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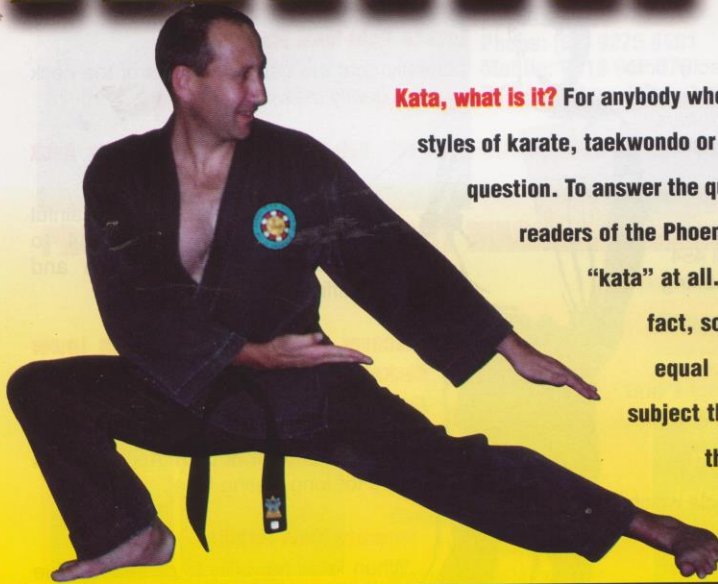
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KATA! WI



Kata, what is it? For anybody who has not studied one of the classical styles of karate, taekwondo or kung fu this can be a very perplexing question. To answer the question I am going to assume that the readers of the Phoenix have no understanding of the term "kata" at all. I know this is obviously not true, in fact, some readers will undoubtedly have an equal or even better knowledge of the subject than I do. However, I have found over the years that it is always better when explaining to begin in a very basic way and build up from there.

The word kata is of Japanese origin. There are similar words in the Chinese, Korean and other martial arts but I am going to use the word kata because that is what I am more familiar with and it will be easier for the sake of standardising the explanation.

Okay, what is a kata? A kata is a concise set of pre-arranged defensive and offensive movements performed in different directions and enacted against imaginary opponents. Many martial arts use kata as the foundation of their entire teaching structure.

The number of movements in a kata can be relatively few or may be many. Some of the small training katas for beginners may contain a little as ten movements. However, they can also contain more than one hundred sequential techniques. It all depends on the experience of the practitioner and his or her level of ability. Naturally, the more inexperienced the person, the simpler the kata will be. For example, the first Shotokan Karate kata called Kihon Kata or Taikyoku Shodan, consists of only one stance, one block and one punch - all performed in different directions. The Goju Ryu style of karate has a similar kata called Gekisai Ichi.

At the other end of the scale, in the Shotokan style, are katas such as Unsu and Gojushiho. Unsu is Shotokan's most senior kata, it contains approximately fifty

BY GARY SIMPSON CHIEF INSTRUCTOR ZANSHIN KAI KARATE DO AND KOBUDO

movements. Gojushiho has two versions, each of approximately seventy movements, depending on the criteria used for counting the actual number of movements.

Goju Ryu's most difficult katas are Suparimpai (the highest kata in the style) and Kururumfa. In fact, some technical articles which have been written on the development of Goju Ryu have suggested that these two kata were originally one. With Suparimpai running to nearly 110 movements and Kururumfa to almost seventy, it is not difficult to understand why they could have been split into two.

In all the martial arts, which use Kata as their base, it is not only the number of movements which make a kata difficult, it is the complexity of movements as well. There are also subtle nuances such as timing, alternating speeds tension and relaxation, angles of execution and varying difficulties of stance to name a few.

