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# KATA AND THE TRANSMISSION OF KNOWLEDGE

IN TRADITIONAL  
MARTIAL ARTS



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Editor: Jared Wolk  
Cover design: Richard Rossiter  
Cover photo: Inmagine  
Illustrations by the author / enhancements by Ariana Berns

ISBN:1-59439-026-6

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

**Publisher's Cataloging in Publication**

Rosenbaum, Michael, 1961

Kata and the transmission of knowledge in traditio  
Michael Rosenbaum. 1st ed. Boston, Mass. : YMAA Publ  
Center, 2004.

p. ; cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.  
ISBN: 59439-026-6 (pbk.)

1. Martial art. ~~Marzial art~~ History. Military art and  
science. Title.

GV1101 .R67 2004  
796.815dc22

2004114870  
0410

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Printed in Canada.

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## What's Kata Got To Do With Anything?

The processes of change have been so great during the past few decades that in many ways they threaten to leave us poorer instead of richer so far as our knowledge of traditional institutions is concerned.

-Donn F. Draeger

The young man shifts gears with one hand, and steers with the other, weaving his car in and out of the rush hour traffic. On his shoulder rests a cell phone pressed tightly into his ear. "Yes Mom," he says with a sarcastic tone. "I'll be home right after class and I'll take the garbage out then." "School? What about school? Oh, it went fine today," He replies to his mother. "Just one more exam then I start preparing for the SAT." They continue talking while he downshifts, then accelerates, as if at the LeMans. The car engine whines a high-pitched squeal as the RPM's increase. Eventually the conversation ends with him promising to be home in time to finish his schoolwork, something he has been neglecting these past few months. On the radio a favorite song is being played and he turns up the volume. A heavy bass beat roars from the large speakers that are mounted where the car's back seat once was. Not only is it deafening to him but also to the people in adjacent cars. "Get a life," he laughs, as people cast hard stares in his direction, some because of his poor driving skills, others from the deafening roar that comes from the car. Down shifting into second gear, he turns into a mall parking lot. Slowly making his way over the speed bumps he finds a empty spot and parks. Getting out he grabs a gym bag and then locks the car with its remote, being careful to place his cell phone within the bag, next to his karate *gi*. Walking through the parking lot, the day's events come to mind, two early classes then back to the house for an "on-line" internet *kobudo* class. So far, it had gone well and in a couple more sessions he would have his black belt in *kobudo*, via the wonders of the world wide web. He wasn't sure if he liked the virtual reality approach better than the video black belt course he had taken last year. Both were expensive but he

was learning more katas, and gaining rank in other systems, and that's what was most important. Although he had only been practicing for three years it was quite possible that by the time he turned 19 he would have black belts in two different systems and possibly six more katas through video and on-line learning. It was even possible that he might hold a master's rank by his 26th birthday.

Stopping in front of the karate school he looked up at its sign, where a samurai warrior stood in full battle dress holding a long sword in one hand and a *sai* in the other. In big gold letters was his instructor's full Anglo-Saxon name followed by "School of Bujutsu Karate-Do." His master, or *O'Sensei* as he was also called, had explained to him two years ago that this was a modern form of *bujutsu* one that had been founded on the various styles the master had studied. *Tae kwon do*, American and Okinawan karate, *ninjutsu*, several styles of Japanese sword fighting and even elements of *taijiquan* had all been woven together to form what O'Sensei had said was the most efficient martial art that had ever been created. Even though his master had only founded this system four years ago, it was still exciting to be studying a 'traditional martial art'. Inside the *dojo* he stepped onto the carpeted floor upon which sat various exercise machines and on the walls hung televisions playing the latest videos of his master performing techniques. Off to one side a student practiced one of the system's kata. Bowing in a very solemn manner, the young lady who was dressed in a bright red *gi*, slowly drew a samurai sword and assumed a ready stance. Then in quick succession, she executed three, crisp spinning heel kicks followed by a figure-eight twirling cut with the sword. Not bad, he thought, not bad at all but still room for improvement with those kicks. Looking about once more he walked towards the dressing room. In a few minutes, the kickboxercise class would end and then his sparring class would begin.

**Time and Tradition.** With the passing of time, our interpretation of specific rituals, traditions, rites, and even the words we speak, will differ from the custom's original implications. Take for instance the word "Spartan." When we use this word today it

is done so to either describe severe conditions, or to portray someone who leads a very frugal lifestyle. However, in ancient Greece, the Spartans were one of the most respected and feared warrior societies. Theirs was a martial culture in its truest sense, a place where boys from the time of birth were trained to be warriors. It was a culture that frowned upon frivolous activities; instead it placed much value upon courage, physical prowess, and self-discipline. Today however, both our knowledge and understanding of life in ancient Greece has diminished and the traits of Spartan society with which we associate the word “Spartan” are not synonymous with the warrior culture itself. This misunderstanding also occurs with cultural traditions, especially ones that have been embedded in a society for so long that their purpose is forgotten. In such instances, cultural traditions can be considered obsolete or nothing more than folklore, when in fact their roles are vital, even if they are not recognized.

The roles that tradition plays in our lives are important. Often they are the basis for preserving our society’s history and religious beliefs; and even our own identities which often rest upon long standing myths, customs, and traditions. As noted author of comparative mythology, Joseph Campbell once said, “Throughout the inhabited world, in all times and under every circumstance, the myths of man have flourished; and they have been the living inspiration of whatever else may have appeared out of the activities of the human mind and body.” (Campbell, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, 3) A prime example of this would be the teachings of the Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, and Islamic faiths. Were it not for their long established myths, traditions, and rituals—many that are thousands of years old—it would prove almost impossible to pass religious teachings from one generation to the next.

To study the traditions of the combative arts is to understand the circumstances of their development. By understanding the process that gives birth to a system, you also gain insights into the worldviews and ethics that were prevalent during its development. The worldviews and practices of the traditional martial artist often contrast greatly to our current views and practices.

Today many people enjoy the sport of fencing but the contemporary fencer's worldviews are quite different than those of his or her seventeenth century counterpart. For modern day fencers, the idea of being killed in a 'duel of swords' is not very probable. But for those who practiced the noble art of defense some 400 years ago it was a very real and likely possibility.

