

How to Practice a Kata

Most traditional Eastern martial arts have kata, or training forms, that are practiced to develop technique, or to simply pass on a tradition. When certain people practice them, they look sharp and have a certain presence; when other people do them, they look like some kind of silly aerobic exercise. This article will help you understand the difference and apply it to your kata practice. Kata practice is, however, more than simply performing the steps well, though that is important.

Steps

1. Get into the mindset. At the opening kamae (combat posture), e.g. uncrossing your arms and putting your feet at shoulder width, imagine you are about to enter a real fight. This involves two things: Projecting confidence and being aware of what's going on around you in a full, 360 degree circle. This should continue throughout the kata, as visualizing every punch striking home will keep your attacks crisp and strong. Regardless of the actual posture (there are a wide variety of opening kamae for empty-handed and weapon arts), the mindset is the same.

2. Perform your first step (or group of steps) against an imaginary opponent of exactly your size. Imagine that if you don't block or strike perfectly, you will be killed. Not hurt, not embarrassed—killed. You must move with this purpose in mind, or you're just doing some sort of strange aerobics in Japanese underwear.

3. Relax between steps. There should be a natural build up of power in each series of techniques, then a pause in-between. If you are stiff throughout the kata (a) it will look bad, (b) you will be training your body to telegraph your moves. The key point is to relax (lower) your shoulders. It is natural to tense up; this is why kata training helps.

4. Some styles have kamae (combat postures) in the middle of the kata. These are not meaningless breaks in the form; these are moments where you are supposed to project yourself and stare down your imaginary opponent, as if to say with your eyes "You can withdraw and I will show mercy, but if you don't, I will kill you." Again, not "I will hurt you" or any of that shoulder-flinching stuff; I will *kill* you. This is a completely different mindset. The main point of kata practice is to develop this mindset so that when you're actually confronted, it automatically turns on, because you've prepared for confrontation this way (as opposed to the natural way, which is to be frightened). If you haven't imagined real opponents, you are not developing this mental skill in your kata practice.

5. Understand that usually the last technique of the kata is the most dangerous or sophisticated. After the last move, pause a moment, and slowly return to the opening kamae (posture). This is done slowly to ensure the final, imaginary opponent is dead. Do not relax your presence or awareness until you bow, or you'll look like you're "phoning it in".

Tips

A technique popular with many high-ranking martial arts practitioners is to imagine that they are confronting a many-headed dragon, attacking from several directions. While it may sound silly, the point is to force you to strive for absolute perfection in every element of the form.

While it is possible to kill someone with one hit, of course this does not always happen. The point of imagining a single, lethal blow is so that you will focus all your energy in that one strike; that way your techniques will reach their full potential.

Most Kata techniques are practiced against the middle-zone of the target (the torso) because this is the core of the target – it's easy to bob your head or move a leg, but it's harder to fake a move with your whole body. Practicing against the middle-zone is most important.

Some karate schools kiai (yell) throughout the kata; some kiai only at the end; some kiai only while performing the strongest techniques of the kata, called in English "finishing techniques" or "killing techniques"; some do not kiai at all during certain kata. As karate was originally practiced in Okinawa at night or early morning, in someone's yard or a room of their house, and this sort of training was banned by the mainland Japanese government, there were some systems that didn't have any yells until the modern era. Other styles use kiai to focus all energy (ki) of the body and mind in one single blow, so kiai is not just a scream, but a breathing technique that comes out not from the lungs, but from the tanden. That's why most traditional Okinawan styles do have two or three throughout a kata: they don't yell in every technique, and the focus in the strongest blows.

Regardless of whether you kiai or not, try to use the same level of focus in all the kata, but focus all your energy (ki) in the strongest techniques. They usually are at the end of a series of movements in one direction; don't just save it for the last technique, or your kata will look soft, and you will be practicing ineffectively. Also, do not overemphasize kiai screaming at every technique, like they do in open tournaments. Some martial art schools, far from their sources, have added a kiai that sounds like a loud whisper made by blowing air through the mouth, lifting the point of the tongue to the alveoles in the upper side of the mouth ("tsssss!"). It is a waste of energy. Other schools do their kiai from the throat, which may damage the vocal cords; it is also wrong. The only traditional kiai in Okinawan karate is done from the tanden. Imagine each technique against an imaginary opponent is decisive, and this will help your technique against a real opponent be decisive, too. If you add a traditional kiai from the tanden to the strongest to those techniques, your kata will be right (although you will not win open tournaments).

Kata training helps you develop technique, but it does not help you develop power. To do that, you need to strike something that offers resistance, such as a punching bag or makiwara (striking post) for empty hands, or similar device designed for weapons. This should be done in a slow, careful, progressive manner to build the strength of the wrists and ankles, and a sense of your own striking range. It will also improve your kata performance by making your moves more powerful and realistic. People who only do kata without striking against a bag or post have a light, whip-like style that exaggerates their true striking range. This is easy to see with a little training; it works in no- or light-contact tournaments, but not in fights, because it doesn't strike through the target.

There are two characters used for "kata" in Japanese; the first is a fixed form, like a sewing pattern; the second is a form that can be adapted to suit a given situation. Martial arts kata are the second kind; you are supposed to adapt the techniques to suit your own body and personality (though not necessarily to perform the kata differently).

When you kiai, do it loudly. It shows confidence and strength.

When practicing a kata, keep remember not to go up and down. Some kata only has 1 stance, make sure if you start low in your stance, keep doing your kata low, if you start high in your stance, go high.

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