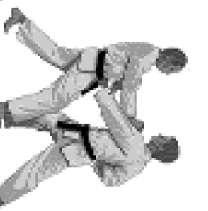
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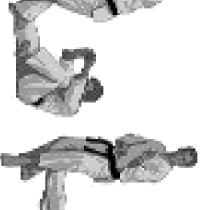
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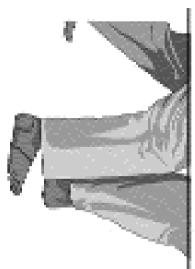
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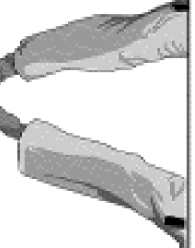
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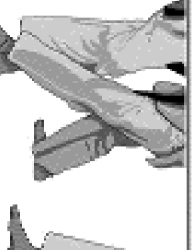
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Close up Foot-work of drawings above

Excellence.” The dojo was founded by Yasuhiro Konishi Sensei and Hironishi Ohtsuka Sensei. Initially, the dojo was known primarily for its practice of kata. In time, however, they added *ippon kumite* to the curriculum and it is believed that the techniques for the kumite were taken from the bunkai of their katas. We have always suspected that this decision was largely influenced by Gichin Funikoshi who was teaching karate at Keio University at the same time that Konishi Sensei was teaching kendo and jujitsu there. There was supposedly a sign in the Ryobu-Kan that read “For karate to be perfect, it cannot be just technique, but also education.”

Throughout the years, many great Okinawan karate masters visited the Ryobu-Kan. They included Chojun Miyagi (the founder of *goju-ryu*), Kenwa Mabuni (the founder of *shito ryu*) and his student Kosei Kokuba. However, one master stood head and shoulders above the rest, and that was Choki Motobu. He made more defining contributions to the dojo through his knowledge of the katas and their bunkai than anyone else. Motobu Sensei let the primacy of kata be known in the world of karate. In his mind, kata was the mother of karate and the bunkai was her soul. From research and conversations with old senseis, it was discovered that Motobu Sensei taught each kata differently, seeking to draw out a different lesson from each one. For example, he might teach one kata with a method that caused the students to feel heavy in their legs and stomach. For another, he might want the students to feel light, with relaxed shoulders, and perform the kata with agility and speed in quick, linear movements. This type of training was extremely difficult, because it required the students to alter not only their rhythm, but also their feelings and philosophy of each move of each kata. Thus, they had to constantly alter their attitudes regarding the katas as they went from one kata to the next.

The objective of this type of training, which apparently was successful, was to cause the karateka to begin each kata with a fresh mind, enthusiastically yet humble. This type of training also developed in the karateka what the Japanese called *ateru* and *mushin*. *Ateru* is the subconscious development of correct distance, vision, timing and accuracy. This brought one into a state of *mushin*, which means “no mind.” I believe that this type of training eliminated the undesirable element of fantasy—or lack of reality—that so often afflicts the martial arts today.

THE TWO SCHOOLS OF KARATE: EXHIBITION AND TRADITIONAL

Today, the practice of karate can be broadly categorized into two schools: on the one hand, we have modern karate for sport. On the other, we have karate as true budo. Generally, the school prevalent in a country depends largely upon the culture and traits of the country in question.

Many of the founders of “modern” martial art styles never trained under a true master. Thus, many never learned the inner teachings of a traditional art. Furthermore, in an attempt to commercialize the art they watered down whatever

techniques they did know in order to make them safer to practice. In addition, there is little if any, *okuden* or bunkai in these modern arts because it is no longer necessary to keep techniques secret. Unlike the original purpose of traditional karate, which was combat effectiveness, the main purpose of modern systems is sport or self-expression. The deadly secrets interwoven into the traditional karate katas are contrary to the principles of sport competition that dictate a level playing field for all participants. It is fine for practitioners to choose to “play” karate, but when their competitive days are over, no one should mistake them for karate masters, no matter how many pretty trophies adorn their shelves. In their youth, these people probably had power and strength; when that leaves them, they will have nothing but memories. They will never have developed a real understanding of karate. On the other hand, when the true master reaches that age, he will still have his traditional kata full of wonderful hidden secrets to practice and teach to the next generation.

By virtue of this emphasis on sport, karate and, by extension, kata have been watered down over the years to their least violent denominator that is acceptable for sport practice. The dojos that are responsible for this have opted for commercial success and popularity over the higher goal of preserving a worthy tradition and art. This was brought home most forcefully several years ago when a call from the curator at the Japanese Consulate General’s office requesting a karate demonstration at the Houston Children’s Museum. During the conversation, the curator mentioned that his ten-year old son was a black belt. “Oh, that’s nice, what style does he practice?” “Style? What do you mean style?” was the reply. An explanation began about the major styles of karate when he broke in and said that his son took “Japanese taekwondo.” There was a rather pregnant pause after an attempted explanation that taekwondo was a Korean art and that we were going to demonstrate a Japanese art. “What’s the difference?” he asked. It was explained that while both employed kicks, punches and strikes, the two originated under different circumstances and, as a consequence, were not exactly alike.