The circumstances, cultural values and ethics that give rise to a combative system reach to its very core. From the weapons used, to the clothes worn by a society, they all affect a fighting arts development. Likewise the pre-arranged training routines associated with a system are also influenced by the same. In his examination of the South Indian martial art of *kalarippayattu*, Phillip B. Zarrilli said, "Because practices are not things, but an active, embodied doing, they are intersections where personal, social and cosmological experiences and realities are negotiated. To examine a practice is to examine these multiple sets or relationships and experiences. A practice is not a history, but practices always exist within and simultaneously create histories. Likewise, a practice is not a discourse, but implicit in any practice are one or more discourses and perhaps paradigms through which the practice might be reflected upon and possibly explained." (Zarrilli, *When the Body Becomes All Eyes*, 5) Zarrilli's observation is one that also proves true for pre-arranged training sequences or katas, as they are often known. Kata is a practice in which the personal, social, cosmological and realities of the age intersect and then are negotiated. Many of these early "experiences" that Mr. Zarrilli, wrote about, still influence the practice of kata and the fighting arts today. *Taijiquan* retains its identity in Daoist influences; likewise Okinawan karate has its own martial identity due to the cultural circumstances that it evolved from. This evolutionary process applies not to just a handful of fighting arts and their kata but to all styles and systems.

The basic goal of pre-arranged training is to preserve and transmit proven techniques; this remains consistent no matter what the system or style. By practicing in a repetitive manner, the fighter develops biomechanical responses that enable him or her to execute those techniques and movements in a natural reflex





JUDO

like manner. The boxer who executes a jab, uppercut, right-cross combination over and over again is trying to attain the same thing as the Okinawan karate-ka who performs *Seisan* kata ten times each day. The ultimate goal is to internalize the movements and techniques of each pre-arranged sequence (kata) so that they can be executed under almost any circumstance, without thought or hesitation. This process elucidates deeper realms of application and of learning. Donn F. Draeger wrote about the importance of pre-arranged training in relation to judo:

Inherent in each technique of kata are “lessons” essential to an understanding of that technique, basic and variation factors, which enhance the polished performance of the technique for randori and shiai. In direct practical terms for training, this means that kata can teach the reasons why a technique will succeed or fail in randori or shiai application. However, in order to be able to find those “lessons” in the kata, the Judoka must have developed his kata out of the “doing” stage into the “using” stage.

—(Draeger, *Randori No Kata*, 25)

The process of development to which Draeger refers is not one in which the kata is placed upon a pedestal for all to be admired, but instead one in which it is picked apart, technique by technique, until each one can be used by the fighter. Once this happens, the pre-arranged pattern becomes second nature. As the great Chinese writer Chuang Tzu once said,

The fish trap exists because of the fish; once you've gotten the fish you can forget the trap. The rabbit snare exists because of the rabbit; once you've gotten the rabbit, you can forget the snare. Words exist because of meaning; once you've gotten the meaning, you can forget the words. Where can I find a man who has forgotten words so I can have a word with him?

—(Chuang Tzu, 140)

Like the fish or rabbit trap, kata exists because of combat. Once its lessons were recorded and then understood, the form was set-aside so that the “meanings” Chuang Tzu wrote of would become clear.

Although “kata” is a term used often by modern martial artists to describe pre-arranged sequences of techniques, the word is a by-product of the Asian fighting arts. In actuality, the practice of combative techniques in pre-arranged forms is a methodology that has been used by many cultures throughout history, from the Roman soldier whose drills taught striking with the shield and then stabbing with his *gladius*, to modern-day karate-ka whose kata is executed so crisply in their starched white *gi*. The use of kata or pre-arranged training routines is a long standing tradition that has been employed in most fighting arts in some form or fashion. Even in those societies whose combative systems may not have been subject to the same systematic methodologies, as is found within many Asian and European fighting arts, some means were used to preserve and to transmit martial knowledge. In some cases transmission of techniques was accomplished in a highly organized manner as during the Renaissance of Europe when mathematics, the printing press, and codified techniques all came together to present a highly scientific—and at times overly

analytical—analysis of the fighting arts. Yet on other occasions, the transmission of technique has been accomplished in less formal, but still eloquent means. Thomas Arnold observed about the Swiss and their martial arts that,

This was an important development, for though the Swiss and the landsknechts certainly possessed elaborate, sophisticated and effective tactics, they apparently had almost nothing in the way of written drill. Theirs was a culture of war, not a science—it was taught by old soldier to new, and never was really codified or regularized.”

—(Arnold, *The Renaissance at War*, 64)

In each case the intent was almost the same: to preserve and pass on knowledge of battle-proven techniques, that could be used at a later date when the need warranted.<sup>1</sup> These routines of transmission also allowed the man-of-arms to practice certain techniques in a repetitive manner. This allowed him to perfect skills and gain artistry that made the execution of his techniques nearly as natural as walking down a city street.

Kata and pre-arranged training routines were not the only methods used to transmit and preserve martial knowledge. Dance, poetry, and written texts were used extensively to record historical events and preserve knowledge related to a society, its existence, and its martial prowess. In the early English epic *Beowulf*, the poem opens with mention of the “Spear Danes” and that “the kings who ruled them had courage and greatness.” (Heaney, *Beowulf, a New Translation*, 3) *Beowulf* is not the only poetical verse that tells of a culture’s martial prowess. Homer’s *Iliad* is filled with passages that detail combat of the early Greek society and shows us that the development of sophisticated fighting arts by mankind is a very old practice. Dance was another medium used to practice and record martial knowledge. Both the Zulu tribes of Africa and early Filipino martial artists used dance to transmit techniques and even train warriors. The use of written text has also played an important role in spreading knowledge of the martial arts. In Europe during the Renaissance period the printing press proved to be of great value in the production

and distribution of fighting arts manuals.

To study the history of kata and pre-arranged routines is to also explore methods of communication, as they went hand in hand with the practice of pre-arranged practice patterns. In fact, the same creative process that was used to develop dance, writing and poetry was also used to create kata. Just as physical shape and form is given to what were often ideals of an abstract nature, kata embodies the essence of the arts of war. It allowed man to identify, segment, practice, and then transmit concepts and techniques that otherwise would be lost in the chaotic realm of hand-to-hand combat. As Joseph Campbell said about man's ability to give physical shape to such ideas, removing them from an abstract process and thereby giving both form and meaning to the process itself, "The craft holds the artist to the world, whereas the mystic, facing inward, may be carried to such an extreme posture of indifference to the claims of phenomenal life as that of the old yogi with his parasol of grass in the Hindu exemplary tale, 'The Humbling of Indra'" (Campbell, *The Inner Reaches of Outer Space*, 89) For the fighting arts practitioner, kata or pre-arranged training routines are the bonds that holds them to this world. They are the physical manifestation of the fighting arts. Without them, and the techniques of which they are comprised, we have nothing but theory.

