

*“It should be known that the secret principles of
Goju Ryu Karate exist in the Kata”
-Chojun Miyagi*

If Karate-do is an art, then kata is the martial artist’s portfolio. Like any good painting, kata can be enjoyed on the superficial level for the sheer beauty of its movements. But as the talent of the artist grows those same movements begin to display a hidden quality, much in the way the brush strokes of a fine painter add depth to the subject. This hidden quality is the *bunkai*, or application of, the kata.

But why bother with this application, this *bunkai*? Shouldn’t we be focused on sparring? Isn’t sparring a more accurate representation of what we’ll need to save ourselves and our loved ones on the mean streets of modern society?

Clearly sparring is a valuable aspect of martial arts instruction. Sparring teaches confidence, timing, control (both physically and emotionally) and, depending upon the intensity, it allows the student to experience being hit in a controlled environment. However, in a true life and death situation sparring has one glaring problem: both parties shake hands and walk away.

The intent of this short essay is to explore the history and application of kata while also presenting an argument to support more study into the Okuden Waza (hidden techniques) that the kata bring to self-defense applications. To quote Iain Abernethy Sensei,

“The kata are a collection of karate’s most brutal and effective fighting techniques, including not only the commonly practiced kicks and punches, but also neck cranks, throws, chokes, strangles, joint locks/dislocations and many other grappling techniques.”¹

I. A brief history.

There are numerous theories regarding the development of Karate before the twentieth century. Patrick McCarthy Sensei describes four theories in his book “The Bible of Karate – Bubishi”,

“The first claims that the unarmed fighting traditions were developed by peasants. The second claims the Okinawan fighting arts were primarily influenced by Chinese arts that were taught by the co-called “Thirty-Six Families” of Chinese immigrants... The third concerns the 1507 weapons ban by King Sho Shin...The fourth theory claims that the arts were developed primarily by domestic security and law enforcement personnel who were not

allowed to carry weapons after the 1690 invasion of Okinawan by Satsuma.”²

Regardless of which theory one chooses to accept, for the purpose of this essay three events are most significant. The first is the transmittal of the Bubishi from China to the Okinawan islands. The second is the modifications brought to bear upon the Okinawan arts by the Japanese Dai Nippon Butokukai. The third is the transmission of the Japanese and Okinawan arts to America via the returning soldiers of the 1950's to today.

A. The Bubishi

The Bubishi has been described as “a manual of military preparation”.³ In terms of Karate, “the Bubishi represents the patriarchal source of knowledge.... Providing disciples with the ancient masters' secrets, the Bubishi has for generations preserved the original precepts upon which the civil fighting traditions rest...”⁴ Funakoshi Sensei references portions of the Bubishi in his *Karate-do Kyohan*, as do many of his contemporaries.

In more simple terms the Bubishi contains the philosophy, medical treatments, vital point analysis and application of ancient fighting techniques. Included in the manual are forty-eight illustrations of self-defense applications from various *quan*, or kata, many of which are remarkably similar to moves in our present day Shotokan kata. The Bubishi gives us an insight into the origins of the *quan*, or kata, through which “[t]he ancient masters embedded their unique fighting systems”.⁵

The Bubishi also describes the various vital points on the human body which, when struck correctly, could produce predictable reactions (e.g. pulling away in a particular direction) if not unconsciousness or death. Unfortunately this text and its illustrations are, at best, vague. The more dangerous (and most useful) combat techniques were passed on orally through the *quan*. “It was through the *quan* that the secrets of self-defense were taught: joint-locks; chokes; take-downs; throws; hand and leg maneuvers; grappling; escapes; ground-work; the pressing, squeezing, or traumatizing of vital points...”⁶.

This oral tradition would only manage to keep the applications alive so long as the student base was trusted and the study of each individual kata perfected; a situation that would change with the migration of the Okinawan arts to Japan.

