

Touch Your Body, Touch Your Opponent

Whenever your hand touches your body during a kata, it's the equivalent of touching your opponent's body. There's no practical reason for your hand to touch your body during a fight; it's a training method designed to make you think about how you can hold your opponent.

Example: In karate's *te gatana* cover position, one hand is open and the other is closed and placed near your hip. Beginners learn that it's a preparatory position, but advanced students know that it means you have a hold on your opponent's body. When such positions are assumed between attacks in a kata, you could be throwing your opponent to the side to get him out of the way.

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In the advanced karate kata known as *da nin sho*, you punch your adversary in the groin, then step back into a V-stance with *te gatana*. When you're a beginner, you learn the move as a preparatory position, a go-between in the form. But upon closer examination, once you hit him in the groin, he'll bend toward you. When you step back into the V-stance and perform a hand cover, you'll take him with you and toss him out of your way.

Forward for Striking, Backward for Grappling

Do practitioners of the striking arts use grappling? Absolutely. Do their forms teach grappling? Definitely. Unfortunately, the untrained eye seldom discerns the moves.

When you move forward in a kata, you're stopping your opponent's momentum, and a strike is the most appropriate technique. However, if you move backward, you're using his momentum against him, and that means a grappling technique is called for. Grappling moves in kata are hidden techniques, disguised as strikes or as artistic motions. But if you experiment with your kata and practice against people who are trying to perform variations of the attack that may be more suitable to real fights, you'll find a lot of grappling. Just examine instances in which you move backward.

Example: At one point, the *bassai dai* kata has you back down, level with your chest. In competition, pear graceful, but in a real fight, you'd break your

Another example: In the *wansu* kata, the open application of the movement is a choke.

Remember: As you study your form for in-thumb is, "Striking works against; grappling

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Hidden Distractions Between Techniques

It's simplistic to think that a technique starts at your hip and ends at the target. What's your weapon doing in between? If kata teaches that secrets are hidden in every movement, those secrets must be examined. Is an edge-of-the-hand block, for example, your preferred block on the street? Probably not. It may look cool, but it's probably not the best weapon for the street.

However, what if you were taught that every edge-of-the-hand block actually starts as an attack to the eyes and ends in a block? Suddenly, the technique becomes a better option for the street. When you're performing it, you can graze your attacker's eyes without even changing the motion of the technique. Or, as you reach up to prepare for a low block, you can slap his ears.

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Vic LeRoux (right) demonstrates a self-defense technique in which he pulls his opponent's left wrist next to his left hip as he attacks. The author contends that kata movements in which the practitioner's hand is chambered between techniques mimics this type of controlling technique.



Importance of Breathing

Kata has but one purpose: to teach you how to fight. It's unfortunate to see students run through forms while seemingly holding their breath because no one should expect to fight that way. You may *kiai* (shout) sporadically in kata, but in a fight, you should do so with all your strikes. With every blow you throw in training, you should maximize your intention and power, even if you don't *kiai*.

At the very least, you must learn to open your mouth, inhale between techniques and exhale at the end of techniques. Breathing is the key to fighting because it prepares your body for action.

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↑ *Breathing is of utmost importance in a fight, the author says, which is why kata include strategically placed kiai that are effected with a forceful exhalation. Tom Muzila (right) illustrates.*

Use Your Whole Body to Strike

As a martial artist, you know that a punch isn't executed with just your arm and fist; it's executed with your body. Kata teach that lesson along with all the others.

Example: Many kata include a sequence in which you step toward your attacker and execute a reinforced elbow smash to the temple. If you use your body, the strike is strong and effective. If you use your whole body, however, it becomes more than an elbow smash. The real purpose of an elbow smash executed as you move into *kiba dachi* (horse stance) is not only to hit with your elbow but also to hit when you take the step—perhaps by driving your knee into your opponent's leg. Every time you move your body, you should use your whole body.

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"The low block you use to stop a kick should hurt your opponent's leg so he can't use it to attack you again. Better yet, that low block can function as a hammerfist to the groin."

Train With Intention and Visualization

Always emphasize the manner in which you strive for true understanding of the self-defense principles of kata. First, train with intention. Intention means that when you execute a technique, you do it exactly as you would on the street. Nothing can be sloppy or weak.