For the pre-modern or classical martial artist, kata practice was not just an empty routine performed for aesthetically appealing reasons. It was instead a complicated training ritual used to instill martial behavioral patterns and responses that were critical to their survival. Kata and the use of pre-arranged routines, allowed the classical martial artist to preserve techniques and behaviors that had proven successful in mortal combat. They were the "craft," that Joseph Campbell spoke of that provided the warrior with a rationalized means to examine the battlefields chaotic realm and then perfect ways to survive on it. Dr. Karl Friday said about the influence of Confucianism on Japanese martial arts and their own use of kata that:

This infatuation is predicated on the conviction that man fashions the conceptual frameworks he uses to

order-and thereby comprehend-the chaos of raw experience through action and practice. One might describe, explain, or even defend one's perspectives by means of analysis and rational argument, but one cannot acquire them in this way. Ritual is stylized action, sequentially structured experience that leads those who follow it to wisdom and understanding.”  
—(Friday, *Legacies of the Sword*, 105)

The “ritual and sequentially structured experience” that Dr. Friday speaks of can be found within all methods of pre-arranged training to one degree or another.

As cultures progressed from tribal societies to city-states and then into nations, so too did their fighting arts advance in sophistication. The early Japanese were a tribal culture composed of hunters and fishermen but by the fourteenth century they had become an advanced civilization with a very sophisticated means of waging war. As the warrior increased his stature in society with his skill of arms, so did the technical aspects of his fighting arts. In keeping with this advance in “technical aspects,” the sophistication of the kata and pre-arranged training patterns used within his fighting arts increased until the realms found within them went beyond the physical to include the development of his ethos and spirituality. The kata became, for not only the Japanese but also other martial cultures, a metaphor for something higher than just combative applications. It was a medium in which the spiritual and combative realms interacted as equals, two halves of a whole, that went hand-in-hand with one another, symbolic of something deeper than just a series of physical movements. It was inspired by warfare but drawn from man's creative conscious and in doing so encompassed both brutality and creativity, which stood side-by-side within his kata. Noted scholar of religious studies Karen Armstrong observed about man's creative imagination and its penchant for symbolism that,

A symbol can be defined as an object or a notion that we can perceive with our senses or grasp with our minds but in which we see something other than itself. Reason alone will not enable us to perceive the

special, the universal or the eternal in a particular, temporal object. This is the task of the creative imagination, to which mystics, like artists attribute their insights.”

—(Armstrong, *A History of God*, 234)

Like the mystics and artists, many warriors who performed kata began to see something of a universal nature in it. Kata became a metaphor that encompassed the duality of life and death, it reflected the transience of man and by doing so the practice became a means through which man could prepare himself for the cycle of mortality—a cycle that was often very brief for those warriors of the pre-modern era.

**Pre-Modern Martial Arts.** What are pre-modern martial arts? I use this term to describe those methods used extensively before firearms became the dominating force both on and off the battlefield. In categorizing man’s fighting arts there are three distinct periods that can be identified, they are; *ancient*, *classical*, and *modern*.<sup>ii</sup> *Ancient fighting arts* are those that evolved when primitive man first took a stone in his hand and used it as a weapon/tool through 1400 B.C. This is the time that bronze body armor began to be worn in Mycenae cultures as well as the employment of specifically designed weapons such as the long sword, rapier, and spear. The era of the *classical fighting arts*, those systems that evolved from and ultimately took the place of the ancient methods, can be categorized between 1400 B.C. until the turn of the nineteenth century. R. Ewart Oakeshott once wrote about the sword that, “Underlying all or any tactics of battle is one basic art which for nearly 3000 years remained unchanged, in spite of chariot or war-horse, long-bow or cannon or musket—the art of hand-to-hand combat with sword and shield.” (Oakeshott, *The Archaeology of Weapons Arms and Armor*, 24) And with Mr. Oakeshott’s passage in mind we will define the boundaries of the classical era. Both the Ancient and Classical systems, for this book’s purpose, are to be considered “pre-modern” martial arts.

With the dawn of the industrialized age and modern society’s birth, many of the pre-modern martial arts were lost due to the

widespread use of firearms on the battlefield. Some were preserved, while at the same time modern systems were born taking the place of those classical methods that were lost and forgotten. Just as the classical systems and their katas were intersections for the customs, personal, social and cosmological experiences of their era, so too are the *modern fighting arts* intersections for their time and place in history. Some of these modern systems maintain a lineage to those classical arts before them, while others do not. Just as it was with the pre-modern systems, transmission of technique in modern methods is done through the use of kata and pre-arranged training forms. The practice of modern fighting arts and their kata however, differs greatly from those used prior to the nineteenth century. This is partly because the real threat of hand-to-hand combat no longer resonates as strongly upon the fighting arts. In examining the use of cut and thrust techniques with the sword, noted author J. Christoph Amberger presented the theory that with the sword's decline in use as an antagonistic weapon during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many people came to speculate about the most effective way to strike with the sword—cut or thrust? These speculations and their resulting conclusion, that the thrust was the better of the two methods, likely was not constructed in the heat of battle but from the comfort of the dining room, or in the academy under ideal circumstances where little or no danger was involved. Amberger wrote about this modern process and its lack of a realistic environment that,

“This now commonly accepted thesis, however, has a terminal flaw: Fighters in antagonistic combat scenarios do not use definitions to dispatch each other. They use tools specifically designed for narrowly-defined purposes to achieve specific objectives against a human opponent's psyche and physiology—an opponent whose actions and motivations are often unpredictable, erratic, uncontrollable because of competing instincts, emotions, and psychological pressures.”

—(Amberger, *Hammerterz Forum*, Summer, 1997)

The same applies to modern methods of pugilism; firearms have become to our society what the sword, *naginata*, karate, kung fu and many other methods of hand-to-hand combat once were. And with the gun achieving such a dominate role in today's society, our assessments and conclusions about the conduct of hand-to-hand combat often becomes based upon theories or on the popularity of combative sports such as Judo, tournament karate, UFC etc., not the realistic environment of the battlefield, duel, or roadside ambush.