B. Changes

The Okinawan arts would begin to change in the early 1900's from a secretive, self-defense-oriented system to the more sport-oriented system we know today. Itosu Anko Sensei along with Funakoshi Sensei would bring the art to both the

Okinawan and Japanese school systems as a form of physical exercise. Unfortunately this shift in emphasis would only serve to bury what was already hidden. “Removing much of what was then considered too dangerous for school children, the emphasis shifted from self-defense to physical fitness through group kata practice, but neglected its bunkai (application). By not teaching the hidden self-defense moves, the actual intentions of the kata (e.g. to disable, maim, and/or even kill by traumatizing anatomically vulnerable areas if necessary) became so obscured that a new tradition developed.”⁷

This new tradition was further codified as the Dai Nippon Butokukai (the governing entity for combative arts) “called for the development and implementation of a unified teaching curriculum, the adoption of a standard practice uniform, a consistent standard for accurately evaluating the various grades of proficiency, the implantation of Kan Jigoro’s *dan-kyu* system, and the development of a safe and competitive format through which participants could test their skills and spirits.”⁸ Gone were the strict days of training in one kata “until Azato was convinced that I had satisfactorily understood the one I had been working on”⁹ as described by Funakoshi Sensei in his autobiography. The kata would now become a standardized routine, losing the focus on survival skills in deference to physical fitness and competition.

C. Moving West

The modern day Japanese and Okinawan martial art forms (e.g. Shotokan, Goju Ryu, Shorin-Ryu etc.) initially found their way to the United States via the returning armed service personnel of World War II and later. Eventually Japanese instructors such as Nishiyama Sensei would immigrate and form various schools, but by then any number of organizations had been founded by the returning soldiers who had limited, if any, exposure to the bunkai.

“So here’s the formula: Take a nearly bankrupt, war-torn country, place it under military rule by occupation forces, add high unemployment, and throw in a means to make a living in U.S. dollars by teaching karate. Add secretive instructors, a language barrier, only a few short years to study, and a bunch of rough and tumble soldiers ready to interpret the confusing new art they are learning via the only means they know, their military training.”¹⁰ What the soldiers would bring back was a basic understanding of their chosen art, something that they would pass on to their students.

This is not to say that the training they brought back was anything less than outstanding or that the bunkai were lost, only that a much greater effort has to be made to find and preserve the applications.

II. Applications

“If you practice the kata thoroughly you will come to understand the bunkai of the kata naturally and completely. However, this will take many years of training, without which you will not gain a true understanding of the kata, and will not be able to apply the kata techniques in real combat. None of the movements is restricted to only one application – in real fight the variations of each application is unlimited.”

-Morio Higaonna

So how do we learn the meaning of these applications? What methods can we utilize to facilitate understanding? First we need to realize that the actual study of bunkai itself has different levels. Then we can progress to some rules for analyzing the kata and finally move to two techniques to apply our interpretations.

A. The Bunkai

Initially we look to Bunkai as “the generic name for applications found in the kata, generally thought of as the most commonly attributed fighting techniques for any given movement.”¹¹ This level of study takes the kata at face value, performing the moves exactly as they are displayed by the kata.

Next we move to Bunkai Oyo which “is usually performed as a set of prearranged applications done between partners in a flow drill.”¹² These drills can take the kata at face value or can break the kata into separate parts, examining the application from different attack angles, different stances etc. These drills get away from the form as it was preserved for teaching and look more to the actual “street” application.

Finally we progress to the Okuden Waza. These are the hidden techniques that the ancient masters sought to keep to themselves and a few select students. These are the techniques that engage the more dangerous strikes such as the vital point strikes that are intended to maim or kill in order to end the fight. Discovering these techniques takes dedication not only to the art but also to understanding how the body reacts to various “stimuli”.

B. Rules for finding the Bunkai

Grabbing your kohai and picking a kata to explore is a step in the right direction. However, applying a few rules will help the practitioners. “The work to uncover the hidden techniques in kata is called *kaisai*.”¹³ In their book, “The Way of Kata”

Lawrence Kane and Kris Wilder cite the following 12 rules of kaisai no genri (theory of kaisai):¹⁴

1. Do not be deceived by the enbusen rule.
2. Advancing techniques imply attack, while retreating techniques imply defense.
3. There is only one enemy at a time.
4. Every movement in kata has martial meaning/significance and can be used in a real fight.
5. A closed hand returning to chamber usually has something in it.
6. Utilize the shortest distance to your opponent.
7. If you control an opponent's head you control the opponent.
8. There is no "block".
9. Pay attention to the angles.
10. Touching your body in kata indicates touching your opponent.
11. Contour the body – strike hard to soft and soft to hard.
12. There is no pause.

By reviewing the kata with these rules in mind, we can divine effective techniques to apply.

