

# An Introduction to Applied Karate



Iain Abernethy

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# Welcome

Welcome to this “Introduction to Applied Karate”. In this e-book you’ll find the basic information you need to begin practising karate in a functional and pragmatic way. This e-book is not about techniques or producing aesthetic movement. This e-book is about the fundamental changes to thinking and training methods that are required if karate is to be workable in live combat.

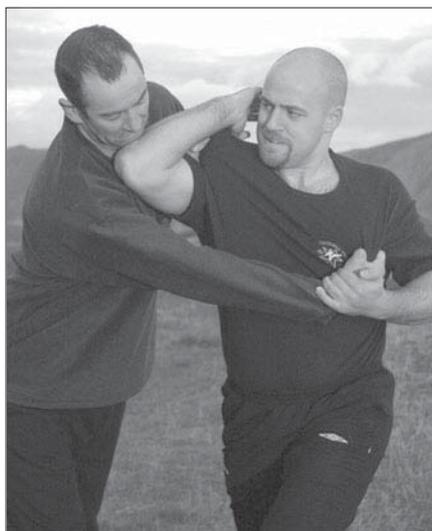
In an e-book such as this, it is obviously not possible to cover all aspects of applied karate. It is hoped that this e-book will provide you with the information needed to get started along the applied karate path and to inspire you to seek out more information to further develop your knowledge and increase your ability.

Although often derided for their perceived lack of practicality, the great irony is that it is the katas that ensure that karate is a pragmatic and functional system (when approached correctly). If you wish for your karate training to effectively develop meaningful fighting skills then your katas must be at the very centre of your practise.

Karate is generally practiced as a fairly limited punching and kicking system; however, the amount of information within the katas is vast! All the katas contain strikes, punches, kicks, throws, takedowns, arm-locks, chokes, attacks to weak points, strangles, wrist-locks, leg-locks, neck-cranks, ground-fighting, etc. In the past, it was common for a whole style to revolve around a single kata!

In this e-book we will be looking at the fundamentals of a four stage approach that will enable you to effectively understand and apply the techniques and concepts embodied by the karate katas. By adopting this four stage approach to kata practise, you will be able to practise karate as the pragmatic fighting system it was supposed to be.

# Introduction to the Four Stages



The first stage is the practise of the kata techniques without a partner and is what most people think of as ‘kata practise’. The first thing that a karateka learns is the actual physical sequence of the kata; the body mechanics required for maximum efficiency; the correct mental attitude etc. This is a very important stage of kata practise. If you are unable to perform the movements in an efficient way when there is no opponent present, you will have absolutely no chance of being able to make those same techniques work when an aggressive opponent is trying to cause you physical harm!

The initial stage of solo performance is often where kata practise begins and ends in many modern dojos. One of the main reasons for this is that the criteria used for determining the quality of a kata is frequently just its visual appearance. If the kata looks good, then it is good! This is obviously a flawed way to view kata when you consider that the katas are supposed to have a functional and pragmatic purpose. To my mind, it is better to judge a kata against its pragmatic use; if the karateka can successfully apply the techniques of the kata, then their kata is good, regardless of what it looks like. Please don’t misunderstand me; I’m in no way saying that poor solo performance is acceptable, just that the goal should always be function as opposed to appearance. A functional kata will often be striking to the eye, but the aesthetics of the kata are essentially an irrelevant by-product rather than the whole purpose of kata training. Gichin Funakoshi (the founder of Shotokan karate) in his book ‘Karate-Do Kyohan’ stated, “*Once a form has been learned, it must be practised repeatedly until it can be applied in an emergency, for knowledge of just the sequence of a form in karate is useless*”. Although the solo performance of a kata is very important, it should not be viewed as the entirety of kata practise. As Funakoshi himself said, unless you can actually apply the techniques of the kata in an emergency, simply knowing how to perform the solo sequence is “*useless*”. We need to be sure we progress our training onto the subsequent stages.

The second stage of kata practise is to study the functional application of the movements of the kata (bunkai). You need to practise applying the techniques of the kata with your practise partners. At this point it is probably worth pointing out the important distinction between realistic bunkai and the more common long range, choreographed karateka vs. karateka battles that are so often seen. The katas were never

designed for fighting other karateka; they were intended to be a record of realistic techniques for use in self-protection. In real situations, people do not assume a stance and then execute an oi-zuki from ten-feet away! If we accept that the kata were designed for use in real situations, then we must also accept that in a real situation we are very unlikely to face a fellow karateka, especially one who executes their techniques in such a contrived and formal manner (you can thank your lucky stars if you ever did!). The applications of the kata should be simple, close-range and not dependant on the attacker performing certain actions in a certain way.

Once you have gained an understanding of the practical application of the techniques of the kata, you should then begin to include variations of those techniques in your training. It should be understood that a kata is meant to record an entire, stand-alone combative system. However, it would not be practical to record every single aspect of that system as the kata would become ridiculously long. It would be far more efficient to record techniques that succinctly express the key principles of the system.

An analogy I like to use to explain how a kata records a complete system is that of an acorn and an oak tree. An oak tree is vast, both in terms of its size and years lived, but everything about that tree, and everything required to reproduce it, is found in a single acorn. A fighting system produces a kata in the same way that an oak tree produces acorns. Both the acorn and the kata are not as vast as the thing that created them, but they record them perfectly. For an acorn to become an oak tree it must be correctly planted and nurtured. For a kata to become a fighting system it must be correctly studied and practised. It is here that we find one of modern karate's biggest failings, in that the katas are rarely studied sufficiently. To return to my analogy, we have the seeds, but we don't plant them!

Hironori Otsuka (founder of Wado-Ryu karate) once wrote; *"It is obvious that these kata must be trained and practised sufficiently, but one must not be 'stuck' in them. One must withdraw from the kata to produce forms with no limits or else it becomes useless. It is important to alter the form of the trained kata without hesitation to produce countless other forms of training. Essentially, it is a habit – created over long periods of training. Because it is a habit, it comes to life with no hesitation – by the subconscious mind."* ('Wado-Ryu Karate' page 19-20). I believe that Otsuka is telling us to practise varying the applications of the kata or else we run the risk of being 'stuck' in the form and hence becoming limited fighters. We need to follow Otsuka's advice and practise so that the form can be utilised, without hesitation, in any situation in which we should find ourselves.

Katas express good examples of the core principles of the combative system that is being recorded. Katas do not record every single technique, combination and variation in the entire system! How could they? So to get the most out of kata we need to practise varying the techniques of the kata whilst staying true to the principles that the techniques represent. This is the third stage of kata practise.

The fourth and most neglected stage is to practise applying the techniques, variations and principles of the kata in live practise. The only way to ensure that you will be able to utilise techniques in a live situation is to practise your techniques in live situations. You need to engage in live any-range sparring if you are to make your kata practise

worthwhile. No amount of solo practise or drilling the techniques with a compliant partner will give you the skills needed to apply what you have learnt in a live situation.

In recent years we have seen more and more karateka begin to include bunkai practise in their training. And whilst this is to be applauded, it is of little use unless we take things one step further and engage in kata-based sparring.

Live sparring and the solo performance of a kata may look radically different, but they are essentially exactly the same. As an analogy, think of a kata as being like a block of ice. The shape of the block of ice is constant. However, if heat is added, the ice will turn into water and its shape will adapt to fit its circumstances. Likewise, a kata also is constant, but in the heat of combat it will also adapt to its circumstances. The block of ice and the free flowing water may look very different, but they are essentially identical (the same molecules of hydrogen and oxygen). In the same way, a kata may look different to the techniques being applied in a live fight, but they are also essentially identical (the same fighting principles). Although the four stages of kata practise may look different, it is vital that you understand that all of them are identical at their core. All four stages are 'kata', not just the solo performance.

