

Kata - A Meditation in Movement

by Sensei Elias Mazur



We all know the basic pillars or principles that must be followed to perform a good Kata: tempo of technique, points of power stress and breath control. These principles provide the basics in order for a karate-ka to achieve an acceptable level of performance. They are by nature physical aspects of performing a kata. There is another aspect of kata that in my opinion needs to be stressed just as much: the internal or spiritual aspect. More than a simple sequence of movements with correct tempo, power and breathing technique, kata is an imaginary kumite session against many opponents. Like real kumite, kata should also employ many of the tactics used, like focus, complete attention to your opponent and, in the spirit of the five rings, an emptiness of mind. Like kumite one should fight without thinking. Punches, blocks, kicks should all flow. On this light, kata can and should be viewed as a "meditation in movement". But how to accomplish that?

First and foremost, one has to step back beyond the three principles of tempo of technique, points of power stress and breath control, to a often forgotten and neglected task: kata training outside the scheduled classes. The only way a karate-ka can move towards conquering the three basic principles as well as the internal aspect of kata, is through exhaustive training. We can never attempt to conquer tempo of technique on a kata if we are "thinking" about the kata as it is being performed. Class time is usually dedicated to reviewing kata movements, learning a new kata or working on kata for a test. Although these training sessions are always very productive they are not enough to truly internalize all movements of a kata. A karate-ka must train kata on his/her own time. This is not always an easy task. Here are some suggestions:

- Think about the kata. For example, right before going to sleep, or during the commercial on that TV show you're watching, close your eyes and perform the kata on your mind. That helps to keep the knowledge of the movements fresh on your mind.

- Do the kata movements even though you may not have enough space for it. For example, when you're heating water to make some tea, or re-heating that soup for dinner, take those few minutes in the kitchen to lightly go over the movements of a new kata or refresh one that you haven't done for a while. Even a few times like that on a week is better than nothing.
- Reserve some time to just "work on a kata". This could be done some time before or after karate class, or when you go to the gym and that space used for mambo aerobics class is available. Walk into the room, take your shoes off and use this time just to work on the kata. Review all movements. Perform the kata many times and most importantly, focus on the parts of the kata that you feel needs work.
- Always refer to the The Phoenix Way book or consult an upper belt or a yudansha if you have any questions about a kata. Also, ask yudanshas to look at your kata and give you some feedback. This is always very productive.

Following these tips will ensure that your mind and body will "know" the kata well enough so that you don't need to think about the kata when performing it. Once this is accomplished than the real battle begins. Tempo of technique is the first important aspect to be addressed on a kata. How fast or slow should you execute that strike? Or this sequence? These simple questions will make or break a kata. It will transform your kata from a sequence of monotonous movements into a vibrant work of martial art. Points of power stress follows right behind. Highlighting and differentiating points where power is needed and applied, such as a moment of kime waza, is vitally important to make a kata really shine. Of course, one must know the application of the technique being used to ensure the correct amount of power is delivered. For example, a double block implies a strong and powerful block against a similarly strong and powerful strike, which dictates the need for a good amount of power when executing it. A tensho block on the other hand may indicate a more fluid movement without the need of too much power. Finally, breath control, although a bit more internal, is still very much visible to all and it does show the amount of control the karate-ka possesses not only of his or her breathing, but on the application of the breathing technique to the kata being executed.

Once all these aspects of performing a kata are conquered, a karate-ka can then move towards truly making it a "meditation in movement". To accomplish that, a more mental approach to the kata is necessary. Start with a few seconds of mukso as you close your eyes and move into our standard stance when beginning a kata. The kata truly begins here as you clean your mind and prepare for battle. As you finish mukso and loudly and forcefully say the name of the kata, you are ready to fight. At this point you should no longer be thinking about the kata. Just the fight. Move into each movement like there is a formidable opponent ready to strike you. Perform each block and strike like you are on a deadly struggle. Finally, ensure that your focus and attention are fully and totally directed towards the kata. Your eyesight should be always pointing in the direction of the next strike and you should never be distracted by noises or movements around you. Of course, like a Kyokushin karate-ka you should be aware of them without losing focus on the kata. After all you never know if someone will attack you during Kanku. So we must always be prepared.

After performing a kata in this manner you should feel a sense of mental relaxation and exhilaration. You should feel like you have won the battle and defeated your enemy. And you did...after all the enemy is inside of us.

Osu!

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