

WHY KATA?

A Kata is a series of offensive and defensive movements arranged into a set geometrical pattern. Kata are passed from teacher to student within a particular ryu (or style) and are, in essence, the "memory banks" of that ryu. Within the katas are the offensive and defensive techniques the early ryu masters thought important enough to pass on. Kata teaches the essential "flavor" of a certain style of martial art, even when two styles utilize the same kata.

It is essential that teachers attempt to pass on katas in their pure and original forms. It is essential, because even when passed down with great diligence, kata do change over time. Why? Because each person will adapt the kata somewhat to their own body type and sense of timing. Over several generations, katas can undergo a metamorphosis into something quite different than was first taught. Therefore it is imperative students and teacher strive to capture the essence of katas without intentionally modifying them.

What benefits are derived from kata practice? Kata practice teaches balance and tai sabaki (body shifting) while strengthening the body. Kata instills the techniques into "muscle memory", where they can be instantly utilized when needed without conscious thought. In kumite and personal defense, this is essential. Kata teaches relaxation, focus, and correct breathing.

Less experienced students often see kata and kumite as entirely different activities, whereas experienced karate-ka see them as inseparable. Kata and kumite are similar to the yin and yang - different parts of a single whole. If a karate system is in balance, the students who diligently train in kata are also the best fighters. In fact, in early Okinawa, Karate Masters taught only kata and makiwara training. Often a certain kata was chosen for a student by his Master with that student's body type or physical propensities in mind. And often that is all the student would do for several years. But when personal defense was needed, the student was able to meet the challenge.

Over your years of karate training you may experience periods of love/hate feelings about Kata, just as you might with kumite. You must press on however, always seeking to understand the essence of both. Eventually it becomes your yoga - you do it because you do it. Like breathing. Then, it is truly yours. Sensei Teruo Chinen, of Jundokan International, once related that learning a kata was similar to eating a piece of beef jerky - at first it is very hard and you don't have the flavor, but if you keep chewing, eventually it is not hard at all and you will understand its flavor. Over time, you will see that good kata is synonymous with good karate.

- Jim Pounds- a Goju-ryu stylist affiliated with The Goju-ryu Network