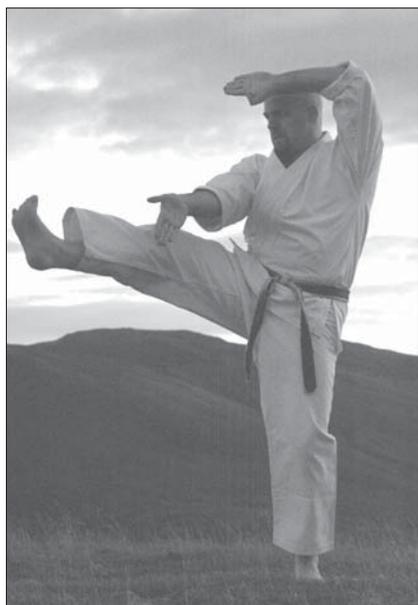
These four stages are by no means unique to Karate. In boxing, for example, a student would first be taught the mechanics of the basic punches (stage one). They would then practise applying those punches against bags, focus mitts and a padded up compliant partner (stage two). Once competence had been achieved, the student would practise combinations, blending the punches etc (stage three). And finally they would get in the ring and try it for real (stage four).

Whilst a student would initially start at stage one and progress to stage four, it should be remembered that the preceding stages should not be abandoned and they must also be practised. Stage four practise is undoubtedly the most realistic; however, you should not abandon the other three stages when you are competent enough to engage in kata-based sparring. The practise of the solo form will allow you to refine technique (it's also a good way to train on the days where your partners are unable to get to training). The practise of the bunkai (stage two) and variations (stage three) will develop your ability to apply the techniques. You will also become a more versatile fighter as your understanding of the kata's core principles improves through stage three training. Conversely, as your ability to apply the techniques of the kata increases, so will the quality of your solo form as the kata will become more meaningful and mentally intense.

The katas truly are works of genius that have a great deal to offer the pragmatically minded karateka. To unlock the whole of what kata has to offer, you need to practise your katas in their entirety. Whilst the solo aspect of the form is very important, it only represents the initial stage. It is only when you move beyond the solo form onto the subsequent stages that it becomes apparent how pragmatic and holistic karate can be.

Having introduced the four stages, we will now move on to discuss each of them in greater detail.

# Stage One: Practising the Solo Kata



It should be understood from the outset that for your techniques to be functional they need to be highly-polished and well-practised. It does concern me that in the quest for pragmatism a growing number of karateka are beginning to abandon training methods such as line-work and even kata practise. The frequent solo repetition of basic technique will develop muscle control, fluid motion, physical fitness, intense concentration, etc; all of which are vital for combative effectiveness. Now it is obvious that if all we ever do is line-work and solo kata then we are not going to develop effective techniques. The solo performance of the techniques is not the destination; it is very much a part of the whole. You must ensure that you regularly and repeatedly drill the fundamental karate

movements so that good form is developed, maintained and advanced.

Line work and solo kata practise should never be a case of just going through the motions; you must constantly strive to improve your technique. In this section we will look at the components of good form.

The basic motions of karate vary slightly from style to style. However, all karate styles adhere to a common set of principles. These principles are merely good physics and as such must not be deviated from if effectiveness is to be attained.

## **The Key Physical Components of Good Form:**

There are no superfluous movements in karate, nor should any be added. Be sure that all techniques are performed with the minimum amount of movement. For example, do not let the elbows flap when the fists are held on the hip, do not hunch the shoulders when punching, do not rock forwards and backwards when moving from stance to stance etc. Assume all stances smoothly and be sure to maintain good balance at all times. It is especially important not to bob up and down when assuming stances. It is said that when performing kata the *'hara must be weighted down'*. The hara is traditionally thought to be the point from which the *'Ki'* or *'life force'* originates. This point is located approximately four centimetres below the navel, half way between the belly and the spinal column. It is up to the individual to decide if they subscribe to a

belief in Ki. Personally, I do not. However, the hara does have a vital role to play in the performance of karate techniques because its location is the centre of gravity for the human body. It is important to keep the hara in mind when practising karate techniques so that bodyweight is transferred efficiently. All movements should originate from the hara. This is nothing mystical but merely the sound application of the laws of physics.

When assuming a stance, be sure to achieve the correct weight distribution. Although the stances vary slightly from style to style, the correct distribution of bodyweight is vital in order to facilitate the application of the techniques. Make sure that the feet are correctly positioned. In particular, be sure that the edges of the feet are firmly on the floor when in long stances. The stances are a vital part of the techniques and great attention must be given to them.

All techniques should be applied using the entire body. A punch that relies solely on the muscles of the arms will have a minimal effect. It is the body movement that generates the power. The limbs are simply used to transfer that power into the opponent. All parts of the body must be co-ordinated and come together at the correct moment if the blow is to be effective. This convergence of forces is referred to as '*kime*' (focus).

Be sure that the techniques are executed with accuracy. If a punch is meant to be delivered at solar plexus height then it must be exactly that, not even so much as an inch either way. Practising the katas in an exact fashion will help to enhance muscle control, improve accuracy and ensure that the techniques are as effective as possible.

The muscles should tense briefly at the end of each technique. The reason for this momentary tension is to protect the joints. For a blow to have the greatest possible effect it must hit the target at maximum speed. If the limb was to carry on moving at high speed then injuries such as hyper-extended elbows could occur. Just before the limb is fully extended the muscles contract so that the limb decelerates in as short a time as possible. Without this type of muscular contraction, the limb would have to start to slow down sooner (if damaged joints are to be avoided) and this would seriously reduce the effect of the blow. A common mistake is for the muscles to contract harder and longer than is actually required. This unnecessary muscular contraction will result in premature fatigue and can slow the delivery of the techniques. Once a technique has been executed the muscles must relax instantly so that the limb is ready to move again. It is important to remember that in kata, as in fighting, there are times to be hard and times to be soft. Using muscular strength indiscriminately is the sign of an inexperienced karateka.

Punches and kicks should be delivered with speed in order to increase their chances of success and their effect. When practising your basic techniques, be sure to move as quickly as possible in order to increase your speed. To develop strength you would lift slightly more weight than you can comfortably manage at present. In order to develop fast techniques, you should try to move quicker than you presently can. Merely plodding through the movements will do little to increase your speed.

Speed is not to be confused with rushing. You must always be sure not to rush your kata. Ensure that every movement must be fully completed before moving on to the next one. Each kata has its own distinct rhythm, the pauses between some movements are long, and others are short. In music it is not only important to play the right notes, they

must also be played at the right time. It is the same with kata. Do not perform the kata at a steady pace but vary the tempo as appropriate.

Breathing is another important part of practise. Air should be exhaled as the techniques are executed. This exhalation should come from the diaphragm and not be excessively noisy as in a grunt or a snort. The breathing must be synchronised with the techniques, otherwise they will become weak and you will tire quickly.

### **The Key Mental Components of Good Form:**

In addition to getting the physical motions correct during basic practise, it is also vitally important that the techniques are performed with the correct mental attitude. All karate training should be intense and with purpose. All movements must be performed in a predatory manner with intense mental focus. You should never forget that all your techniques and physical fitness will be rendered useless in a real situation if you have not sufficiently conditioned your mind.

Kata should be a rehearsal for real situations. The kata must be '*real*' to the point where the opponents actually exist in your mind. You must have no doubt that the techniques you are performing are actually inflicting pain upon an opponent. If you truly believe in the reality of your kata it will be strongly reflected in your performance. Your kata will be 'alive'. Learning 'what goes where' is a relatively simple task compared to bringing the kata to life in this fashion. Master Itosu (creator of the Pinan / Heian katas) once said, "*When you train in karate you should imagine you are on the battlefield. When defending and attacking you should make your eyes glare, drop the shoulders and harden the body. When you move you should always picture the enemy.*" Be sure to put this advice into practise. In your mind there should be no difference between the solo performance of the kata and the actual live application of the techniques and concepts recorded within it. Without this mental intensity solo kata practise becomes empty and meaningless.

## Stage Two: Study the Applications (Bunkai)

As we have already discussed, simply having good form, although vital, is not enough on its own. We must actually practise the applications of those movements with a practise partner. One problem you may face on the path to pragmatic karate is that many (the majority?) of karate instructors don't actually know how the kata techniques can be applied! And where “*applications*” are taught, they tend to be long-range choreographed interpretations that rely on the “*opponent*” behaving in an implausible way. Many of those reading this e-book will not be lucky enough to have an instructor that teaches pragmatic and workable kata applications. So what is the way forward for the vast majority?

