

# Kata Bing, Kata Bang, Kata *Boom!*

## Searching For The Essence Of Okinawan Kata: A Personal Journey

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*A life-long, passionate student of Okinawan martial arts shares his perspective on the nature of authentic Okinawan kata in a Joisey-boy, Soprano-like chronology.*

### KATA BING 1968

Think gangly, introverted seventeen-year old, living in a quiet, insulated and affluent, New Jersey suburb. One evening I was “wowed” by Ilya Kuryakin’s (David McCallum) karate chop, summarily dispatching a Russian, Cold War thug during an episode of the popular 1960 TV series, Man From U.N.C.L.E. Agent Kuryakin’s *shuto* shattered my utter ignorance about this exotic, Asian fighting art.



Then there was the uncanny timing of my sister's boyfriend, an *actual* karateka, inviting me to train in his dojo the next town over. There was a great air of mystery and excitement about the martial arts at this time in the United States. Karate was not a household familiar word to

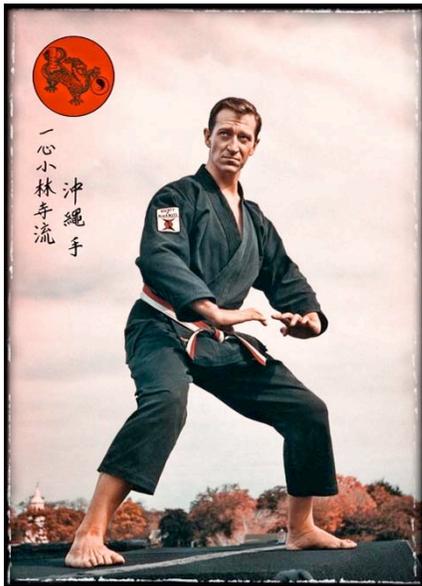
Americans in the 1960's and, unless you served in the armed forces, Judo wasn't much better known. It not only caught my attention, it bit me hard. My sister figured if I really was earnest in trying to teach myself self-defense in my parent's basement from Bruce Tegner's *Complete Book of Karate* (Bantam Books 1966), I might actually want to join a *real* dojo. In my defense, that one-dollar, 224 page, dog-eared paperback carried me long enough to jump on her boyfriend's serendipitous offer for one free karate class. The next day, I had joined the International School of Judo and Karate. Cost, \$60 a month, allowing me participation in up to six classes a week. I shelled out an additional \$12 dollars for a mandatory pair of unbleached, cotton, pants-to-your-mid-calves, sleeves-to-your-mid-forearms, combat 'jamies.

I had officially stepped into the Circle of Iron. My mother was both equally pleased and irked. Her oldest of four had found an outside interest, but she had gained another chore—driving me to the dojo.

What did I know about martial arts back then? Absolutely *zero*. Perhaps, it was karate's sheer mystery that compelled me to leap in—with hindsight—over my head. I had no idea that the infamous Bank Street School was one of the United States' pioneering East Coast dojos, or that I would rise to become one of its primary sensei, and later, to head a martial *ryu*. I had no idea what authentic Okinawan karate was all about, nor the tremendous, life-altering grip this niche, Asian discipline would have on my future. For it would consume me—body, mind and soul for the next four-and-a-half decades. And nothing would grab me so completely as its fighting Forms or Kata.

Bank Street, as we informally called our dojo (named after its location at 3 Bank Street, Summit, New Jersey), opened its doors to the public in 1962. A shrewd salesman and avid *judoka*, named Allen H. Good, foresaw the coming popularity and business boon in the martial arts. He negotiated a lease to open a second-

floor, training hall near the center of town. Not a black belt himself, Good hired a French judoka to run his spacious 3,500 square foot facility. Bank Street was an instant success. Within months, the studio had 250 judo enrollees. In 1964, he received so many requests for karate instruction that he hired the square-jawed, marine corps veteran and Isshinryu black belt, Gary Alexander (current head of Isshinryu Plus) to become the School's first official karate sensei. Though Alexander only reigned a few months as head teacher, Bank Street's karate history had officially begun.



