

# Adaptable Karate - The Three Technical Stages of Kata Analysis: Part 2

By Chris Denwood

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*"When viewing a magnificent oak tree, don't simply flutter your eyes around every visually pleasing leaf. Instead, gently pull your gaze back and accept all parts of the tree together as one entity. You will then come to realise just how it could have grown from a single solitary acorn."*

In the first part of this article, I suggested that *kata* should be an open and continuous process of learning, rather than a progression of movements holding comparatively little value. I then began to explain the classical three-stage method of technically analysing the forms and described the first and second phases of *omote* and *henka*. In this second and final part, I intend to look at third stage of *ura* and discuss how we can proactively practice our forms as very potent learning aids that have virtually no limits.

## The third stage: *Ura* 裡

The last stage of technical analysis is called *ura*. It is the opposite of the first stage, *omote* and means, 'inside' or 'back'. *Ura* represents that which we cannot see unless expressed through physical movement. It represents the principles that surround the movements of the form and is based on the notion that I explained right at the beginning of this piece; that *kata* is a way of recording the most effective fighting principles of a particular style, system, strategy or individual. *Ura* is also very dependent on the way in which you focus on the form i.e. not as a collection of shapes, but more as a series of transitions or motions. There will never be any potential in static or discrete postures/techniques. In other words, it's important to look at the journey, not the destination.

It is commonly understood that *kata* was originally practiced intensely for years at a time. For this to be so then the movements depicted in the form must represent something much more than just a handful of potential applications. A whole style couldn't possibly be recorded within something that only takes minutes to perform unless there is something else that we should be focusing upon. This, I believe, is one of the main stumbling blocks that *karate-ka* come up against when studying *bunkai*. They focus far too much on the actual techniques of the form (believing these to be the most critical part), rather than the lessons that those techniques are actually trying to impart.

Techniques are literally 'principles in action' and it is these principles that we should always be more focused upon. Please consider the application shown in pictures 1 to 9. Now you may initially think that it shows something completely different from the movements that we've been previously looking at in part 1, but I beg to differ. This is still very much an

application from the start of *Pinan Godan kata*! If we go back for a moment to the *omote* application (which I've shown again in pictures 10 to 16) and extract the principles, then we can start to ask the question, 'what is this part of the *kata* teaching us?' In this particular instance it is my own personal view that even at a fundamental level, the form is trying to explain that when seized; you can escape and shift to the outside of your attacker (a safer option), use the seizing arm as a temporary barrier whilst countering and then finish by attacking the throat.



(Pics 1 to 9: Ura - extracting the principles)

The form is thus teaching an effective strategy based on movement, timing, and distance, as well as gaining a fast initial and continuing advantage. The techniques used to express

this within the form can and should then be appreciated as being a 'typical effective example' rather than 'the only way of achieving that particular objective'. If a movement in a *kata* is teaching us the principle of attacking the inherent weakness of the elbow joint for example, we should then be actively asking ourselves, how else can we exploit the antagonist's elbow joint in a similar fashion? As long as the principles of the form are followed, then the answers you'll find will in no way differ from what the *kata* is originally trying to portray.



(Pics 10 to 16: Omote application)

If you consider the principles of movement, we can see that the application shown in pictures 1 to 9 are not in any way different from what the start of the *kata* is trying to teach us through the superficial analysis of *omote*. The exact same principles are being used; they're just being physically expressed in a different way – that is all. Once we appreciate the potential at this stage of *ura*, we can easily see how a single form could represent a complete system or strategy of fighting and why this was originally considered as so.

Now, some might say that the creators of the form may never have even considered many of the applications generated in this adaptable way and I have to admit that this argument more than likely holds elements of truth. But so what? As interesting as I may find this historic piece of information, I simply refuse to consider this as a barrier against the main objective for my study. Above all else, I am a martial artist first and a historian second. For the *kata* to mean anything it has to be both a direct learning tool, as well as being a method

to promote and increase further understanding as time and experience progresses. I strongly believe that this is what the founding fathers of karate would have wanted for us.

Everyone by now should have aligned to the fact that in karate, many things are not what they first seem to be. I'm sure you'll have all heard that 'a punch is not just a punch' or 'a block is not only a block' – you may even be actively be practicing in that way now. In reality, everything that we accomplish in the art comes from the same source – just like the acorn. That source is nothing 'alien' or for that matter, anything to do with karate. The art simply acts as a vehicle for the source to be expressed. That source of course, is you! The self-satisfaction you experience through your practice is proportional only to how honestly and thoughtfully you undertake each training session. *Kata* is exactly the same as this. If we can learn to view and train a form in an open and honest way without the restrictions of preferences, laurels, ideals or politics, its true potential will shine through and allow us to take what we need, when we're ready to understand it.

It is my view (and I hope you agree) that the original masters of karate would be totally dismayed to see their beloved *kata* being reduced to nothing more than a restricted and 'choked' pattern of very limited value, just for the sake of maintaining what may or may not have been a historic truth at the time. To release the true potential of *kata*, I believe that all traditional *karate-ka* have both the opportunity and a genuine duty to study in an unrestrictive and adaptable way. This will inevitably help towards maintaining the original perceived intent of karate as an effective civilian self-protection system and ensuring that the art remains constantly fresh and alive.

In a practical sense, learning by equating to the principles associated with the form is very favourable. Instead of collecting a million unrelated techniques to cater for a wide range of attack scenarios, 'principle-based study' allows you to respond in a much more spontaneous way by limiting (to some extent) the mental 'log jam' that can occur when your brain is being forced (by yourself) to think or process precise information in a situation where your evolutionary instincts would ask it to switch off. Combat is extremely hard to begin with. Why would you even consider making it any harder through collecting what will inevitably become useless knowledge when depended upon?! I think that we should treat *kata* how it should be – as a vehicle to promote a greater understanding of the principles associated with combat and the art in which you diligently study and thoroughly enjoy.

If I was to give you one final piece of advice regarding the analysis of karate, it would be to think of using *kata* as your *sensei*. Try to appreciate what the form is trying to teach you and as with any kind of learning, don't forget to ask questions. You should find that as long as you face those questions honestly, then the *kata* will answer them for you and more. It will become possible then to reach a little closer towards those great masters that left us these timeless masterpieces to benefit from.

Thank you for taking the time to read my words. I sincerely hope that they've succeeded to crack open at least one more door to help your own personal exploration within this lifelong learning process of karate.