

## Kata, Patterns & Forms – Do they have a place in modern Martial Arts Teachings?

Please let me start by stating that this essay was not written to offend anyone or cause arguments, it was merely my intention to promote discussion on differing viewpoints within the diverse and amazing range of martial arts studied by many individuals.

I consider myself very fortunate to have had the opportunity to study a variety of systems over the years, and during that time I have heard some students and instructors state their belief that kata (to save space I am using the term Kata to refer to patterns & forms found in other systems also), are just as important as the individual techniques and combinations taught within their system, whilst others state that kata is nothing more than a ritualised dance that has no place in modern martial arts training. So, in this article I will outline my own opinion on this topic, and it is just that, my opinion, if people disagree with it that is fine and welcome if such disagreement is voiced in a respectful manner.

Now, my background is primarily Japanese systems, so the basis for my opinion is grounded in my exposure, training and research into this branch of the martial arts. I admit that when I first saw kata, when I first began studying Karate, many, many moons ago, it just seemed like a structured version of shadow boxing, some of the techniques seemed very odd and ineffective when looked at from a purely blocking and striking point of view, and therein lay my error. It took nearly 15 years of exposure and study of other martial arts which involved systems whose primary focus was not on striking and blocking, but rather on weapons, grappling, throwing etc... Training in these systems, and cross training in general, allowed me to look at the Kata from different viewpoints and I began to see something, something that to me made Kata training very interesting and an important part of my Martial Arts journey. So, when you look at a kata you are limited by your own experiences as to what you can see, for me when I first saw kata performed by my Sensei I was looking at it from a striking and blocking background, that is all I had studied up to that point – Boxing & Karate. However, as my interest grew and I began to cross train in other systems, such as Aikido and Ju-Jitsu – whilst still practicing my karate kata (mainly because I liked them, even though I didn't fully understand them at this point!) I began to notice certain similarities between the moves in the kata and some of the locks, holds and throws I was being exposed to via my other studies. Certainly, they needed a subtle tweak, but the basic foundations were there!! This is when I realised that if you demonstrated a kata to a striker they are more likely to only see the striking and blocking applications, if you demonstrated the same kata to a Judoka they are most likely to see potential throwing movements, and likewise with someone who specialises in locks and holds they are most likely to see locking techniques buried within the kata, the story of the three blind wise men trying to explain an elephant. This all makes perfect sense when you consider that kata were utilised by the old masters as a teaching tool for their students, the skills embedded in the kata are generally made up of a mixture of the following:

- Seizing and grasping.
- Striking to vital points and other anatomical weak points.
- Attacks directed to joints.
- Locking and holding
- Throws and takedowns
- Escapes and reversals.
- Chokes and strangulations.
- Principles of movement.

Now I know many people will think this is a stretch, or merely shoehorning evidence into a theory to suit my opinion, but I have arrived at this conclusion after decades of research and continued learning in martial arts, and as I said earlier it is my opinion, my truth and it does not have to match yours, but that does not make it any less valid. If I may offer a brief example from the much-underrated kata of Naihanchi, there is movement performed in that kata – Nami Gaeshi (returning wave kick) - and whilst it is a valid technique on its own, the principles and movement of it bear an uncanny resemblance to Tsubame Gaeshi (Swallows Flight), a counter to a foot sweep, found in Judo and Japanese Ju-Jitsu systems. If we couple insights such as this with the fact that Okinawan Te (Karate) was originally utilised as a complete fighting system on the Ryukyu Islands (Okinawa) then

it stands to reason that it would have incorporated, even on a basic level, some form of throwing and locking aspects along with the striking and weapons aspects. Maybe these were lost as the old masters died and failed to pass their knowledge on, maybe they were removed when trying to promote the system in mainland Japan, since the Japanese already had numerous grappling / throwing systems, I am unable to say for certain, and in the end that is irrelevant as we will never know for definite what the intentions of the Old Masters truly were. My own opinion is that they utilised kata to train their students in certain fundamental body mechanics, tai sabaki, that would allow them to understand the basic principles present in all martial disciplines. These principles apply whether you are throwing, locking or striking and kata allow us to train in all of them on our own, in a structured manner in a relatively small space, and the bonus centuries ago was that if you don't know what you are looking at all you are seeing is a ritualised dance with no relevance to fighting 😊.

Thank you for reading this, and if you enjoyed this essay, I hope it has encouraged you to look at the kata of your own systems with new eyes. The wonder of training in the Martial Arts is not in the destination, or number of belts we can obtain, but in the journey itself, discovery of knowledge and the discovery of ourselves and the realisation that no matter how long we train, or how much we think we know there is always so much more to discover.

If you didn't enjoy, or disagree with my opinions in this essay then I look forward to hearing your opinions on why I am wrong.

Yours in Budo,

**Shihan D. Court**

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