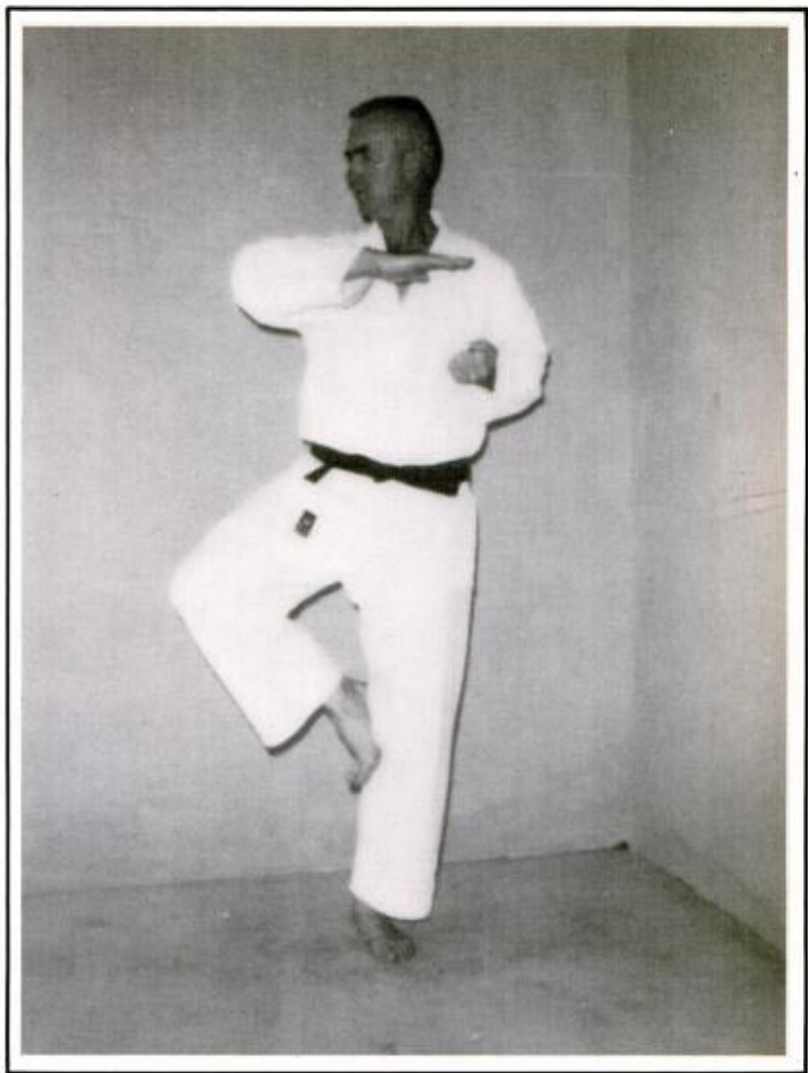


# KATA THE ULTIMATE TRAINING METHOD

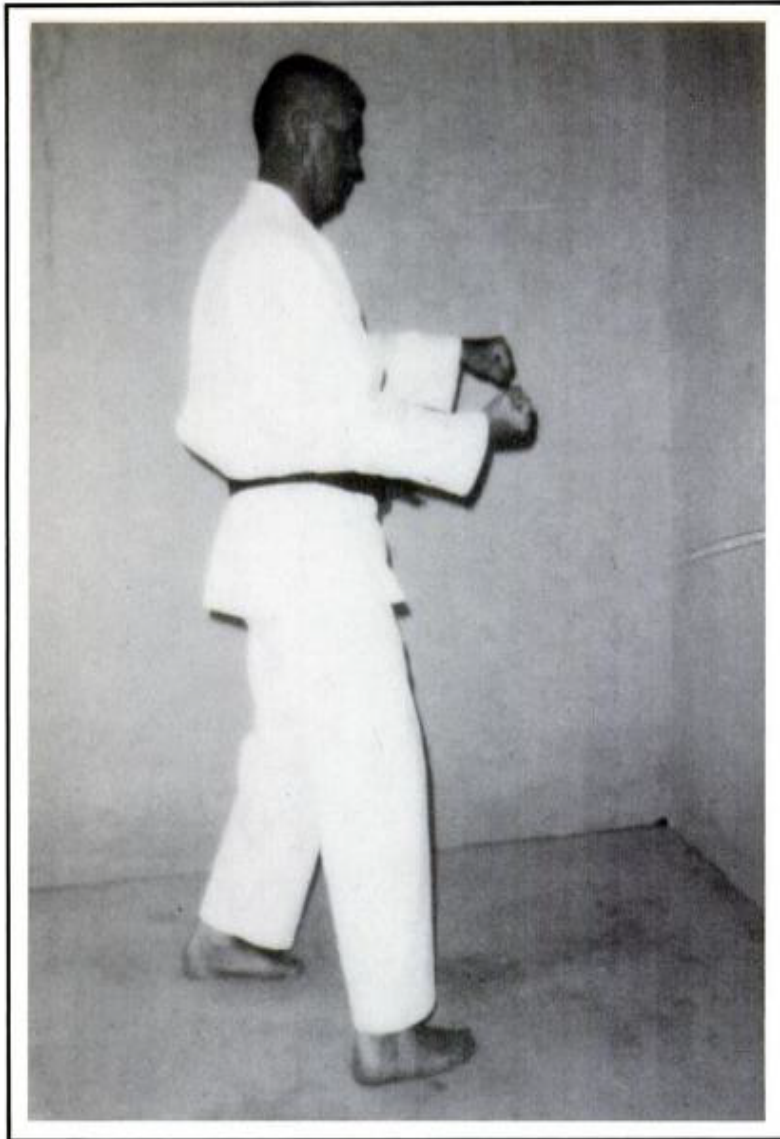
by Glen Grabow



*The one-legged stance (ippon dachi) is from the common form "gekisai one" and is an example of a transition technique. These connecting techniques allow for a change of direction and give the karateka a chance to restore air to his system.*

Kata is the ultimate training method in karate—and if you don't believe it, please bear with us a few moments. First, let's make sure we are talking about the same thing; that is, classical, traditional karate, not the competitive, sport type karate now so prevalent in the United States and Japan.

Kata (formal exercise) is the mother



**A double punch (morote tsuki) from the classical goju kara "sanseiru." There are eight classical forms, which are more lengthy and difficult than the more-basic common forms.**

of karate, without which karate would be nothing more than an unorganized jumble of offensive and defensive moves, lending dignity to what would otherwise be an unsightly physical endeavor.

Strong words? You bet! However, I am prepared to back them up.

Kata teaches balance, timing and coordination, as well as the more obvious kicking, punching, striking and blocking techniques. Anyone who thinks kata is performed solely for kicking, punching and blocking techniques is simply missing the boat.

Regardless of how well a person's motor skills may be developed, he soon learns that he has a long way to go once

he begins studying karate. Indeed, a close examination of certain kata makes it obvious that some movements have been deliberately included to develop these motor skills.