One obvious way forward is to study the materials of those who do teach the applications of kata. Read the books, watch the videos and attend the seminars of instructors who specialise in this field and adapt the aspects of their approach that appeal to you into your regular training. There is a growing amount of really good material out there that is sure to help you develop your understanding of kata. That said, the ultimate source of knowledge on kata applications has to be the katas themselves. Contrary to prevailing thought, understanding the katas is not the sole reserve of those who possess ‘*the secrets*’. Everyone can, and should, study the katas for themselves. I feel that it is very important that the individual discovers their own unique understanding and expression of kata applications. You should actively study the katas, as opposed to just practising them.

The fact is that there is no single correct application for any movement! Master Itosu – who had a huge influence on the way that kata is now practised – once wrote, “*There are many movements in karate. When you train you must try to understand the aim of the movement and its application. You have to take into account all possible meanings and applications of the move. Each move can have many applications*” (Page 25: A Precise History of Shotokan Karate by Harry Cook). There are no right or wrong applications, only those that work and those that don't!

We'll now look at a few simple rules that will help you to understand the katas and extract workable applications for yourself.

### **1 - Each Kata is a stand-alone self-protection system.**

It is often said that specific katas are for a specific purpose eg defence against a staff etc. However, katas were created to record the full range of fighting techniques and

principles. When analysing your katas, be sure not to pigeonhole them and hence limit what you are looking for.

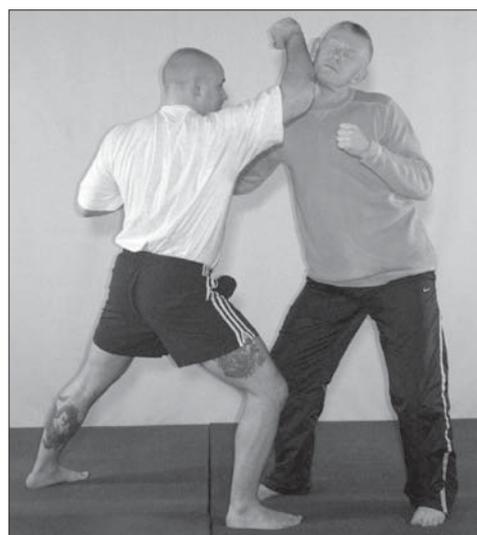
## **2 – All applications of the katas are designed to end the confrontation instantly.**

There is a tendency for katas to be interpreted in an overly defensive way. Many interpretations would have every other movement applied as a block. Each and every movement of a kata should endeavour to end the fight there and then. This may mean that the opponent is totally incapacitated (e.g. unconscious) or left in a very vulnerable position (eg on the floor whilst you are standing).

As an example, we will look at an application of Age-uke (“*rising head block*”). This is commonly interpreted as a blocking movement to be used to defend against a high attack. Aside from the fact that it is extremely difficult to “*block*” anything in a live situation, the common blocking interpretation does absolutely nothing to end the confrontation. A much better way to utilise this motion would be as a response to a single-handed grab. Trap the opponent’s wrist (as in hikite) and strike the superficial branch of the radial nerve (inside upper forearm) using the free arm. As you deliver the strike, step backward into Zenkutsu-dachi (basic front stance) in order to put bodyweight into the strike and to position the body so that you are less vulnerable to being struck by the opponent’s head. This movement will cause the opponent’s head to shoot forwards and turn. The opponent’s free hand will also be made to shoot backward. This will prevent the opponent from effectively delivering any rear hand strike (**Figure 1**). Age-uke is then performed. The forearm will hit the opponent’s jaw as their head drops forward (be very careful in practise). This is a very powerful strike that requires little skill in the way of accuracy, because the forearm is such a large striking weapon and the opponent’s predictable response is considered (**Figure 2**). When delivered with force, the opponent will be instantly incapacitated by the Age-uke.



**Figure 1**



**Figure 2**

### **3 – All parts of a movement are significant.**

It is vital that you examine the movements of the katas in their entirety if you are to effectively understand their purpose. Hands are not placed on the hips or wound up before ‘blocking’ as a preparation for the following technique. No movement is without purpose and a good application must take every single part of the movement into consideration. If the hand moves out to the side before coming back in, then both parts of the movement serve a purpose not just the inward part. In particular, the application



**Figure 3**

of the hikite (pulling hand) must be considered. In Gichin Funakoshi’s 1925 book, ‘Rentan Goshin Karate Jutsu’ there is a short paragraph devoted to the use of the hikite. He writes, “*Here the meaning of the hikite, or pulling hand, is to grab the opponent’s attacking hand and pull it in whilst twisting it as much as possible so that his body is forced to lead against the defender*” It would seem that the true meaning of hikite is to control the opponent’s limbs such that they become unbalanced (**Figure 3**). Be sure to take this into account when studying bunkai. The hands are never held on the hip in preparation for following moves.

### **4 – Every kata move is designed for use in combat.**

We often see movements of katas being explained as exercises to increase strength or improve balance. Certainly, kata is a good way to improve your physical condition, and certain moves do increase strength etc, but that is not their primary purpose. The primary purpose of every movement in a kata is to disable an opponent in combat. In his 1974 book, ‘The Heart of Karate-do’ Shigeru Egami wrote, “*Despite a lack of complete understanding, one should not assume that the movements have no meaning or function. I advise performing the movements, thinking about them, and interpreting them in your own way, concentrating heart and soul. This is practise*”. This includes the opening and closing salutations. As an example, the opening salutation of Passai / Bassai-Dai is often not attributed any combative function (**Figure 4**). However, the motion must be there for a purpose and as we will now see it can be applied as a low level response to the opponent making a threatening hand gesture.



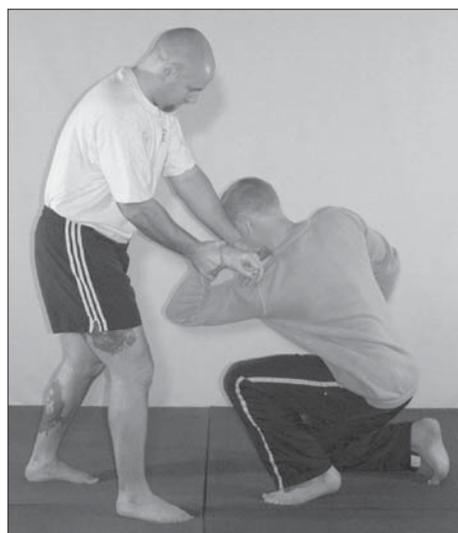
**Figure 4**

Palm the opponent’s hand across as you place the palm of your free hand on the back of their hand, near the knuckles of the ring and little finger (**Figure 5**). Tighten your grip on the opponent’s wrist as you begin to push on the back of their knuckles. Pull the grabbing hand in towards you whilst ensuring the other hand remains in contact and continues to push. This will cause the opponent’s wrist to bend. Push both hands

downward in order to lock the wrist and cause the opponent's legs to bend (**Figure 6**). When analysing kata, be sure to understand that every move has a combative purpose and endeavour to understand that purpose. All movements have direct combative functions.



**Figure 5**



**Figure 6**

### **5 – The angles at which the techniques are performed are important.**

You are never changing angles simply to face a new opponent. In the vast majority of situations the opponent will be in front of you. The main exception being surprise attacks, and by definition you won't know they are coming until it is too late! The kata is telling you to position yourself at that angle in relation to the opponent. Being at the angle demonstrated by the kata will increase the effectiveness of the technique in question.

In Pinan / Heian Yodan kata we have a kick which is accompanied by a simultaneous arm movement. This motion is then followed up with an elbow strike. The whole sequence is performed at ninety-degrees and it is commonly assumed that the reason for



**Figure 7**

this is that the opponent is at a ninety-degree angle to the kata's performer. Most fights do not just 'start'; they are normally preceded by some kind of heated verbal exchange. Statement such as, "What the \*\*\*\* are you looking at?" or "Give me your money!" are common examples. Only a fool would not turn to face their assailant. The vast majority of kata techniques are designed to deal with an opponent who is in front of you. The opponent has managed to secure a grip on your clothing (**Figure 7**). At this point the opponent's back hand is posing the greatest danger. By seizing the opponent's hand, and turning to the side, the karateka is moved off the line of any back hand punch and the opponent's arm becomes



**Figure 8**

locked (**Figure 8**). Notice how the turn to the side is a fundamental part of the movement that lessens the chances of the karateka being hit whilst disadvantaging the opponent. The kata then tells us to pull the opponent back by their hair whilst a simultaneous kick is delivered to the knee (**Figure 9**). The opponent's head is then controlled and an elbow strike is delivered to the opponent's jaw (**Figure 10**).



