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The Three Technical Stages of Kata Analysis

(Published in 'Traditional Karate' Magazine, June & July 2008)

"Every part of every movement in every kata holds a valuable lesson in the development of pragmatic combat for self-protection and more. Each of these lessons need to be learned, then understood and then expanded positively with the open questioning attitude of 'what if'? Only then can we experience the traditional forms fully and come to enjoy a shining glimpse of the true potential they hold."

It's commonly agreed that the phenomena of *kata* was a way of recording the most effective fighting principles of a particular style, system, strategy or individual and the huge increase in the understanding of effective *bunkai* (analysis) over the past few years has certainly helped to provide strong evidence in support of this idea. When I'm teaching *bunkai* during a seminar or lesson, participants often come up to me and ask why sometimes my applications bear very little resemblance to the actual technique(s) performed in the *kata*. I may for example demonstrate a particular application and state that it's from *Chinto kata*, even though there may be no such similar looking technique performed within the form itself. It becomes obvious to me that a number of participants seem somewhat let down by this because they believe that what I'm teaching is blatantly dissimilar to the movements of the form. However, when I explain the method of my madness, most come to agree with my idea and are then able to see the 'concealed' relationship between the form and function of the application for themselves.

In response to a number of requests, I thought it would be a good idea to write a short article about the generic, but critical 'three-stage' approach to generating applications from *kata*, which will hopefully answer most of the questions related to this issue. Before I go any further though, I have to point out that this approach to *bunkai* is simply my own personal interpretation of what I believe to be true. It works very well for me and for many others who hold the same or similar views. Nevertheless, please take my words in the way in which they're intended - with an open mind and in a fashion that does not go in any way towards degrading the views or opinion of others, especially those who may no doubt be more highly skilled and experienced than you or me. This is not an approach that's been invented recently,

but something that has always been there and becomes apparent only through the complete, combative study of traditional forms. The method is classified and structured through the Japanese words of, *omote*, *henka* and *ura*. Let's first look at each of the three stages, then gain an appreciation of how each can be applied and see how all three can be brought together to form a comprehensive strategy for deciphering karate *kata*.

One thing that you'll notice straight away is that at no point have I begun to categorise either the initial learning, the ongoing perfection of the *kata* movements or other important training strategies such as drilling the applications in different environments or testing them against 'un-compliancy'. Even though these aspects are both useful and vital to the complete study of *kata* (and should therefore never be disregarded), I feel that they are not strictly part of the *bunkai* phase of learning. The three stages of analysing *kata* as detailed below deal only with how an individual would correctly interpret the movements contained within the form in a technical way. Rather than clouding matters, I think that like an umbrella, the training methods used to accentuate your findings and make them more functional should be considered to be overarching and ongoing 'necessary additions' to be used in conjunction throughout, rather than being discrete stand-alone components along the way.



(Pictures 1 to 4: From Pinan Godan Kata)

So, after the initial learning of the movements within a particular form, the *karate-ka* is usually then ready to start his or her study of the applications contained within. Of course, the general term for this analysis is called *bunkai*, with applications or interpretations being referred to as *ohyo*. Since this is only a relatively concise article; rather than focus on a whole *kata*, let's briefly analyse a series of commonly taught movements from the *pinan (heian)* *kata* series of *Anko Itosu* and see how they can be interpreted using each of the three stages. Please

bear in mind though that for the sake of this article we are only dealing with a single application from the opening sequence of *Pinan Godan* (from *Wado Ryu*) as demonstrated in pictures 1 to 4. All movements of the kata of course, have many.

The first stage: *Omote* 表

To begin to understand the movements from the kata, we need to first appreciate the ‘ground rules’ on which these apply and probably more importantly, what would constitute a bad or impractical application. Examples of these rules would include aligning the movement as a response against the typical real street attack, rather than the educated attack of another combat expert (i.e. head high kicks and long-range *gyakuzuki*’s are out), or making sure that from the onset, the application gains almost immediate advantage over your antagonist and maintains this throughout (i.e. from conception to completion). I could go on and on about the rules associated with pragmatic *bunkai*, but I’m assuming that with the substantial material already covering this subject readily available, you will be at the very least appreciative of the idea. From this initial foundation, we can then construct an application using the first stage of *omote*.

