

# HITO-KATA SAN-NEN

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Whenever I practice kata, one of my teacher's favorite stories comes to my mind: One day a student of archery was practicing by himself in the dojo. He thought, "I shall eliminate the first movement - that of stretching the hand upward prior to pulling the bow - and just shoot the arrows as fast as I can. The sensei is not in the dojo now, and he cannot insist that I perform all the movements as he always does. He is such a stickler on the complete kata. I'm glad he is not here. The kata is not really that important."

Then the student took two arrows and shot them as fast as he could, eliminating the first movement of the kata. He hit the bullseye, and the student was pleased with himself. As he was congratulating himself, his sensei, who had been in the library adjoining the dojo, came in and admonished the student for eliminating the first movement.

The sensei, a Zen master, knew what the student had done without being in the dojo. The sensei told him, "Practice must be maintained the same at all times, even if no one is watching or supervising. One must practice for one's self. You are not practicing for me or for society, you are practicing for yourself - for your self-improvement and awareness, If you eliminate or add movements to the kata, you are cheating yourself, not me."

Many students of karate are unaware that the elimination or addition of movements to an original kata shows disrespect to the ryu (school or style) that they are studying under. If such students are dissatisfied with their particular ryu, they should leave and join another one.

Blame for the mutilation of existing kata and the creation of new ones rests with two sorts of individuals. Both types, however, are the products of the occupational era of Japan, Okinawa and Korea. On the one hand, there is the type of individual who has achieved a fair degree of proficiency in the mechanical aspects of the art. Returning from the Orient, he opens his own school in the 'Western Hemisphere. Either he did not learn his kata properly, sufficiently, or else he forgot them and his kata are an improvised lot.

On the other hand, there is the type who learned from the first type, and who subsequently opens his own school. This individual, after winning some kumite championships, creates his own kata out of his fantasy that he is an infallible nzei fin (master). To him kata is nothing more than a dance. Nothing is farther from the truth, but within the realm of his experience and awareness, this is all that counts.

"Hizo-kata san-nen" means "three years 'for one kata". Many people would say, "What nonsense, three years for one kata. Why, I can learn and do one kata in a matter of weeks!" Empirically, the masters knew that kata achievement requires blood, sweat and tears. They knew that they could not produce a "90-day wonder". All evidence pointed to the fact that it took great faith, tenacity and hard work to master a kata. Three years was the minimum three years on one kata produced the awareness of what it meant. The kata is karate and karate is the kata.

Proper understanding of the kata would help fill the cup of life with clear water, not dirty water. Without the guidance of the teacher and the kata, the pupil cannot distinguish between clear water and dirty water. The kata teaches fighting and living skills at the same time. The aim of the kata is to make the individual one with the universe. As he tunes in with the kata, he is, in the end, attuned to himself.