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## INSTRUCTORS' FORUM

This column is devoted to those instructors who feel strongly about issues in the martial arts, and who wish to express their ideas and opinions in a way that would be constructive and of interest to all martial artists of all styles. Although we cannot pay for such contributions, each contributor will receive a copy of the issue in which his opinions appear in advance of the sale date. The editors reserve the right to edit all material submitted into a workable length. The opinions expressed in this column are not necessarily those of the staff.

### Karate Kata by Toshio Tamano

"In Okinawan karate, kata is the most essential part." This is always stressed by our karate teachers. A proverb says that karate starts with kata and finishes with kata. Kata is everything for the art. In contradiction with these strong beliefs is the negative attitude that certain karateka have adopted toward kata. These are some of their arguments: "We cannot use the techniques of kata in *jujyu kumite* (free sparring) matches. It is a waste of time to practice kata; instead we should only practice free sparring in order to win tournaments. In streetfights, one or two strong techniques will do. Why then do we need to learn dances to fight?"

Kata is very unique in the Japanese martial art of karate. Indeed, other Japanese martial arts such as judo, kendo and aikido do not stress the importance of kata at all. Whether one likes kata or not, if he studies the art of karate, he ought to know what karate kata is and how it was perfected.

Okinawan karate was developed under the strong influence of Chinese boxing arts. The original concept of kata is thus also to be found in Chinese martial arts. It is said that in the sixth century Boddhidharma went from India to China and began teaching Zen Buddhism in the Shaolin temple in the Kanan province. After many years of teaching, Boddhidharma found that many of his disciples were getting physically and spiritually weak from the lack of exercise. Realizing the necessity for some kind of exercise, Boddhidharma began teaching *ekikin gyo* to his followers. This exercise aims at strengthening

the internal organs by tuning up *ki* (life energy). It is probable that the *ekikin gyo* exercise was developed from yoga.

After Boddhidharma's death, his followers fanned out to spread Zen Buddhism in many parts of China. They were often persecuted by villagers and robbed. In order to protect themselves, they did not hesitate to use violence. However as Buddhist priests they were forbidden to kill any living creatures. They did not carry any kind of weapons but used bare hands and feet to fight. Seeking more effective ways to defend themselves, they discovered many usable and efficient bare-hand fighting techniques in the *ekikin gyo* exercise.

Along with *ekikin gyo* exercise there existed in ancient China a legendary exercise called *gokingi* (five-animal movement). The ancient people found that by copying the movements, postures and the breathing of tigers, bears, birds and so forth, they could improve their health and sometimes cure their diseases. Thus *gokingi* was established.

Although this exercise does not remain in an actual form but only in literary sources, we can easily surmise that the ancient people copied and applied the fighting skills of animals. Actually, there still exist many fighting forms in China which carry names of animals. Among them are the tiger style, the monkey style, the snake style, the crane style, the bear style and the praying mantis style.

The fighting techniques from *ekikin gyo* and *gokingi* were seriously studied and developed over many centuries. However, it became difficult for the people to remember and practice all of these complicated movements. Especially people like Zen monks, who traveled alone, found it impossible to practice these techniques without partners. For this reason, they invented a solo form of bare-hand fighting techniques, using *ekikin gyo* and *gokingi* as prototypes. This was the beginning of kata.

Okinawan karate was completed when the Chinese boxing arts were introduced to the island. The Chinese

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kata were originally practiced there but, after a long period of time, they adapted and changed to the Okinawan way.

### Different Elements of Kata

Though Okinawan karate was strongly influenced by Chinese martial arts, it has its own unique characteristics. The Okinawan karate kata have, in my opinion, four different elements: the fighting art, the physical education, the dance and the meditation.

### Fighting Art Element

The fighting element has been, needless to say, present in kata from its very origin. However, since many martial art schools were established in China in the 17th and 18th centuries, each school tried to keep its art secret in order to conceal its fighting skills from the other schools. Thus the fighting element was not made obvious in the kata. Therefore, one has to practice kata many times

to extract the true meaning of its movements.

### Physical Education Element

As kata derived from ancient physical fitness exercises, it has kept the form of a physical education. By practicing kata, one can strengthen one's internal organs and loosen up one's joints and muscles. Also, through the practice of fighting techniques, one develops good reflexes. Kata is indeed ideal for physical fitness.

### Dance Element

The dance element is the most unique aspect of the Okinawan karate kata. Kata is not a mere sequence of fighting techniques. Far from being mechanical, it must harmoniously combine beauty, elegance and force. It is widely known that karate was formerly called *te* in Okinawa. However few people are aware that the word *te* carries two distinct meanings. The first one is, of course, the fighting hand techniques. The second one is a dance form called *meikata*. Since the name *te* was changed to karate, the fighting art aspect of *te* was much stressed whereas its dance aspect was forgotten, especially outside of Okinawa. There is an

amazing similarity between Okinawan karate and the traditional royal Okinawan dance *ukansen odori*. For example, some of the classical *nisei odori* dances are choreographed with many karate techniques. Furthermore, *tensho* kata, which was created by Chojun Miyagi (the founder of Goju-ryu karate), is an ideal example of how dance and karate can be combined beautifully. Chojun Miyagi got the idea of this kata from the Chinese boxing arts techniques *rokkishu* (six-hand techniques). Although he used Chinese hand techniques in the kata, he combined them with techniques of Okinawan dances such as *ogamite* (praying hand), *konerite* (twisting hand), *osute* (pushing hand) and so forth. Miyagi's kata *tensho* is a very good example of the Okinawanization of Chinese martial arts because we know exactly how the kata was made.

### Meditation Element

As we have seen, the origin of Chinese martial arts and kata is to be found in Zen Buddhism. After more than 1,500 years, the spirit and the idea of Zen Buddhism is still alive in Okinawan karate and in its kata. Now-

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adays, *zazen* (sitting meditation) is the most popular method of Zen training. However, in the old days, "standing Zen" and "moving Zen" were among the training methods. And it is commonly known that kata *sanchin* of Goju-ryu karate is the evolutionary form of standing Zen and meditation. Thus, we can also practice kata *sanchin* as a pure form of meditation without the concept of fighting form while applying a special breathing method. This idea—to practice karate kata as a method of meditation—should be kept in mind by all karateka. I do not believe in the necessity of another kind of meditation training for karateka as long as they practice kata seriously. (Because many practitioners of judo, kendo or other martial arts do not have a particular meditation method in their own art, they need a quiet sitting meditation.)

The ultimate purpose of karate and its kata is to achieve spiritual enlightenment. The three other elements of kata (the fighting art, the physical

education and the dance) are secondary to it.

Karate kata should be considered as a whole with the four elements just described. None of these elements are dispensable. If one only extracts the fighting element from kata and thinks that it is its purpose, he cannot fully appreciate karate kata. For such a person, it is a waste of time to practice it. However I do not consider him a true karateka, because he can practice any other types of fighting arts for this very purpose.

With this idea in mind, I hope that all karateka practice kata seriously. My karate teacher, Seikichi Toguchi, writes in one of his essays: "Karate kata is like a flower seed. If you nourish it with sun and water, it will bloom a beautiful flower someday."

*About the Author: Toshio Tamano is currently heading the Shorei-Kan European headquarters. Tamano is a sixth-dan black belt under Seikichi Toguchi and acts as U.S. adviser, overseeing Ichiro Natio and Scott Lenzi, Shorei-Kan representatives in the United States.*

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