The word *omote* can be defined as ‘outside’ or ‘front’ and represents what can be seen in a movement readily and easily. Unfortunately, this is usually the end of the road for many who study *bunkai* but in actual fact, it outlines only the first part of your *kata* analysis. For *kata* to be useful in the realm of self-protection, they need to (and of course do) have a very practical meaning. For something to be practically useful, it needs to be adaptable. Why? Simply because combat itself is never certain and the nature of fighting should always consider the potential for change. That said though, within the *omote* stage of analysis, we tend to briefly embrace that luxury of a pre-defined sequence and look at what the movements of the form physically provide us with as they are presented.

A typical application at the stage of *omote* can be seen in pictures 5 to 11, which show a release from a wrist grab, counter, seize and choke. There are a couple of points to highlight here. Firstly, you’ll notice that both upper limbs are being used in a positive way. Secondly, that the application uses the stances as transitional movements as opposed to static or stationary postures. These are both important points to consider in the analysis of *kata* movements and it’s vital to emphasise that fact that all practical and efficiency aspects (not only these) should

be used where possible during even this first stage of *bunkai*. Applications that have no practical use or do not provide a meaning for all significant movements should not really be considered at any stage; not even at *omote*.



(Pictures 5 to 11: Omote application)

The second stage: *Henka* 換

Henka means 'change' or 'transform' and represents the next level of *kata bunkai*. It is based on the idea that the many slight differences that can be seen in the same *kata* throughout a number of styles are simply nothing more than variations on a theme. We also know that during the modernisation process of *shuri-te*, *Anko Itosu* made slight alterations to a number of the traditional forms in order to make them easier to learn. It's also thought that a number of the original hand weapon formations were changed to the commonly used fist. This seems to make sense because many of the Chinese forms that pre-date karate heavily use open hand movements, whereby the more modern interpretations of the forms tend to focus more on closed fist techniques. The *Naha-te kata* of *Sanchin* is a typical example of this (since both

'closed' and 'open' versions of this kata are practiced). There's nothing to suggest that these small changes went as far to degrade the *kata* in any way, it just illustrates the human urge to adapt according to a particular purpose, approach or preference.



(Pictures 12 to 18: Henka variations)

The second stage of *henka* allows the practitioner to become more open minded and accept the possible slight variations to the movement in order to see other options that may not have been considered at first. It also takes into account the fact that the movements in the form represent the heart of the application and therefore in many cases do not reference initial strikes, finishers or other subtleties that may have been either purposefully omitted (on the basis that these are common strategies throughout combat), or as a result of the 'aesthetic' modernisation of the form itself.

To give some examples of how the idea of *henka* can be applied to your analysis, please consider the variations shown in pictures 12 to 18 from the same part of *Pinan Godan kata* as previously described above. Here we can see the initial attack being made 'less formal' as a

response to an attempted groin seize and the additional use of accentuating strikes before attempting to escape the wrist grip as per the *kata*. In addition, the second movement of the form (*chudan gyakuzuki* - mid-level reverse punch) is shown in slightly different ways (pictures 16 to 18), by considering the possibility of 'what if'? Here, the outline of the form is being maintained, however the weapon formation (i.e. fist, grab or open hand strike etc), the height (i.e. *gedan*, *chudan* or *jodan* etc) and the intention (i.e. as a strike, lock, or throw etc) are being questioned. This allows us to become more adaptive in our analysis and instead of a limited number of 'direct applications'; we can now start to appreciate the fact that the intention of the *kata* movement could be used against a variety of situations.