Today the circumstances, traditions and realities that brought forth the development of pre-modern martial arts systems and their training patterns are often forgotten, or reinvented such that they bear little or no resemblance to their original predecessors. When the words "kata" or "form" are spoken today quite often an image comes forth of a karate-ka dressed in a white *gi* executing crisp movements in a tournament. Yet for the pre-modern man-of-arms, his forms may have been something as simple as two or three techniques executed in a sequential pattern or performed in a more fluid but still organized manner. Systematic practice does not mean rigid; freedom of expression and application has always been a hallmark of the successful fighter. With these modern misconceptions it has become almost "en vogue" to devalue the classical martial arts. This misconception stems from the rational that these traditional methods and their "kata" have not kept up with the trends of today's fighters. There is also the argument that traditional combative systems have become obsolete due to the development of what are deemed 'new and improved' methods of hand-to-hand fighting, which supposedly serve contemporary man better than those of earlier times. With the changing face of warfare, evolution is commonplace within combative systems, but the popular belief that many of the pre-modern, or traditional martial arts, have become obsolete is often based upon a lack of understanding rather than on the fighting arts themselves. Today's full contact ring is a far cry from the battlefield upon which the medieval knight, Greek hoplite, or Japanese samurai fought and died. Such assumptions fail to consider that during the battle of



Cannae in 216 B.C. over 48,000 Roman soldiers were killed in a few hours during a battle that was conducted with sword, spear, and shield. Just one example of many such battles fought long before *modern fighting arts* came to be. The man-of-arms who fought on these early battlefields, be he Japanese samurai, Roman legion, Germanic tribesman, Mongol horseman, or many others like them, was well versed in the use of sword, spear, bow, knife and empty-handed forms of fighting. This was not an option for him but a prerequisite for his survival.

It was Socrates who said, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” His statement also applies to the *modern fighting arts* and the position that kata holds within their practice. The purpose of this book is to develop an understanding of just why these rituals were used for so long in the *classical fighting arts* and just how we can benefit from them today. To do so is to study not only the history of kata training but to also explore the circumstances that gave rise to the martial arts in which they were used. It is only by understanding the process of change and evolution that affects the martial arts that we can begin to see our current practice in a clearer light and achieve a balance between past and present. To value tradition is to understand history. However, to ignore it, is to lead the “unexamined life” which Socrates spoke of, the one not worth living.



## Foreword

Eastern martial arts have blossomed in the West over the past fifty years, and are practiced today for a variety of reasons including sport, civilian self-defense and even mystical fulfillment. Despite their popularity, there is little appreciation in the popular mind—and even amongst practitioners—of their origin in military and civilian forms of mortal combat, and of the existence of Western martial arts, the historical record of which is only awaiting recognition.

While it is both inevitable and wholly appropriate that the imperatives of our own age should color the practice of martial arts, our enjoyment of them can only be enriched by a better understanding of their historical origin and purpose. As a former paratrooper, a karate instructor, and a student of history, Michael Rosenbaum is well-equipped to pursue such an understanding.

Delving more deeply than the average writer on martial artists, and ranging more widely than the fragmented historical specialisms of academia, the author achieves a holistic perspective that restores martial arts to the field of military science, and shows how their development was functionally driven by the need to triumph and survive in a world much harsher than our own.

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## CHAPTER 1

# Traditional Martial Arts



But their real solution was war...

—Ernle Bradford

When we use the word “traditional” today it usually denotes an Asian fighting art whose lineage and teachings have been passed down from the systems founder to its present day instructors. However by using “traditional” in this manner the effect that time has on our reasons for practicing a fighting art is not recognized. *Aikido* is a traditional fighting art, but there is a vast difference between “traditional *aikido*” and the *Koryu bujutsu*, which are the “traditional martial arts” of Japan. *Aikido* is a system that was born in the early twentieth century, and although it does have combative elements within its teachings, they are very different than those found within the *Koryu bujutsu*. This is because the *Koryu* practitioners of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries made extensive use of weaponry, wore armor, and fought on battlefields where there was uneven terrain. In contrast, today’s *aikido* student practices on a level floor in a *dojo* without armor, wearing only a *gi* and *hakama*. Although both are

traditional systems that were born in the same culture, *aikido* is a modern fighting art, developed in a day and age when firearms had become the dominating weapon of the battlefield. The *Koryu* by contrast are pre-modern martial arts, which were employed before firearms were the main weapons on the battlefield. Therefore the mindset, ethos, kata, and techniques of the two differ in so much as do the times in which they were developed and the manner in which warfare was conducted. Furthermore, since each system was developed in a different era, they held different roles in their respective ages.<sup>iii</sup> The *Koryu* were used as extensions of the state's power to further political agendas and occupy territory by means of warfare. They were designed by warriors for warriors. *Aikido*, although it does contain combative techniques, is a system used as a means for spiritual development, self-defense, and physical fitness. It was designed by civilians for civilians, and was not intended for use on the field of battle.

In defining the term “martial arts” the late Donn Draeger stated that:

Genuine martial arts are always designed and practiced as weapons arts; any portion of training regimens devoted to “unarmed” combat is always, at the very best, secondary in nature and based, paradoxically enough, upon the use of weapons. Moreover, martial arts are primarily designed to operate on natural terrain and under any climatic conditions. Martial arts are also, carefully designed with the concept that combatants will normally wear armor, howsoever sparingly the protective devices worn may be. Another feature unique to martial arts is that they are composed of a wide range of weapons skills and do not permit specialization in a single weapon.

—(Draeger, *Hoplos* Vol.3, No.1 Feb 1981)

Just as with our use of the word “traditional,” our modern definition of martial arts differs greatly from Mr. Draeger's. More often than not when used today, the term “martial arts” is to describe Asian fighting arts like karate, *aikido*, or judo that became popular with the masses (i.e. went mainstream) during

## CHAPTER 2

# Inspiration and Transmission of the Warrior's Way



The method of back-sword play was handed down by a succession of professors, who learned it partly by rote, but mostly by practical experience (for of books there were very few indeed), and down to the end of the eighteenth century there were practically no changes in it.