**Figure 9**



**Figure 10**

## **6 – The stances are a vital component of the techniques.**

A key part of effective fighting is ensuring that you use your bodyweight when applying techniques. The stances illustrate the weight distribution and leg position to be utilised during that technique. Stances are never assumed because they look nice, or to strengthen legs, or to improve balance. Stances are taken because they put bodyweight into the technique or they help to unbalance the opponent. Look at the stance, the weight distribution, the resulting shift in bodyweight and the manner in which the stance was assumed. Ask what techniques the shift in bodyweight would aid and you will be one step closer to unlocking the hidden application of the movement.

## **7 – Real fights are sloppy affairs and the way the application is performed will reflect this.**

The movement in the kata represents the ideal. However, real fights are very chaotic and hence you should not expect the movement to remain exactly the same as it appears in the kata. Provided the movement is recognisable and is the same in essence, a slight loss of form is a good indicator that you are practising in a realistic manner. When applying the kata's techniques your main concern should be the movement's effectiveness, not retaining an inch perfect performance. What is a graceful movement when performed in the kata will become rough round the edges when applied in an all out situation. Visual appearance is irrelevant. The effect of the technique is all that matters.

## **8 – There is a need for skills at every range.**

To be a competent martial artist you need skills at all ranges of combat. Katas are not just striking and blocking drills, they are records of the full range of combative methods. Within the katas, we not only find strikes, but also throws, takedowns, locks, chokes, strangles, holds etc. However, if you've only had exposure to striking methods, then that is all you will see in your katas. This emphasises the need for your training to be as broad as possible. As an example, we will look at a throw from Kushanku kata. The last three



**Figure 11**

moves of the kata see the practitioner step around with their left leg (Figure 11), assume a low stance as the arms are pulled in (Figure 12), and then straighten the legs as the arms are brought upwards (Figure 13). This is normally interpreted as a low block followed by two high blocks. One of the reasons for this bizarre and improbable interpretation is the fact that many modern karateka have not had exposure to ranges other than mid- to long-range striking methods and therefore see every motion as a strike or a defence against a strike (even when it's plainly ridiculous to do so!).



**Figure 12**



**Figure 13**

In a real fight you need skills at all ranges and it therefore stands to reason that the katas will record techniques and concepts for use at all ranges. The sequence just discussed makes much more sense when considered from the perspective of a throw. Turn to the side and take your arm underneath the opponent's lead leg. Lift the opponent's arm just above your head as you step across (Figure 14). Pull the opponent's arm downward so that they are loaded onto your shoulders. At this point your legs should be bent, and your spine should be straight (Figure 15). Straighten your legs to lift the opponent into the air. You can then dump the opponent onto the floor in whatever direction is appropriate. In Kushanku kata the opponent is thrown to the rear (Figure 16).



**Figure 14**



**Figure 15**



**Figure 16**

## **9 – The likelihood of any attack must be considered.**

A common error in martial circles is the misguided assumption that all able fighters will behave like able practitioners of their particular discipline. It is for this reason that the vast majority of books on karate katas show nothing in the way of applications other than 'defences' against 'karate attacks'. In a self-protection situation, your assailant is very unlikely to behave like a martial artist in the dojo or the sporting environment. The 'enemy' in a self-defence situation will utilise vicious and simple methods, and it is these methods that we need to focus on in our self-defence training. There are certainly many other reasons to train; enjoyment, recreation, sport, physical fitness etc. But for the self-defence aspects of our arts, it is vicious simplicity that should be the order of the day. These simple techniques won't be suitable for use against the type of opponent we face in competitive martial arts; they will either be banned or easily countered by practitioners with experience of the method.

It is also worth remembering that most fights occur at close-range and hence one would expect the majority of kata techniques to be for use at that distance. Katas are not about fighting other martial artists. They are about neutralising the aggression of an attacker who is highly unlikely to use ‘*martial arts techniques*’, in an environment where no etiquette is observed or rules obeyed.

### **10 – Strikes should be aimed at anatomical weak points.**

All the strikes in the katas should be aimed at suitable weak areas of the opponent’s anatomy. When analysing your katas you should have a clear idea of which area is under attack. Remember that the katas show the ideal movement. Real fights are intense and frantic affairs and the accurate placement of blows becomes extremely difficult once an altercation is underway. The key thing is to be able to strike the opponent with force. We aim for the weak points that are recorded in the katas, but the reality of combat means that the accurate landing of a blow should be viewed as a bonus.

### **11 – No kata techniques rely upon unpredictable actions from the opponent; however, predictable responses should be acknowledged.**

Personally, I dislike any interpretation where your opponent / partner is required to perform certain actions in order to make the technique valid. A good interpretation or technique should require nothing from the opponent. True applications are not something you do *with* your partner, but something to do *to* an opponent. It is quite common to see applications that depend upon the opponent performing certain actions; e.g. “*it is at this point the opponent responds with a back-fist.*” On this type of application the opponent could respond in any of an innumerable amount of ways and there is often no reason why “*the back fist*” should be singled out for special attention. By relying on the opponent “*playing along*” it should be obvious that the application is unworkable in real situations. However, there are some responses from the opponent that we can predict (e.g. the instinctive way in which the human body moves away from a source of pain).

A classic non-combative example of a predictable response is what happens when you touch something hot. The hand is snatched away before your brain even has time to register the heat. This action is outside the conscious control of the person being burned. They don’t decide to move the hand; there isn’t time for that! Their subconscious mind moves it for them in order to protect the body from harm. The katas use similar methods to cause the opponent’s subconscious to react and hence move them in a particular way. It is important to understand that the opponent moves themselves! All the karateka does is provide the stimulus for the movement. In this way a smaller person can move a larger person, and we have a classic example of using the opponent’s strength against them.

On the sequence from Pinan / Heian Yodan that we looked at earlier (Figures 7 to 10) notice how the opponent’s instinctive desire to move away from the pain caused by the initial elbow lock is acknowledged by the kata (the following hair pull is not performed at “*head height*”, but at the height the opponent’s head is most likely to be).

There are many instances where the katas make use of the body's instinctive programming to move away from the source of pain. For our purposes we will look at one further example from Passai / Bassai-Dai kata (**Figures 17 & 18**).



**Figure 17**

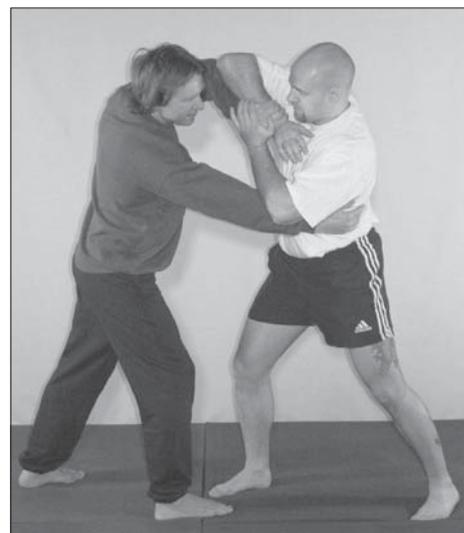


**Figure 18**

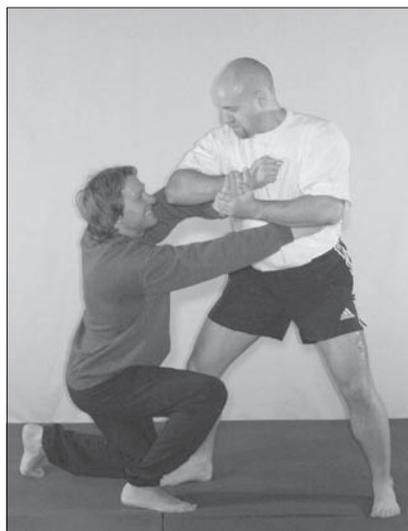
You attempted to gouge the opponent's eyes and they countered by seizing your wrist and moving your hand away from their face (**Figure 19**). Reach up with your free hand and pin the opponent's seizing hand (if you do not pin the opponent's hand, the following rolling motion can still be used in order to release you from the opponent's grip). Having pinned the opponent's hand, rotate your elbow over the top of their forearm (**Figure 20**). Keep your hands close to you and drop your bodyweight in order to lock the opponent's wrist. The lock will instinctively cause the opponent to withdraw from the source of pain by bending their legs (**Figure 21**). Secure a grip on the opponent and deliver a hammer-fist strike to their face (**Figure 22**). You can see how the opponent's predictable response is utilised by the kata.