The Bank Street Dojo produced many notable teachers and a steady stream of experts (several who went on to distinguish themselves in other disciplines). By the 1970's, Karate had established itself as the Big Man on the U.S. martial campus. Judo was phasing out and Bank Street began profiting from hundreds of young men, aged seventeen to thirty-five, looking for a little Asian, kick butt mojo. By 1973, the Bank Street Dojo, under its formal new name, the Isshin Kempo Association, boasted 1,000 active students. On any given evening there were three mats teeming with fifty to sixty, testosterone-charged males snapping their sweaty gis through grueling two hour classes (*sorry*, there were no ladies). As a side note, protective gear was in its infancy in those early days of American karate. All practices, including *jiu-kumite* (free-sparring), were engaged barehanded, barefooted, and with unprotected pearly whites (teeth).

One day I found myself awarded a new color strip around my waist and being lectured by my sensei that *kata* were prerequisites for mastering the art of karate.

My promotional, small-step recognition to *shichikyu*, yellow belt, one step up from the bottom-most, white-sashed newbie, initiated me into the 'warrior dances' of Asia. *Kata* ushered me into an entirely new arena of physical education—rehearsing detailed movement sequences of fifty to one hundred individual actions strictly according to my black-sashed, taskmaster's cadence.

We practiced what we were told—what I thought was just a random collection of punches, kicks, blocks and stance work, bookended by perfunctory bows. I

almost always performed my kata in a group, on the mat, and in a white gi. Only high dan-ranked karateka were allowed to wear black gi jackets. Each of my Isshin Shorin Ji Ryu Okinawa Te kata, under the late master, Robert Murphy, possessed an enigmatic name matching its equally strange composition. *Seisan* (thirteen), *Seiuchin* (war kata) *Wansu* (named after a bird, the swallow) etc. Nevertheless, I threw myself into kata practice. But oddly, I would learn, decades later, that for all my early quaffing from kata's well, I had barely drawn a sake cup's worth of its martial blood.

I hated the Rubik's Cube puzzle of the 70's. I was convinced that I could make a small fortune inventing the Rubik's Cube Hammer— guaranteed to smash the frustrating little block in one blow. By contrast, I couldn't get enough of kata's kinesthetic, multi-dimensional challenges. By brown belt I was hammering at its kernels of truth with six hours of training a day. Granted, it often seemed like I was trying to cram my 6' 4" frame into a Japanese rice box. Who would ever fight in a cat stance, or want to thrust their hips "in unmanly fashion?" a later student would comment, or sashay across the floor in funny half-moon steps? Is this really how the Japanese fought? No wonder they lost the war! And why am I turning red as a beet feeling like I'm about to blow an abdominal gasket with this toe-gripping tension kata called *Sanchin*? Let's face it, when you perform an Okinawan kata, you are slipping into another person's body, another time dimension, another culture, and another headspace. That's why the initial fit can feel so horribly confining to

Western beginners who basically hate any idea of conformity. I took some comfort knowing that every other neophyte's Kata Bing seemed to share my robotic struggle to find the right flow. Thankfully, my native intelligence kicked in early telling me that when facing



any new or novel relationship the first thing you do is "court." You spend time getting to know one another. So with open mind and bared feet, I painted and repainted each kata's embusen with calculated steps upon the dojo's canvas mat. (Every kata traces a distinct symbol on the ground).

I've heard many a diehard karateka remark of their kata, or aspects of them, as if

describing paramours. “*I love Chinto.*” “*I hate Neihanchi’s leg lifts.*” “*Wansu apps are so cool!*” I once joked that Tatsuo Shimabuku (Isshinryu karate’s founder) named all his kata after his former girlfriends for that special love/hate relationship members of the opposite sex are so good at fostering. (In truth, all but Sunsu kata were hand-me-downs to Shimabuku from his past masters).