Applying the stage of *henka* to your study will greatly increase your understanding of not only the form, but of the truths that surround the general process of karate training. In other words, it allows you to appreciate how the practical aspects are 'stitched' together in the art. *Henka* still has its limitations though, because you are still only left with what I call a 'box of tricks'. For instance, collecting ten thousand applications is of no use if you can't appreciate and malleably use the common principles on which these techniques rest. Equating to principles is by far the most useful way to train because it is the techniques themselves that are a product of the principles you've learned. This is where the third and final stage of technically analysing *kata* comes in.

"When viewing a magnificent oak tree, don't simply flutter your eyes around every visually pleasing leaf. Instead, gently pull your gaze back and accept all parts of the tree together as one entity. You will then come to realise just how it could have grown from a single solitary acorn."

The third stage: *Ura* 裡

The last stage of technical analysis is called *ura*. It is the opposite of the first stage, *omote* and means, 'inside' or 'back'. *Ura* represents that which we cannot see unless expressed through physical movement. It represents the principles that surround the movements of the form and is based on the notion that I explained right at the beginning of this piece; that *kata* is a way of recording the most effective fighting principles of a particular style, system, strategy or individual. *Ura* is also very dependent on the way in which you focus on the form i.e. not as a collection of shapes, but more as a series of transitions or motions. There will never be any potential in static or discrete postures/techniques. In other words, it's important to look at the journey, not the destination.

It is commonly understood that *kata* was originally practiced intensely for years at a time. For this to be so then the movements depicted in the form must represent something much more than just a handful of potential applications. A whole style couldn't possibly be recorded within something that only takes minutes to perform unless there is something else that we should be focusing upon. This, I believe, is one of the main stumbling blocks that *karate-ka* come up against when studying *bunkai*. They focus far too much on the actual techniques of the form (believing these to be the most critical part), rather than the lessons that those techniques are actually trying to impart.

Techniques are literally 'principles in action' and it is these principles that we should always be more focussed upon. Please consider the application shown in pictures 19 to 27. Now you may initially think that it shows something completely different from the movements that we've been previously looking at, but I beg to differ. This is still very much an application from the start of *Pinan Godan kata*! If we go back for a moment to the *omote* application and extract the principles, then we can start to ask the question, 'what is this part of the *kata* teaching us?' In this particular instance it is my own personal view that even at a fundamental level, the form is trying to explain that when seized; you can escape and shift to the outside of your attacker (a safer option), use the seizing arm as a temporary barrier whilst countering and then finish by attacking the throat.

The form is thus teaching an effective strategy based on movement, timing, and distance, as well as gaining a fast initial and continuing advantage. The techniques used to express this within the form can and should then be appreciated as being a 'typical effective example'

rather than 'the only way of achieving that particular objective'. If a movement in a *kata* is teaching us the principle of attacking the inherent weakness of the elbow joint for example, we should then be actively asking ourselves, how else can we exploit the antagonist's elbow joint in a similar fashion? As long as the principles of the form are followed, then the answers you'll find will in no way differ from what the *kata* is originally trying to portray.



(Pictures 19 to 27: Ura - extracting the principles)

If you consider the principles of movement, we can see that the application shown in pictures 19 to 27 are not in any way different from what the start of the *kata* is trying to teach us through the superficial analysis of *omote*. The exact same principles are being used; they're just being physically expressed in a different way – that is all. Once we appreciate the potential at this stage of *ura*, we can easily see how a single form could represent a complete system or strategy of fighting and why this was originally considered as so.

Now, some might say that the creators of the form may never have even considered many of the applications generated in this adaptable way and I have to admit that this argument more than likely holds elements of truth. But so what? As interesting as I may find this historic piece of information, I simply refuse to consider this as a barrier against the main objective for my study. Above all else, I am a martial artist first and a historian second. For the *kata* to mean anything it has to be both a direct learning tool, as well as being a method to promote and increase further understanding as time and experience progresses. I strongly believe that this is what the founding fathers of karate would have wanted for us.