The practice of kata must be taken seriously. True kata performed correctly is kata performed realistically. One must practice kata as though the threat of danger is always there. Once you have practiced long enough, then there is no longer a question; the enemy is always there. Kata trains the mind to look first at what is advancing and respond with the training that has now become subconscious. When someone observes an old sensei, someone who has been practicing kata for many years, they know the practitioner is visualizing many attackers coming at him. Properly done, kata will make the hair on your arms stand up on end.

Kata demonstrates dedication to the martial arts and dedication to kata means seriousness. Kata demonstrates the ability and character to stick to something you said you were going to do, long after the mood you said it in has left you.

The day after our demonstration, which consisted of only kata and the bunkai

to one of the katas, the curator called me to complain that our demonstration was far too violent for young children to watch. He then inquired as to why we did not use pads on our hands and feet. I told him that we do not practice our art that way and, as he surely noticed, not one punch or kick actually touched a demonstrator. “Yes”, he replied, “but if one had then someone would have been injured.” “What do you think karate is all about?” I asked. He said “Obviously I thought I knew, but if your school was demonstrating karate, then I did not have a clue. My son only plays karate, and if I thought he could get hurt doing it I would stop the lessons at once.” I suspect this to be the feeling of a lot of parents, because they have been introduced only to the watered down version of the art and not the real thing.

Over the years Craig Sensei attended many karate tournaments, originally as a participant in the kumite and later as the coach of my students or a judge. Over these years, the divergence between the karate as he was taught it (and teach it) and the karate that was being demonstrated became more and more pronounced. This was particularly true in the kata competition. Silly gyrations in colorful costumes set to music bearing no relationship to the series of interwoven, battle-tested techniques that constituted the traditional katas. They appeared to be “mix and match” products of various systems that ended up as an illogical mess based, it would appear, on the mistaken belief that the mixture would produce an end result that was greater than the sum of its parts. It was a sad illustration of a worthy tradition and centuries of painstaking effort being discarded in favor of the novel, the cutting edge, or the worthless.

To be effective, kata training must employ sound, basic techniques combined with advanced combinations that, with proper instruction, the student can eventually understand. Only then will the student be able to defend himself using the techniques found in the kata. The arm-waving, high kicking and other acrobatic foolishness that characterizes modern kata are utterly impractical. The answer continues to lie in the study and practice of the traditional katas. They are boring to the modern student, raised in an age of instant gratification. To the modern student, the traditional katas are not at all what they see in the movies; the katas seem to be just a bunch of down blocks, middle blocks, kicks and lunge punches. The average student will perform these moves hundreds of times and never realize, perhaps because his instructor does not know, the devastating bunkai that just a slight variation of these moves will produce. For example, the average student today does not know the meaning of the statement that “the block is one half of the punch.” What it means, and what he would know if he trained under a traditional sensei, is that the block and the punch are inseparable; they are not two separate moves even when performed with the same arm. This means that, in most cases, there is no need to step forward to punch; you block the attack with the forearm and punch with the fist simultaneously.

Frequently at these tournaments I was asked to judge kata. This was very difficult for me because I did not know how to judge the performance of a routine I considered meaningless. I was not alone in this. At one tournament I was talking to an old friend of mine, a man who had grown up in a traditional kung fu environment and was, himself, a teacher of many decades experience. He watched the kata participants and then turned to me and said, “That must be one of your students.” I was dumbfounded. It was one of my students, but he had never met him. “How did you know?” I inquired. “Because he is the only one doing a kata that I can understand,” was his reply.

Rather than practicing and studying kata for actual functional purposes, too many of today’s students do only do kata. They practice only for self-expression, or, stated another way, to “look good.” Kata cannot be viewed as a “doing” exercise; it must be viewed as a “using” experience. By this I mean that the student, when performing the various techniques contained in the kata, must employ visualization against an imagined attacker. If, for example, the first move of the particular kata is a middle block followed by a lunge punch, the student must try to visualize the exact angle of the punch that the middle block will deflect. He must try to visualize the exact body position of his attacker. This will enable him to visualize the correct ma-ai for his lunge punch as well as visualize the punch hitting the desired vulnerable point on his attacker. Exhibition kata is largely a “doing” exercise. On the other hand, kata performed as a “using” experience is an appraisal tool. If a technique contained in the kata has failed to produce the desired results against an opponent in kumite, careful study of the kata will, in many cases, reveal to the observant student the reason for the failure.

From what I have said, it follows that, in order to do traditional kata correctly, the student must understand the inherent bunkai. This is not to say that the bunkai is revealed when the kata is demonstrated; the whole purpose of the kata in the first instance was to preserve the bunkai in a hidden fashion. But the student must at least know the bunkai. Only from a sensei, who knows and who has a desire to teach the hidden bunkai, will a karateka achieve progress on his road to perfection.

Even though we are now in the twenty-first century, we believe that there are still many people who would like to excel in the martial arts for their original purpose: self-defense and self-improvement. However, when many of today’s students begin their martial arts training, they quickly become mesmerized by the “belt chase.” That is, to achieve the first, and then the next and finally the black belt. Belts—and particularly the black belt—are seen as the ultimate goal and purpose of the study. This is wrong. Students should be made aware of a higher calling. They should use their training to mold their own characters and become better persons. The opponent we should all seek to defeat is within ourselves. Every traditional karate kata begins with a defensive move and in this it is revealed