

Sample Chapter from  
**Cracking the Kata Code**

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“Kata are not simply exhibitions of form, they are concrete manifestations of techniques that can be transformed at any time to any form at will and in which the essence of karate has assumed a definite form.”--Chojun Miyagi





# What You See Is Not What You Get

“What,” I asked myself, “could possibly be the meaning of the hammerfist movement in kata Heian Shodan?”

Obviously it was a blow, but the way I had seen Shito stylists perform the kata, it was more like a block. And not everyone drew their forward foot back the same way. Nor did they circle their right arm the same way. Could it be that different styles had different “translations” for the same movement? Could it be that there was more than one meaning to the same method of practicing the technique?

In the 1970s, thanks to the iconoclastic articles by Bruce Lee in *Black Belt Magazine* a few years before, kata became the symbol of all that was wrong with the traditional martial arts. Kata were unrealistic, static, rigid, not geared toward the individual, not eclectic enough, and basically had little meaning or training value.

A visitor from California, having read one of my articles in *Inside Karate Magazine*, dropped into my Massachusetts dojo and respectfully, I must admit, promulgated to me, sitting beside him in my traditional whites, the kata-as-an-exercise-in-futility idea.

He used to do kata, even liked them, he said, but totally dropped them from his regimen as they had nothing to do with martial arts except for a linkage to outdated training concepts. I asked him what he did for training. He replied that he sparred.

“And what do you do to prepare for sparring?” I asked.

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“Oh, the usual stuff. You know, bag work, combinations...”

“Terrific. That is definitely good preparation for the ring. And what do you do before that?” He didn’t seem to understand, so I tried to clarify, “How do you know what to practice for combinations or what combinations to throw on the bag?”

He must have thought I was rather ignorant for a martial artist with a more than decade of experience under his belt, but he humored me. “My instructor shows me properly thrown individual blows, then how to work them in combination. I practice them solo until I have them down with good speed and form, and then...”

“Oh,” I interrupted, “so you practice kata, too!”

At first the young man looked non-plussed; then he said quite simply, “I never thought of it like that.” We went on to discuss the analogy and my views on how kata was often poorly understood and therefore poorly practiced. I asked him if he had ever practiced Heian Shodan and if he remembered the first few movements. He affirmed this knowledge but said that it had nothing to do with actual fighting.

“You mean to say that it has nothing to do with sparring...”

“Yeah! You can’t tell me that a person will have time to loop his arm and foot back and strike his opponent over the head with a hammerfist in the middle of round two.”

“No, not in the middle of round two, but very few real confrontations occur with rings, ropes, and rounds. Can you imagine a situation in which someone would kick you in the groin while sparring?”

“Of course. It’s against the rules in sport, but in real fighting it could happen.”

“What might you do to deflect the blow?”

“Depends on the height. I might just slap it across with my hand or I could maybe deflect it with my leg.”

“Show me.” He set up his imagined situation and performed the defenses he described. His form was loose and quick as one would expect a kickboxer’s to be. “Okay,” I said, “now let me try. Remember I am a beginner at this.” I purposely made my movements more formalistic than his had been.

He got the message immediately. “Heian Shodan. Okay, you made your point. By why do it so rigidly? You have to admit it is slower the way you did it.”

“Right, because I was doing formal kata, not application.”

“But that’s precisely my point!” he said, “What good is formal, rigid kata? It might be good for training this specific type of defense but I can learn that without learning a whole kata in its precise form.”

“What if I told you that this movement could be a wrist release, a foot sweep, an arm jolt, a throw, a spinal lock, a...”

“No way.”

I proceeded to illustrate my claim.

Nearly twenty years later, a student of mine from Texas called me to talk about his recent trip to California. He said that in one of the dojo he visited, he had run into a guy who had met me years before. My student could not remember the gentleman's name but evidently he spoke well of me. "Sensei Annesi," he said, "changed my whole view of traditional martial arts." It was quite a powerful compliment. I had no idea of the lasting impression I had left. My goal was not to convert him from being a more contemporary martial artist but to have him understand that the traditional arts might hold much more depth and interest (and, in some ways, better training) than he had originally believed. That he had not chosen traditional budo was fine with me. That he did not understand its possibilities disappointed me. Misunderstanding often leads to bad-mouthing, rivalry, and parochial true believers.