Everyone by now should have aligned to the fact that in karate, many things are not what they first seem to be. I'm sure you'll have all heard that 'a punch is not just a punch' or 'a block is not only a block' – you may even be actively be practicing in that way now. In reality, everything that we accomplish in the art comes from the same source – just like the acorn. That source is nothing 'alien' or for that matter, anything to do with karate. The art simply acts as a vehicle for the source to be expressed. That source of course, is you! The self-satisfaction you experience through your practice is proportional only to how honestly and thoughtfully you undertake each training session. *Kata* is exactly the same as this. If we can learn to view and train a form in an open and honest way without the restrictions of preferences, laurels, ideals or politics, its true potential will shine through and allow us to take what we need, when we're ready to understand it.

It is my view (and I hope you agree) that the original masters of karate would be totally dismayed to see their beloved *kata* being reduced to nothing more than a restricted and 'choked' pattern of very limited value, just for the sake of maintaining what may or may not have been a historic truth at the time. To release the true potential of *kata*, I believe that all traditional *karate-ka* have both the opportunity and a genuine duty to study in an unrestricted and adaptable way. This will inevitably help towards maintaining the original perceived

intent of karate as an effective civilian self-protection system and ensuring that the art remains constantly fresh and alive.

In a practical sense, learning by equating to the principles associated with the form is very favourable. Instead of collecting a million unrelated techniques to cater for a wide range of attack scenarios, 'principle-based study' allows you to respond in a much more spontaneous way by limiting (to some extent) the mental 'log jam' that can occur when your brain is being forced (by yourself) to think or process precise information in a situation where your evolutionary instincts would ask it to switch off. Combat is extremely hard to begin with. Why would you even consider making it any harder through collecting what will inevitably become useless knowledge when depended upon?! I think that we should treat *kata* how it should be – as a vehicle to promote a greater understanding of the principles associated with combat and the art in which you diligently study and thoroughly enjoy.

If I was to give you one final piece of advice regarding the analysis of karate, it would be to think of using *kata* as your *sensei*. Try to appreciate what the form is trying to teach you and as with any kind of learning, don't forget to ask questions. You should find that as long as you face those questions honestly, then the *kata* will answer them for you and more. It will become possible then to reach a little closer towards those great masters that left us these timeless masterpieces to benefit from.

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Tactile Awareness: A Critical Component to Traditional Karate

(Previously unpublished)

In this article, I'd like to discuss the fundamental idea of developing tactile awareness and reaction in the art of karate. I personally consider this an important aspect that sadly seems to be overlooked in the large majority of our regular training, even though the elements necessary to expand this useful skill are embedded in almost every traditional technique we execute.

The driver for competent tactile skills lies within the practice of karate for use as a civilian self-protection system (as was originally intended). By comparison, when training in karate for sport competition, the need to polish close combat skills would simply not be necessary, since the control and responsibility over this range is usually given over solely to the referee of the bout. Consequently, it then becomes blatantly obvious why so little emphasis was/is placed on tactile development within most 'modern' karate dojo.

Traditional karate on the other hand is based first and foremost on practicality, with the emphasis focussed directly on self-protection. Therefore by definition, it becomes critical for those who practice traditional karate to proactively withdraw the tactile concepts from the kata and incorporate drills to help increase the chances of successfully controlling a close range encounter.



(Fig 1: Close range fighting – a distance not usually emphasised in many dojo)

Our physical senses

As human beings, we all have a number of physical senses that are used to link ourselves with the outside world. Without our senses, we would quickly become imprisoned within our own bodies and find it impossible to interact with what's outside our own corporeal boundaries.

In terms of self-protection, the three physical senses of most importance are sight (visual), hearing (auditory) and touch (tactile). Sight and hearing are quite self-explanatory and help us to successfully employ awareness as the backbone of our protection strategy. The more we choose to disregard these senses, the more at risk we'll be from potential threats. The sense of touch however, only really comes into use if we are (1) unfortunate enough to have made enough mistakes and end up becoming burdened with a close-range physical encounter or (2) if a violent attack has been so ferocious that other possible alternatives to dealing with the assault are simply no longer valid and through the midst's of combat, have been cancelled out. For instance, in a situation where a well practiced right cross could very well swiftly end the altercation; it is not always possible due to lack of distance, time or free space.

