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### **The Essence of Karate-Do**

The very essence of karate-do is found in its kata, for it is here that all of the techniques, knowledge, spirit and philosophy have been combined, concentrated and cataloged in a sequence of moves that could be passed on from teacher to student in order to preserve and propagate the art of karate-do. It is through the tireless and repetitive study and practice of the numerous subtleties and details of these kata that the vast wealth of information that they contain gradually reveals itself to us and in the process of attempting to perfect our physical technique we are also strengthening and refining our character allowing us to progressively become not only a better karate-ka, but a better person as well.

In the early history of the martial arts in Okinawa practice of any form of formalized fighting method was forbidden so all training and teaching had to be done in secret. Kata was a way to disguise fighting techniques into a dance-like form so that its true purpose would not be discovered, as well as a

way of keeping track of techniques in an organized fashion since few written records could be kept. The master who created a particular kata used his knowledge and experience to put together a set of defined movements which represented defending oneself against multiple imaginary opponents, and then used this kata as a means of transferring the techniques and knowledge to his student. According to Robin Rielly in his book Karate Training, this process of the creating of kata and then passing it down is as follows:

Individual karate master's training and life experience

Individual mastery

Transcendence (Ri)

Creation of kata

Transmission to student (condensed knowledge)

Learning basic techniques of kata (Shu)

Understanding kata and expanding knowledge (Ha)

Diversified technique and transcendence (Ri)

Through this we see that the kata becomes a way of summing up an individual's knowledge and experience and organizing it into a package that

can be more easily passed on and taught to others. Thus, from its origins this has acted as the primary vehicle for the effective transmission of knowledge and skill.

For many years kata and kihon were the primary aspects of karate-do. Students would spend numerous hours practicing one kata over and over while attempting to perfect their technique. Eventually however, times changed and students who may have previously studied some other martial art such as judo or kendo, began to desire more kumite type training. The masters of the time knew that if karate-do was to survive it would have to adapt and evolve, and it was at this point that jiyu kumite began to be introduced and practiced more regularly in karate dojos. However, as karate moved into a more sport oriented focus, in order to make it safe for competition many of the more dangerous techniques such as attacks to the joints, groin, eyes, etc., had to be eliminated from free fighting. Today there are some schools who fail to see the value and usefulness in kata training and have chosen to delete it from their repertoire entirely in favor of free fighting kumite exclusively. Although jiyu kumite has come to have its place in modern karate, and there are things such as timing, distancing, reading your opponent, etc. that can't be readily learned from kata and kihon practice alone, this is very unfortunate as that mindset misses the point of karate-do as

an art as well as self-defense method altogether. With the elimination of the more dangerous techniques for tournament sparring the original combat oriented techniques would be lost were it not for kata, as would the spiritual and philosophical aspect of karate-do, since this is deeply rooted in the study and practice of kata. The key to learning karate as a system of self-defense therefore lies in the mastery of its kata, as numerous methods of evading an attack and finishing off an opponent are interwoven throughout.

In addition to the self-defense benefits of kata, there is a seemingly endless well of information that can be gleaned from the intense study and practice of kata. Among this is the fact that each kata has a specific sequence and the correct movements must be learned with little or no deviation from the original form. Through this we are learning, among other things, the correct body posture, positioning, body dynamics, stances and techniques. Each movement in a kata, whether offensive or defensive, has a bunkai or application which must be kept in mind while performing the kata. In most cases this application is not limited to one specific meaning and is up to the interpretation and creativity of the practitioner to determine for him or herself. This examination of possible bunkai helps to further develop the karate-ka's knowledge base and self-defense abilities as they experiment with what works and doesn't work in actual application.

Each kata also has its own rhythm based on its bunkai. Sometimes the rhythm is quick, while at other times it may be slow. Techniques are grouped, punctuated by pauses, continued and combined so that the rhythm follows that of actual application. The practitioner must also show light or heavy application of strength as necessary, as well as demonstrate proper use of expansion and contraction of muscles based on the meaning of each movement. As speed is another important quality when considering bunkai, the study of kata also helps to develop this muscle coordination by forcing us to focus on relaxing the muscles as much as possible in transition, and then contracting at the moment of impact to generate maximum speed and force in each technique that is delivered. Appropriate timing of relaxation and contraction in addition to hip action, body dynamics, and use of internal and external forces creates maximum power which is evident in the technique. In addition to muscle control, breath control is also developed. The conclusion of each movement usually coincides with an exhalation, while the inhalation usually occurs during the preparatory movements. Each kata contains at least two, but not more than three kiai points whereby an intense exhalation and contraction occurs giving additional strength and force to the move. Within the kata, quick, short breaths help to add quickness and sharpness to techniques, while deeper, slower breathing creates heaviness and strength. Other kata emphasize exaggerated breathing from the tanden to effectively

generate strength and power. Proper breathing helps to connect you to the floor, as well as helps you to manage your own energy and endurance.

