

CRACKING THE KATA CODE

HOW DOES A KATA MEAN?

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“Kata are not simply exhibitions 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.”--Chojun Miyagi





Introductory: How Does A Kata Mean?

In the late sixties, I was wandering through Harvard Square on a Saturday afternoon and spied in one of the used books stores that used to dot the area, go out of business and spring up in yet another locale, a book entitled *How Does a Poem Mean*. Although the author, John Ciardi, was unknown to me at the time, it occurred to me, a student majoring in English and American Literature, that the title itself spoke volumes about the book. I did not buy the book on that occasion because I did not have the requisite \$3.25, but I thought for days of what the title implied: that it was important not only to understand what a poet had to say (the burden of junior high schoolers who balked at words that were not short, slang, or sarcastic) but also how the poet had to say it. Precisely *how* a poem went about meaning what it meant was a valuable study by itself. *How* a poem could mean what it meant instructed us about the use of language. That, in turn, instructed us about human psychology. “How a poem means” awakens in the reader unrealized images and emotions — all because of the poet’s method.

The same is true of kata. Ultimately, of course, those kata practitioners who study for self-defense are concerned with *what* a kata means. But to get full meaning out of these condensed volumes from the martial library, one must understand *how* they use their language. Moreover, if one studies karate for

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general self-development, *how* a kata means is even more important! *How* a kata means is this study that can convey valuable lessons regarding form and appearance, meaning and communication, perception and interpretation.

I consider kata to be like poems: little creative units with subtleties that do not appear obvious upon the first reading. Sometimes, a poem's meaning is not what it says but the mood it sets. Whenever an author communicates the simplest of feelings to us, his communication is effective to the extent we re-experience the feeling as if for the first time. The more real the feeling, the more we marvel at the skill of the author. This is one of the messages of Emily Dickinson's "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass."

A narrow fellow in the grass
Occasionally rides;
You may have met him, —did you not?
His notice sudden is.

The grass divides as with a comb,
A spotted shaft is seen;
And then it closes at your feet
And opens further on.

He likes a boggy acre,
A floor too cool for corn.
Yet when a child, & barefoot,
I more than once, at morn,

Have passed, I thought, a whip-lash
Unbraiding in the sun,—
When, stooping to secure it,
It wrinkled, and was gone.

Several of nature's people
I know, and they know me;
I feel for them a transport
Of cordiality;

But never met this fellow,
Attended or alone,
Without a tighter breathing,
And zero at the bone.

The meaning is obvious: something like, "I get scared by snakes," but of course that does not help us re-experience the feeling much and it tells us nothing about language use or human psychology (outside the obvious statement of knee-jerk pathology). But a high school English teacher could

teach a class of at least forty-five minutes on this poem. “Why does Dickinson,” he might ask, “give us a picture of the snake before describing her reaction to it?” or “Why,” he would continue, “does she never mention the word ‘snake’ or ‘serpent’?”

“Is there a psychological value in using the ampersand (&) instead of the word ‘and’?” Each verse is studied on its own, then at another level entirely. Mr. Poirier, Smith, or Levitan, Mrs. Levine, Jones, or Scarapelli might then start discussing the details of each *line*: “How does ‘A floor too cool for corn’ sound out what it says?” Or the teacher might dwell on the suggestive power of images, “Why does Dickinson choose to give us the image of a unbraiding whip?” Or the questions might center on the rhythm of the poem and how it feels like a pleasant walk until the sudden ending. “The final verse is no more truncated than previous verses but it does feel more abrupt. Why?” There is more to Dickinson’s simple, little rhyme than first appears.

An even smaller, simpler unit is provided by William Carlos Williams in “Pastoral”.

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.