The term 'reaction time' can be defined as the time it takes for your brain and body to react after a stimulus has been presented or in other words, the time that elapses between a particular change in condition and the response to that change. When countering a strike in punching range for instance, it takes time for your eyes to first see the strike coming toward you, your sensory nerves (neurons) to send an informational message to your brain and your brain to recognise process and confirm the required reaction. In the environment of a close-range encounter (i.e. a distance of less than one arms length), the chances of successfully responding to visual stimuli is severely impeded. Therefore, space becomes a chief deciding factor between successful or unsuccessful reaction. So simply put, the further away you are from an object, the more chance you have to react before that object can make contact with you.



(Fig 2: Reaction at close range – responding to visual stimuli only is almost impossible at this distance)

Tactile self-protection

Practically speaking, there are a number of methods we can employ to mitigate the effect of an attack at close range and all of these rely on proactive awareness. The first and by far the most effective is not to be there in the first place (i.e. maintaining distance), thus removing the hazard altogether. The

second is to utilise a pre-emptive assault before your attacker can initiate the first strike. In this instance, if your attack is successful, the chances of a positive outcome (control) are increased and you will have bought valuable time to either make an escape or if this is not possible, continue with your onslaught. Only the very last option would be to control the hazard at close range and in reality, this should be seen more of a necessity than a choice. If all else fails and since everyone, everywhere makes mistakes, then it becomes quite clear that the ability to respond and control force using the physical sense of touch would be invaluable during such a situation.

Reacting to a change in movement using tactile awareness is very different to responding to a purely visual stimulus. When something is in actual contact with you, it becomes possible to feel the amount, direction and subsequent adjustment of the force being applied. Consequently, it is reasonably achievable to react very quickly with an appropriate response when compared with a response to visual stimuli alone. This is why close range fighting always looks much more 'hands on' and 'scruffy'. When someone is completely in your face, a subconscious natural urge will undoubtedly compel you to lift the hands to protect the face. Therefore, a physical connection between you and your opponent with the upper limbs is both probable and necessary to ensure a realistic chance of reacting to any subsequent force being applied against you.



(Fig 3: Tactile Reaction – The opponent's push is felt and an appropriate response becomes possible)

The requirement for touch awareness in Karate

Karate, as a complete hand to hand combat art, encompasses the whole body and by definition, needs to take into account every conceivable empty handed combat range. For karate to be useful as a civilian self-protection system (as it was originally intended), then principles for dealing with close-range combat must be analysed and realistically interpreted.

As practical karate-ka, we are clearly most comfortable at punching range since a large part of the art focuses on striking with the upper limbs and quite rightly so from a self-protection perspective.

However, punching range if not controlled can quickly move into close combat (or trapping) range. Furthermore, close combat range if not controlled, can move even quicker into clinching or grappling - this being the distance we should try to avoid at all costs. Therefore, techniques and drills used to increase skill on a tactile level should be extensively incorporated into the syllabus to help back up our striking, so that the abilities to control an altercation standing up are developed and thus increasing the overall potential for success.

Most martial arts that emphasise practical close-range combat will use some form of tactile exercises designed to increase the ability to use touch reaction. A typical example of this would be the 'chi sau' of wing chun gung fu or tai chi chuan. Traditional karate too has its own type of push hands called 'kakie', which is more popularly seen in styles such as Goju Ryu. Although at first this practice seems on the surface much less 'sophisticated' than its Chinese counterpart, kakie still does at the very least serve to indicate the necessity for karate-ka to become familiar with using touch awareness in close-range encounters.

In addition to and for those styles that don't practice a traditional form of push hands as part of a formal syllabus, similar tactile drills can also be extracted directly from the close-range fighting principles and strategies of the traditional kata. It becomes quite eye opening to many people, that once the underlying principles of the forms are understood, they begin to exhibit a whole myriad of applications based around the effectiveness of close-range tactile awareness. One of these principles, which is perhaps the most extensively taught within the art (although is most applications not understood correctly), is that of hikite.