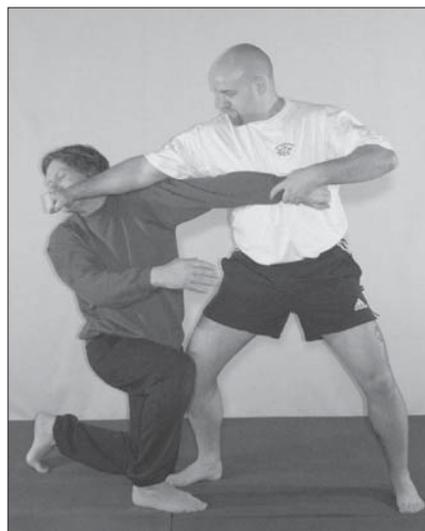
**Figure 19**



**Figure 20**



**Figure 21**



**Figure 22**

### **12 – There are many effective applications for every movement.**

You will often find that a movement in a kata will have more than one effective application. Every one of us is different. It is my belief that everyone must use the katas in a way that works for them. We should all interpret and apply the katas in a way that complements our own strengths and weaknesses. I'm not saying we should radically change the kata, or that we should have a bunkai '*free for all*'. We should, however, ensure that we apply the techniques and concepts contained within the katas in a way that works for us as individuals. This will undoubtedly mean that there will be some variations in opinion with regards to how certain movements and concepts should be applied. That is exactly how it should be! If someone interprets the katas in a different way to you, that does not invalidate your interpretation, or theirs. The only valid measure of an application is its effectiveness.

### **13 – All applications must be workable in real situations.**

It is common sense that a technique must be workable if it is to be deemed valid. However, an understanding of what makes techniques workable is a rarer commodity. It is very common to see the katas interpreted in a way that is overly complex, overly defensive, reliant on a passive or compliant attacker etc. When looking at applications, ask yourself the following questions: Could this technique be applied when under extreme stress? Will it work against an uncooperative and possibly physically stronger attacker? Is the application truly practical or am I settling for the first application I came across that seemed to fit the kata? Is the technique for use against violent untrained attacks or predetermined karate techniques? All kata applications should be relatively simple to use; they were designed that way. If the application you have come up with is not practical then scrap it and start again. For every kata movement there are many practical applications, just keep looking.

In order to be able to effectively evaluate if a technique is workable, it is vital that students are exposed to the sensations of combat. It is for this reason that I believe the serious martial artist must engage in live, any-range, non-compliant sparring.

It seems blindingly obvious to me that if you wish to learn to fight, then you have to practise fighting. No amount of kata, pad work or drills will give you the required skills if you never progress to practise your techniques against a non-compliant opponent. I've written about this at length in my books and we will discuss this in further detail when we cover the fourth stage of kata practise. Suffice to say that if you are to be able to utilise your katas in a real situation, you must practise doing so in a realistic fashion. If you are going to be an able martial artist then you need to experience the sensations of 'combat' first hand. In this way your knowledge will be factual, not theoretical. Hence, you'll be in a better position to interpret the katas correctly.

#### **14 – Endeavour to understand the principles upon which the techniques are based.**

A kata is essentially a record of a fighting system. When constructing the katas, it would make little sense to include every single technique in that system because the kata would become impracticably long. A good fighter would understand that principles are much more important than techniques. Hence, it would make more sense to record techniques that expressed the key principles of the fighting system.

Katas contain information on strikes, throws, chokes, locks, strangles, holds, groundwork etc. To try to fit all the various techniques into a single kata would be impossible. It would therefore make much more sense to record the fundamental concepts that give birth to the techniques. I believe that is exactly what the creators of the katas did. So if, for example, a particular kata contains only a small number of arm locks, it does not mean that we should limit our study to those specific locks. We should endeavour to understand the principles upon which those techniques are based, and experiment with the many different ways in which those principles can be applied. This is what stage three is all about.

It is hoped that the fourteen rules just discussed, and the examples from the katas, will help you to understand the 'language of kata' and extract effective applications from them. For a thorough discussion on kata applications, please refer to my *Bunkai-Jutsu* books and videos.

## Stage Three: Adapt the Techniques and Apply the Underlying Concepts

When you have sufficiently mastered the solo kata, you have gained an understanding of the applications of the kata, and have practised applying those applications with a partner; you should then begin to practise variations of the techniques and explore the many ways in which the underlying concepts can be applied. This point is probably best illustrated by means of an example. Towards the start of Pinan Shodan / Heian Nidan kata we have what is most frequently labelled as a '*double block*' followed by a '*dropping block and inner block*' (Figure 23 & 24).



**Figure 23**



**Figure 24**

The fundamental application of this sequence (stage two) is as follows: You have checked and controlled the opponent's arm. Position your other arm to the outside of the opponent's arm (Figure 25). Push the opponent's forearm backward and down as your other arm pulls the opponent's elbow towards you. This will bend the opponent's arm and twist their Humerus beyond its natural range of motion (Figure 26). Now that the lock is securely applied, keep your arms close to your body and turn in order to cause the opponent to overbalance (Figure 27).



**Figure 25**



**Figure 26**



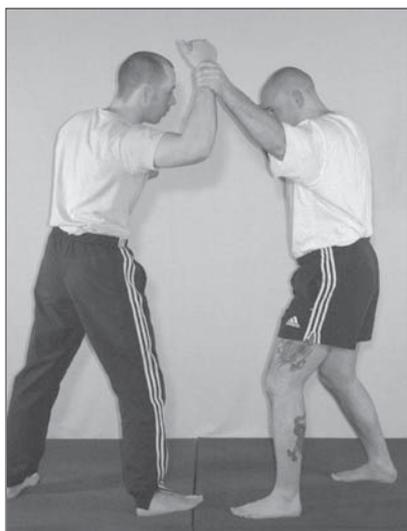
**Figure 27**

Having mastered the fundamental application, we should then study the underlying concepts and examine the various ways in which they can be applied. If we were to examine all the concepts demonstrated by this movement, this e-book would rapidly balloon into an e-encyclopaedia! For the purposes of this e-book we shall select a single concept and examine a few of the ways in which it can be applied and developed.

You will notice how the application shown teaches the kata's practitioner about the limitations of the shoulder joint and gives a good example of how we can exploit those limitations. To engage in stage three kata practise, we now need to examine what those limitations actually are and then look at other ways in which it may be possible to exploit them.

The kata has shown us that we can exploit the limitations of the clockwise and anticlockwise rotation of the upper arm. Whilst the exact range of motion varies from person to person, there comes a point, in both directions, where the Humerus can't rotate any further. Many arm-locks which attack the shoulder joint attempt to twist the Humerus beyond the range of motion permitted by the structure of the joint in order to cause pain, damage the related ligaments and nerves, and control the opponent's body (as did the example from the kata).

As part of our kata study, we should look at other ways in which we can achieve the same effect (utilise the same underlying principles). We will now look at a couple of variations on the kata movement.



**Figure 28**

You have seized the opponent's wrist and pushed their hand backward and to the side (**Figure 28**). Step past the opponent as you feed your arm under the opponent's arm. Grab the opponent's wrist so that your thumbs are towards you (**Figure 29**). Keep the opponent's elbow close to your chest as you pull downwards with both hands. The movement will twist the opponent's Humerus beyond its natural range of motion and is likely to cause the opponent to overbalance (**Figure 30**).

