

Unchanging Form

Our seniors tell us that we should never, never, never change the kata. And yet we have seen that our kata have changed numerous times since the initiation of kata as training devices. Within the 50 years that I have been training, I have seen kata change even within the same dojo of the same system. What is to be made of this adamant admonition that seems, simultaneously so inaccurate and, for many of us, inadequate?

If we change the kata, the story goes, we lose the intent of the authors of the kata, miss out on details of training, and weaken the art in the same way that a Shakespeare play would be weakened if a scene were changed. But, you may think, people change Shakespeare all the time. *Romeo and Juliet* is produced as a 50s gang movie and it comes out as *West Side Story*. Kurosawa retells *King Lear* as a samurai tale. Kenneth Branagh sets both *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Hamlet* in different centuries than did Shakespeare. Sometimes changing Shakespeare is successful; sometimes it is decidedly unsuccessful. However, we still have the original folio and quarto editions of Shakespeare to refer to. Even if they had been disintegrated in a fire, we have copies of the originals (or close thereto), away from which we can vary at our heart's content, knowing that we can never in our eagerness to change, change the first editions. In kata, however, the first editions were not preserved and the authors fiddled with them whenever they felt there was a good training reason to do so. So, on one hand, changing a kata will in fact make you lose any reference to an origin that is already poorly preserved, while, on the other hand, the act of changing a kata seems to have been previously justified by teaching authorities who saw a way to benefit their students.

If we do *not* have the courage to change the kata, the story goes, we are slaves to tradition, which means we think that techniques that worked in nineteenth century will work in the twenty-first century. Sure, people's bodies are approximately the same, but their attitudes and their attack strategies have completely changed. Besides, why should we force all martial artists into the same gi size? As Ed Parker argued, you have to adjust the technique to the individual. Why should the kata be any different?

I have seen people trained in lax atmospheres in which emulating the kata "kinda, sorta accurately" was good enough for a rank. Usually these schools did not study kata in depth, but only as a traditional requirement to produce the approximately authentic stylistic coordination. Of course, some of their students were natural athletes or natural fighters so the "kinda, sorta" standard did not interfere with their skills. The sparring success of these athletes gave the school a retrospective justification for sloppy kata standards. But many of these schools, on average, turn out less-than-mediocre martial artists because there is no ideal physical standard to which to aspire. The excuse is that the student has to be free to express him/herself, so rigid standards and "perfect form" are not desirable. Would you accept that standard for your lawyer, doctor, or auto mechanic?

It is not that founders of martial systems (which are really just groups with preferred practices with recognizable curricula) should never, never, never change the kata; rather, it is that their student should aspire to emulate a chosen “correct form” (*tadashii katachi*) of the kata because if he changes it for whatever reason, he will have the all-too-human tendency to change it for a self-serving reason. For “self-serving” read “taking it too easy on oneself”.

Kata will change over the years, but the admonition that students should not vary the kata for him/herself should remain the same.