

Standard Applications – part 1.

As the “warrior competitors” of yesteryear go beyond their competition careers, it is only natural that those who love their martial arts will look deeper into them. No longer content with scoring points (and in some cases no longer able, through disease, injury, or fading fitness levels), there are those who remember that sensei said Karate was for life. They plumb the depths of their art for something to continue training with. They find meditation, and they find bio-mechanical principles that govern movement. A certain economy of motion inherent in experience over enthusiasm.

And within all of this they begin to wonder what those funny looking postures in their kata are for. The applications that some sensei teach are obviously built around a kumite (sparring) distance and an application that encourages movement to full extension (the “form” of the movement). The experienced martial artists (and not a small number of inexperienced ones) then ask “but what if it was a “street” sort of attack?” Then the subject of “applications” becomes a hotbed of conversation and not a few arguments.

There are people out there writing books and making videos promoting their interpretation of what the “real” applications are to the moves from kata (set forms). Not that there is anything wrong with that in itself, just that we must put a little bit of context on these kata before we look at what the moves do.

Sometimes I have heard students say “It doesn’t work” to other instructors. Their reply has often been “You need to work harder at it” or (the worst one) “You’ll be able to do that one when you are a [insert level three grades higher than current, here] th Dan” . Sometimes it just doesn’t work for you.

The applications that you use have to work “for you”. This is why in my books, dvds, and seminars, I will show multiple applications to moves. Some of them are not for you.

By this I mean that some applications may not be appropriate. They might not be appropriate for your body type, they might not be appropriate for your mind-set, and they might not be appropriate for the kind of situations that you are likely to find yourself in. Over the next few articles, we’ll be showing how an application can fit with your needs, rather than you having to fit “it”.

The Rules

The first thing to establish is that the movements of kata were never meant to be matched against the attacks of another martial artist. This was a civilian method of self defence, to be used against an attacker who was unlikely to know martial arts themselves, and unlikely to know that their intended victim did martial arts.

As such, we must understand the range that these techniques were useful in. It was not announced at 6’ away, but sudden and close in. There was no time to stand and prepare to block.

The attack would be one of very few “common attacks”. (Patrick McCarthy refers to these as the “Habitual Acts of Physical Violence”.) As such, there are various, predictable, actions and reactions that occur with the human body. These “flinches” can be used to the martial artist’s benefit.

Whatever retaliation was used would have to prevent further attack, or at very least, leave the

defender in an advantageous position. This makes a mockery of movements that appear to block attacks that then have no obvious retaliation to them. It is only logical then, that the blocks do not just ward or parry, but are excellent fight-stoppers in their own right.

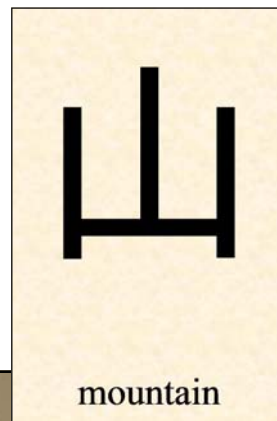
Principles are more important than postures. The masters of old are known to have changed kata depending on who they were teaching. It would seem that they were imparting the principle over and above the idea of a set position. Today we have to try to piece together what those principles are to get the same messages across.

With these in mind, we can look at kata moves and the situations they might be applied to. We'll start with a posture from Jitte which is often subject to misunderstanding. The position is called "yama uke" or "yama gamae", which means "mountain block" or "mountain posture/guard". The descriptive use of Japanese merely tells you that when you stand like this you look like the kanji (Japanese calligraphy) for "mountain". It does not indicate that you are blocking with the strength of a mountain or that you look like you could lift a mountain.

<insert yama kanji here>

This move is sometimes shown as blocking a straight punch.

This application shows the posture meeting another karate-ka's attack, and as such it disobeys our rules of attack type, distance, commonality, and prevention (as the defender is no better off). Applications like this teach you how to perform kata (as they teach the movement "as it's written"; they're not for self defence.



Body Type



Even where the application is more realistic, it may not be appropriate for your body-type.

A move that looks like it lifts an opponent onto your shoulders might be great for the strong judo-ka type of body with good stability, but that 5ft tall lady at the back there isn't going to be able to heft me (at 6'2") onto her shoulders with any amount of will-power.





She might be better served using that same movement against the common hook punch as a simultaneous block and strike to the face. This type of application fulfils certain criteria that mark it out as useful to us.

The attack is realistic: The hook punch, particularly from a right fist, is the most common attack.

And it is being met in a manner that allows the attacker's force to continue (and even be accelerated) in a direction that prevents harm to the defender and makes the attacker land even more heavily on the retaliation



The technique does the work: She isn't meeting force with force, but is rather using a circular deflecting motion that uses her whole momentum to escape direct impact and it is the strength of her legs behind her impact on the attacker's face.

The distance is realistic: There is very real danger, not just of an opponent scoring a point, but of imminent harm, if the karate-ka does not respond.



The shape of the kata: The posture shows her using her size to her advantage. If it happens to look like the “mountain block” from Jitte, then we have found something useful.

If we have the coordination we might even get in the rest of the technique, with the lifting of the knee (hizageri - strike to the groin) and the stamp down (fumikomi – smashing the knee of the attacker).

The same principle, applied to a bigger man, shows the defence in a slightly different form.



It still has the incoming hook punch met by a deflecting forearm that sweeps the opponent’s power past us, and it still has the attack with the whole forearm (albeit with a little less circularity). But the size of the person receiving the attack dictates that the arm cannot be in the yama uke position because then they would still get hit by the attack.

If the variation happens to look like the move from Sochin then we might discover that form fits function rather than the move “having to” perform a particular action.

In the next part we will look at how your mindset can change the nature of a response in application.

Thanks to Richard Carrick sensei and Gillian May sensei for posing for the shots. Those willing to learn are always welcome at my dojo. Anyone who would like a Functional Kata Application Seminar at their dojo please contact keikokarate@aol.com, call 01626 360999, or write to John Burke, Martial Arts World, 36-38 Market Walk, Newton Abbot, Devon, TQ12 2RX. Books and dvds are available from www.johnburke.info and www.karateacademy.co.uk