

KATA IS KARATE

Richard Kim

Kata is the heart of karate, and it is on kata that karate is based. Karate without the kata is not karate. The goal of karate is self-mastery and it deepens and strengthens with training and perfection in the kata.

The methods of training used in karate were in part determined by the times and cultures in which the masters who devised them lived. The teaching methods have undergone much change since those times; however, the principles of the masters have not. The principles and aims are embodied in kata and when these are changed, there will no longer be any karate.

We have professed exponents of karate in America who have never studied karate per se, who have spread misinformation about the kata and who have cried to high heaven that they are building up and not destroying. The masters have passed down, through the centuries, and have stated what kata is and for what purpose it should be used. Kata is meant to train the mind, not intended solely for conceptual and intellectual self-defense; indeed, to bring it in contact with the real self.

Kata in the traditional sense is a religious ritual. Therefore, by the "art of karate" I do not mean the ability of technical excellence, which can be developed by physical training, but an ability of attaining a spiritual goal through the practice of the kata, so that the player plays against himself and succeeds in conquering himself.

This may sound like arrant nonsense. You may say, "Am I to believe that karate, a deadly fighting art, has been downgraded to a spiritual exercise? I do not care for the kata, I want to learn how to fight."

According to the masters, karate is a matter of life and death to the extent it is a contest of the player with himself; and this kind of contest is not the shadow but the substance -the foundation of all contests outwardly directed, for example, toward a real opponent.

Kata reveals the quintessence of karate as it is a fight of the player with himself, and where can you find better training fundamentals than this? The purpose of kata is to create a certain frame of mind which is made always ready to respond, intuitively, to an attack from without. Physical, technical training is necessary, but without the mind, training cannot even begin. Kata makes your mind grow from within. It makes you master your mind, not your mind master you.

The way of karate is not easy to follow. The spirit of sincerity, in which nothing is held back, nothing is wasted, must prevail and is achieved through kata. It is noteworthy the consistent karate champions are good kata men. Naturally, there are some who win contests without being proficient in kata, but they are few in number and inconsistent in their wins. If push comes to shove, give me the good kata man anytime.

Unfortunately, in this country through a peculiar process evolved in the disordered corridors of their minds, some practitioners of the martial arts have vilified the kata as nonsensical classical deadwood. Nothing could be further from the truth. I view the credentials of such proponents, with all their public posturing, with suspect. Probably one or two are good street fighters. However, it does not take a genius to realize street-fighting is not karate. They do not know what is meant by human dignity and laws of morality which regulate our human life. Kata is the heart of karate and if you take away the kata, you kill karate.