At first, there seems to be no greater depth to which the reader can go than to simply understand Williams’s respect for mundane tools. We can be surprised that we never thought of a wheelbarrow as being a key instrument in the workings of a farm, but then that realization itself makes us re-evaluate the farm and, by implication, the farmer. Yet there is more. Is there a purpose to the structure of each two-line stanza? Williams could easily have made each stanza one line and reduced the poem to four lines. Why did he choose to visually represent his thoughts in this manner? And isn’t it unusual that the heavier, less mobile object (the wheelbarrow) should be said to be beside the lighter more mobile objects (the chickens)? Usually one describes more mobile

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objects as being beside less mobile objects: Mary stood by the car; the car was parked by the hydrant; hydrant stood in front of the building; the building stood a mile from the mountain range. Why has Williams reversed the order? Why did he use the word “glazed” rather than “soaked” or some similar word? What values do colors play in this poem? Why does Williams describe the wheelbarrow as having been covered with rain? What do we assume because of it and how does that effect the mood and meaning of the poem?

None of these questions will be answered in the next eleven chapters. (I can hear certain readers thinking, “Whew! I bought a book on karate, not on poetry!”) But similar questions resulting from the study of karate kata (even if poetry chills your bones rather than glaze your barrow) will be answered. I hope the answers will inspire you to ask additional questions that will fuel your own kata study. Martial artists do not have to be poets, students of poetry, or even kata affectionados; but, the martial artist who does not understand *how* his art means is not an artist at all.

What You See Is Not What You Get

“**W**hat,” I asked myself, “could possibly be the meaning of this hammerfist movement in kata Heian Shodan?”

Obviously it was a blow, but the way I had seen Shito stylists perform the kata, it was more like a block. And not everyone drew their forward foot back the same way. Nor did they circle their right arm the same way. Could it be that different styles had different “translations” for the same movement? Could it be that there was more than one meaning to the same method of practicing the technique?

In the 1970s, thanks to the iconoclastic articles by Bruce Lee in *Black Belt Magazine* a few years before, kata became the symbol of all that was wrong with the traditional martial arts. Kata were unrealistic, static, rigid, not geared toward the individual, not eclectic enough, and basically had little meaning or training value.

A visitor from California, having read one of my articles in *Inside Karate Magazine*, dropped into my Massachusetts dojo and respectfully, I must admit, promulgated to me, sitting beside him in my traditional whites, the kata-as-an-exercise-in-futility idea.

He used to do kata, even liked them, he said, but totally dropped them from his regimen as they had nothing to do with martial arts except for a linkage

to outdated training concepts. I asked him what he did for training. He replied that he sparred.

“And what do you do to prepare for sparring?” I asked.

“Oh, the usual stuff. You know, bag work, combinations...”

“Terrific. That is definitely good preparation for the ring. And what do you do before that?” He didn’t seem to understand, so I tried to clarify, “How do you know what to practice for combinations or what combinations to throw on the bag?”

He must have thought I was rather ignorant for a martial artist with a more than decade of experience under his belt, but he humored me. “My instructor shows me properly thrown individual blows, then how to work them in combination. I practice them solo until I have them down with good speed and form, and then...”

“Oh,” I interrupted, “so you practice kata, too!”

At first the young man looked non-plussed and then he said quite simply, “I never thought of it like that.” We went on to discuss the analogy and my views on how kata was often poorly understood and therefore poorly practiced. I asked him if he had ever practiced Heian Shodan and if he remembered the first few movements. He affirmed this knowledge but said that it had nothing to do with actual fighting.

“You mean to say that it has nothing to do with sparring...”

“Yeah! You can’t tell me that a person will have time to loop his arm and foot back and strike his opponent over the head with a hammerfist in the middle of round two.”

“No, not in the middle of round two, but very few real confrontations occur with rings, ropes, and rounds. Can you imagine a situation in which someone would kick you in the groin while sparring?”

“Of course. It’s against the rules in sport, but in real fighting it could happen.”

“What might you do to deflect the blow?”

“Depends on the height. I might just slap it across with my hand or I could maybe deflect it with my leg.”

“Show me.” He set up his imagined situation and performed the defenses he described. His form was loose and quick as one would expect a kickboxer’s to be. “Okay,” I said, “now let me try. Remember I am a beginner at this.” I purposely made my movements more formalistic than his had been.

He got the message immediately. “Heian Shodan. Okay, you made your point. By why do it so rigidly? You have to admit it is slower the way you did it.”