—Alfred Hutton

Knowledge is power; this has never been as true as it is within the ranks of the warrior. The means to communicate and transmit knowledge has often been a deciding factor in the course of history. When the Spaniards came to the New World, written accounts of Columbus's expeditions and Cortez's conquering of Mexico spurred others to follow in their paths. Likewise, the ability to communicate through written word helped the Spaniards greatly in defeating the Inca Empire. The Incas had no literary tradition in their society as did the Spaniards; they knew nothing about the Spaniards or their intentions. Unlike the Spaniards, who did have such traditions, which

gave them great insight into not only history, but also a long example of combative behavior and tactics that had been proven through the course of many wars. They used this with great effect to defeat the Incas. At the battle of Cajamarca, Peru in 1532, a force of Spaniards numbering less than 200 men defeated an Inca army numbering close to 80,000 without the loss of one Conquistador. (Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel*, 75-80)

## **2-1 POETRY, ZEN, AND THE WARRIOR'S ETHOS**

Aside from the transmission of knowledge pertaining to techniques and tactics, literary traditions have aided the warrior in preparing themselves mentally for battle by helping induce mental states through rhythmic chants and symbolic meanings that were attached to certain letters, phrases, and passages. While discussing the use of *mudras* and *mantras*<sup>sv</sup> in 'Japanese Bujutsu', David A. Hall stated that,

Hand-to-hand combat anywhere in the world requires a strong will. If a participant in a battle had performed a ritual that makes him psychologically stronger (i.e., more confident in himself and his fighting ability), he will be a more formidable opponent to face. One example of this is the use of the kuji (nine mystic letters) and the juji (ten mystic letters) by such traditions as the Katori Shinto Ryu. By inscribing the proper ideographic character upon one's hands, weapons and so on, protection of various types may be obtained.

—(Hall, *Hoplos*, Nov. 1979 Vol. 1, No. 6)

This tradition, however, was not only found within Asian cultures but also European martial traditions. Many old English poems have their roots in the German heroic traditions where legends that were handed down orally were also used in a martial context. Often the poems would tell of an ancient hero's exploits on the battlefield and would serve as an example of the warrior's courage and martial prowess.

Thor was one of the early Germanic hero-gods and it was common for Germanic warriors to march off to battle singing war songs about him. Just prior to the start of battle, they would



### CHAPTER 3

## The Spur of Development: Combat



When war is reduced to its simplest elements, we find that there are only two ways in which an enemy can be met and defeated. Either the shock or the missile must be employed against him.

—Sir Charles Oman, 1885

Although martial arts originated from the intersection between war and creativity, it was on the field of battle that the birth of kata took place. The catalog of battle-tested techniques was made out of necessity. Sir Richard Burton stated about their relationships that, “Painting and sculpture were the few simple lines drawn and cut upon the tomahawk or other rude weapon-tool. ‘As men think and live so they built,’ said Herder; and the architecture, which presently came to embrace all other arts, dawned when the Savage attempted to defend and to adorn his roost among the tree branches or the entrance to his cave den.”

(Burton, *Book of the Sword*,15) As he learned to transmit and preserve other knowledge, early man realized that the same had to be done with techniques and tactics that had proven themselves effective during the hunt or on the field of battle. He began to record specific techniques in pre-arranged sequences. These proved to be very effective in preserving and transmitting of combative techniques and would later be the foundation on which many martial systems would be built.

Man's earliest attempts at creating training patterns and codifying prescribed techniques were no doubt very rudimentary, like his early poetry. However, as time passed and his martial skills grew in sophistication, so did his kata. There were many factors that contributed to this process and not all of them had the same intent. Although combat is the spur of development for both the fighting arts and their kata, combat varies according to the social, geographical, political, and cultural forces at work. For the sixteenth century knight, the idea of kicking their opponent in the face as a means of fighting wasn't contemplated. This is because of their social attitudes and the fact that they were armed with a sword most of the time. There was no need to kick an opponent because a sword was a more effective means of disposal, not to mention the fact that they wore armor during battle, that would have prohibited them from executing such a technique. For the eighteenth century Frenchman engaged in a duel, thrusting one's *epee* into an antagonist's chest was proper form; yet had the same technique and weapon been used two hundred years earlier, it would have had little or no effect. This is because the sixteenth century knight fought his battles dressed from head to foot in body armor, and a mere thrust executed with a light *epee* would not have penetrated his chest piece. However, for the eighteenth century *capoeira* player living in Rio de Janeiro, the idea of kicking their opponent in the head was perfectly acceptable and an often performed technique. The *capoeira* player was not allowed to carry a sword, therefore, he relied heavily upon his hands and feet for defense. The premodern man-of-arms used a wide variety of weapons under different circumstances.

Differences in the social, geographical, cultural, and historical

### **3-1 MILITARY SYSTEMS**

Much of how a society's art of war evolved is due to its interaction with other cultures; hence, it can be stated that advanced societies also have advanced martial arts.

Arms and armor have always played a major role in battle-field combat, and as societies advanced so did their weaponry. Our Paleolithic and Neolithic forefathers made use of sticks and rocks for weapons, the hand-stone being the preferred weapon of choice. Flint, which is easy to chip into a sharpened edge, was one of the most sought-after materials for making weapons. Man's first attempts to make weaponry were not for warfare, but to defend himself against the wild animals who hunted him or for killing game for food. As time passed and mankind's means to produce arms advanced, he developed more sophisticated weapons such as spears, axes, and knives, which often were manufactured from flint or stone. During pre-historic times man realized that there was greater power in numbers, consequently he began to band together into tribal societies. This led to the development of agricultural techniques, the clearing of land, the building of roads, stone structures, monuments and temples, as well as trade between different tribes. With this breakup into groups there also came disputes over territory, crops, water and other matters crucial to survival. It was not long after before warfare came into being and man began using his hunting weapons to fight other humans.

Warfare was initially a crude affair with two opposing tribes facing off in battlelines tossing spears and rocks, shooting arrows at one another, and exchanging shouts and insults. Some tribe members would become brave enough to cross the no-mans land separating the two sides in an attempt to thrust their wooden spear into the belly of a foe. Usually these ritualized wars would last for a few hours, or until sunset, then both parties would leave the field, often without a clear resolution.