Martial arts, as exemplified by kata, were supposed to be valueless training because they were so unrealistic, static, rigid, not geared to the individual, and not eclectic enough. These criticisms do seem true; but, what you see is not necessarily what you get. The way I understand kata, just the opposite is true in every case.

Within the context of both sudden-attack self-defense and bodily training of skills, kata are realistic, fluid, personalized, unbelievably varied in technique, and an excellent physical, mental, and spiritual workout.

I do not claim that kata are or should be the only type of martial training or even the best type for each situation, only that they are much richer than they are commonly given credit for.

I used to think that, with the exception of a few instructors, I was alone in this perception. Certainly other martial artists, even those who extolled the virtues of kata, did so because they labeled themselves "traditionalists" rather than because they understood the virtues of kata training. When I was a kyu-ranked student, most "traditional dojo" were doing traditional forms for tournament trophies. A few still studied *bunkai* (analysis or sample application) but usually in the form of pre-arranged engagements, sometimes performed in two-person sets. These two-person kata were not bad training in themselves, but did not use kata to disclose *waza* (techniques) and, to me, this was the next step. Later, I discovered many (albeit not very many) traditional martial artists who valued kata for the same reasons I did. Because kata were not in vogue, they simply took their studies quietly into the back room.

The following text concentrates, for simplicity sake, on karate kata. However, I believe the concepts suggested here apply to any art that does one-person forms for martial training. In one of the aiki-ju-jutsu styles I studied, for example, the techniques required for promotion were called "kata". No one seemed to realize that these

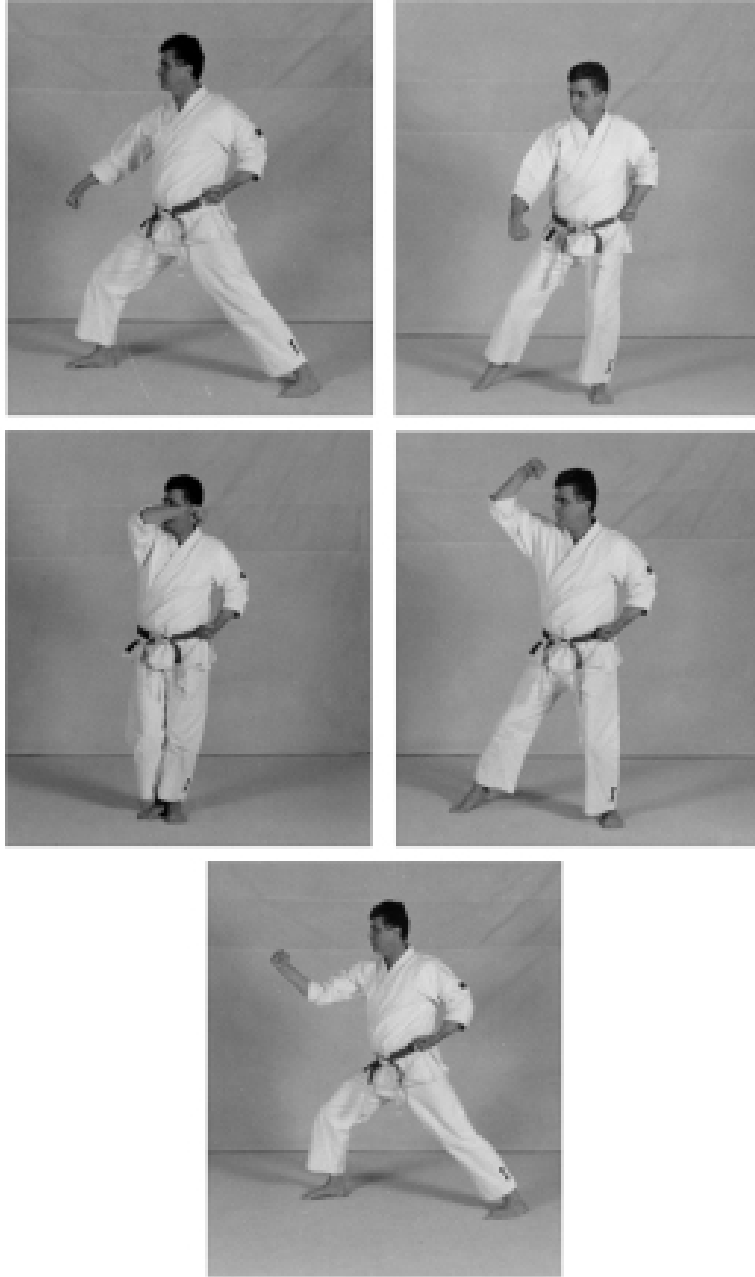
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aiki-kata-*qua*-waza could be interpreted just like karate kata. Not all kata training is necessarily for the same purpose, however; and, not all training was conceived as having the depth that certain kata masterpieces might have. I do not claim that the ideas or interpretations presented here are the traditional, originally intended, or objectively correct ones. However, I do claim that in every case the study of kata as an artistic creation with multiple striations of meaning will allow one to use kata as an ever fruitful source of knowledge.