If my Kata Bing initiated the courtship, my Kata Bang showed my commitment to “marry” them.

## KATA BANG 1975

For the average Japanese, the word *kata* has a broad range of linguistic application, not limited exclusively to fighting patterns. Literally the word can be interpreted as; direction, toward; peace; shape; tideland, lagoon, bay; shoulder.

Wikipedia accurately describes kata as ‘detailed choreographed patterns of movements practiced either solo or in pairs.’ Partnered work lends a whole new perspective to kata training. Paired kata makes up the second of the three major pillars of traditional martial arts form training. Those three pillars are: the solo form (inward-directed focus), the prearranged partnered form (what I call, “success rehearsal”), and the *jiu kumite*, free-form, or free-fighting exchange (outer-directed focus). If Kata is the soul of karate, then its *bunkai* (applied knowledge) is its heart, and free-fighting is its musculoskeletal system.

The mainstream American martial arts community simply calls these choreographed shadow boxings—Form. Other cultures have their respective names. Chinese call them *Hsing*. In Korean it’s called *Hyeong*. In India, warrior sets were referred to as *Bodhisattva Nata*. We must also consider that the concept of kata is not confined solely to the martial arts or even to Asian culture. Kata incorporates a wide range of patterned work and disciplines.

Life itself can be viewed as grand kata performance. Aren’t we all trying to get it right?

The term ‘Form’ however was so general to me, so ambiguous, so academic in my early practices that it didn’t give me a single clue to the specifics of any kata I was learning at the Bank Street Dojo. For me, kata was just a choppy flow of technique (no pun intended). Early on, I did find a helpful analogy of kata being compared to the craft of writing. If an individual technique could be likened to a

letter of the alphabet, then a set of kata moves could be analogized to a sentence. Each set/sentence had a beginning and an end. Your invisible opponent attacked and you concluded the attack with successful counter maneuver(s). So, I prematurely guessed that an entire kata must be some past warrior's locomotive essay on the art of "winning a bunch of fights."

Even during my Kata Bang era I was still only privy to the kata as a means of neutralizing physical aggressions. I had no idea that kata derived from ancient Indian (Hindu) warrior techniques involving particular orientations of mind, breath, and body based upon Buddhist principles, or that kata was used as a dynamic, self-unraveling movement meditation.

Martial author and kendo enthusiast, Dave Lowry, shared his commentary on kata's meaning by philosophically waxing on and off in his book, *Sword and Brush* (Shambala, 1995). The *kanji* pictograph for kata, he points out, is that of "a lattice grid with rays of sunlight penetrating it." Someone would poke a few holes in the earliest bamboo abodes to let in some light and air; Think primitive Asian window. Kata then, is our primal window into the house of personal combat, and for the spiritually inclined, into the bigger picture of human conflict itself. Lowry suggests that non-practitioners of kata can only see this light emitted from the outside, like gazing innocently through a

形



peephole into a mansion. But to those who have chosen to dwell in the kata house, not just enter as an occasional visitor, endless textures and subtleties of light and shadow, and the ethereal qualities of air reveal themselves. Lowry suggests that dwelling in kata offers us a special sort of illumination. Of course, we cannot discount the

negative experience of those students who get bruised by kata's shadowy ambiguities and thus exit perhaps, to the simpler drive-up window sports like MMA.

I entered kata's kinesthetic room of my own free will, curious about its action furnishings. Due to my youthful naiveté I only saw its simple functionality. Kata's unique environment was stoically highlighted by my teacher's critiques. "No, the

middle block must be higher. “That’s a *seisan*, not a *kiba dachi*.” “Yes, the front kick was well-placed.” “Faster please, don’t tense. Ah! Too fast! Sink lower.”

Most novice performances of kata initially feel like a robotic extension of their teacher’s mind. We oblige our sensei as good disciples must, by moving about in their airy, sunlit action house according to *his* rules, *his* pacing, and our infrequently allowed creative wandering amongst kata’s intractable architecture with our own spirited and rebellious intent.

