

Form to Formlessness

Kata training is not for everyone. One can master a *budo* without *kata*, chiefly by practicing *waza*.

That which is called a kata does not have to be a choreographed sequence as in karate, but can also be formalized *waza* as in a ju-jitsu system. In most cases, some sort of kata (either prearranged sequences or prearranged techniques) is the foundation of *budo*. Without one or the other, combat engagement is formless. Without form, only experience itself can teach, and once experience teaches, some sort of form (*kata* or *waza*) is created. That is, once an engagement (in practice or in reality) takes a form, it becomes at least one *waza*. If someone wants to replicate that *waza*, it will be formalized and is one step closer to becoming a *kata*.

A Buddhist adage says, “From Form comes Emptiness; from Emptiness comes Form.” Let’s take the second segment first. Some people oppose *kata* training because they say that a real fight (by fight, I think they mean self-defense, but it is hard to determine in today’s world that confuses a cage match with self-protection)—they say that a real fight is formless. It is not. How can it be? Is it a void? Is it the “*ku*” of *Kanku* floating out over the horizon? If a real fight were formless, you’d never see clips of real fights on YouTube. What people mean by “formless” in this context is that a “real fight” has no predetermined sequence and no set aesthetic propriety. In other words, a real fight may be a lot sloppier than a *kata* or even a series of applied *waza*. Out of emptiness—The Void—some troublemaker slugs a fellow who is willing to fight back. The retaliator responds with a physical action that has some sort of form—thus we can understand the second segment of the Buddhist saying: “from Emptiness comes Form”.

What about the first segment? How can Form produce Emptiness? Formlessness is not truly empty, but it is devoid of an exact preconceived shape. The Form by which one practices one’s martial art has a predetermined shape, but when applied, it will take a different, unpredictable form. It will not truly be Empty, but it certainly will be empty of predetermined propriety and preconceived precision, and that’s what people mean when they say a real fight is formless.

I therefore suggest that, for the martial artist, the saying should be read in a different order: “First, from Emptiness comes Form. Second, from Form comes Emptiness.” A physical conflict takes a Form; that Form becomes a training device that prepares the martial artist for an unpredictable situation that develops without warning, without a *gi*, without a bow, and without a command from Sensei. From that Form comes a response that, if not Empty, is at least free and adaptable. The formed training device (*kata/waza*) prepares one for the relatively un-formed attack.

Chojun Miyagi, the founder of Goju, and usually not considered a wild-eyed modernist, once said, “*Kata* are not simply an exhibition of form, they are concrete manifestation 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.” In other words, those rigidly adhered-to forms are applied in variable ways such that they seem formless to the untrained person. I suggest that rigid Forms are ways to discipline the body to do something it would not do before.

Dissecting formal kata, we arrive at waza (individual techniques). Kata are to be *performed*, but techniques, by their very nature, are to be *applied*. Seeing what the Formal can become reveals the Applied, and the Applied can be whatever it needs to be.