Hanshi Bruce Juchnik of the Sei Kosho Shorei Kai (whose practitioners use kempo not traditional karate as their base art) once stated that what kata represents depends on the intellect and desires of those who practice it. For those of little intellect or imagination, what you see is what you get. For those who desire to broaden their knowledge, what is you see is not what you get — it is much more. And that's a concept I had been using independently for years. It is an idea that gets you much more than what you see, both in performance of kata, in application, and in a general understanding of one's art, even one's life. And that is worth getting down on paper.

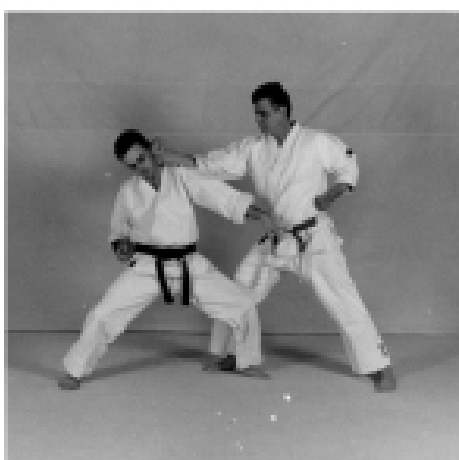
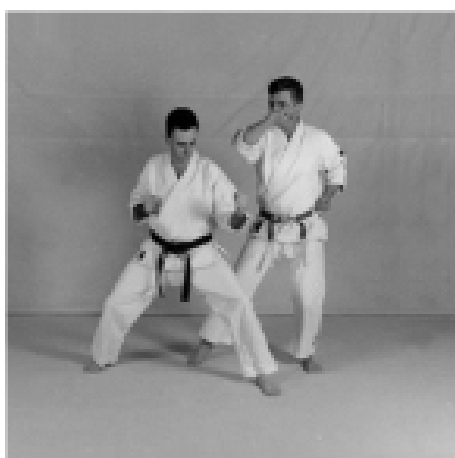
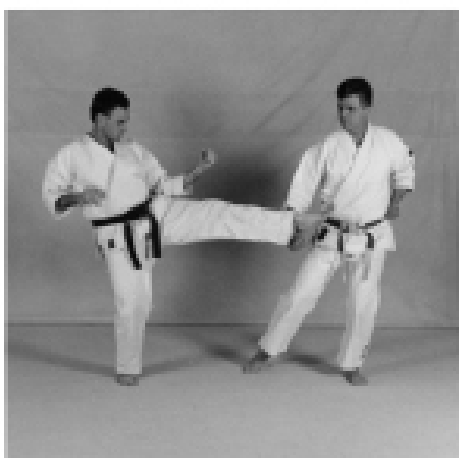
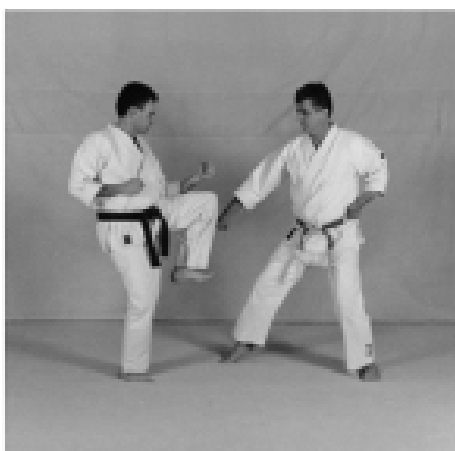
*The following examples are from Heian Shodan: the fourth count of the kata when the performer draws his lead leg backward and then returns to apply tetsui uchi (iron hammer strike).*

