

The meaning and importance of bunkai  
By Irina Idrissova  
York Karate-Do©

Karate involves one's physical development, including correct biomechanics and memorization of techniques, but it also involves strategic analysis and study of the human body and various combat situations using the tools given to one in the teachings. Karate-ka constantly exercises not only her body but also her mind. This aspect of karate is embodied in the practice of bunkai, which is an analysis and application of kata moves.

Kata is an effective mechanism that provides a karate-ka with a roadmap to all the deadly techniques, both offensive and defensive. Originally kata was developed by the martial art practitioners to be able to practice techniques on their own, simulating battles without the use of an opponent. In that sense, it can be compared to a modern-day flight simulator for pilots, providing a karate-ka with an experience of a "virtual battle". Richard Kim in "The Weaponless Warriors" argues that: "Kata in itself is a teacher forever. One does not have to go to the dojo except to be under the eye of a sensei whose function is to see that one is going in the right direction". Kata also provided an effective form to pass on the fighting skills to the next generation of students. Of course, a large component of kata training is energy development, breathing and improving one's conditioning. However, the primary purpose of the kata was to teach one how to fight. Deciphering the kata is bunkai, which enables a student to take moves out of a kata, interpret them and use them as fighting techniques. Often these techniques are not obvious and require thorough analysis, which makes practicing bunkai crucial to one's training.

As karate spread to the West, the Japanese masters, known for their secrecy, did not necessarily teach all the key principles of bunkai to their western apprentices. Peter Urban in "The Karate Dojo" writes: "Karatemen tend to be secretive about their important discoveries; they do not want them to be misused or cheapened through easy access. For this and other reasons, many of the movements and postures of the katas are disguises for the true movements, and many meanings contained within them are varied to contain the mood or intention of the performer." As a result, kata moves were open to the students' often-misguided interpretation. It is frequently the case now that one comes across some bunkai for kata moves involve elaborate and often unrealistic explanations, such as fighting in narrow alleys or on ancient boats. Perhaps this has something to do with the katas brought over from Japan without grasping the true meaning of bunkai. As karate gained popularity in the West and developed into more of a sport than a fighting art, kata became more 'artistic' in its execution with an emphasis on the aesthetical appeal. It seems that tournament katas of today resemble more a dance than a deadly sequence of attacks. Bunkai has lost its emphasis in the training since kata moves are often dismissed as a legacy of the karate past that will never be utilized in a real fight.

However, an effective study of bunkai is exactly what makes the cryptic kata moves useful for combat as it allows one to practice the principles that kata teaches. Bunkai involves continuously employing one's mind to combat, actively thinking of the move applications. Gichin Funakoshi talks about a similar principle in "Karate-do, My way of life": "...your opponent must be always present in your mind, whether you sit or stand or walk or raise your arms ... You may train for a long, long time, but if you merely move your hands and feet and jump up and down like a puppet, learning karate is not

very different from learning to dance.” This highlights the fact that one does not need a sparring partner to train, as well as one of the key principles of bunkai practice - visualizing the attack, especially when practicing kata. One practices bunkai every time she does katas by visualizing the attack sequences during kata, and then testing, analysing and perfecting the technique when practicing with an uke. Bunkai makes sense of the kata and teaches one the principles of combat.

Several of these principles are described by George Dillman in “Advanced Pressure Point Fighting of Ryuku Kempo” and include the “no blocks rule”, the “pressure point rule” and the “two-hand rule”.

The “no blocks rule” states that blocks are a natural reaction and therefore kata does not necessarily teach blocking, as was thought previously. Instead, moves that are commonly interpreted as blocks make for effective offensive techniques. A conclusion here is that in bunkai one should focus on developing offensive and pre-emptive techniques using kata, instead of worrying about proper ‘blocking’.

Bunkai takes on a new meaning with the “pressure point rule”, which maintains that every kata move is an effective pressure point technique. George Dillman says: “Every kata technique is a pressure point technique...There are hundreds of pressure points, each with its own angle and direction for activation. Kata is, quite truthfully, the only way to remember them all.” When a martial artist applies proper pressure point and energy redirection methods to one’s bunkai, it enables her to develop techniques that are truly deadly. Kata then becomes even more useful in its application as the previously puzzling nuances of kata moves pinpoint the proper execution of pressure point techniques.

The two-hand rule confirms what there is no wasted move in a kata, just like there should not be a wasted move in combat. ‘Chambering’ one hand to ‘prepare’ to punch, or shifting stances idly is a luxury one cannot afford in a fight. That is also why many of the kata moves that are misinterpreted as aesthetic yet useless are dismissed in the application context. However, each move serves a purpose, with the interpretation that is almost always simple but not always an obvious one. For instance a ‘chamber’ can be interpreted as a grab and a pull and shifting stances becomes significant in a grappling situation. Not only applying this rule ‘makes sense’ of the moves, it also dictates proper biomechanics, directing one’s body in proper directions and forcing it in the proper postures and angles as dictated by the kata. Therefore, bunkai also teaches one the principles of combat biomechanics.

These rules highlight the fact that bunkai is a truly universal tool. Bunkai allows for many interpretations of the same kata moves, but at the same time it must have precision to be truly effective. Because the study of bunkai is flexible, it allows one to adopt a kata to oneself - “making the kata your own” (principle 4 of kata). It allows the student to successfully mould the moves depending on one’s size, strength and level of skill. New bunkai become apparent as one continues studying in the art and learning more about combat, human body, pressure point and joint manipulation techniques. Bunkai can be as simple or as complicated as one wants it to be, although the simpler ones are usually more effective. It is equally important, however, to be precise in bunkai. One kata move can produce several equally effective techniques, but each must take into consideration every angle, step and every peculiar-looking hand movement in the kata, as

they account for the pressure point angle and direction, effect on the opponent and biomechanics.

Bunkai is irreplaceable in one's study of karate, as it teaches principles necessary for effective training. It coaches the student to continuously employ her mind to the kata teachings, to question, explore and develop effective applications. Only with an active and open mind can one have the opportunity to make the connection between the practice on the dojo floor and the challenges of real-life situations.