Most katas have rather exotic translations, many of which are obscure even to the

experienced martial artist. Of those mentioned above, "Taikyoku Shodan" means "First Cause" "Gojushihosho" means "The First Fifty Four Steps" "Unsu" means "Cloud Hands", Gekisai Ichi" means "Break, Hit and Destroy", "Suparimpai" means "The final 108 steps" and "Kururumfa" means "Holding your Ground"

Some other names of katas which I find personally rather enchanting are "Sanchin (The Three Battles of Mind, Spirit and Body), Rohai (Vision of a White Heron, Empi (Flight of the Swallow) Matsukaze (The King's Crown), Gankaku (Crane Standing on a Rock), Sochin (The Grand Prize) and Annanko (The Light shining from the South)

There are approximately fifty well known karate kata currently being practiced today. Some are common between styles but some are unique to an individual style only. There are also differing methods of performing a kata of the same name between different styles. Some very rare and lesser known katas are also practiced. Then, of course, there are katas which certain modern day individuals have made up as personal katas. Many traditionalists do not favour this. However, some styles demand the

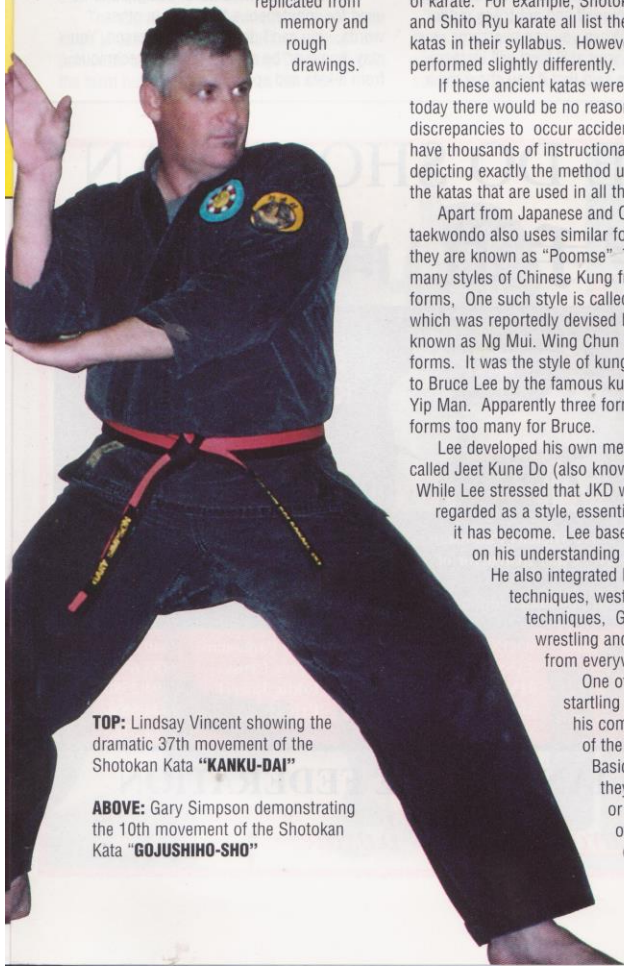


WHAT IS IT?

construction of a kata before an individual is allowed to pass a particular rank. These are the "freestyle" clubs who borrow techniques and ideas from everywhere and anywhere.

All of the katas that I have mentioned above are long standing traditional katas which have been handed down from master to student through the ages. They have stood the test of time, some through decades, others through centuries.

Before the excellent recording methods that we have available today such as computers, videos and books, each individual kata could only be replicated from memory and rough drawings.



TOP: Lindsay Vincent showing the dramatic 37th movement of the Shotokan Kata "KANKU-DAI"

ABOVE: Gary Simpson demonstrating the 10th movement of the Shotokan Kata "GOJUSHIHO-SHO"

This is the reason why so many discrepancies exist. As each giver of information passed it on to his next disciple, subtle variations were made either through poor instruction, misunderstanding or deliberate alteration either by the master or the student. Perhaps the master perceived that the student was not ready for the full techniques of the kata. Perhaps the student believed that he had found a better method of performing certain techniques. Who knows?

It is suffice to say that for whatever reason or reasons, most katas are not performed exactly the same between the different styles of karate. For example, Shotokan, Yoseikan and Shito Ryu karate all list the five Heian katas in their syllabus. However all are performed slightly differently.

