

The Benefits of Kata

I was recently reading a message board in which the topic was whether Kata had a place in modern Karate. As you might imagine, there were opinions both for and against. Most of the opinions in favor only focused on the external benefits of Kata, and the ones against tended to focus on the inflexibility and lack of practical application of Kata. While I agreed with most of the positive comments, even some of the negative ones had a point, but they both missed some essential benefits in the diligent practice of Kata. In addition to strength and technique, experience is one of the most important factors in a physical confrontation. It is difficult to obtain experience in street fighting while maintaining the ethics of our style. This is where Kata can fill an essential gap.

As I was taught in Intro to Psychology, strong mental visualizations can create a physical reaction. This is why excessive worriers often experience as much physical stress by worrying about a catastrophe as experiencing one. The creators of Kata discovered how to use this phenomenon to their advantage. Practicing Kata while tricking their minds into believing they were in a real fight allowed them and their students to attain valuable experience in applying proper form and focus under the mental stress of a real fight without the physical risks. No other form of training can accomplish this.

While other forms of training are of course useful and key elements to a well-rounded training regimen, they also miss some of the aspects gained through Kata training. Kumite is great exercise, improves the spirit and gives us a chance to experience people throwing punches and kicks at us. However, in Kumite, the first thing out the window is form. This of course is due to the nature of Kumite. Kumite is two trained individuals, fully prepared, with artificial rules and in an artificial environment. I've been in and seen a few scuffles over the years, and not one of them resembled a Kumite match. Self-defense drills also lack some of the benefits of Kata. By facing a set attack, these drills allow us to apply good form in the face of a real attacker. However, with two people involved, safety is always a concern. Often the attacker will not give you a true attack for fear of hurting the defender, and even if they do, they must hold back on their technique or risk running out of attackers not to mention friends. While all these training tools are important and have their place, only Kata allows you to try and "kill" or "maim" your opponent who is trying to "kill" or "maim" you, and to do so with correct form.

Lastly, it is often said that diligent practice of a Kata will reveal its secrets. I believe one of those secrets is how to extend our Ki or Qi. For the reasons stated above, it is rare in other types of training for there to be an intent to strike your opponent. As the Ki follows the mind, it will stop short when there is no intent behind a strike. Kata allows you to add that intent. Since the person you are striking in Kata is in your mind, you can fully visualize your strike connecting with and going through your opponent. Visualization is the key to extending Ki. Therefore, Kata is a very useful tool in learning to extend your

Ki while striking. Meditation or Qigong practice before practicing Kata can enhance this effect.

Of course, talk is useless unless you're willing to give it a try. If you're serious about getting the full benefit of Kata training, the next time you're training Kata, try this exercise. Go through the form a few times to make sure you're completely familiar with both the form and the bunkai. The bunkai is essential, or you won't be able to fully visualize the attacks. Next "psych" yourself up. Imagine yourself in a dangerous environment, surrounded by your most feared enemies. Imagine they're threatening your family, girlfriend or whatever you hold dear. When you really feel their presence, you're ready to begin your Kata. When going through the Kata, forget about the form, if you've practiced the Kata enough, the form should come naturally. Instead, concentrate on what the attackers are doing and react. If you mess up a move, forget about it, put that attacker down with whatever technique is appropriate and move on to the next. In this frame of mind, the feeling you're going for is not anger or fear, but a feeling of animal necessity. By animal necessity I mean the same kind of feeling a predator has towards its prey. A leopard doesn't kill a gazelle because it hates or fears it; the leopard kills because it has to in order to survive. When you're done, you should feel as if you've been through a real fight. It is said that when the masters used to practice Kata, it was not uncommon for them to develop bruises where they had blocked their opponents.

Our system has a large number of Katas. There are also different bunkai interpretations that can be applied to each technique in those Katas. This means there are virtually infinite numbers of fight scenarios you can practice. In the end, Kata is an imaginary life or death struggle against multiple opponents, and performed with enough intensity and visualization, your mind won't know the difference. So, does Kata have a place in modern Karate? I submit that Kata is the soul of Karate. Without Kata, training is not Karate at all, and you can never attain the skills the masters intended.

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