*1.1-5. The sequence from Heian Shodan performed solo: I have just completed my right gedan barai (downward sweep). I draw my right foot back and loop my arm across my waist and groin and then past my face stepping back toward the target in a front stance.*



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*1.6-10 Mike Leonard attacks with a left front kick. I parry it from the outside with my rearward sweeping forearm, dropping him into a left front stance in front of me. I continue the motion to perform a bottom-fist counterstrike.*



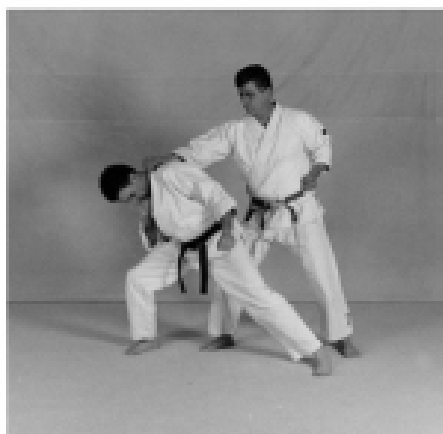
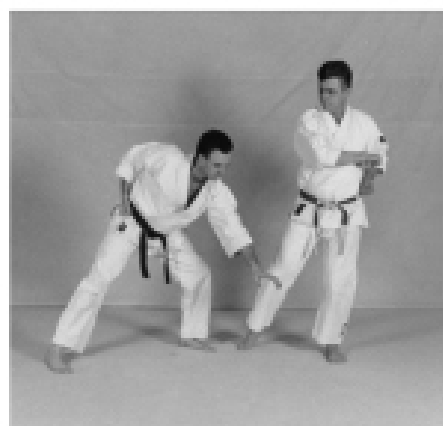


1. 11-14 Against a similar kick, the defender can also use his withdrawing leg to sweep or deflect the blocked kick before it lands.



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*1.15-20 The attacker grabs my right wrist and prepares to strike with his right fist. I off-balance him by drawing my hand in front of me and turning my hips. The rotation of my wrist effects a release which I follow up with a bottom-fist strike.*



*1.21-24 Same wrist attack. Rather than release, I off-balance uke into my footsweep.*



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*The off-balancing movement can be used to draw the attacker into my rear hand, securing him for a downward elbow strike—the first part of my descent to the bottom-fist strike. Naturally, a bottom-fist strike or throw (see final example) can be used as a follow-up.*