C. Testing the Bunkai

Two forms of kumite can be used to explore the bunkai in a quasi-realistic scenario. The first is Kiso Kumite which is described as "prearranged sparring with an emphasis on technique. It is a set of attack and counterattack sequences designed to teach self-defense skill without the danger inherent in free sparring. Techniques are pulled from a variety of kata and grouped by theme (such as evasion, nerve strikes, short techniques, and so on.)."¹⁵ This technique would be similar to our san-bon kumite with the focus being moves straight from the kata.

The second form is Fuku Shiki Kumite. This is a form of free sparring with the emphasis placed upon using moves from the kata. "Partners may decide to use only techniques for specific kata or may select a more freeform manner, but either way the emphasis is on employment of the kata bunkai." This form of practice has an inherent risk given the nature of the application.

Examples of these two training techniques can be on the web at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xrkUYBQz9iE>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MANg174D7Vw>.

III. Okuden Waza

“No matter how much time you devote to practice, no matter how many months and years pass, if your practice consists of no more than moving your arms and legs, you might as well be studying dance. You will never come to know the true meaning of karate.”

-Funakoshi Gichin Sensei, Karate-Do Nyumon

As Funakoshi Sensei’s statement implies, it is up to us as dedicated practitioners to dig beyond the physical training and find the meaning behind the moves. In this final section we will briefly discuss the “hidden techniques”, (and the results of their use from a medical significance), of the kata.

Looking back to the Bubushi we find drawings designating 36 vital points in the human body identified by the ancient masters as targets for chops, thrusts, punches or grabs. Ideally, striking one of these points would either limit the opponents’ ability to attack or incapacitate the opponent completely. The Bubushi goes on to describe the best time of day to attack a certain point and what two points should be attacked simultaneously for maximum affect.

Granted, pinpointing a small area and applying pressure at the right angle can be difficult, but not all the hidden techniques require nerve attacks to result in major injuries. For instance:

1. Chinte’s Nihon Nukite (eye strikes) can result in “Rupture of the eyeball...temporary to permanent blindness...a torn eyelid”¹⁶;
2. Chinte’s double tei-sho-uchi (double palm heel strike) can serve dual purposes. At the traditional chudan level it can be a “pincher” movement striking the diaphragm “relax[ing] those muscles and all breathing will cease for the moment”¹⁷, while at the same time striking the kidney leading to “rupture of the kidney...there will be peritonitis, extreme pain, bloody urination, coma and death...”¹⁸;
3. Any Gedan Barai utilized as a strike to the groin, or for that matter a kick or knee strike to the groin (as in Gankaku), can result in a rupture of the bladder and/or a fracture of the pubic bone resulting in “blood and urine in the abdominal cavity...an inability to walk because of the nauseating pain originating between the legs...”¹⁹

The list of potential incapacitating injuries resulting from both the hidden and overt movements of the kata is as numerous as the body parts that they target.

IV. Conclusion

Ultimately studying kata will take the practitioner as far as he wishes to go. In terms of this essay, I hope this information will encourage everyone at the USKL to dig deeper into kata and find the waza that may someday save a life. This is certainly the direction that I intend to take my studies.

Respectfully submitted,

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¹ www.inainabernethy.com

² McCarthy, Patrick. *The Bible of Karate Bubishi*. Tuttle Publishing 1995. pg 43-44.

³ Ibid, pg 23.

⁴ Ibid. pg 23.

⁵ Lawrence Kane & Kris Wilder, *The Way of Kata*, YMAA Publication Center Inc., 2005 pg 2.

⁶ Ibid, Bubishi pg. 111-112.

⁷ Ibid, Bubishi pg. 53-54.

⁸ Ibid, Bubishi pg. 55

⁹ Funakoshi, Gichin, *Karate Do My Way of Life*, Kodansha International, Published in English 1975, pg 6.

¹⁰ Ibid Way of Kata, pg 10

¹¹ Ibid Way of Kata, pg 14

¹² Ibid Way of Kata pg 14

¹³ Ibid Way of Kata pg 109

¹⁴ Ibid Way of Kata pg 110

¹⁵ Ibid Way of Kata pg 16

¹⁶ Adams, Brian, *Deadly Karate Blows – The medical implications*, Unique Publications 1985, pg 17.

¹⁷ Ibid *Deadly Karate Blows* pg 59

¹⁸ Ibid *Deadly Karate Blows* pg 69

¹⁹ Ibid *Deadly Karate Blows* pg 83