

Transitional Aspects in Karate - Are you appreciating only a small portion of your technique? - Part 2

By Chris Denwood

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In part one of this article, we considered the performance aspects of kata and suggested that there may be more than one way to look at them. We also highlighted the way in which our attention can usually be drawn to the most vibrant or visual aspects of a particular form, whereas categorically, the real 'meat' of the movements is found within the frequently subtle transitional motions between each 'snap shot' posture. Furthermore, we discussed ways in which you can practice kata in the dojo by isolating each of these transitional movements. In the second and final part of this piece, I'd like to explore the ways in which a more attentive study in the movements of kata can help towards the universal goal, to develop more pragmatism within our traditional arts.

Let's say then that we've managed to alter the way we see our forms and through training in performance, now have much greater respect for the transitional movements contained within them. As far as the practical application of kata goes, how can concentrating on these transitional movements help us? Well, even on a superficial level, there are at least four important elements that when a focus on transitions are applied, really help to benefit more pragmatic skills in combat. These four elements are:

1. Appreciating the effects of bodyweight manipulation through stances.
2. Gaining a higher degree of body control.
3. Subconsciously choosing techniques that flow together.
4. Considering applications within the transitional movements themselves.

Appreciating the effects of bodyweight manipulation through stances

Without digressing or delving too deeply here, the stances found in karate have only one main purpose – to manipulate the bodyweight in order to create advantage over your opponent in combat. How you use that body manipulation is entirely up to you. For instance, as the kata may suggest, you have the option to use the energy derived from bodyweight manipulation to evade, block, receive, strike, lock, or even to throw over the stance itself.

As we progress through a transition, we naturally change our bodyweight orientation through movement and because we are in fact moving means that we have the potential to use that energy. As long as we keep moving then we become almost like a large pendulum hanging from a large grandfather clock. When performing the simple act of walking for instance, we are in fact doing nothing more than keeping bodyweight in motion by repeatedly catching ourselves just before we would usually fall. This can be illustrated quite graphically when we see people tumbling over nothing more than a slightly raised paving slab, a small rock or a sudden change in floor surface friction. If we can no longer control or

catch our inevitable fall whilst walking then we will undoubtedly end up flat on our face! This is energy in motion and a perfect example of transitional movement.

It's only when we stop altogether that the energy from the body is wasted. Ironic as it may seem though, many karate-ka forget about the true potential behind these transitional movements and as I've briefly described above, they become far too fixated with the end position or posture. But of course, at this end position, there is no movement. If there is no movement, then there can be no bodyweight manipulation and therefore, there can be no potential. Becoming deadlocked like this means that you are forced into 'kick starting' that pendulum again before any further energy can become available for use.

Although bodyweight manipulation in stances can sound rather complicated when discussed in the pages of a book or article such as this, it can be more easily understood by performing the following simple exercise (Fig.1 and Fig.2). If you stand with your feet around shoulder width apart and your legs completely straight, then as long as you don't suffer from any sort of structural deficiency then your bodyweight will have a balanced 50/50 split between both legs. Now start to bend the left leg and experience what happened to your body weight. You should find that your weight will shift downwards and across towards the bend left leg. If you bend the left leg only a little, then the bodyweight will shift only a small amount. Bend the leg any further and the bodyweight will shift proportionally further to compensate. Next, observe what happens when you try something different such as bending the other leg, bending both legs, taking one leg in front of the other or since the knees should always be kept over the feet, altering the direction in which the feet are pointing?



(Fig's 1 & 2)

The little exercise described above provides the bedrock for all the rules associated with bodyweight manipulation throughout all the stances found in karate and in my view, provides the key behind understanding the transitional movements found in kata. In respect to stances, the following rules should be deemed as true in the vast majority of cases:

- The bodyweight will shift in proportion to the change in angle of the knees.
- The bodyweight will alter according to the proportions of the end position of the stance.
- The bodyweight will naturally be directed in respect to where the feet are pointing.
- The velocity of the shift in bodyweight will be in proportion to the velocity to which the knees change their angle (i.e. the principles of collapsing and efficient relaxation).