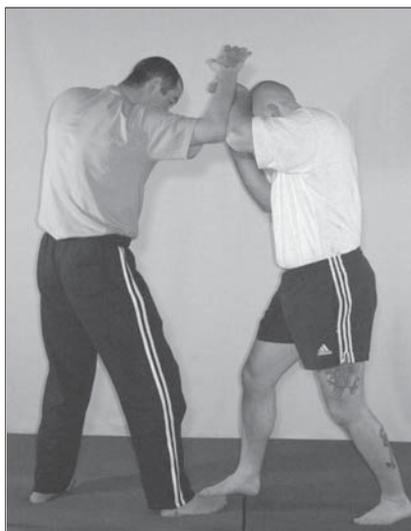


**Figure 29**

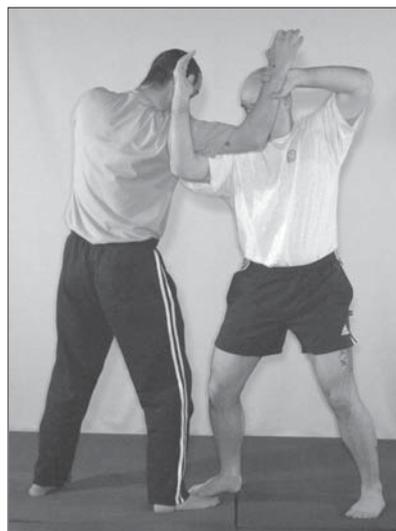


**Figure 30**

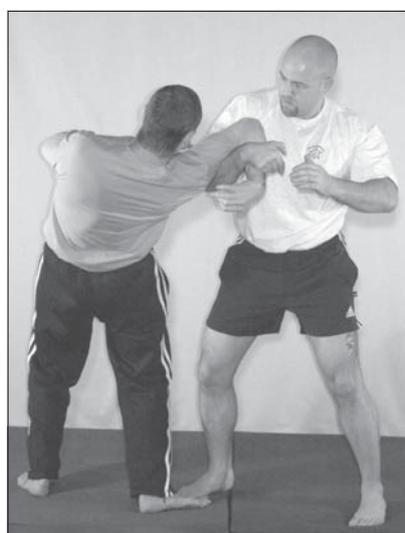
During the fight, your forearm has come into contact with the opponent's (**Figure 31**). Maintain contact with the opponent's arm as you slide your hand back and seize the opponent's wrist. The instant your grip is secure, feed your free arm under the opponent's arm (**Figure 32**). Bend the opponent's arm in a similar way to the way shown by the kata before releasing your grip with one hand as you hook the opponent's wrist with the other hand. Move the opponent's wrist downward as you lift their elbow. This will rotate the opponent's Humerus, lock their shoulder and take the opponent off balance (**Figure 33**). You can use your free hand to strike the opponent on their way down (**Figure 34**).



**Figure 31**



**Figure 32**

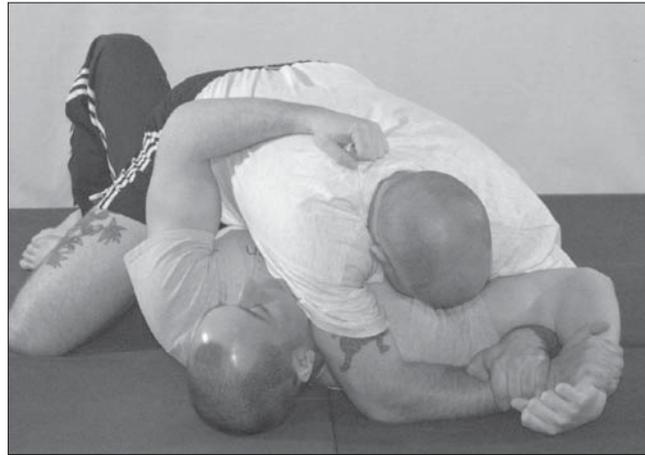


**Figure 33**

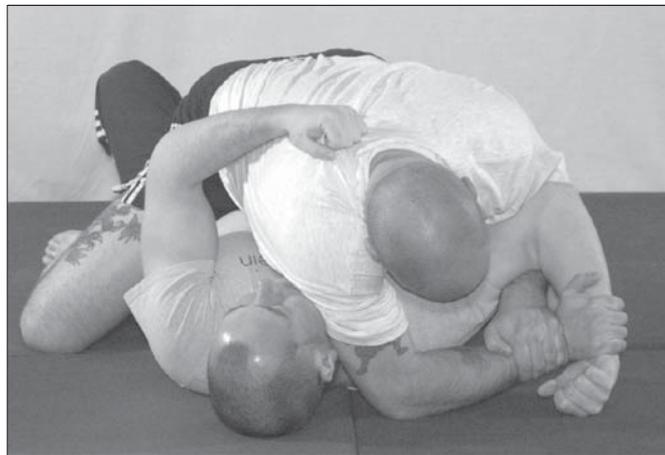


**Figure 34**

You'll notice on both of the preceding techniques how the opponent's arm is twisted in a very similar way to the technique demonstrated by the kata. By practising these variations and learning to apply the concepts of the katas in differing ways you will become a more adaptable and versatile martial artist. In addition to practising '*subtle variations*' you should also explore ways in which the concepts of the katas can be applied in radically different situations. For example, as well as looking at ways in which we can exploit the limitations of the shoulder joint from a standing position, we should also look at how the exact same limitations can be exploited from a horizontal position. From the mount position, seize one of the opponent's wrists and push it towards the ground. Feed your other arm under the opponent's upper arm and grab your own wrist (**Figure 35**). Pull the opponent's arm in towards their body, raise their elbow and rotate their arm in order to lock their shoulder joint (**Figure 36**).



**Figure 35**



**Figure 36**

There are obviously many other ways in which to lock the shoulder joint in this fashion and it is important to explore as many as possible. Although the techniques may start to look quite different from the initial kata technique it is important to remember that they are still based on the same underlying concepts (remember the ice and water analogy used in the introduction?).

It is much more important to understand the kata's concepts rather than amass a collection of techniques. If you only understand specific techniques you will only be able to get them to work in specific situations. If, however, you understand the concepts involved, you will be able to adapt the technique, in line with those concepts, to be suitable for use in many other situations. It is for this reason that you must be sure to include the study and application of these underlying concepts in your training and not limit your study to the specific techniques recorded in the kata. It is vital that you understand that the techniques in the kata are there to demonstrate the underlying concepts. These concepts are far more important than the techniques used to demonstrate them.

## Stage Four: Kata-Based Sparring



Hironori Otsuka (Wado-Ryu Karate) wrote, “*Martial Arts progress from kata, to kumite, to combat.*” If we wish to function effectively in combat then we need to ensure that we progress our katas, and their associated applications, into kumite (sparring). Once we have learnt to apply the techniques and concepts of the katas on a compliant training partner, we need to progress our training to include practise against opponents who resist our every action, because that is what we will be facing in reality! Applying techniques on a compliant practise partner is a world apart from applying them on an opponent who will fight tooth and nail to prevent you from doing so!

The majority of today’s karateka include ‘*kumite*’ in their training. However, the most commonly practised type of sparring is definitely not a progression of kata. Most modern-day dojo sparring uses different techniques, principles and strategies to those employed by the kata and is almost always based upon the rules of modern karate competition. The katas are based on the combative principles needed to survive real combat. Hence, assuming that effective fighting skills are your aim, your sparring should also be based upon those exact same principles.

It is often said that kata and kumite are the same. If your kumite is kata-based then the previous statement is true. However, if your sparring is based on the rules of competition, then the statement is false. Please don’t misunderstand me, I’m not saying that there is anything wrong with competition karate, as I have the utmost respect for the skill and athleticism of its participants. But it must be remembered that the katas are about real fighting, and competitive karate is not real fighting.

It is important that you understand the key differences between sporting kumite and kata-based kumite. Kata-based kumite will allow the participants to continue fighting regardless of the combative range in which they find themselves. Sporting kumite always begins outside kicking range and does not allow grabbing, close-range fighting or ground-work. Sporting kumite only allows a limited number of techniques. Kata-based kumite will include strikes, throws, locks, chokes, ground-techniques etc. Sporting kumite is limited by the associated rules. Kata-based kumite is unlimited (aside from

safety considerations). The most significant difference, however, has to be one of intent. The aim of sporting kumite is to win tournaments. The aim of kata-based kumite is to improve and enhance real combative skills.

If you do not engage in kata-based kumite, you will be unable to apply the techniques and principles of the kata in live situations. Simply practising the katas and their applications, although vital, will do little to improve combative skills on their own. Like many endeavours, it is necessary to have a solid grasp of the theory, but it is also important to put the theory into practise! Kata-based sparring will develop the skills needed to freely express the principles of the kata in a live situation. It should be remembered that the katas are a physical manifestation of combative principles. In order to be a competent fighter, you will need to be able to instantaneously adapt your actions, in line with the kata's principles, to be appropriate to the situation at hand. Kata-based sparring will help you to better understand the kata's principles, and it is the only way in which you can develop the ability to effectively express those principles.