Man's ability to produce food enabled him to plant and harvest crops. He was able to store surplus food and in doing so took up permanent residence on the land he farmed. This led to organized societies with structured levels of government and an easier



SPEARS FROM THREE CULTURES—SWISS FIFTEENTH CENTURY PIKE, MASAI SPEAR HEAD, JAPANESE WINGED SPEAR

**Clubs.** Perhaps one of the oldest, yet easiest pole-arms to wield is the club. Man's first pole-arm and the easiest to manufacture, the club has a long and distinguished history in the fighting arts of many cultures. From the Native Americans to the Maoris of New Zealand, and both the European and Asian martial arts, clubs have been used on the battlefield and have had codified techniques established for their use. During the fifteenth century in Europe, war clubs and maces took on stylistic designs; they were often adorned in much the same finery as swords. The shafts of maces and war clubs were made from either wood or metal, and in the hands of a skilled warrior proved to be very deadly weapons. The length of these weapons often depended upon the user's own taste. Some could be three feet or less, while others could range up to six feet or more. In some instances where the weapon was one of large frame, like the Japanese *tetsubo*, which was a large metal rod with spikes on its sides, it required a strong person due to its size and weight. These factors also limited its movement patterns. Therefore, timing became critical in the employment of the weapon on the battlefield—its user had to know exactly when to strike, for if not executed properly the person wielding the *tetsubo* would be left with an opening in his defenses. In other instances such as with smaller maces, the weapon could be used by the average man-of-arms and

ations in the execution of combat, even when the use of cut and thrust weapons was at its prime. Hutton wrote of this when he penned, *The Small Sword is the Call of Honor, the Back Sword the Call of Duty*. (Hutton, *The Sword and the Centuries*, 286) Weapons and their respective systems are different; the backsword was intended for use on the battlefield where hacking and chopping actions were used often during melee combat. The thrust was used, but the warrior, more than likely, fought as he could, having no time to square off with an opponent; his terms of engagement often placed more emphasis on inflicting a mortal wound. Due to his realm of combat being filled with many armed opponents, therefore, the sequence of blocking or parrying with his sword, then following up with a riposte was abandoned in favor of covering with his shield and then counter attacking, or avoiding the enemy's attack and then countering.

Hutton's writing placed the small sword and its thrust squarely into the civilian's realm of fighting, a method absent of the battlefield, where body armor was not to be found. The division Hutton made between civilian weapons and those used on the field of battle is also found within systems related to civilian and military fighting arts, as well as the kata used within them. Just as Burton's statement reflected upon the differences found between his worldview and that of the Abyssinian warrior who used the *shotel*, there also was a division to be found between the civil and military fighting arts and the way they were conducted. Although there were murderous intentions associated with each system, the environments and methods associated with both forms of fighting differed. These differences greatly affected the goal of each system's techniques and how they were practiced.

### **3-2 CIVILIAN FIGHTING ARTS**

As we examined earlier, the term 'martial art' is used today in a very generic manner to describe any and all forms of fighting, particularly those of Asian traditions. This is not an altogether accurate use of the term; in fact it can be a very misleading one. Depending upon the time and culture, pre-modern civilian and military systems would differ not only in the environments that they were used, but also in their techniques, tactics, weapons,

and pre-arranged training sequences. The early *Okinawan* *te* practitioner might have spent hours perfecting his straight punch on a *mikawara* board. His knuckles needed toughening to ensure a better punch, and from his practice he not only achieved this goal, but he also developed a bio-mechanical response that was very crucial for the proper execution of his technique in the high stress atmosphere of combat. He trained himself to fight an opponent who recognized the same rules of engagement as he did, rules under which the use of empty-handed techniques was perfectly acceptable and on par with the society's customs, where unarmed fighting in the civil sectors was commonplace. In comparison to the Okinawan, the Japanese samurai would have perfected his sword skills. This is because unlike the Okinawan, he was in possession of a weapon, and the likelihood of the samurai engaging in an unarmed brawl, as the Okinawan would, was highly unlikely. If such an instance did arise, the samurai would merely have drawn his sword and cut down the would-be attacker. It was a distinct possibility that the Japanese martial artist would meet an armed foe, either in daily life or on the battlefield, therefore his fighting art was based on the use of weapons.

In his recollections of a lifetime spent studying karate, famed Okinawan Master Shoshin Nagamine wrote of his experiences of training with Motobu Choki, whose philosophy about the kata of Okinawan karate was as Nagamine recalled, "In his later years Motobu told me that the applications of kata have their limits and one must come to understand this. The techniques of kata were never developed to be used against a professional fighter, in an arena, or on a battlefield. They were, however, most effective against someone who had no idea of the strategy being used to counter their aggressive behavior." (Nagamine, *Okinawa's Masters*, 96) Likewise, Donn Draeger, in writing about the differences between civil and military systems stated that, "Many of the commonman's systems are basically unarmed methods for dealing with an adversary, for the good reason that his socially superior overlords proscribed the bearing of weapons to all but the elite, hereditarily legitimized, professional warrior class. Thus it was that in contradistinction to the aristocratic warriors and

their martial arts, plebeian man developed civil arts of defense.” (Draeger, *Martial Civil Dichotomy*, 7) Both statements provide much insight into the civil fighting arts and the development of their kata. This kind of system’s intended purpose was usually not for the battlefield, but as protection for daily life during which the civil practitioner did at times encounter trained men bent on harming him. In such cases, the civilian had no choice but to stand and fight. When this occurred, the civil practitioners often found themselves at a disadvantage because their weapons and systems of fighting were developed for self-protection, instead of battlefield combat.

At various times, and within certain cultures, the distinction between civil and military fighting arts is not so clear as is found between the Okinawan and Japanese fighting arts. For the Englishman of the sixteenth century, the two methods often went hand-in-hand and martial/civil fighting arts were practiced by a majority of the culture’s populace. Terry Brown wrote of the English martial arts that,

It is clear from these sources that martial arts have always been held dear by Englishmen, which is not surprising when one considers how frequently during its early history England was raided and invaded. With these facts in mind the passion of the English for martial arts can be seen as a zeal for their freedom and independence, though, like modern martial artists, they were also concerned for their personal safety because, in times past, England suffered levels of social violence that make modern society seem, by comparison, like Utopia.”

—(Brown, *English Martial Arts*, 14)

Many Englishmen of this time, both of the aristocratic and common class, carried weapons. It was in fact the commoner’s possession of arms that allowed him to have social and democratic rights, since the British government was afraid of armed rebellion. Since the populace as a whole was trained in the use of arms, when the army’s ranks needed to be filled for battle, it was the monarchs who turned to the British people. Although the fighting arts prac-

#### CHAPTER 4

## Kata, Metaphors, and Nuances



The battlefield is symbolic of the field of life, where every creature lives on the death of another.

