

Kata – What It Means To Me

It was a little while ago when I walked into the dojo for the first time. Hopefully to learn some new killer moves, keep fit and have some fun. After all, I didn't move around in the most salubrious of surroundings, so it might come in handy if I encountered a spot of bother. That first session was tough and a shock to the system. More fitness things that I was used to; press-ups and sit-ups, and a good few basics. It was the early nineteen eighties and £5 for a license and 50p per lesson plus £10 or so for a gi was a lot of money. So that was that after two belts.

Fast forward nearly thirty years. I walked into the dojo for the first time. Again. Much of the nervousness and apprehension were the same, but surprisingly I could remember stuff from all that time ago. This time round, we'd actually thought about Judo, as the dad-in-law used to do it and had stories of when it was of use. No-one seemed to do it locally, so we decided we'd do karate. However, while it would be good to learn some self-defence techniques – to help with confidence, fitness etc. – I didn't really want to have to maim people with a jugular strike. After a few years, I still wondered. The archetypical situation I'd most likely find myself in would be some drunken lout in a pub giving hassle or, more potentially, someone kicking off at work for whatever reason (inherently a much less out-of-control situation). Work is no place for maiming unruly staff.

So, take 3, we find ourselves standing in a dojo for the first time. Yet again. The same nervousness and anxiety as both times previously came back. This time, for some reason, something starts to make sense. The penny drops. I start to realise there is more to karate. In fact it starts to dawn that I need to learn a lot more. I need to take people down. I need to throw them. I need to utilise appropriate locks. This was really interesting, I needed to see what else was hidden away.

In that first lesson, doing one-step with one of Junsui's black belt students, we utilised the focus hand. A hand which I hadn't really had paid much attention to previously. It's a hand which is, in fact, very useful. And then it became apparent a block isn't just a block. In fact, block is the wrong name for it. It's also a strike or (and here was the real revelation for me) something a lot more nasty, maybe involving necks or joints.

So, now all the missing essentials for me had come together, it started to become apparent that the katas can make a lot more sense. With a little imagination and a willing volunteer who wants to be thrown around a little (which I have at my disposal, luckily) all sorts of things can start to come out. With some key pointers from Sensei Manning and, latterly and more frequently, demonstrations and ideas from Sensei Beresford in the dojo over the years, those weird arm movements in Nijushiho, for instance, become something altogether different and that Gedan Barai can be much nastier than it looks. That odd hand-on-wrist movement in Bassai Dai makes sense. Even the odd Manji Uke can be used for something (and not for a double block to front and back like the books state!!!).

Analysing and working through the katas provides a wealth of hidden techniques. Much of it is unsuitable for minors and unlikely to ever be needed in real life by adults, but some of it is of great use and is actually applicable to children who like to grab and wrestle. Or, more pointedly, to those children who don't like being grabbed and wrestled. Or bullied. I personally believe there's far more manipulation within the katas than is commonly talked about, including techniques for escaping from wrist and clothes grabs as found in the playground.

And this is where my interest really lies in Karate – trying to understand and make sense of all this. Better people have tried. Some good stuff is documented, and some is less convincing. The point here is that I feel like I can at least make my own mind up now. I feel like I understand. Having read a little, I think it's clear that not all of the katas will ever make perfect sense. They've been taken from far and wide, passed down and tweaked by generations and had wholesale changes at times. They've been subject to the forces of competitive karate and been hauled from China to Japan via other places.

So, I come full circle back to that point six years ago where I started again. No need to learn Judo (even if these dodgy joints and my age allowed), much of it is there already; we just have to find it. That end throw in Enpi, it's a Judo move I watched the other day. Funakoshi himself listed nine throws, although some are a bit too dangerous for the dojo. It's funny how all of this has been overlooked in many other dojos. People I know who have trained at them confirm this. It's also disappointing. So, we're quite privileged to train in a dojo where throws, locks and takedowns are thought about and tried.

I started Karate again as a family thing for us all to do together and to support the kids. But, for me personally, it's a little about fitness, but really about confidence. I don't look for trouble; in fact, I avoid it. I don't like confrontation, so I naturally dislike Jiyu Kumite. But I try to force myself in a position to at least tolerate it.

Preparing for Jiyu Kumite using Ippon Kumite and utilizing some of the techniques in the katas breeds confidence in what is, essentially, an unusual situation in my normal life. It's not the false confidence of the dangerous type, but a quiet inner confidence, to know that I've got a fair chance. It's unlikely (after 40-odd years I can't really remember any decent fighting situations) but situations can happen. A couple of years ago I had a one-to-one meeting with an individual who was visibly agitated at the news he was receiving. Having quiet inner confidence allowed me to remain calm, seated, and to in turn calm him down. Knowing that if I had to deal with that situation then I could, that's a big thing and it benefitted both people in the room.

And the icing on the cake of all of this is that I can pass it on, responsibly, to others. To keep the message going that karate is more than block-strike and to allow those younger and fitter than myself to actually put it to some good use. And, as I've only

learnt the moves of two thirds of the katas, there's a lot left to do and a whole lot more knowledge to be gained and work to be done.