One day I began to wonder ‘Why do we have to move like these ghostly Okinawan masters anyway? How would I move without these Asian influenced restrictions?’ An intermediate-ranked student, named Dan, asked me once, “What makes *their* patterns so special?” How would a kata I create be any different from those early martial craftsmen?”

My answer to him was, “far more than you can imagine,” for I had walked down that same well-trodden, inquiring road decades ago. I too had once entertained the idea of creating my own kata, until I came across a statement from a source, long since forgotten, that in Shotokan (once the world’s most prolific system) no one below the rank of *sandan* would have their kata creation taken seriously by its hierarchy. This raised my suspicion that either there was either more substance to kata than I had divined or that egocentricity and politics were no stranger in the dojo and had simply not yet ambushed my youthful idealism.

I eventually reached Sandan grade (3rd degree black belt). I had become an expert in Okinawan kata *jutsu*, and a sensei. I was now standing on the other side of the martial fence, no longer that innocent, bungling novice. I could execute crisp, snappy, lethal forms and guide others to the same. I had collected multiple, self-protecting interpretations and trained hard with partners to assure their worth—should I ever have to use them seriously. I also knew my martial history well, and gobbled up Asian philosophy like a bowl of hot Ramen. I claimed kata nuances that dojo newbies wouldn’t see for years. Yet, despite all my physical and philosophical talents, ghostly fingers from a distant past kept poking at my gray matter during practice suggesting that I was still in the initial stages of a very long



kata journey.

My Kata-Bang blossomed at sandan, years after I had bumbled through my first form and well into a solid, full-time martial teaching career. I had survived three teaching regimes at the same dojo. Each one had morphed my kata performance and stretched my understanding of kata's nuance. This was mostly due to the different foci of my sensei coupled with my own maturation into a *martial* man. I came to clearly see that there were two distinct kata camps; those of an orthodoxy that nothing new could be added by a practitioner, as the kata had been worked out to the *utmost* perfection by its originators, and that of the progressive viewpoint, that kata is a general blueprint of action, and with slight modifications most assaultive actions against you can be answered intelligently with a kata principle.

By staking my claim into kata's relevance by sweat and blood, and by living daily within a small community of eight forms, I had claimed my kata *buyu*.

### KATA BOOM 1990

It arrived as a sudden, lightening bolt awareness. I caught a glimpse of something strange, yet immeasurably powerful, a spark of intuition, illusive to my intellectual grasp. It was like hearing thunder for the first time as a child. What kind of power could shake my sensibilities so forcefully? Why hadn't any one mentioned this before? Had I been dreaming the whole time, asleep at my own art? Had I just been playing with toy blocks; kicks and punches? Had I forgotten that kata had been forged in blood by the elite warriors of Asia—*real* men faced with *real* life and death issues?

It's strange, at first, to realize that that there are degrees of wakefulness even after we have roused ourselves out of bed in the morning, and that there are currents within currents in the sky above and in the oceans below.

I discovered, time and again, that the surface of a kata often conceals its depth and dimensionality. This fact arrived as a deafening, yet silent Zen *BOOM*, a one-handed thunderclap only for trained ears to detect. Even today many tuned-in Asian ears are not telling the West what they fully hear in their disciplines. And those who do shout their martial truths from the mountaintop often find their voices falling on the deaf ears of the entranced beginners in the Western valley below. For the Western world is entranced by the surface stimulation and

adrenaline highs of American karate. When my third eye finally opened from its encrusted, and superficial slumber, I saw that Kata was far more than what it appeared.

The essence of Okinawan kata is a form of “deep-see” diving, not for the faint hearted. Traditional Okinawa Kata is not just a clever set of self-defense techniques or surface formula for self-protective fitness. Kata is not *just* a ‘physical’ art. Its composition leaves us with an acute puzzle of the essence of life and energy and the fundamental principles and cycles of movement, upon what Buddhists call the *sanmitsu* (three mysteries of body, mind and speech/vibration). Kata are the Tao’s well-placed steppingstones for the modern *Doka* (Way follower).

