



**Kissaki-Kai
Karate-Do**

Newsletter

Seasons
Greetings
to all!

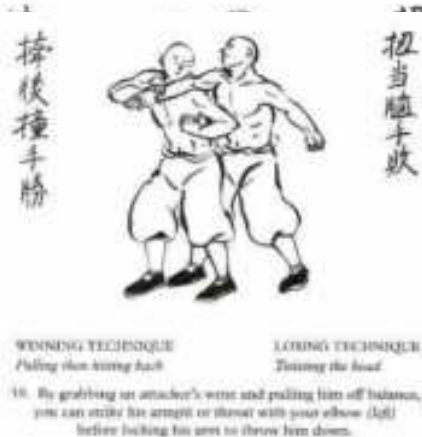
December 2017



What is 'Original' Bunkai?

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Why understanding real original Bunkai is so difficult.

You only have to Google "Bunkai" these days to be faced with a plethora of videos demonstrating dozens of instructor's versions of what they see as explanations for the techniques and combinations to be found within the various Kata.

Is this a bad thing? That depends.

It's a free world (supposedly) and everyone is entitled to their opinion, and to show anything they like about what they consider to be an explanation for a particular move in Kata.

The danger lies in the fact that they may be right, but they may actually also be wrong!

Indeed, one may ask why, after so very many years of silence, of ignoring anything except the Japanese patently silly Bunkai explanations, they are doing this at all?

One answer is that they are truly concerned to promote knowledge of effective karate, however, another is that they saw the Bandwagon coming and decided to leap aboard!

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First, get one thing straight – the Japanese sensei we revere were, and in the main are not, interested in Bunkai; they never spent any time studying it and most of their training went into mastering kihon and the performance of Kata. This is a matter of history stemming from the relative developing peace and isolation of the later Tokugawa period in Japan and Okinawa, when realistic martial skills for the battlefield were superseded by the practice of the martial arts less as a method of personal combat but more of peaceful, meditative, self-improvement skills.

In such practice, the validity of the waza was now not to be judged by its effectiveness, but by the manner in which it was performed; Art triumphed over effectiveness – Ritual overcame Reality.

When the Okinawa martial art was introduced into mainland Japan by Master Funakoshi, he did this with the help of Master Jigaro Kano, who had recently overseen the transformation of the combat effective art of Ju-Jutsu into the sports art of Judo. In just the same manner, the dangerous defensive waza became of much less importance, and thus eye-gouging, testicle kicking, arm-breaking, hair-pulling – even throwing and strangling, together with the concomitant knowledge of Kyusho-Jutsu were degraded and almost lost in importance in favour of longer range kicking and striking. As I relate later, there was also a pact of secrecy involved to prevent the spread of the hidden knowledge.

This emphasis on Kata was not confined to the martial arts, but was a pervasive factor throughout Japanese daily life, the 'how' was deemed more important than the 'why?'.

In this milieu, it is not difficult to understand why the lack of attention paid to understanding what the waza

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were originally intended for came about.

Add also, the nature of Japanese society in which: 'The nail that sticks up must be knocked down' was a dominating and pervasive factor, one can see the difficulties to be faced by any student who had the temerity to question anything his or her sensei taught! What was taught was 'Right' – to argue against it was anathema!

When these sensei brought karate to Europe and the USA, this attitude prevailed and sensei were treated almost as gods! It did not do to question them. Some of us, however, with intimate long-term knowledge of some of them, came to look with a jaundiced eye upon their 'extensive' knowledge and understanding of Kata when we saw how a new Kata was often introduced only after a few weeks holiday back in the Japanese Hombu! A small matter but indicative of the depth of knowledge possessed by some of the revered sensei.

My own experience of trying to get answers from sensei about these things is of being smacked smartly on the head and told flatly: "More training!" When many years later sensei mentioned to students how I had the annoying habit of always asking 'Why' and then praised me to my students for now not asking 'Why' anymore as if I had now attained enlightenment, I said nothing, knowing all I had learned was not to ask questions! (Actually, sensei was in a tradition followed by many masters who demanded that students figure out the answers for themselves).

In Okinawa, it seems that Kata were considered repositories of combative techniques and details of Bunkai were originally transmitted orally to individual students. This in turn created further problems as each student may well have been shown a different

application, more suited to him personally than to another.