—Joseph Campbell

Warfare is one of the most complex experiences that man endures, for within its realm there is violence, bloodshed, courage, honor, fear, and terror, as well as happiness and rejoicing. The act of fighting is in itself a mass of contradictions all of which make up the sum total of the fighting arts. However, to explore and understand this complex experience and all of its contradictions, it is necessary to bring some form to its chaos to separate the substance of fighting from its matter, for without substance there is only chaos and no way to understand or interpret the experience itself. In his long standing work, *The History of Western Philosophy* Bertrand Russell, while examining Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, made the observation about established forms and their relationship to mankind, that by creating form man is not giving birth to something new, for the elements of his creation already exist; he instead is merely giving substance and shape to an experience where there was none. To quote Mr. Russell, "The form of a thing, we are told, is its essence and pri-



mary substance. Forms are substantial, although universals are not. When a man makes a brazen sphere, both the matter and the form already existed and all that he does is to bring them together; the man does not make the form, any more than he makes the brass. Not everything has matter there are eternal things, and these have no matter, except those of them that are movable in space. Things increase in actuality by acquiring form; matter without form is only potentiality.” (Russell, *The History of Western Philosophy*, 166) While man does not create form because its elements are already present, he can give form where there is none and in doing so, bring together those elements that are of both a physical and non-physical nature. This he does with kata.

To give form means much more than arranging physical objects in a symmetrical pattern. Instead, to give form to something is to bring together elements of a physical and non-physical nature. For example, when artists create paintings, they do so with more than just brush strokes. The painting is a physical expression of creativity; it comprises many years spent training, the artist’s emotions, intellect, ideas, and ethics. When the painting is put on display and viewed by others, this wide range of physical and non-physical elements is brought together as a single entity, that is the painting itself.

This process of bringing form to man’s world is done through other mediums as well, such as poetry. The poem is an intersection of man’s creativity with the world in which he lives. The poem is a reflection of both his world and his views of the world, a reflection with an almost bottomless depth to it.

Likewise, the same holds true for the practice of kata. Man did not create kata per se, for its elements already existed. He instead gave form to the chaos of combat by bringing its various elements of both physical and non-physical nature together. In giving form to combat, he incorporated not only codified techniques, but also the warrior’s emotions, ethos, and worldviews. By doing so his kata increased in its actuality and potentiality, and just like poetry, art, and literature, kata came to embrace much more than just physically-based techniques. Kata, like poetry became a reflection of the world in which he lived.

#### **4-1 ESOTERIC REALMS**

Our modern world is interpreted through many things: logic, politics, religion, science, art, technology and even business. However, each one of these means of interpretation is a reflection of our current society and its morals and values. The world in which we live is seen largely through mechanistic and technological viewpoints that have come to influence our myths, religions, and philosophical thought. Unlike the fifteenth century man-of-arms who said his prayers or contemplated the meaning of a *mandala* before entering combat, modern day warriors may seek solace in prayer before battle, but their art of war is often conducted through the computer screen of an attack aircraft or scope of a high-powered rifle. These methods of fighting are different from those used by the samurai, mongol, or viking who fought hand-to-hand, close enough to smell his enemy and feel the warmth of his blood as it spattered forth from the stroke of a sword.

In our society today esoteric beliefs are often shunned because of the influence of Western logic resulting from industrialized and technological ways of thought. Today's logic differs considerably than what it originally entailed when Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and other great minds practiced it in classical Greece. Although our modern logic is one that debunks many ancient superstitions, at the same time it has a tendency to separate man from the human experience instead of helping him to understand it more completely. Our logic often reduces the human experience into equations and figures and leaves no room for the traditional realms of exploring man's humanity through myth, metaphor, poetry, literature, philosophy or even mysticism. Joseph Campbell wrote about the role played by myth in our modern world and how we now view it,

Whenever the poetry of myth is interpreted as biography, history or science, it is killed. The living images become only remote facts of a distant time or sky. Furthermore, it is never difficult to demonstrate that as science and history mythology is absurd. When a civilization begins to reinterpret its mytholo-

## 4-2 PHYSICAL METAPHORS

As a young karate-ka, I once had a *sensei* who told me that kata was the art of war. For several years I pondered this statement to no avail until I entered the military, and it was there that I began to understand what his words implied. His statement concerns not so much the kata employed on the battlefield, but instead that the use of the kata's techniques were accomplished with a specific strategy in mind. It was within the kata that the strategy could be found, where each technique was executed in a particular manner to allow for timing, distance, and rhythm, all of which were used to create openings in a foe's defense. Likewise, each technique could be used in either a defensive or an offensive mode. These same principles hold true for the infantry squad or rifle platoon, which can be used in an offensive or defensive mode. In the assault, distance and timing has to be taken into account to successfully engage the enemy. Attack too soon and your men will not be ready; attack too late and the enemy will be waiting for you. This applies to the battlefield where successful commanders know how to skillfully deploy and move their troops judging when and where to strike. The same sense of strategy is found in kata, which stresses when and where you should move in relation to an opponent's attack as well as the appropriate timing to use.

This metaphoric relationship between kata and warfare is not new to the annals of the fighting arts but instead has been part of their nature for many years. The same strategies used for war were also used in individual combat. The samurai looked upon his individual duels just as he would battlefield combat. The two were one in the same except that the duel was a microcosmic view of the battlefield's grandiose struggle. The kata he practiced reflected the same attitudes, strategies and techniques; however, the physical realms of kata was a metaphor for much more than just strategy and tactics. They also came to represent the ideas and viewpoints a society embraced concerning health, physical conditioning, spirituality, and even various social issues.

The metaphor was created from and based upon martial reasoning. For instance, the foundation upon which much of the

ancient Greeks spirituality rested was the three tenants—strength, beauty, and health, and it was through their Olympic Games and combative sports that these tenants were realized. Winning may have been everything to the Greek boxer but so was a healthy mind and body, and it was through his training that he achieved his trim form and clear mind. As much as his skills and healthy body were admired by others, the value placed upon his athletic prowess was not just from a sense of sportsmanship but also due to the rigors of fighting in the phalanx formation. The classical Greek had to be in prime shape to fight effectively on the battlefield; to be ‘unable’ would result in not only his own demise but his society’s as well. Therefore, the value of a healthy mind and body was one born out of warfare and expressed throughout other mediums in Greek society. The boxer performed his pre-arranged patterns to not only stay in shape and win his match but also to preserve his society’s existence.