(Fig 4: Kakie – A typical example of push hands in Karate)

The non-striking limb

The word hikite literally translates as 'pulling hand' and is the term usually used to describe the motion of retracting the non-striking limb during the large percentage of techniques used in karate. Many practitioners will spend years repetitively learning how to pull the rear hand back to the hip or towards a mutual strike without even fully appreciating the huge impact this simple movement can have within close-range combat. The practical applications of hikite are typical examples of how tactile awareness can be used to great effect in close-range encounters and it is for this reason that I'd like to elucidate this idea in a little more depth.

Generally (and practically) speaking, suitable applications found in karate must never be singular in either development or implementation. By this I mean that both sides of the body should be 'live', active and used extensively at all times. The reason behind this idea is twofold. Firstly, fighting at close-range is extremely difficult to begin with. This complexity would increase even more so if you were foolish enough to deliberately limit your effective arsenal by half! In addition to this, we have also established that when all else fails in close range, you need to have a tactile awareness of where your opponent and his/her weapons are in order to have even a slight hope of reacting in time to any amendments made during conflict. Therefore as one hand should strike, the other (non-striking limb or hikite) should be actively and positively utilised in order to achieve one or more of the following three outcomes:



(Fig 5: The use of hikite – Making the strike more effective)

1. *Increase the net effect of the mutual strike.* If a car were to hit a brick wall at 30mph, then the resultant crash speed would be 30mph. In contrast, if two cars, both travelling at 30mph were to crash head on, then the resultant crash speed would double to 60mph. This simple paradigm shows how much more effective your strike can be if your target (a weak area on your opponent for instance) is travelling towards it. This idea becomes even more critical in close-range practical applications where distance (to create power) is certainly not a luxury that's readily available. Therefore the

non-striking limb can be used to forcefully pull available targets directly towards your attacking tool to increase the net effect of the strike.



(Fig 6: The use of hikite – Moving away the opponent's limb to strike)

2. *Eradicate barriers within the intended strike path.* A clear route to the target is desirable to help ensure that any strikes delivered would stand a greater chance of being successful. If a clear path does not present itself then it may be necessary to 'manufacture' one by employing the non-striking hand to clear any obstacle(s) before a strike is launched. This can be achieved in number of ways i.e. using a trap for instance or even incorporating an initial strike in an attempt to damage the opponents covering limb beforehand. This is what the Filipino's would call 'to de-fang the snake'.



(Fig 7: The use of hikite – Sliding up the limb to strike the jaw with 'age uke')

3. *Obtain tactile reference points upon the opponent's body.* Real close-range fighting is a nasty and unpleasant business. In the midst of combat, targets move uncontrollably and the chances of successfully striking accurately become severely limited. This problem is further enhanced if you have happened to suffer strikes yourself and may be disorientated (realistically probable) or if

your eyes are full of tears or blood. In situations like this, having a tactile awareness of your opponent's vital areas is to your clear advantage. As an example, if you seize the back of your opponent's head before striking, then the target becomes much easier to control. In addition, if the target does happen to move, then you will have the ability to quickly alter your strike to suit without having to solely rely on a visual appreciation of where the target is. In addition, it's possible to locate with a sufficient degree of accuracy, many vital areas on the opponent's body by creating a 'reference datum' with the non-striking limb. By acquiring a connection with the forearm for instance, you know that unless you happen to be fighting an extraterrestrial, then at the end of every human forearm is an elbow. At the end of every upper arm is a shoulder and at the end of every shoulder is a neck and face. Although it's obvious that the opponent will not stand still during conflict, these bodily connections will always remain constant and therefore serve to feed an exploitable advantage.