Second, visualize your attacker(s) with each technique you throw. Visualization is part of intention. Pretend you're surrounded by attackers whenever you can't train with real opponents. See yourself doing the techniques as you'd want to do them on the street. Only then will you enjoy all the benefits of kata training. ✕

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10 KEYS TO COMBAT

Essential Principles of
Self-Defense You Already
Learned From Your Kata

by Joe Chianakas
Photography by Rick Husted

If you've attended a martial arts tournament or watched a demonstration, you've been exposed to scores of *kata*. In fact, you've probably noticed that there are so many variations that it can be difficult to see their practical value. That confusion, coupled with the rise of the mixed martial arts and their focus on hand-to-hand sporting combat, has made more and more practitioners drop kata from their training.

Big mistake.

Forms teach at least 10 invaluable lessons that pertain to self-defense. To reap those benefits, however, you need to learn what those combat concepts are and then train in a manner that emphasizes them. The following will set you on the path. >>

Soft Against Hard, Hard Against Soft

This principle is so crucial that lacking knowledge of it could lead you to break your own bones—or worse. That's why kata teach strikes along with the corresponding targets. For instance, hard techniques like the knuckle punch are aimed at soft targets like the solar plexus or groin, and soft techniques like the palm strike are aimed at hard targets like the jaw.

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Example: You've no doubt heard stories about fighters who punched someone in the jaw and broke their hand. That happens all the time when bare knuckles make contact with bone. The best way to prevent that is to take note of how your kata teach you to select your targets. Mentally run through your favorite form and count the number of hard strikes to soft areas and soft strikes to hard areas. While it may include hard strikes to hard targets—which are obviously effective, especially if you've conditioned your knuckles—it probably avoids soft strikes to soft targets because they seldom work well.

High-Low-High, Low-High-Low

Kata teach practical combinations and strategies, as well as the ways your opponent is likely to react to each strike. For example, if you throw three punches to the nose, by the second or third one, your opponent will have moved out of range. Kata practice helps you avoid that pitfall by emphasizing smart target selection—specifically, by changing levels.

The *go pei sho* kata of Okinawan *shuri-ryu* karate provides an example: a strike to the eyes, followed by an elbow to the chin, an overhead backfist to the nose and a hammerfist to the groin. The eye gouge moves the attacker's head back, exposing his chin. The elbow targets the chin, which angles the head back even more, setting up the backfist. The backfist makes the attacker thrust his hips forward, which exposes his groin and facilitates the low hammerfist.

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↑ All blocks should be executed as though they're strikes, the author says. Here, Gary Alexander (right) puts limb-injuring power into his defensive maneuver, thus stopping the attack and preventing his opponent from following up with the same arm.

All Blocks Are Strikes

The problem with traditional sparring competition: Hard blocking is often discouraged and sometimes illegal.

The truth of fighting: Blocking is essential, and hard blocking is superior to passive blocking.

One of the most important lessons of kata is that there's no such thing as a passive block. Every block should be executed as though it's a strike, which means you must make it as hard as possible with the intention of ending the fight.

Examples: The low block you use to stop a kick should hurt your opponent's leg so he can't use it to attack you again. Better yet, that low block can function as a hammerfist to the groin. Likewise, a middle block to the arm shouldn't just stop the punch; it should eliminate your foe's ability to use that arm. Arts that teach pressure-point methods exploit this principle. Practitioners love to strike the brachial nerve in the arm with their middle block or edge-of-the-hand block, rendering the limb useless.

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Chambering Has a Purpose

The chambered position, in which your hand is formed into a fist and positioned near your hip during forms training, may be among the most misunderstood concepts in the martial arts. Chambering obviously puts some "art" in the martial arts, but are you really supposed to do that in a real fight? Shouldn't you keep your hands up like you do in sparring?

There's clearly a conflict. If one method is wrong, why train that way?

The real purpose of the chamber is related to the concept of hiding movements during training, thus disguising the intent. That was done for several reasons, perhaps most often because masters wanted to teach forms applications only to their most trustworthy students.

The chambered position actually indicates a grab or hold effected on your opponent. Whenever you strike and pull your hand back, you're mimicking the movement of grabbing your foe and off-balancing him to set up your next attack.

Example: Consider the sequence in which you execute a middle block that's followed by a reverse punch. In forms training, you pull the blocking hand back to your hip as your other hand punches. You're told that the scissor motion increases your power, but the actual reason is that the retracted block yanks your opponent's arm and body, thus pulling him into your follow-up strike. Likewise, a low block to the leg—which is actually a strike—pulls the leg to off-balance the enemy as you counterattack.

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