In terms of physical metaphors, kata and pre-arranged training routines can be viewed with two purposes in mind: combat and conditioning. In this particular instance a combative metaphor does not refer to the particular techniques and weapons used but to the fine art of using them and the where and why of employing a particular strike, cut, or thrust. For instance, the boxer who strikes his opponent on the shoulder with a straight punch will not inflict nearly as much pain as if he had hit his opponent in the solar plexus. Likewise, the duelist whose rapier’s thrust punctures a lung has inflicted a very damaging if not lethal blow, whereas the same thrust to his opponent’s forearm would not have ended the duel. It was from this lethal process of trial and error, in addition to the birth and practice of various healing arts, that the man-of-arms developed a principle awareness of the body’s vital organs, circulatory, and respiratory system. He wanted to be able to kill as efficiently as possible; therefore, he began directing his strikes into those areas that produced the best results. These observations of the cause and effect that certain blows, cuts and thrusts had on the human body greatly impacted the practice of kata and pre-arranged training sequences. The fighter at times set out with a particular



SANCHIN KATA

## Gunpowder and the Classical Warrior's Demise

When they fired, the smoke came at us in a solid wall. Things plucked at my clothes and twitched my hat, and when I looked around I saw men all over the ground, in the same ugly positions as the men back on the slope, moaning and whimpering, clawing at the grass. Some were gut-shot, making high yelping sounds like a turpented dog.

—Shelby Foote, *Shiloh*

One of the most interesting figures of the Western martial arts, at least during the nineteenth century, was Sir Richard Burton. An Englishman by birth, Burton lived a life such as one about which novels are written; fluent in many languages, he was an explorer, spy, and writer who published numerous books, one of which is the *Book of the Sword*. Other works include the first English translation of the *Arabian Nights* as well as the *Kama Sutra*. In addition to his numerous intellectual pursuits, Burton was a skilled swordsman who on several occasions had to rely upon his martial prowess in hand-to-hand combat. It was during one of these skirmishes that he was severely wounded by a spear thrust to the face. In his long-standing classic *The Book of the Sword* first published in 1884, Burton wrote about “the queen of weapons” and the Golden Age, which was to him the sixteenth century. “And now arose swordsmanship proper, when the ‘Art of Arms’ meant, amongst the old masters, the Art of Fence. The sixteenth century was its Golden Age. At this time the Sword was not only the Queen of Weapons, but the weapon paramount between man and man. Then, advancing by slow, stealthy, and stumbling steps, the age of gunpowder, of ‘villainous saltpeter,’ appeared upon the scene of life.” (Burton, *The Book of the Sword*,

xviii) Burton's words reflect upon more than just the transition of one weapon being replaced by another. It speaks about a change in not only the weapons of the day, but the practice of the fighting arts as a whole and with them a reevaluation of the martial artist and his role in society. It also reflects upon the changing social attitudes of the day, for with the ability to kill at a distance, and more importantly the technology to do so on a massive scale, man began to shun the warrior ethos that he once had embraced so strongly. His enemy no longer was an opponent whom he met face to face but instead engaged in a very distant manner far beyond arms length. The symbolism, esoteric reinforcement and mental preparation that once were an integral part of the pre-modern martial arts were discarded. This was due to not only the distance of engagement at which gun toting armies now fought but also the fact that many of these beliefs came to be shattered by the roar of gunfire. Although pragmatism is a trademark of the successful warrior, for those who came to be so steeply entrenched in esoteric practices, believing that they could withstand the hail of gunfire, the results were often devastating. During the Chinese Boxer Rebellion of 1900, many boxers held the belief that their cultivation of *Qi* would ward off bullets. This esoteric reinforcement, which was based on a naïveté of both firearms and the classical martial arts, resulted in the slaughter of many of their numbers by Westerners armed with bolt action, repeating rifles. The same fate awaited the Filipino Moro who embarked upon a one man Jihad against occupying American forces. The result was death by gunfire instead of the Moro achieving complete victory through his martial and mystical powers, as fierce as they were.

The process of evolution and change brought by the use of firearms was not only found in Europe, but throughout the world. At the battle of Nagashino Japan, in 1575 A.D., 3,000 gunners wrought destruction upon a large force of samurai cavalry, before the horsemen could even close within spears' distance of the gunners' ranks. Their horses shot down under them, chaos reigned in the Takeda army's cavalry as Oda Nobunaga's samurai and foot soldiers finished the slaughter that their arquebuses had

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## TRULY UNDERSTANDING KATA MEANS REALLY KNOWING YOUR HISTORY

*“Delving more deeply than the average writer on martial arts... the author achieves a holistic perspective that restores martial arts to the field of military science, and shows how their development was functionally driven by the need to triumph and to survive...”*

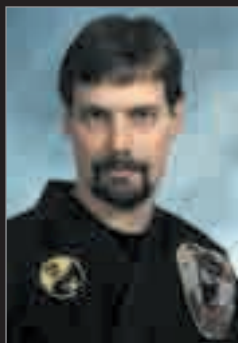
—Richard Lawson, editor *armed-combat.com* (from his foreword)

All too frequently, martial arts practitioners study their art without truly understanding where it comes from, how it was developed, and why it was created in the first place. Indeed, many don't care—and if you feel this way, you should put this book down. For the rest of us, who have taken our art beyond tournaments, it is reasonable to expect that we want to uncover the past. We want to understand the where, why, and how of martial art development. We are intellectually curious about our combative history.

To study the combative arts is to understand the circumstances of their development and to gain insights into the views and ethics of the societies that created them. As we travel back in time, we see consistent evidence of martial systems being influenced by those that came before and/or invaded. We also see the use of 'pre-arranged' fighting patterns (kata) to transmit proven techniques from one generation to the next.

It is this transmission of martial knowledge, through kata and other forms of communication, that this book will explore. The author will demonstrate that pre-arranged fighting techniques (katas) were used by ancient Greek, Egyptian, Asian, African, and European societies. And that Poetry, Dance, and Song were also significant methods of preserving and transmitting battle-tested fighting tactics through the ages.

The purpose of kata training is not to become bound by the form but to transcend the form itself—to evolve.



Michael Rosenbaum began his martial arts training at the age of five. Along with Isshin Ryu, which he has been practicing for 25 years, he has studied Bando, Judo, and Boxing. Michael is a former member of the elite 82nd Airborne Division of the U.S. Army, and has completed Infantry, Airborne, and Jungle Warfare Schools. He currently resides near Knoxville, TN.