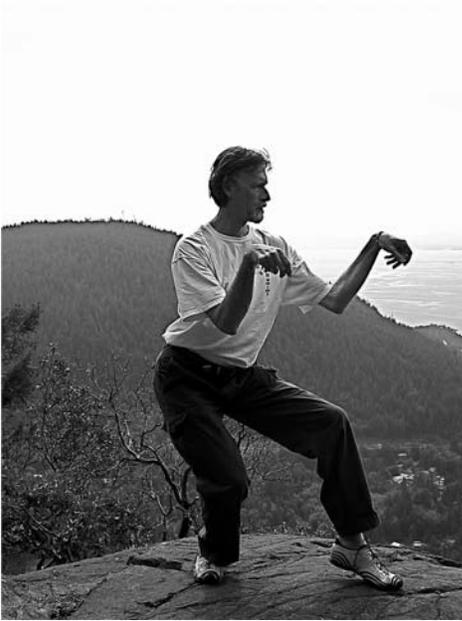
My Okinawan Kata had become my personal sunbaked island sanctuary and warrior bible.

All kata’s present us with three primary fields. I think of them as forests. When we walk into a forest we acquaint ourselves with its peculiar nature. Likewise, most will first encounter kata’s biomechanical forest, absorbing its many fine lessons of distance, timing, balance, leverage, speed and power. This forest teems with 96% of the world’s practitioners. Next comes the inner forest, the world of internal or subtle energies, where ki is consciously cultivated and entwined with the mechanical to add greater force to all type and level of technique. Only about 3% of the world’s martial arts population are lucky enough lucky to enter this forest. On the furthest horizon, kata’s deepest backcountry, lay the third forest, an expansive spiritual realm where the emergence of the authentic self and true power unfolds. This forest represents the source field of Life energy in its deepest workings. The rare few ancients who stepped into this field and mastered its tools were often referred to as mystics and assumed mystifying skills. Very few martial artists, less than 1% will reach, let alone master this destination.



In the West we suffer from a peculiar myopia regarding the treasures lying in the

second and third forests. It's difficult to access higher lessons from kata when one cannot see its quintessential truths. The main problem is the West's general fixation on kata's topical values. How do you move forward if you don't have a clue about these other dimensions?



Do not despair. For those who proudly claim years of kata experience, or simply find the idea of kata study compelling, I urge you to keep trekking—*mindfully*. Of revelations I've discovered, and that await the sincere, is Sanchin kata's remarkable, best kept secret from the Western world; how some forms are actually five-in-one; how the *neko-dachi* (cat stance) is an extraordinary energy receiver; why it really does take ten years to master a traditional form—and is worth the effort; why Okinawan karate systems are slowly losing their ancient kata legacies; how authentic power is cultivated through proper kata practice; how every punch and kick packs two

completely different types of impact; how certain kata align the body polarity; how the mind is awakened and radically altered with calculated kata work; how the Chinese monastic masters used their forms as a trinity of mudras, mantras and mandalas, likened to a martial yoga, toward enlightenment; how the simplest of kata actions excite waves of hidden and influential, interior tidal energies; the truth behind the mystery why some kata are named after numbers with a multiple of three; why the ancient masters used Feng Shui as an extension of their kata tactics. Awaiting also, is the discovery of the five layers of kata and why most of the world's masters work only within the first three. This is just a hint at the amazing wisdom inherent in the Asian kata schools.

Grand assertions, I admit. But I've watched the sunlight and shadows interplay through the immovable lattice of the venerable kata houses of Okinawa for forty-eight years. I've witnessed a teeming, dynamic world ripe with valuable life lessons for the picking. My spirit has happily come to dwell, to meditate, and to rest in these splendid rooms. Having been truly moved myself, I encourage all of you to cinch your belts and keep searching for those refreshing and vital fields of energy and understanding in your forms. It's there. *BOOM!*



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