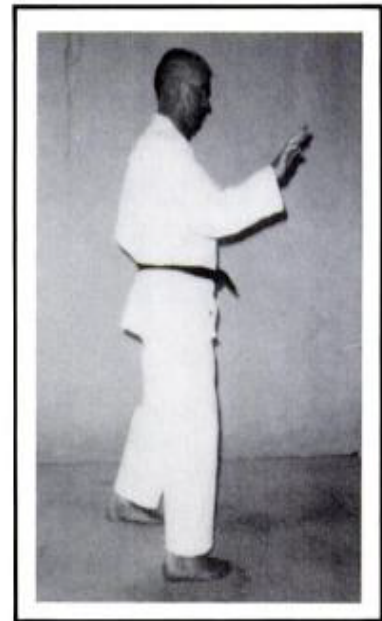
An example of this is to be found in the gojuryu kata *saiya*, which the student blocks with both arms, balances on one leg and turns the head as he prepares for a simultaneous front kick. It should be remembered that beginning karate students are not expected to excel in any particular physical endeavors. In fact, ability in any physical activity is not necessarily an asset, as the new karate student soon learns for himself. This inability was recognized by karate teachers in the past, and kata were developed specifically for the beginning student.

The Okinawa gojuryu employs two categories of kata. First are "common forms" which include basic techniques developed for the beginning student. Common forms were developed by

individual teachers, and the number of common forms that an individual teacher or school employs is strictly up to that teacher or school. Examples of Okinawa gojuryu common forms are *gekisai one* and *gekisai two*. The student is required to attain a certain amount of expertise in these forms before moving on to the second category of kata. The amount of time required to develop this expertise will vary from student to student, but one year is probably the average.

The second category of kata includes "classical forms," and in Okinawa gojuryu, there are eight of these forms—the most obvious difference being the degree of difficulty. The techniques—punches, strikes, blocks, kicks and footwork—are advanced and some classical forms are much longer and display much more varied techniques than common forms. Also, in classical forms, one movement can sometimes have two or three different meanings.