This idea of bodyweight manipulation should always be considered when first analysing your forms. After all, it's the body working in unity that provides the possible framework on which more pragmatic applications can be uncovered. The core of the body and the way in which it's manoeuvred is by far the most important and pivotal aspect in karate. Everything else merely represent 'add-ons' to the overall effectiveness.

Gaining a higher degree of body control

The whole idea of physical self-protection is to project your intent physically against your opponent in order to help assure your safety. This process initially begins at the brain, where signals are sent to fire nerve impulses that contract the required muscle(s) in order to perform the intended action(s). If you take a few minutes to think about this, I'm sure you'll agree that the process of moving alone (let alone fighting) is rather impressive and hugely complicated indeed. In order to be able to move effectively in karate, we have to be mindful of two elements to our training. Firstly, we have to aim to practice in the correct way so as not to build any bad habits. This is why so much emphasis is placed on correct technique in traditional schools. Secondly, we have to practice repeatedly over time, so we can develop what is commonly termed 'muscle memory'. Of course, it's not the muscles that have the memory, but this is still a great label for repetitive subconscious learning nonetheless.

The more that we practice whilst mindfully becoming aware of 'how' we are moving, the better placed we'll be to having a greater control over our bodies. It's amazing how many people who study karate move around with almost no appreciation as to how each of their legs are shifting into the correct (or in a lot of cases, incorrect) position. If we concentrate on the transitional movements between every technique, we can learn to appreciate the subtleties that make these movements much more efficient. As a quick test, try to practice your form in 'ura' (the opposite way round) and see how much more active your mind has to become in order to complete the task well. This is perhaps a perfect example of the effects of repetition, muscle memory and 'learned' body control.

The quickest way from point 'x' to point 'y' is always going to be in a straight line, but some transitional movements require different 'flight paths' in order to affect a particular outcome. Some movements for instance are inherently circular by nature and aim to nullify, embrace or accentuate an opponent's energy in your own favour. You need to first understand the main aim(s) of the movements and then repeatedly develop the transitional movements so that they can be mindfully executed towards perfection. After a while, you'll begin to find that the body will get used to what is deemed to be an 'effective' transition and your understanding can be progressed towards spontaneously and subconsciously choosing strikes and techniques in a free flowing way that naturally blend together. This is obviously the most efficient way of applying what you have learned in a more pragmatic way.

Subconsciously choosing techniques that flow together

Increasing your ability to perform seamless transitions is very important for all things combative (Fig.3 to Fig.6). The next time you watch a boxing match on TV, try to specifically observe the transitions between each strike thrown from the fighters. After all, these are the best 'all-round' punchers out there. You'll quickly come to realise (comparing this to your own experimentation) that some techniques just do not sit well when combined together. A four technique combination such as 'jab-cross-lead hook-reverse uppercut' displays sound transitions. Each strike naturally flows from its predecessor and correct sets the body up for the next. Conversely, a 'lead hook-lead uppercut-reverse back fist-reverse

hook' combination feels completely un-natural to execute. If you consider that it is in fact your whole body (not your limbs) that actually 'strikes' then it becomes clear that with smooth transitions, the 'spent' position of one technique becomes the 'reservoir' for the next - or to put it in other words more akin to what was explained earlier in part 1; the termination of one, automatically becoming the origin of the other. Simply put; the proactive repetition of grouping suitable techniques together, along with specific training geared towards reducing the transition times in between these will greatly help your pragmatic combat skills.