If these ancient katas were being devised today there would be no reason for any discrepancies to occur accidentally. Today we have thousands of instructional video tapes depicting exactly the method used in each of the katas that are used in all the various styles.

Apart from Japanese and Okinawan karate, taekwondo also uses similar forms. In Korean they are known as "Poomse". There are also many styles of Chinese Kung fu which use forms. One such style is called Wing Chun which was reportedly devised by a woman known as Ng Mui. Wing Chun has only three forms. It was the style of kung fu first taught to Bruce Lee by the famous kung fu master Yip Man. Apparently three forms were three forms too many for Bruce.

Lee developed his own method of combat called Jeet Kune Do (also known as JKD)

While Lee stressed that JKD was never to be regarded as a style, essentially that is what it has become. Lee based much of JKD on his understanding of Wing Chun.

He also integrated Korean kicking techniques, western boxing techniques, Greco-Roman wrestling and bits and pieces from everywhere else.

One of Lee's most startling innovations was his complete disregard of the forms (katas). Basically, he said they were of little or no use and has often been quoted as

saying that they were part of "the classical mess".

Well, you can agree or disagree with Lee on this point. Personally I strongly disagree with that he said about the usefulness of kata. On the other hand, I admire the unquestionable ability he had with almost everything he did. I believe that Bruce Lee had such consummate abilities, skills and dedication that he certainly did not need to practice katas. In fact, he scorned anybody and any style of martial art which did. What he did not seem to understand was that there will always be people of far lesser potential in the martial arts than him. He was a person of extremely rare talent. Such people often cannot tolerate the needs of others.

If you would like to read further about Bruce Lee there are numerous books available with more being published every year.

However, the best book that I have ever seen is one that I have had in my library for more than twenty years called "The Legend of Bruce Lee" by Alex Ben Block. Unfortunately I think it is now out of print but I am sure that there would be a few second hand bookshops which would be able to procure a copy for you.

Anyway, getting away from the diversion of Bruce Lee and his personal dislike of traditional katas, I have seen far too many students benefit from their practice to ignore their value. The average person taking their first martial arts lesson has no coordination, no balance and has two left feet. Then we have athletes from other sports who are obsessed with making everything work by using brute strength alone. The assiduous training in kata can bring about so many benefits to these people.

In my experience there are far too many people willing to criticise the benefits of kata these days. They say things like "what use is it?", "its irrelevant in today's world", "you can't use it for fighting", "you can't do a kata on a person" and numerous other negative things.

If some of the famous masters were still alive today, I wonder what their reaction would be? I speak of the great masters such as Gogen Yamaguchi, Gichin Funakoshi, Mastoshi Nakayama and Mas Oyama. Everyone of these karate luminaries devoted their entire lives to perfecting karate and a big chunk of it consisted of kata training.

Each kata teaches not only numerous



techniques but also a central theme. For example, in the Shotokan system, Hangetsu teaches the dynamics of power, tension and relaxation. Gankaku emphasises balance while Empi highlights the difference between high and low attacking manoeuvres.

You should seek out the katas within your style that you do not enjoy performing. These are precisely the katas that you must practice and become proficient in. When you are able to execute all the movements of these katas you will find that you no longer dislike them. You see, we automatically dislike those things that we are not very good at.

Many years ago I had a great dislike for a kata called Kanku Sho. That was because I fell into the trap of comparing my ability in performing that particular kata with that of a rival club member. (We will call him Wayne - because that is his name. If you are reading this, Wayne - "Hello"). Wayne was absolutely awesome when he performed Kanku Sho as I will explain. There is a section in the middle of this kata which requires a leap and spin at the same time followed by a fall to the ground on all fours. When Wayne did it, not only did he get tremendous height with the leap, he seemed to be able to hover at the apex of it. And when he went into the crouching position he looked like a panther about to strike. I was always dumbstruck by way he did this.

I figured if Wayne could do it, so could I. Wayne was a fairly muscular sort of a chap

but I was bigger and heavier. What I failed to recognise was that his weight displacement was different to mine. What I also failed to recognise was there were other katas that, looking back now, I was better suited to than him.