Many people consider kata training a dreadful bore. This is usually the feeling of someone who has gotten into a rut. One way of getting out of this rut is to change training methods such as extracting the more difficult techniques and working on them separately from the rest of the kata. These are supplementary exercises (*hojo undo*), and it is amazing what three or four months of this type of training will do for the overall kata performance. Indeed, Seikichi Toguchi, a very senior gojuryu teacher, has developed prearranged sup-



**A center pulling block from the kata "gekisai two." In addition to being a block, this movement is also a transition technique, and is thus performed while inhaling.**



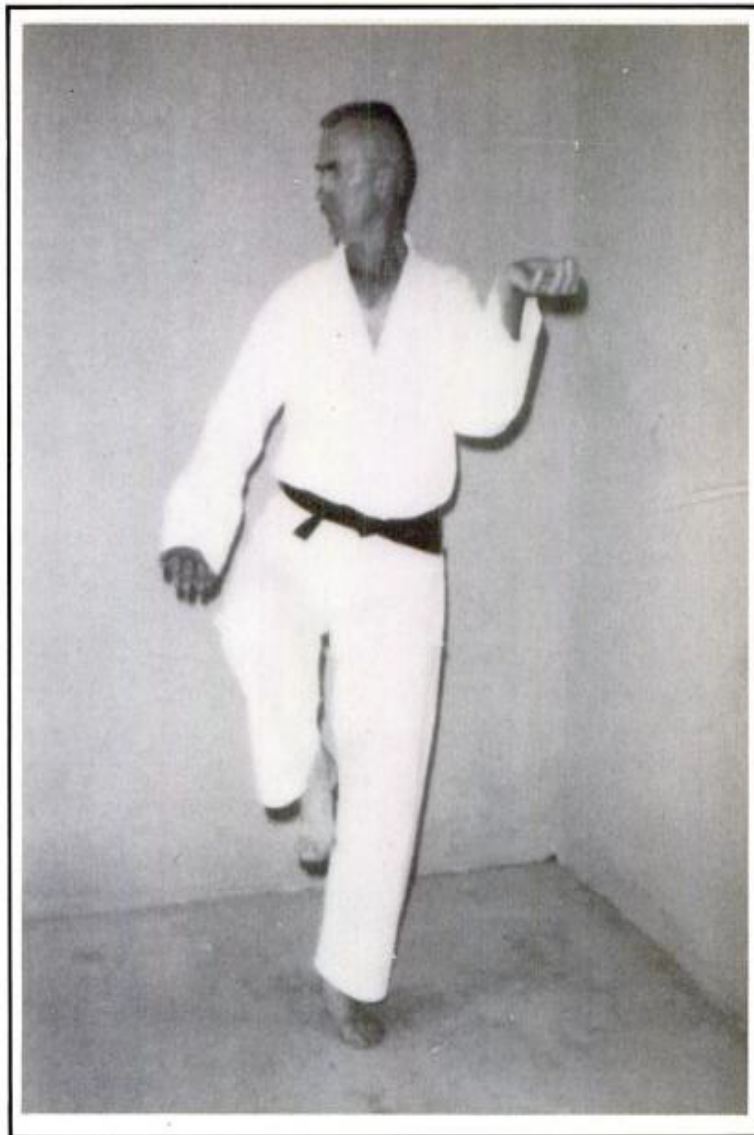
plementary exercises that are learned and practiced concurrently with certain classical kata.

On Okinawa, one year is considered the minimum training time necessary for proficiency at a given kata. A question that often arises is: How many times each session should I go through the entire kata? Three or four times each training session is sufficient, but do not forget the supplementary training for that particular kata.

Techniques must be perfected in kata before attempting to apply them in kumite. If one cannot perform a given technique in kata, he certainly will not be able to perform it in kumite or a real situation. Expecting a student to do well in kumite (whether it's pre-arranged, free-style or in a real self-defense situation), without a firm background in kata is similar to sending an untrained army to war.

If techniques are to be perfected in kata, one must also understand the theory of the techniques. Having mastered this, the student should apply these techniques with a training partner in kumite. Any technique in classical kata should be viewed as important, particularly if it is in more than one kata (as many techniques are).

Another aspect of kata training that many students fail to appreciate is the fact that many movements are for training purposes only and cannot be translated directly into combat techniques. A good example of this is *suzuki waza* (connecting or transition tech-



**Another double punch from "sanseiru." Note that the vertical distance between the fists is wider than in the photo of the same technique on the opposite page. Both are correct.**

nique). These connecting techniques serve a three-fold purpose: (1) to connect one major technique to another, (2) to change direction, and (3) to give the karateka a chance to restore air to his system (most connection techniques are executed at a rather slow pace).

