Is Kata Really Important?

Back to the Basics II:
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Is Kata really important? This debate has been with the Martial Arts community for as long as there have been Martial Arts. This question has taken on new meaning in the past several years with the invention of "reality" based competitions. Bruce Lee started the debate in modern times with his outspokenness against forms (kata) and what he called the "Classical Mess". Although Bruce Lee went on to become one of the finest Martial Artists in recent times, many forget that his own early training in Wing Chun Kung-fu included forms.

So the question remains; is kata really important? I say, Yes! Kata is a proven method for developing automatic responses to a variety of attacks, as well as training in body mechanics. We'll try to examine this subject in detail.

KATA AS PROGRAMMING?

Usually the response to the above is, Huh? In reality kata is just that, programming automatic response. The purpose of kata can be compared to writing computer programs.

When a programmer decides to begin his/her career, the first thing they must do is learn the programming language. It would be hard for a programmer to sit with a book and write code and learn the language all at the same time. The learning of "Kihon" (fundamental techniques) is the Martial Artists equivalent to learning the language. The Martial Artists must learn how to do techniques correctly, and how to put together techniques in combination with one another. Certain techniques just flow more naturally from one to another and have their own logic to them. The computer programmer must learn how the programming language is put together to achieve a desired action (called syntax).

Once the fundamentals have been learned, then it's time to begin programming. Techniques are put together in logical sequences that require the student to learn body mechanics, rhythm, timing, and responses to a variety of attacks. It is not enough that a student mechanically go through the motions. Instead kata should be performed with the rhythm and intensity as if in a real situation. Another factor comes into the programming of the student; it's called visualization.

Over the past several years, research has proven what the ancient masters have known all along. That the mind and body are trained as one and when performing kata, the student should "see" with his mind, or visualize the their imaginary opponent's attack as they respond with their own techniques. Visualization is used widely in all aspects of sport today. The competitor concentrates and visualizes themselves performing their sport and being victorious. Kata uses this same method only it adds the benefit of actual physical movement combined with visualization. Practice of kata with the combined visualization doesn't happen overnight and may require the repetition of the kata literally thousands of times.

The next step in the "programming" sequence after you have learned the fundamentals, and began training the proper responses, is to test it. This is where Ippon, Sambon and Juji Kumite come into play. The student learns to practice their responses are in a safe and controlled environment where an improper response would result in no more than a few bruises. Needless to say, a few bruises in the dojo are preferable to loss of life on the street. This would be the software industries equivalent of a "beta program" in which the software is tested over and over again for bugs, and corrective action can take place before going on the market.

Once the software has been released to the public, the efforts of the programmers, and the thorough testing is put to the ultimate test of performing in the real world. The same applies to the Martial Arts student when their training and skills are put to the ultimate test of survival on the street.

HIDDEN TECHNIQUES

Another reason for kata is the preservation of a particular systems distinct techniques. Each Martial Art has certain key techniques that distinguish their particular style. Katas were an excellent way to preserve those techniques and ensure that they are passed on to subsequent generations of students in their original form.

Katas were for more than just passing along the techniques of a particular style. They were also used to conceal techniques that were later taught to the most advanced students. Many kata have techniques concealed in them such as pressure point and joint manipulation, that would not appear obvious to the casual onlooker. Further, many of the most obvious techniques are not what they appear. What appears to be a block or a strike, may in fact be a joint lock.

Because many of the hidden techniques within katas are reserved for instruction to the most advanced students, many students leave and strike out on their own before these techniques were taught. They are now teaching their own students, but not teaching with a complete understanding of their art.

BUNKAI

Bunkai means the application of the techniques within kata as they relate to combat. Bunkai is really the essence of kata and should be practiced with the same diligence as the katas themselves. Not only should the obvious techniques when the kata be studied, but as mentioned in the previous paragraph, the hidden techniques once a certain level of proficiency has been reached.

Bunkai is not simply whatever the practitioner decides they will be, but rather bunkai follows as logical path in performing techniques in the most efficient manner for self-defense. Although individual interpretation may occur with regard to bunkai, the guiding principles are effectiveness and economy of motion.

KEY POINTS

So what are the key points in developing good Kata? The first requirement is a foundation of solid fundamental (kihon waza) techniques.

With this in mind, here are some key points to follow:

1. Mentally prepare yourself before kata by calming the mind. Whether you meditate, do breathing exercises, or whatever, the preparation for good kata starts between your ears.
2. Maintain correct posture. Keep your back straight, head erect, and eyes focused on the imaginary opponent.
3. Lead each technique with your head and eyes and visualize your opponent making the attack in your mind. Respond with your own techniques with the same intensity that you would defending and countering the attack in real life. By doing this, observers of your kata can see the battle develop before them.
4. Whether you do your kata slow or fast, remember that each kata has it's own rhythm. The rhythm of the kata is dictated by the battle that it represents. Some movements are quite fast, while others are slow.
5. Stay focused throughout the kata. Your Sensei or a judge in tournament can immediately spot it when your mind is diverted.
6. Remember to breathe correctly. When preparing to do a technique, inhale. Upon executing the technique, breathe out sharply.
7. Stay relaxed. If you are tense, your movements will be erratic and jerky. Only tense the body where and when required, such as the final executing of a punch.
8. Practice regularly. Regular practice will keep your kata sharp. When you cannot practice, find a quiet spot and go over the kata in your mind, step by step.

Kata doesn't come easy. Many just do it to get through their rank examination and be done with it. However, if you take the time to learn more about your kata including it's history and beginnings, practice it's bunkai and learn the real meaning behind the techniques, then you have opened the door to a world that will draw you in and have you hungering for more.