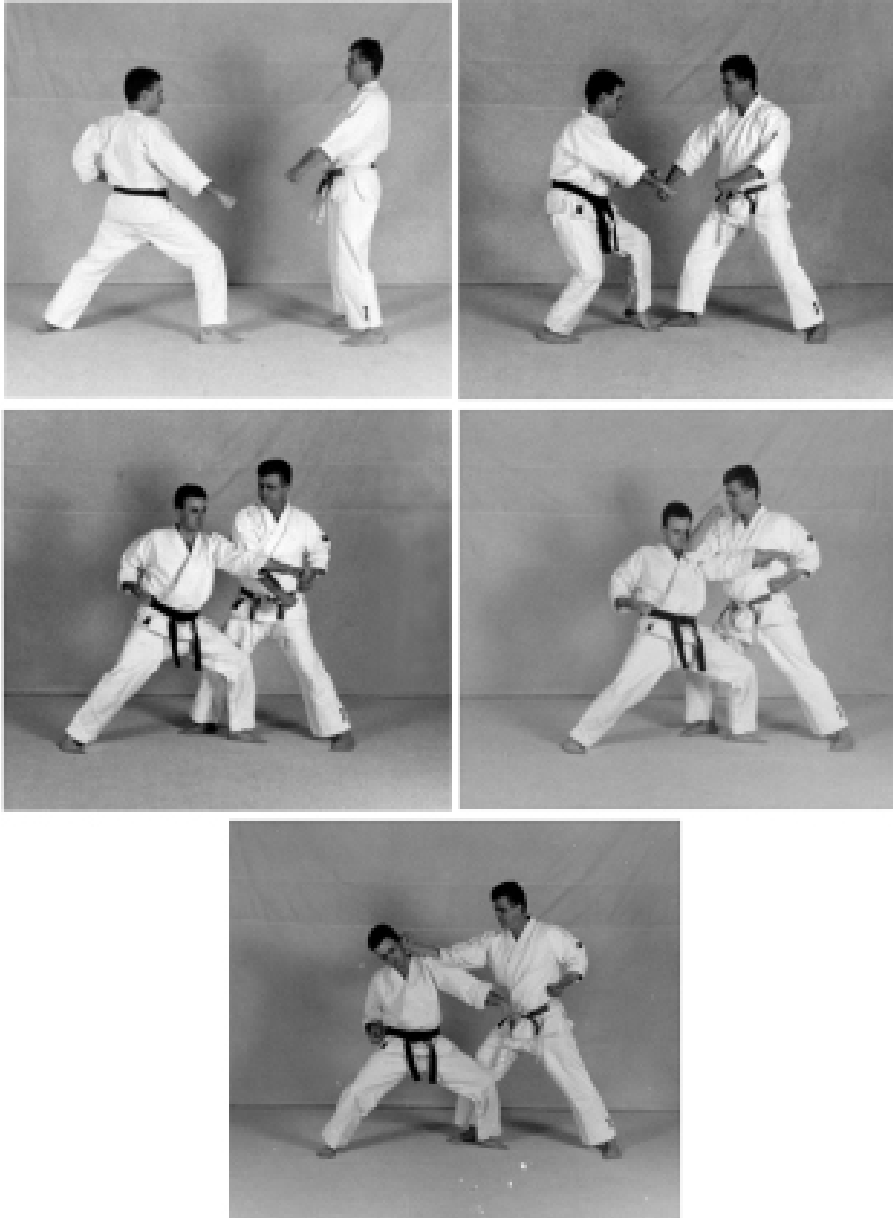


*Cross-grip attack. My off-balancing movement gets the attacker to resist my pull, so I reverse my motion to perform a wrist lock (kagi/nikyo).*



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*Against a left middle punch, I withdraw and deflect the blow in a manner similar to my earlier deflection of the attacker's kick. If I wish, I can catch the attacker's wrist with my rear hand (not illustrated). The deflection then becomes an elbow jolt. Of course, I can also follow-up with a bottom-fist strike.*



*1.37-40 I deflect the left middle-punch and then continue my arm-circle so that the attacker is struck on the chest by my descending elbow. This arches seme-te (attacking partner) and my return to the final position throws him.*



Each set is from the same sequence in the kata but has a different interpretation.

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about the author

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Tony Annesi, a martial artist since 1964, has earned dan-ranks in judo, aiki-ju-jutsu, and karate and has researched numerous other martial arts. Annesi is the director of BUSHIDO-KAI BUDOYA, which markets martial arts videos, books, manuals, and other educational materials. He serves as chief officer of BUSHIDO-KAI KENKYUKAI, an organization dedicated to the development of traditional martial arts in the modern world and specifically of the Takeshin Sogo Budo which it administrates from its BUSHIDO-KAI HOMBU DOJO, Ashland, Massachusetts.

Annesi has written for INSIDE KARATE, BLACK BELT, INSIDE KUNG-FU, MASTERS OF SELF-DEFENSE, FIGHTER INTERNATIONAL and other publications. He is the author 8 Aiki-ju-jutsu Manuals, 6 Karate Manuals, and of *Cracking the Kata Code*, *The Principles of Advanced Budo*, *Expressing the Budo*, *Sudden Attack Defense*, *Tales of the Dojo*, *The Dojo Files*, *Elevated Elementals*, and *Comparative Aiki in Action*. Many of the above titles in video format as well as numerous kata analysis videos are available from BUSHIDO-KAI Productions.

He has also written *1969, Loss of Innocence*, a book of short stories, and *The Shangrilla Artifacts*, a fantasy novel trilogy.

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