It is imperative that you practise the techniques and concepts of the kata in a fashion that is as close as possible to actual combat. Not only will this type of practise develop your technical skills, but it will also develop the correct combative mental attitudes. You will learn how to cope with fear, discomfort and self-doubt. Kata-based sparring will also develop physical fitness and confidence in your true abilities. It should be a self-evident fact that the only way to become an able fighter is to practise actual fighting! Sadly there are many that believe that simply walking through the kata is all that is required.

There are some who would argue that the techniques of the kata are too dangerous to use in sparring ... and they would be right! There are certainly some kata techniques, eye-gouges for example, that you simply can't use in sparring, but you can indicate them. There are many training methods that will allow us to develop the required skills whilst keeping the risk of injury to an absolute minimum. Before we go on to look at these training methods, I feel it is important that we discuss general safety considerations. Obviously a lot depends upon exactly what type of kata-based sparring is being practised. However, you must understand that many of these drills require a good level of physical fitness and a solid technical background. Please get yourself checked out by a doctor, ensure all necessary safety precautions are in place and be sure you have sufficient skill before engaging in any type of kata-based sparring.

## **Training Partner**

This is undoubtedly the most important aspect of your kumite practise. You need a partner who is sufficiently able to test your skills and who will ensure that your sparring time is worthwhile. If you are winning every bout, then you should consider getting a more able partner. Remember that the aim is to improve your skills, not to feed your ego! Likewise, it is also important that your partner is capable of leaving their ego outside the dojo. Your training partner must be as committed to improving their skills as you are. It is no good if your partner misses training days or stops sparring the instant the going gets tough. A partner who is overly excitable or unable to control their emotions should also be avoided.

Whilst it is important to push your boundaries and not to quit at the first sign of discomfort, it is also important to take good care of yourself. Once an individual has had a solid lock, choke etc applied on them, it is time to tap out, analyse what went wrong, and then start again. The type of individual who won't concede defeat when seconds away from unconsciousness or millimetres away from a dislocated joint should be avoided. Such individuals are a danger to themselves and should not be allowed to engage in sparring while that attitude persists.

You also need to ensure that your training partner is the sort of individual who cares about your safety and well-being. Whilst they should never take it easy on you, they should know when to back off if you are facing injury etc.

You'd also be well advised to get a training partner who will provide you with good feedback. I'd have to say that much of the learning I have gleaned from my kumite has come from talking with my partners between gulps of air as we recover from the fight. Your partner can tell you what went well, what surprised them, what they saw coming etc and then you can use this knowledge to improve your performance next time around.

I have been extremely lucky with the people I have trained with over the years. They have all been talented, hard-working, intense, ego-less and very productive to work with (not to mention good fun as well!). Who you choose as your training partners is one of the most important decisions you will make in your kumite training. Be sure to choose well!

## **Supervision**

All sparring should be closely supervised. It is vital that the person supervising understands the nature of the sparring being undertaken and has knowledge of the techniques and strategies being applied. The observer must understand all the associated risks and keep a close eye on the fight. During the rough and tumble of practise, it is possible that you may not be aware of any predicaments your partner may find themselves in. For example, you may be positioned in such a way that your partner is physically unable to tap out. The observer can keep a close eye on you both and ensure that injury is avoided. If the observer suspects that either party is in difficulty, they should stop the fight without hesitation. The observer can also provide the combatants with feedback on how to improve their performance at the end of the bout.

## **Mats**

Because the fight will involve throws, takedowns and ground-fighting, it is important that the fighting takes place on suitable mats. The mats should be thick enough to comfortably absorb a fall and should be secure enough so that they do not slip apart. It is also vital that the mats are in a good state of repair. I have heard it said that the use of mats should be avoided in training because you won't have any mats to fall on in the street. Whilst this is true, we should not injure ourselves so badly in the dojo that we are in no fit state to defend ourselves outside it! Suitable mats are a must if our training is to be both safe and realistic.

## **Protective Equipment**

It is vital that gum-shields, groin-guards, chest-protectors etc are worn during training. It is also important that suitable gloves are worn if striking is to be permitted. Because of the nature of kata-based sparring, it is important that the gloves used afford your partner protection from your blows whilst still allowing you to seize them for grappling techniques. There are many such gloves on the market today and I'd encourage you find a brand that you are personally happy with. It is also important that the feet, elbows, knees and any other striking surfaces that are to be used are also suitably padded. Head guards are also something you may wish to consider if heavier levels of contact are to be allowed.

## **Control**

By 'control' I mean the level of actual contact that is to be allowed. Whilst heavy contact is obviously the most realistic, it is not always the most productive. You are unlikely to attempt to improve your weaker techniques, or try anything new, if you run the risk of getting hurt every time! If you are fit enough, if you are supervised, if you are wearing suitable protective equipment and are of a high enough skill level then heavy contact sparring may be something you'd like to consider. It is undoubtedly the most realistic way to practise and it is a great confidence builder. Getting used to delivering strong blows in sparring will also help to ensure that you don't inadvertently pull your punches in real situations! However, heavy contact all the time can be counterproductive as it does little to encourage the use of weaker techniques. Sparring with control will allow you to experiment without fear of a solid blow for every mistake made.

It is very important to ensure that control is exercised on locks, chokes etc. The techniques should be applied to the point where the opponent feels a little pain and then taps out. Locks should not be applied with force because a permanently damaged joint could easily be the result. Likewise, chokes and strangles should be applied in such a way that your partner can tap out without being injured or passing out. If you are to control your strikes, you should agree an appropriate level of contact (ensuring all relevant factors are taken into account) and then stick to it. If you've agreed to keep the contact light, then keep it light! The observer and your partner can ensure that you stick to the agreed boundaries. It is also important to limit the level of contact when striking with unpadded areas e.g. head-butts. In these instances contact should be little more than a touch.

## **Substitution and Omission**

Some techniques are simply far too dangerous to be used in sparring and hence they need to be either substituted or omitted. Techniques such as strikes to the groin, kicks to the knees, neck-cranks, eye-gouges, biting etc should obviously not be allowed. However, you could substitute some of them for safer alternatives. That way the skills needed to apply and defend against such techniques are developed without running the risk of serious injury. As examples, you could touch just above the eyebrows to indicate that your partner is open to an eye-gouge, grabbing the inside leg of the trousers can be used

as a substitute for groin attacks, gently nipping with the teeth can be used to show vulnerability to bites etc. Some techniques should be omitted altogether e.g. neck-cranks, strikes to the throat, kicks to the groin etc. Remember that training should be realistic, but by definition it can never be real. So some concessions need to be made in the name of safety.

Please consider all the risks when engaging in kata-based sparring and endeavour to make your training as safe as it can possibly be. Be sure to take into account all required safety precautions so that your training is realistic without being overly dangerous. Now that we have looked at the various safety requirements, we shall now move on to look at the differing ways in which the techniques and concepts of the katas can be realistically practised. We will begin by discussing some compliant drills before moving on to the various types of non-compliant sparring that are vital if the katas are to be effectively expressed in real situations.

### **The Learning Phase**

While you are initially getting to grips with the application of a kata movement, it is important that the opponent offers no resistance and simply moves as the technique directs. If a mistake is made, the technique should be abandoned and then repeated whilst endeavouring to correct the initial mistake. Once the basics of a particular technique have been understood, you should begin to practise the application while moving. After all, you are highly unlikely to remain rooted to the spot in a real situation. Developing the skills needed to apply a technique whilst on the move is a must. The aim of this type of practise is to acquire the basic mechanics of the movement, and it is a critical part of learning to apply the kata in real situations. However, once the basics of the movement are understood, it is vital that you reduce the amount of compliance offered by your partner. After all, an opponent in a real situation is highly unlikely to be compliant!