Therefore, learning how to coordinate the breath with movement is yet another important aspect of karate training that one learns through their kata practice.

Embusen, or the line of the kata, is another key element. According to Funakoshi Sensei “Whatever goes must come back” (Karate Do Kyohan), meaning that where one begins and ends must coincide and follow the original intention of the kata, which in most cases is at the same spot. Failure to come back to your starting point indicates that either a wrong step or error in the kata occurred, or that there may have been variations in the length of one’s stride. Since the stability of the hips is a crucial element in karate training, the length of one’s stances and the positioning of the feet is of great importance, and therefore the embusen of the kata must be strictly adhered to. Through repeated practice in keeping the embusen in mind we gain that consistency and stability in our stance that is vital to overall effectiveness of technique.

In addition to the pre-determined line of the kata, how we move within that line is also crucial. Kata teaches us how to move from our center, or tanden, and to maintain forward energy and ki so that we can transition from

one move to the next quickly and smoothly while maintaining proper posture, body connection, strength and stability that is required for an effective technique. Achieving an explosive, quick burst of energy requires that a multitude of factors such as body posture, muscle relaxation and tension, pressure to the floor, spring, forward movement from center, breath control, etc., come together simultaneously in the proper manner to attain the desired results. Since kata have been designed to move in all directions and use both sides of the body equally, no one side becomes stronger or favored and the karate-ka is able to move freely in any number of directions smoothly, quickly and effectively while making use of his entire body and not having to rely on or favor one side only.

The seemingly endless list of physical details that one learns through the study and practice of kata are meaningless if the spiritual and philosophical principles are not considered and developed as well. Gichin Funakoshi said that "The purpose of learning kata is for the tempering and disciplining of oneself" (Karate-Do Kyohan), and it is through kata that we work on perfecting our character through perfecting our technique. The repetition and physical and emotional struggle that is required in the attempt to perfect something so complex as kata serves to , in many ways, break down the ego in the individual and cause them to come out stronger

and wiser in the end. The more we learn the more we realize how much more there is still left to learn and that there is always more that could be done to improve. Likewise, we as individuals are not perfect and must continually strive to achieve more. This realization of our many imperfections keeps the ego in check. Meditation, clearing the mind and letting go of the ego are central to the philosophy of karate-do, and kata is considered to be moving meditation. While performing a kata one must become totally immersed in it, being present at each technique and not letting the mind wander on to what is coming up next or to what is happening around them. The karate-ka's state of mind is reflected in the kata and whether one's mind is focused and calm or distracted by random thoughts and emotions will be evident in their performance. Ultimately we should strive for a state of mushin, or no mind, where we become totally present and one with the kata so that each move is performed with the utmost intensity and precision. And just as we strive to perfect our kata by repetitive practice, recognizing our mistakes and attempting to correct them, practicing to exhaustion and continuing to push through, analyzing details and subtleties and maintaining the proper spirit throughout, so too is the path to perfection of character. Through the practice of karate we learn that we must attempt to recognize the mistakes we make in our life and correct them. We look at the details of our character and attempt to make better the areas we find faulty, we strive continually to



the point of mental exhaustion, but push through to find that we come out stronger. We try to maintain the proper spirit throughout, not giving up when times are tough, all the while knowing that while we may strive for this perfection in kata as well as in character, it is unlikely that we will be able to achieve either, but we don't give up and continue to learn and grow both mentally and physically throughout our lifetime.

Kata has been and continues to be at the heart of karate-do and is the sum of the knowledge, experience, and wisdom of those masters who have come before. The vast wealth of information that is contained within them is truly incredible and requires many years of serious and intense study to begin to truly understand their richness. It is inspirational and exciting when in the process of training some of these details reveal themselves to you and allow you to reach a new level of understanding of karate and yourself as well. So many subtleties and details in kata make perfection difficult if not impossible, yet we keep striving to improve our performance, keeping the numerous points in mind as we practice over and over without losing spirit. This repetition, struggle, determination and relentless pursuit leads to development and strengthening of the character of the participant which spills over into all aspects of our lives.