

The importance and meaning of Bunkai

A look behind the scenes of Karate's most misunderstood element

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An introduction

The word "Bunkai" means "to find meaning". In other words, to investigate, search, and find the real application of the movements in Kata. Unfortunately, the very search for meaning comes up with a wide variety of responses. For example, you might ask someone at most dojos about bunkai and be told that kata (and bunkai) are nothing more than a sequence of steps but are largely useless and that the "meat and potatoes" of karate are in kumite (combat). Or, you might be told that you are fighting many opponents in a variety of situations ranging from fighting on a boat to fighting over the bodies of dead people, or other such stories and that kata prepares you for those scenarios. Or if you are lucky, you might find someone who will tell you what kata is all about, and show you that it is an efficient means of remembering some of the most deadly techniques ever invented.

The range of responses will make most people ask "why?" Why is there such a broad range of interpretation? The answer lies in understanding a little about Karate's past and the context in which it spread.

A grossly simplified History

The fact that Karate itself was a deadly art was not really a secret. Like most martial arts, the people of area developed a system of combat based on their knowledge of the body. The masters of a particular style would then teach their students to fight by showing them where to attack. As you progressed you were shown why things worked

the way they did and you were able to then keep studying and develop techniques that worked for you. The most dangerous techniques however, were reserved for their closest students and often the inheritor of the style would be the only one with a complete knowledge.

However, this all changed with the end of World War II. Outsiders (namely American servicemen) witnessed the effectiveness of Karate and wanted to learn it for themselves. At the same time the government, having noticed the excellent physical condition of karate practitioners, wanted to institute Karate education in its school system. The masters however, did not want to teach a) their enemy that just defeated them in war and b) children the secrets of their work. So as a result they stripped down and modified slightly the techniques and left their true meanings secret. In this way, they were able to maintain supremacy over the art.

The consequences

What the masters did not anticipate however, was the flourishing of the martial arts in the west. As awareness of Karate grew, so did those looking to learn. The result was that many dojos opened up and the people that were running them were westerners who were never taught anything more than children's karate. This would be the equivalent of trying to teach someone calculus without understanding concepts of addition and subtraction.

Combine this with the rise of martial arts film (with such pioneers as Bruce Lee creating immense interest), the ignorance of the true meanings to the techniques, and the typical western arrogance of believing that they knew everything, it really isn't any wonder why there is such a wide gap in understanding what bunkai is. And although

some people were starting to realize that there must be more going on than just “block, block, block” and there was some progress to try to earnestly figure out a better meaning, the truth of bunkai stayed right where the masters wanted, a secret.

An effort to undo the damage

Now we fast forward to the present where there is considerable progress being made in unlocking the true meanings of kata. Especially notable here is the work of George and Kim Dillman and their organization. They have taken the kata and using pressure point theory (the same points that are used in acupuncture and shiatsu) have shown how every move in kata is a series of pressure point nerve attacks that produce devastating (even fatal) effects.

The ideas presented are sound and the effectiveness cannot be argued. It makes perfect sense that in order to truly understand the application of karate (or any other martial art) you first have to understand how the masters of the art understood the human body. Once you understand the body the way they did, you begin to see the meanings that were implied in the kata all along.

This is precisely what the Dillmans’ teach us. We now understand not only how to knock out opponents, but also why. The Dillmans’ teach us 6 main concepts: (1) **No Block Rule:** there are **no** blocks in kata. (2) **Pressure Point Rule:** Every move in kata is a pressure point technique. (3) **Two Hand Rule:** Both hands in the kata action move because both hands are combative in the function. Also known as two-way action. (4) **Multiple Interpretation Rule:** There is more than 1 interpretation of a kata move. (5) **Direction of Movement:** The direction of the movement in the kata indicates the angle the defender assumes in relation to the attacker in order to apply a technique

successfully. (6) **Visualization Rule:** Always visualize the points you are striking on your opponent as you do your kata. By applying these precepts to kata, the scope of what is actually possible in kata is extraordinary.

Epilogue

The impact of the Dillmans' pressure point work is great. The most important reason however, is that with the application of the pressure point theory, Karate is opened up to many more people, especially the small. Practically every karate student or martial arts enthusiast has heard of the "small, little man" that could take out the biggest of opponents. With the old "traditional" understanding of Karate, while it will give someone a slight advantage against a really slow and untrained opponent, the idea of a small man's art is simply not possible. In that scenario, size and strength would always win.

If, however, you apply the real bunkai of Kata, you equalize your chances against much larger opponents. In fact, the bigger the opponent, the easier points are to locate and strike. This is what the meaning and importance of kata are all about; the ability to take control of a confrontation out of the opponent's hands and into your own.