### **Continuation Practise**

In a real situation, it is very unlikely that every technique you use will work exactly as planned. Hence, it is important that you develop the skills needed to instantaneously change your actions so that they remain relevant to the situation. If a particular sequence of movements is no longer relevant, you should abandon or adapt the technique rather than rigidly stick to the initial sequence. During continuation practise, you and your partner will practise a kata sequence whilst offering only a little resistance. If an error should be made, the person performing the kata technique should not stop, but should instantaneously move on to another appropriate technique. The person on the receiving end of the technique should attempt to counter and gain the advantage. After two to three seconds, the drill should be abandoned and the initial technique practised again.

If the initial technique is successful then the person who is applying it should follow that movement up with whatever action is appropriate. Again, the recipient should endeavour to counter that technique and gain the advantage. As before, the continuation period should only last for two to three seconds. This drill will start to develop your

ability to freely express the techniques and concepts of the kata so that you do not get locked into any fixed patterns.

### **Themed Practise**



Themed Practise is rapidly practising a particular set of kata bunkai that have a common theme. For example, you may pick five differing chokes from the katas, or five throws, or five counters to grabs etc. You will then rapidly run through all five techniques, and then your partner will apply those same five techniques against you. You will then swap sides and repeat the drill. The aim is to limit the amount of time you have

to think and hence promote spontaneous action. If an error is made, you should instantaneously apply a suitable technique as in continuation practise. The aim is to keep moving with no hesitations. Should you or your partner stall, you may wish to consider the imposition of penalties, e.g. 20 push-ups, as an added incentive. After all, stalling in combat can have dire consequences!

### **Compliant Sparring**

In compliant sparring, both partners take it in turns to rapidly apply any techniques they wish from within the katas. The person on the receiving end does not put up a great deal of resistance and simply goes with the technique. Because your partner will not know what is coming, they are less able to actively comply. As before, should you find the initial technique is no longer appropriate, you should rapidly move on to a more suitable manoeuvre. Once a technique has been completed, both participants should return to a neutral position. The aim of this particular drill is to encourage rapid thinking, to practise applying techniques appropriate to the situation, and to allow the practise of weaker techniques without fear of your partner's counter-attacks. There should be no hesitation between techniques.

A good way to practise compliant sparring is against the clock. For example, a two-minute period where both practitioners have to execute a minimum of twelve techniques each. This should be fairly easy to achieve if you flow from one technique to the next. If, however, there are undue hesitations, then you will run out of time. This drill can be fun to do, and it is a great way to warm up for the non-compliant sparring. However, it should be remembered that opponents are never compliant in a real situation. It is of great importance that you progress from the compliant drills on to the non-compliant ways of practise that we are now going to discuss.

## **Bulling**

Bulling is a basic form of sparring that is designed to improve your balance, footwork, grips and your ability to control the opponent. The participants both secure a grip on each other and then try to move the other person to a predetermined spot on the dojo floor. You will quickly learn that raw strength is nowhere near as efficient as sensitivity and the skilful manipulation of your partner's movements. The main aim of bulling is to introduce the student to some of the sensations associated with grappling. In my own dojo, we also use bulling as part of our warm-up routine.

## **Grip and Lift**

This is a drill that will allow you to practise and counter the various grips associated with the katas. Both participants start a few feet apart with their hands by their side. The aim is simply to grip your partner around the waist and lift both their feet off the floor. As you try to lift your partner, you will also have to counter your partner's attempts at securing a grip around your own waist. This will help to develop your gripping skills, which are critical if you wish to be able to apply many of the techniques found within the katas.

## **Stand up**

One participant lies on the floor whilst the other one attempts to hold them down. The aim of the person being held is to get up onto their feet, and the aim of the other person is to prevent them from doing so. If the person being held should get to their feet, then they are declared the winner. If, after a predetermined amount of time has elapsed, the person is still on the floor, then the one doing the holding is declared the winner. It should be remembered that in a real situation, the amount of time spent on the ground must be kept to an absolute minimum. This form of practise will help you to develop the required skills.

## **Striking only**

In this type of sparring, both participants can only strike. The amount of contact allowed depends upon the skill and physical condition of the participants, and protective equipment being used. It should be remembered that we are talking about kata-based sparring, and hence it should be the methods recorded within the katas that we should be using. We should use knees, elbows, head-butts, kicks to the thighs etc (in such a way that safety is always maintained) and the fight should take place at close-range. We should not exaggerate the distance and begin using high-kicks etc as in Shiai kumite (competition sparring).

## **Striking and Grips**

As above, except that this time you may also seize the opponent in order to position them for strikes and to prevent them from striking you. An interesting variation is to have one participant who can only strike, and the other one must seize the opponent in order to prevent themselves from being struck. Either way, no throws, locks, chokes etc

are allowed. This is a good drill to develop your ability to control the opponent at close-range.

### **Throws Only**

For this type of sparring, both participants start a couple of feet apart. On the observer's signal to begin, both participants will attempt to throw the other to the ground. A clean throw is fairly difficult to achieve and should both participants hit the floor together, as is often the case, then the bout is declared a draw. The participants should then regain their feet and continue. If your partner should find themselves on the floor, whilst you are still on your feet, then you are the winner and vice-versa. This drill will improve your ability to apply and counter throws. It will also improve your ability to take the opponent to the ground with you should your balance be broken.

### **Throws and Strikes**

As 'Throws Only,' except the use of strikes is now permitted. It should be remembered that striking is always the preferred option in a real situation. Hence, striking should also be the preferred option in training. If your strikes create the opportunity for a throw, then take it, but don't go looking for throws in the first instance. If heavy contact is to be used, then the winner is the one who manages to take the other off their feet, either through being knocked down by the strikes, or through the application of a throw. If control is to be applied, a ruling on what strikes will be classed as winning blows should be made e.g. "*three head punches in a three-second period*". The observer should then declare the winner when that requirement is met or a successful throw is executed.

### **Ground-work**

Both participants sit back to back on the floor. On the observer's signal they will turn and wrestle for position. Neither participant is allowed to stand up. The winner is the one who can get their partner to submit by using the techniques of the kata. All locks, chokes, strangles etc are permitted. The use of strikes can also be allowed depending upon what areas the participants are wishing to develop. It is important that the observer keeps a close eye on the fight in case either participant should find themselves in difficulty.

### **Grappling**

All of the grappling techniques of the kata are allowed (excluding neck cranks etc). Both participants start from a standing position and may use throws, chokes, strangles, locks, ground-techniques etc. The winner is determined by submission. In order to prevent the participants from opting to go to the ground to get a submission, which would be a foolish thing to do in reality, the following rule should be applied. If one participant is prone, whilst the other is upright, then the one who is upright may win the fight with a single controlled kick to their partner's body.

## Limited Sparring

In this type of sparring, one or both of the participants is given a limitation e.g. one can only kick; one can only strike, the other can only grapple; one can only win with arm-locks, the other can only win with chokes etc. The variations are endless. This drill is particularly useful for developing your weaker areas. It is also a good way to learn about the strengths and limitations of the various methods.

## All-In

This type of sparring is the most realistic and demanding. 'All-In' sparring should only be attempted by those in excellent health and who have a high enough skill level. Strikes, throws, chokes, strangles, locks, ground-work etc are all allowed. The participants begin from a standing position and then fight until the allotted time expires, there is a win via a submission or the observer stops the fight. If one fighter should be prone then the fighter who is standing may deliver a single controlled kick to the opponent's body to win the match. No hard stamps should be delivered whilst training due to the inherent dangers of such methods. As before, if the blows are to be controlled then the fighters should agree beforehand which ones will be classified as stopping blows. If the fighters have sufficient skill and appropriate protective equipment, then the blows can be delivered with more force. Obviously no blows should be aimed at the groin, throat etc. Practising your katas and their applications on a compliant partner, although very



important, will do little to improve your ability to defeat a non-compliant opponent in a real situation. It is vital that you progress your training so that you practise the application of the kata's techniques and principles in a realistic way. If effective combative skills are your aim, then you must ensure that you make the drills and sparring methods described in this e-book a regular part of your training.

# Conclusion

**T**hat concludes this brief introduction to the four stage approach to applied karate. In an e-book such as this we are only really able to scratch the surface and I'd ask you to visit [www.iainabernethy.com](http://www.iainabernethy.com) or refer you to my books, videos and articles if you'd like to learn more. I sincerely hope that you found this e-book useful and that it will help you develop your ability to apply the techniques and concepts recorded within the karate katas.

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