Just recently, on two separate occasions, I watched two of my senior black belts, Gordon Chester and Bill Vagnoni, performing a bo (six foot staff) kata and was totally amazed at how, during certain sections of the kata, the bo was lost in a blur of speed. From side on the bo looked like the blades of a windmill. Neither of them knew I was watching (I guess they will now) but I wondered whether I could achieve the same effect for somebody else watching from the side. I hoped so. It is strange how we always seem to make such comparisons with others.

Most martial arts katas are so different to one another that certain body types will handle them better than other body types. Everybody has a different muscle structure, flexibility and other physical characteristics to everybody else, so do not expect to be able to outperform everybody else in every kata. Some katas will suit you, others will not - but you should still practice them all. The point I am trying to make here is that you should be the best that you can be for yourself and not try to outdo somebody else. When you can overcome your failings in a kata your skill level will increase.

I have always said that if you show me a

martial artist who is a good kata performer, that person will have little difficulty learning the skills of free-fighting. However in my opinion a naturally talented free-fighter will usually only ever be a good puncher and kicker. Eventually the punchers and kickers get weary of free-sparing (especially as they grow older and sustain more injuries) and drift away from their clubs. I find that rather sad.

Another benefit of kata performance is that it can remain a worthwhile activity as the practitioner gets older. There are many examples of karate exponents well into their seventies and eighties still performing katas at a high level of skill. One that springs readily to mind is Shinpo Matayoshi, the renowned Okinawan 10th dan karate and weapons expert. In his twilight years he was still able to make instructional video tapes on weapon katas and techniques. His level of dexterity would make most men half his age shake their heads in disbelief.

So if you are a traditional martial arts person and your style includes the practice of kata, be proud. Next time you hear a kickboxer or boxer or "no kata type" person say "You can't use it in the ring" just be polite and say "Yep, You're quite right."

You see katas were never designed to be used for spontaneous fighting. In other words, you can't do a kata on a person. You may, however, be able to extract a technique from a kata and apply that to a real

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Above: Michael Panossian receiving Nidan (2nd DAN) from Sensei Kayo, Chief Instructor of Shobukan.

Left: Shobukan juniors at State Titles

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confrontation situation. And therein lies the greatest, but by no means only, benefit of practicing katas. Katas give you ideas. They stimulate the imagination. They lead you into deeper study.

Kata practice simulates dozens of separate encounters to dozens of separate situations. It is a form of shadow boxing. The benefit you can receive from the proper practice of kata is only limited by your imagination.

I often tell my students that practicing kata forces the body to follow the instructions of the brain. Unfortunately, these days, there are far too many "Norms" and "Normas" (to quote the "Life, Be in it" advertisement from some years ago.), that is, people who refuse to do anything at all if it causes any stress, pressure, effort, discomfort or new experience. These people are hedonists - those who are only motivated by physical pleasure. Such people have a brain ruled by a lazy body. The practice of katas forces the body to respond to the demands of the brain.

When practicing katas new abilities are revealed. Improvements are made to a vast array of positive attributes - timing, techniques, speed, coordination, balance, tension, relaxation, power, distancing, focus, attention and many more.

The application of techniques learned from katas is called "bunkai". In fact, the more particular terms is actually "oyo" but I will use the term bunkai because it has far wider

acknowledgment and acceptance. Each technique in a kata may have two or three or even more bunkai applications according to the experience and skill of the practitioner. No singular technique, providing it is plausible, can be said to be superior to another technique if the person executing the technique has researched it thoroughly and can apply it with dexterity. The myriad of techniques within the katas allow for a tremendous variation of sparring moves.

The simple truth concerning the benefits of kata can be summed up as follows. Learning the different katas requires much dedication and toil. The greater the number of katas known equals a greater level of dedication and toil required. The maintenance of these katas also requires considerable time because you cannot perform anything well if you do not practice it. It's a bit like having a knife - if you don't sharpen it, eventually it becomes dull. So to perform katas at a proper level requires a time input that many will not concede is worth the effort.