Another facet of kata training that many students are unaware of is that of a starting and ending position when performing a kata. In some kata, the starting and ending positions are the same. In others, the ending position can be either in front of or in back of the starting position. Among other things, knowing the proper ending position (in relation to the starting position) will give the trainee a method of checking on his performance. (If you do not end up where you should, you have either added or deleted techniques to the kata, or some movements are either too big or too small.) Regardless, knowing the proper ending position will help delete these possible errors.

***This technique from the classical form "saifa" helps develop timing, balance and coordination. In classical forms, one movement can sometimes have two or three meanings.***

Kata training is a most effective way of teaching the student proper stances, most of which are used in kumite and self-defense situations exactly as they are in the kata. It should be remembered that kata are guides to many and varied techniques. They stimulate the creative imagination and enhance karate theory. Kata may vary slightly from school to school, but the overall pattern will remain essentially the same.

Some kata are designed to train both sides of the body (left and right) but most were primarily developed by and for right-handed people.

Breathing is another aspect that should not be neglected in kata training. Air is to the human body what gasoline





**The leg hook technique shown here is from the classical goju kata "seipai." The leg hook can be employed three different ways. If one cannot perform a technique properly in kata, he will certainly not be able to perform the technique in kumite.**

is to a car, and we all know what happens when a car runs out of gas.

In kata training, most of the misunderstanding stems from the student not knowing when to inhale, exhale or when to refill the lungs. When performing any punching, kicking or striking type action, one should exhale through the nose. Conversely, when any blocking-type action is done, one should inhale through the nose. The lungs will need to be refilled after performing any major technique (such as a kick, punch or strike combination). Fortunately, most major techniques are followed by a connection technique (suzuki waza), and remember, one of the purposes of connection techniques is to restore air

to the system. Many connection techniques consist of blocks which, as noted, are performed while inhaling. As the student improves his breathing techniques while performing kata, it will naturally carry over into kumite or other types of training.

As a check for proper breathing techniques, when one finishes a kata he should not need a large amount of air to return his breathing to normal—one or two large breaths, but no more. In the course of a kata, if one finds himself out of air, it is obvious that his breathing techniques need serious attention.

Another aspect of kata training that many students do not understand is that of *tokui kata* or favorite kata. Just as a person will have favorite sparring techniques, he will also have favorite kata.

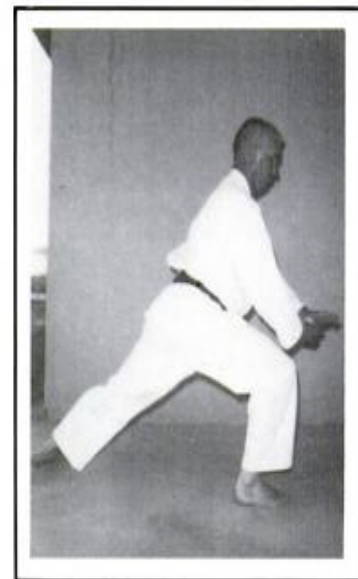
How do you know which kata are your favorites? The most obvious person that can tell you this is, of course, your teacher. Also, by the time you have mastered all of the kata of your particular ryu, you will certainly be a

senior student, and are expected to do some thinking on your own. This is not to say that some kata are beautiful and others terrible, but merely that some kata, no matter how long or how hard we work on them, will never be as easy to perform as others. This is also true in other martial arts.

The stances, methods of training for developing timing, balance and coordination, plus the breathing and connection techniques, make kata a most excellent vehicle for karate training. The old teachers who developed them were obviously attuned to physical culture as well as self-defense. Kata training transcends time; it will be as relevant 100 years from now as it was 100 years ago.

In summary, to make kata training more effective, you should practice kata three or four times each session, reinforce it with supplementary training, perfect techniques in kata before attempting application in kumite, and understand (and apply) the proper breathing methods. Also, be aware of the proper starting and ending positions, and finally, do not sacrifice quality for quantity. These aspects, if properly followed, will make kata the ultimate training method. ✕

*Glen Grabow is the highest ranking American gojuryu instructor of the Okinawan Karate Association. An historian of the art, Grabow also holds a black belt in judo and is familiar with the five traditional weapons associated with Okinawan karate.*



**The above technique is used in "kururunfa" and "sanseiru" kata of gojuryu. Any technique in more than one kata should be viewed as especially important.**