It's useful to note that the three methods for using hikite above require you to first physically touch the opponent. This, as we have already discussed, is a must in close range fighting. It would also be interesting to point out at this stage that the basic 'blocking' techniques found in karate (including the commonly practised 'soto uke', 'shuto uke', 'gedan barai', 'age uke', and 'uchi uke') can all be practically applied to devastating effect by correctly utilising hikite against various reference connections. Although this subject would constitute a whole article in itself, I would recommend that you have a go at applying these with an open mind during your training in order to see for yourself how far away from a 'block' these movements really can become!

Tactile drills in Karate

Practising drills to help increase the ability to use tactile awareness are critical to gaining an understanding of close range fighting, in addition to learning karate in a wholly traditional way. Once the discrete applications found within the kata are fully understood, it then becomes necessary to adapt the principle(s) used in a more natural, free flowing way. This is an important aspect to consider and personally, I believe this is essential to both the correct and complete study of the art. How then, can we go about achieving this in our regular practice?

One aspect that's vital in the development of useful tactile drills is that the movements used should be to a greater extent, spontaneous by nature. The whole idea should be to increase your capability to accurately respond with a predominant reliance on tactile awareness and reaction. By this I mean that throughout the performance of the drill, the sense of touch should be utilised and developed to the utmost so that any changes in the angle and direction of the opponent's force are largely felt rather than seen or heard. Those drills, which for instance are either pre-arranged or are performed with a predetermined quantity of techniques on the left side before switching over to the right (or vice versa) possess an inherent flaw, since they do not rely on tactile awareness and reaction for the initiation to change. These kinds of drills can take much skill to perform, are impressive to watch and are useful in developing other key attributes. However in terms of developing good tactile

awareness, they unfortunately tend to fall slightly short of the mark. You should instead aim to practice exercises that will spontaneously require you to adapt and develop according to your opponent's changes in force application, direction and magnitude.

The Barrier Drill

A very useful drill, which I routinely teach in my dojo, is called 'The Barrier Drill' and is a great way to start developing a fundamental sense of spontaneity. It's used to build an appreciation of actively employing the non-striking hand, in addition to developing the essentials of tactile awareness and how it links to traditional kata. In this exercise (which should be performed at about one third of normal speed to begin with), one person takes the role of attacker and the other acts as the defender. Both stand facing each other with the forearms touching in a typical outside reference connection:



(Fig 8: The Barrier Drill – Starting posture)

From this starting position, the attacker's role is to remove the barrier in front i.e. the opponent's limb, in order to create an opening and then strike to the available target:

英 悟 空 手 道 協 会

EIKOKU SATORI KARATE-DO KYOKAI

The E.S.K.K is a small, but dedicated traditional karate research group located on the edge of the Western Lake District in Cumbria, England. Our dojo is semi-closed by nature to ensure a positive learning environment and its unique syllabus emphasises a very malleable and adaptable approach to the art; in line with its original intent as a civilian fighting system, as well as a method for stimulating personal challenges, growth and achievement.

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(Fig 9: The Barrier Drill – Removing the obstruction and striking)

The defender should then respond by checking and maintaining a connection with the striking limb:



(Fig 10: The Barrier Drill – Defender parries the strike)

The effect of doing this will present another barrier for the attacker to overcome and subsequently strike through the second opening created.



(Fig 11: The Barrier Drill – Removing the next obstruction and striking again)

This process is repeated over and over so that the attacker gets used to removing barriers and striking and the defender becomes accustomed to creating efficient barriers against strike paths that may become available. After a time, the roles/sides can be reversed and the drill resumed again. What's critical is that there should be no set methodology as to which techniques are used. Instead the movements should be performed spontaneously so that with practice, the drill flows naturally without too much thought.

A more advanced stage of this exercise would be to actively employ the particular applications found throughout the traditional kata when it feels most appropriate. The large majority of practical kata applications are usually based around achieving some sort of physical reference point, so once that particular reference has occurred within the drill, then those appropriate applications can be used at will. It is sometimes also very beneficial to restrict your practice of movements within the drill to those found in a single kata. For instance, it's perfectly feasible to practice the barrier drill with movements solely from Pinan Shodan (Heian Nidan). This can become somewhat mentally challenging and restricting, however it certainly causes you to stretch your imagination and appreciate the amount of information that can be contained in just a single form.