I can almost hear some people groaning right now - "What a waste of time, I'd rather work the focus mitts or kick the bag! Now, I will admit focus mitts and bag work are important too. So is sparring. But consider this - it is always easier not to do something than to do it. It is always easier to spectate than to participate. And it is far easier to criticise something than it is to understand it.

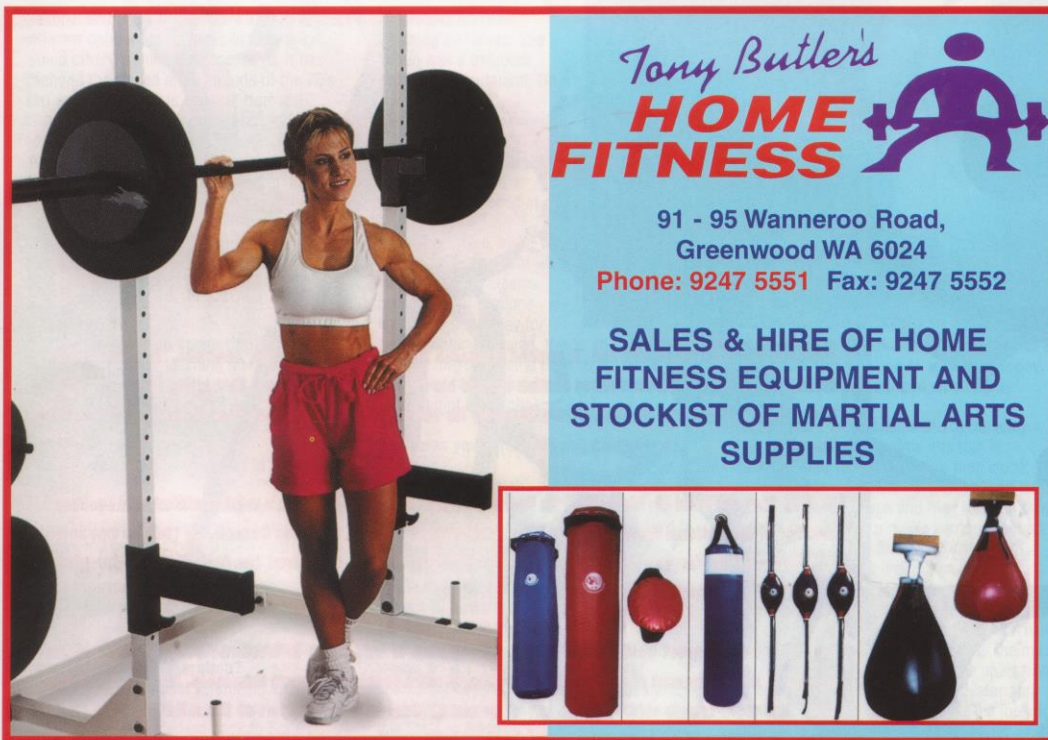
I hope I have been able to give readers an insight into katas and what they are all about. I don't claim that what I have written is 100% correct for everybody. In fact, for those who abhor the practice of kata and dismiss it as a gross waste of time, I am probably 100% incorrect for them. What I do claim, however, is that I am approaching being 100% correct for me. What other people choose to believe is based on their own thoughts, ideas and experiences. "To each his own".

The subject of kata is so open ended and intriguing that it would take an entire book to explain, not these few pages of the Phoenix. In fact, I would love to write a book on kata but there is no real need. You see it would be extremely difficult to better one that it is already in print. If anybody would like to continue learning about kata. I can thoroughly recommend "Karate Kata Training" by Dr Geir Store. I consider it to be one of the finest and most fascinating books in my collection. I have read Dr Store's book from cover to cover at least a dozen times and I am still learning things from it.

In closing, let me leave you with this quote by Don Warrener from his book called "Advanced Traditional Goju Ryu Karate".

"The kata is a means of self perfection".


I think that little quote sums up the benefits of kata training just perfectly.



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