

Categorizations, Measurements, and Divisions

The brand of kefir (drinkable yoghurt) boasts 10 active cultures as well as 140 calories and 11 grams of protein per cup. If I have half a cup of kefir, I would consume 5.5 grams of protein and 70 calories, but would I consume only 5 active cultures? Of course not. The cultures are folded into the blend and are part of the whole such that they become nearly identical with the kefir itself. No matter how much or how little kefir you drink, you are still drinking kefir, thus drinking all 10 cultures. The protein and calories on the other hand measure certain qualities of the mixture: their quantity is directly dependent on the quantity of the kefir consumed.

In the same way, karate can be said to have various divisions that we can categorize in various ways, for example: warm-ups exercises, basic techniques, combinations, kicking practice, kata practice, kata interpretation, engagement matches, freestyle sparring, etc. If you only kick, are you doing karate or some other art? If you only practice kata, would your practice magically become something other than karate? Although karate can be divided and its divisions categorized, it nonetheless maintains its identity as karate.

We can perform a similar division and categorization with other martial arts. Judo, for example, has grappling training, throwing training, combinations, sparring, partner kata, solo kata, etc. Each type of training, if seen alone, would still be recognized as judo. Aikido has takedowns, immobilizations, locks, throws, weapons practice, etc. Where these subjects separate is self-evident. No one would look at your jo kata and think you are doing immobilizations. Sure, you can combine the subjects and do an immobilization with a jo, but “combining” is not the same as “confusing”. Anyone watching would say you are doing both an immobilization and working with a weapon.

Most aspects of training can be further divided into their own component parts. Judo’s grappling, for example, contains immobilizations, strangles, and joint locks. Aikido’s locks can be categorized into *kime* (going with the joint), *gyaku* (going against the joint) or *kagi* (literally “key”: stressing the joint sideways). But, how about karate’s solo kata? To break down that subject into component parts, we would first have to determine where one movement ends and another begins, and then we would have to name the movements. However neither the division nor the categorization-through-naming is self-evident. Kata resists categorization because its movements resist division. Even if we accept the current practiced count of each kata by dividing its components into measurable discrete movements, naming a movement labels only one possible application. If we say the first movement of Heian Shodan is a downward block, we ignore the fact that it can be seen as a blow, a wrist release, a lapel release, a throw, a joint jolt, and so forth.

A kata is, strangely enough, both a unit that can be divided and a composite, the units of which defy categorization. Any kata is a unit with a definite beginning and end, made of movements. But those movements, even if performed identically by every practitioner, can be segmented only artificially and the resulting segments interpreted only variably, according to the imagined situation and attack. Neither the unit nor the component parts come with a universal karate kata handbook published by Daruma Daishi circa 500 AD.

As karate-ka, we have to face the daunting task of not only dividing the elements of our kata, but also ignoring our own categorizations so that we can discover others. Only by treating kata as definite things that possess malleable natures can we take the true measure of their worth.