To conclude

Close combat range is a distance that we should ideally never find ourselves in. Distance is the main key to successful self-defence, however, everyone is capable of making mistakes and this becomes far more likely in a highly stressful situation such as a physical altercation. The masters of old knew this and recorded (along with other practical concepts) methods within the traditional kata to help achieve success at close range. Karate is a civilian self-protection system, with emphasis placed on attaining personal safety in the quickest amount of time. Therefore the methods used to achieve this can often be quite brutal and damaging for the opponent. The longer our opponent remains cohesive, the more danger we are in. At close range, reacting successfully to visual stimuli is almost impossible.

So instead, emphasis has to be placed on a tactile strategy. By keeping your whole body 'live' and allowing both upper limbs to work positively, you can utilise the concept of hikite to devastating effect. In addition, practising those drills that extract the tactile principles from the kata will help you to naturally flow and become much more spontaneous at close range.

To broaden the concept

Finally (and to get a little esoteric), it's always been my opinion that karate is very much an art that needs to be personally appreciated and owned. To keep a constant open and questioning mind during practice, will inevitably lead you towards a greater understanding. Even though these words only represent a single view – just like peeling an onion, the beauty and mystery will always lie behind the layer not yet removed. Karate means 'empty hand' and therefore by definition encompasses everything. Like many other enthusiastic karate students, I always enjoy exploring the art and pondering its magnitude. Therefore, I'll leave you with something to think about that takes the subject of tactile reaction a little further:

“Those times when the hair on the back of your neck stands up on end, when the atmosphere feels amiss, when you're constantly on edge for some unexplained reason, when you've instinctively made a decision that just happens to feel right– where do these judgements come from, what 'senses' are you using and most importantly, why do you feel the urge to react?”

About the Author:

Chris Denwood 4th Dan is Chief instructor of the Eikoku Satori Karate-Do Kyokai and a senior instructor with the British Karate-Do Chojinkai, one of the most successful associations in the U.K. With over 20 years experience in martial arts, he is a regular contributor to the leading martial arts magazines, 'Traditional karate' and 'Combat', with his articles gaining very positive reviews. His enthusiastic approach to karate has been driven by a genuine urge to uncover the core principles surrounding the art and his thought-provoking work is fast becoming popular with people of all ages and backgrounds. Chris can be contacted for seminar enquiries via his website at www.eskk.co.uk

"Chris's honest approach and genuine love of martial arts shines through in all that he does. He not only loves martial arts, he is fascinated by the complexity of its simplicity. This is, I believe, what drives Chris to dig deeper than the average practitioner. If he continues to explore the uncharted, it is what will in the future, place him in the company of such notable researchers as Harry Cook, Steve Morris, Patrick Macarthy and the late great Don Draeger"

Paul. S. Clifton: Publisher/Managing Director, Traditional Karate & Combat Magazines

"Chris is certainly one of the most thoughtful martial artists I know and one of the very few who examines our tradition in the depth it deserves. His writing seems to effortlessly communicate what are often very profound concepts. He is definitely a unique personality and the arts need more like him"

Iain Abernethy 5th Dan: Internationally Renowned Bunkai Expert & Author

"Chris Denwood is the head instructor and driving force behind the E.S.K.K. They are a great bunch of folk and you would do well to get on the floor with them! It took all but two seconds around Chris and I knew straight away his attitude regarding the arts. He sets the tone for a truly great karate club that's heavily based in tradition, but not at all stagnant. There's no doubt we are both singing from the same hymn book"

Kris Wilder 4th Dan: Head Instructor West Seattle Karate Academy & Author

"It's obvious that Chris's clear open minded approach has had a very positive effect on his self development. Having someone with such high levels of technical expertise coupled with a great thirst for knowledge is a real asset to the Chojinkai organisation"

Doug James 7th Dan: Chief Instructor B.K.C