

## Where I Am Not a Fan of Kata

Anyone who knows my instruction, sees my karate videos, or reads my articles knows that I am a big advocate of karate kata. Kata serve as the library of knowledge and test protocols in the dojo laboratory. Traditionally, Asian cultures prefer the kata learning method because it is a formal way of learning by imitating and repeating. If you are going to repeat, it makes sense that you do so in an idealized and therefore formalized way. Because they have no pre-assigned partner, kata are vehicles for creativity and can be adjusted on the fly when applied. Chojun Miyagi, the founder of Okinawan Goju, said, “Kata are not simply an exhibition of form; they are concrete manifestations of techniques that can be transformed at any time to any form at will and in which the essence of karate has assumed a definite form.” Let me rephrase that: “The shape of kata is idealistically formal but can be transmuted to deal with the situation at hand.”

Kata train the body to be stable and efficient so long as the techniques of the kata are tested with a real person. So why do I suggest that maybe, somewhere in the dark recesses of martial training, I do not favor a kata approach?

Two-person forms are valid ways to get across techniques and how they can be countered. But 2-person forms are rigidly preset as are solo kata, but unlike solo kata, they are seldom varied because the attack as well as the defense is clearly illustrated, thus they do not lend themselves to interpretation. Kempo students do a variation of a 2-person form when they do pre-arranged kumite, sometime given colorful names like Young Duckling Quacks Up. These serve the same purpose as a 2-person form, although because they are less rigid, they can be varied to the circumstances more than an official 2-person form. The ju-jutsu or aiki-ju-jutsu equivalent to the kempo sets are its formal techniques. Traditional Daito-ryu, for example, requires its practitioners to adhere to exact standards of both form and sequence. Hakkoryu does the same thing, borrowing from its Daito roots. This is laudable for learning the generic shape of the technique, but my objection enters when practitioners, in their desire to get the technique perfect, assume that the partner will attack perfectly and respond perfectly.

When movements are performed as *waza* (techniques) rather than *kata* (prearranged forms), they allow for some adjustments for the real size, timing, weight, flexibility, etc. of *uke* (the receiver of the technique). Of course, *waza* can fall into the “let’s cooperate while I learn it and we’ll get realistic later” syndrome. But “later” seldom comes since pleasant cooperation can be a thief of time.

Where I am not a fan of kata is where application has evolved beyond the basic level and one needs to feel some feedback, resistance, or lack of cooperation from *uke* or *seme-te* (the attacking partner). A quick caveat here: those teachers who instruct 2-person sets with the idea of eventually making the attacks less predictable and the cooperation minimal need not bristle. I am on their side.

There is a human tendency to think that what you learn demarks where you have arrived. There is a stylistic tendency to be satisfied with arriving at the level of a student who is able to replicate what was taught. In reality, one learns what one is taught and adjusts according to the real teacher, the less than imaginary opponent. Form is the indispensable grammar, techniques are the words, but only the situation determines the sentence.