(Fig's 3 to 6 - A combination of strikes with smooth transitions)

All of the benefits of karate training are useless if you're not alive to experience them. Therefore, the art is first and foremost for assuring safety from harm. The body control that's repeatedly trained through austere training therefore must have some practical value unless all your efforts will be wasted. If we are to take practical advantages from the transitional movements found in kata, then one of these should surely be the fact that the body and mind learns how to choose and then execute a group of techniques smoothly and seamlessly. Without thoroughly understanding this principle though, your smoothness will only be restricted to the confines of the kata itself. Bunkai (analysis) allows us to take lessons from the kata and not only utilise the visual movements within as physical applications, but also to appreciate how the human body can move effectively so that how you apply karate can transcend the form itself and become an expression of your own mind. As esoteric as this may seem, it's no more different than what I, myself am doing here by freely joining commonly known words together to form the article you're reading now, based naturally on what's in my mind and my own individual opinion.

Considering applications within the transitional movements themselves

This can be for most, the greatest 'eye opener' in appreciating the significance of the transitional movements between the origin and termination of any technique and all boils down to the simple question of: 'why should we only limit our applications of the form to the discrete number of 'snap shot' postures that they consist of?' If a particular form has for instance, 30 techniques, then at least another 30 applications are possible for all those 'linking' transitional movements before even looking at the shape of the techniques themselves. It's no understatement to say that absolutely everything throughout the traditional forms of karate (among other things also) have some practical relevance designed to support you in physical combat.

A good place to start looking for applications within transitional movements is within the preparatory position of any basic 'blocking/receiving' technique. Before the hand strikes down, it has to be brought up. Before the hand swings to the outside, it has to first be brought to the inside – we could go on and on. If you were to punch when sparring, your sensei would advise you that an excessive movement in the opposite direction would be visually telegraphing the strike. If this is so, then why does almost every karate-ka perform exactly this kind of telegraphing before executing many of the traditional blocking techniques found within karate? Obviously, the answer is that these preparatory movements have some greater significance and are in fact, only really preparatory in a 'secondary' sense of the word. Consider the applications for Gedan Barai (lower sweep) and Uchi Ude Uke (inside forearm response) as shown in Fig.7 to Fig.12. Both of these show the preparatory movement being used in a positive way in order to quickly seize the initiative against the attacker.



(Fig's 7 to 12)

As well as considering only the arm movements during transitions, we must also concentrate on how the rest of the body moves, such as the legs, trunk, head and even your 'intention', in order to gain a deeper understanding into the many applications associated with these. In fact, to get a good idea as to just how much information can be derived from these, I would recommend that for one session, you choose only a single technique and dissect every part of that movement. Then search for ways in which you can positively apply your findings in a more pragmatic combat situation. I guarantee that you'll be absolutely amazed at the results!

To conclude this two-part article on the focus toward transitional movements in karate, I'd like to bring your attention back to the analogy I made in part one about kata being very much like one of those 'magic eye' puzzles from the 1990's. Sometimes, what we initially see with our eyes can become quite misleading. While strong and vibrant colours or shapes can be more pleasing to look at, it certainly pays to take a step back and look in a much wider sense and in different ways. Many people look, but don't see the whole solution merely because their minds are already fixated on what seems to be most significant part of the view. A 'magic eye' puzzle claims its success in ways very similar to this. To give another example, magicians also use the limitations of the eyes to affect their tricks and make people wonder how they can perform 'seemingly' impossible feats.

In karate, we also have to be aware that sometimes, our eyes can be our own worst enemy. What we feel is by far the most important aspect to consider. The transitional movements of the forms often contribute to very little emphasis within the training regime of many karateka. I believe that this is simply because, more often than not, these subtleties are not even seen, let alone mindfully felt. Techniques may feel wrong to the practitioner, however he or she may not even know why. Furthermore (and more worrying), it is entirely possible to experience a long and fruitful life in karate without ever dwelling in these subtle aspects, which in my own personal view, are wholly critical to understanding not just what you're doing, but why? This is indeed, I hope you'll agree; a really unfortunate position for one to be in.