When during the long times of peace, the arts began to be taught openly to civilians and commoners, it became even more the custom to teach them the Omote (outside) of an art; the Ura (We have direct evidence from Master Funakoshi himself that this desire to hold back the truth of Bunkai as he relates the story of his son being taught the inner secrets to a Kata by an old Okinawa master near death who proudly admitted that he had not shown these secrets to anyone else, indeed he had misled an irritating enquirer by showing him all the right moves but: "All the wrong meanings!"

In feudal times, and - as we see above - even when the teaching of karate became more public, masters frequently still jealously guarded the hidden secrets of their art.

According to Master Shozen Kubota, who began his training in 1935 under Master Funakoshi in Tokyo, the Okinawa Masters had a secret pact which forbade the teaching of the Kata together with the oral instruction of the secret Bunkai to mainland Japanese, and that what was taught in regular classes was quite different from that taught by Master Funakoshi at night at his home! The general classes having no more Bunkai taught than is common even today.

When starting to look at Bunkai in order to begin to understand them one has to look at the differences in the manner in which original karate was practiced compared with that after its introduction to mainland Japan. If you do not even know what these differences are, then it becomes impossible to even get close to



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understanding the original intentions.

Again, some sensei seem to believe that inventing 'Flow Drills' is one way to interpret Kata sequences. Well, they may serve a purpose of sorts, but are completely antithetical to the original karate where defenses are fast and immediate, and if done correctly, as Master Motobu states: there will be no further attack possible, let alone a sequence of them!



Bubishi & German Medieval Manuals

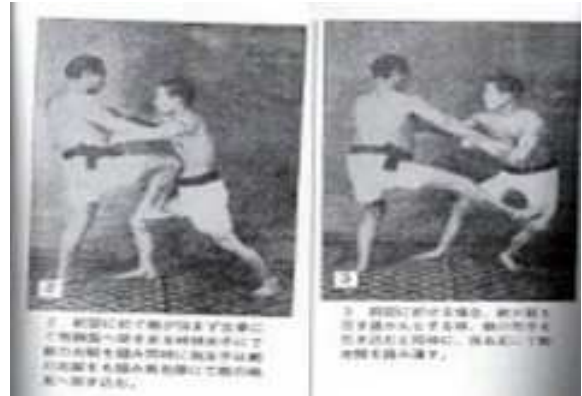
It is impossible to list all the difference here, but, for example: **Original karate** used the front hand as a weapon, modern karate front hand is used to block; **Hikite originally** was to pull an enemy onto a blow or to control him, modern karate uses it to aid punching power and speed; **Blocks were originally** two-handed, modern karate mainly uses one hand; **original karate** made great use of throws and control methods; modern karate only recently has allowed the use of a variety of throws in Kumite; **original karate** utilized different hand and fist types to attack the vital Kyusho points, these are generally not used in modern training; in **original karate** opponents were usually immobilized before being struck with blows, modern karate is more mobile against moving opponents; **originally, karate** taught methods of defense against a variety of weapons, modern Dojo karate does not, **side-kicks** and round-kicks are common in modern karate; they do not feature in original karate; **original karate** contained choking, strangling, locking and grappling methods, modern karate pays little or no attention to these aspects; **originally Kata** were supposed to be practiced after learning the Bunkai, modern karate does not do this and the Bunkai is mostly forgotten - the list goes on.

I leave this section with one serious point to consider. Modern karate is often taught with the adage: "Karate begins and ends with a block!" It doesn't - none of the Kata finish with a block! That alone should give you food for thought!

One has also to remember that there usually were no names for the many techniques and training methods in original karate, these became necessary only when personal instruction gave way to group instruction and the necessity to establish conformity for evaluation and teaching. (c.1935 for Shotokan) For example, the

confusion of so-called 'Blocks' (Uke) actually being attacking techniques.

I have been studying the Bunkai of karate for around 45 years now, and I am still learning! I don't believe I have everything perfectly understood, but I have confidence that these years have revealed many of the secrets and the principles upon which effective defensive combat was, and is, built.



Hiza-Geri & Nami-Gaeshi



Poss. Nijushiho Kata Bunkai

So, by all means look at what is offered as Bunkai, but also look at the sources of this information and judge for yourselves if you believe that the demonstrators really deeply understand even the few points I have raised earlier. The final pragmatic test is (a) Does it work effectively under pressure? And (b) Does it conform to the underlying 'Rules of Combat' - the principles?



Have a great Xmas and a Healthy New Year!

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