

One-Way Karate

There are many “mysteries” in the study of karate kata. Kosaku YOKOTA Shihan discusses some of these mysteries in his books *Shotokan Myths* and *Shotokan Mysteries*. I would like to add to the list.

Consider the movement I call the “cross-stance, rolling back fist” that occurs at the end of the first vertical line (usually the first *ki* point) of Heian Yondan. This circular back fist occurs again in Kanku-dai and Kanku-sho, and a similar movement from a front stance serves as the beginning of the two Gojushiho kata. In each instance however, the rolling back fist is done with the right fist and the right foot forward (while the left hand parries downward and, in the cross-stance, the left shin folds behind the right). Kata that modify this movement, such as the *shikko-dachi uraken-uchi* of Goju’s Seienchin or the *sanchin uraken-uchi* of Kururunfa, do not favor one side. Why is the rolling back fist from *kosa-dachi* (crossed stance) in kata from the Shorin lineage always favor the right side?

Consider also the jump-spins in karate kata such as Empi and Kanku-sho. These are not the double jump front kicks as in the end of Kanku-dai, but the jump-spins as in Shotokan’s Meikyo or Unsu. A similar non-jumping spin with a crescent kick occurs in Sochin. Spinning crescent kicks occur in Kanku-sho and Unsu, as well as the non-Shotokan kata Matsumora (Tomari) Rohai and Wando/Wanduan. Perhaps in some more esoteric kata of other systems, these “rules” are broken, but it seems that, by and large, the counter-clockwise spin off the left foot and crescent kick with the right foot is dominant. Why?

To explain the right-handed rolling back fist, I have heard some fanciful explanations that have to do with the imagined attacker being a Japanese swordsman (by strict tradition, always right hand-dominant). The idea is that the cross stance-rolling back fist prevents the opponent’s right hand from drawing the sword from his left hip. But, I would offer, so would a left foot forward cross-stance left handed rolling back fist.

Kyusho (pressure point striking) explanations also fail. Generally, a blow received on the right side of the torso or face might hit a pressure point, but its mate would exist on the left side, so why not a rolling back fist both ways? True, a heart strike would be easier when delivered with the right hand, but it is not difficult to deliver with the left.

To explain counter-clockwise jump-spins, people offer the idea that jumping over a low cutting sword swinging from right to left (counter-clockwise) might favor a defense that blends with the slice (i.e. that jumps in the same circular direction), but I would offer, Japanese swordsmen were capable of doing reverse cuts in clockwise circles, as well. The swordsman-as-attacker explanation seems both fanciful and overly romantic.

Jumping in one direction seems to leave the *Kyusho* explanation out of the picture altogether.

How about Tuite or standing grappling explanations? Same problem. A lock or takedown on one side of the body can be done in the opposite direction since the opponent’s body will always be bilateral. Then, why are certain kata techniques not also bilateral?

The only viable explanation I can think of has to do with the general preference in Japanese/Okinawan kata for un-uniform forms. Many kata appear to be structured on a pattern whose branches are equally distributed left and right, forward and backward, but in reality, none but the most basic exercise form is perfectly harmonious this way.

Perhaps it is not so important that forms give us the chance to practice with our right side as well as our left (although this is decidedly true at times), but that we should view the repetitive movements as part of larger combinations. If that is the case, one-way jumps and one-side rolling back fists are simply techniques that should be practiced on the alternate side just as three lunge punches in a row (right, left, right) should also be practiced the alternate way (left, right left). Maybe it's that one-way karate is a reminder to consider both ways.