

10 Keys to Unlocking Practical Kata Bunkai



**A Beginners Guide to
Form Applications for Self-Defence**

Leigh Simms - 4th Dan

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by

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Introduction

*"A journey of a thousand miles
begins with a single step."*

- Lao Tzu

Introduction

Bunkai. Simply translated to “analysis” in the English language. However, in the general Karate community it refers to the actual application of the katas technique. For ease of reference and understanding, the term bunkai used throughout the book will refer to the application of the technique rather than the analysis of the technique.

Before we delve into the good stuff, I want to make point out that there are thousands of people practicing Karate Kata around the world. However, what isn’t practiced at such a mainstream level is the practical application of the Kata techniques.

If you are reading this, chances are you have at least a little curiosity in learning how these ritualized formations of techniques can be used as practical self-defence techniques. My aim is for this book to give you enough information to get you off your computer, grab

your training partner and begin to train your kata applications in a practical manner.

Getting started in applying kata bunkai can be a daunting task and over the last ten years of my personal martial art journey, I have met many people interested in the subject but that soon gave up as they felt there was too much to learn in order to get started!

Whilst I agree that the kata bunkai is an all-encompassing area that takes years and years of practice, it is definitely not difficult to start once you have the right strategy.

If you haven't already figure out, I am extremely passionate about kata bunkai, karate and the martial arts in general. Therefore, I have devised a simple list of 10 keys that will help you to unlock the "secret" effective fighting methods in your katas.

Firstly, I found that the problem a lot of people had was that they went straight to analysing the kata motions

without understanding the context in which they were designed to be used for. Therefore, what you will find below is the 10 keys have been split into two sections. The first four keys unlock the “context of kata” and the final six keys unlock the “kata motions as practical fighting techniques”.

Whilst, it may be tempting to skip the first four keys (and go straight to the “good stuff”), I strongly urge against it, as it is impossible to fully understand the solution if you never fully understood the problem.

We will now look at the 10 keys needed for unlocking the Practical Applications of Karate Kata. They are in no way the only keys and there is a lot more to Practical Kata Bunkai than understanding them. However, what the 10 keys below will give you is strong starting point to begin your journey into practical karate.

Analysing the Context

As Martial Artists, we tend to focus on the physical techniques and leave out the theory. What the first 4 keys will unlock is the context of which the kata is based upon, the behaviors involved with this context, our desired outcome and how we can drill practical kata applications within that context.

- **Key 1 – Context of Kata**
- **Key 2 – Desired Outcome**
- **Key 3 – Nature of Non-Consensual Violence**
- **Key 4 – The Starting Points**

Key 1: Context of Kata

"Karate is not intended to be used against a single assailant but instead as a way of avoiding injury by using the hands and feet should one by any chance be confronted by a villain or ruffian."

- Ankoh Itosu

Key 1: The Context of Kata

In 1908 Master Itosu (one of the core teachers of Shotokan Karate founder Sensei Gichin Funakoshi) wrote that Karate: -

"is not intended to be used against a single assailant but instead as a way of avoiding injury by using the hands and feet should one by any chance be confronted by a villain or ruffian".

Master Itosu clearly makes a distinction between what karate is for - *avoiding injury against a villain or ruffian* and what it is not for – *use against a single assailant*. When starting out in bunkai it is more important to make this distinction from the very beginning.

One of my mentors, Martial Art & Self-Protection Author and Teacher, Jamie Clubb once told me that the main difference in the context between a sporting contest and self-defence is **consent**. One involves the consent of both parties and one does not. A karate spar, boxing match, MMA bout, "square-go/street fight" are

all forms of mutual consent violence and the strategies and tactics will be different to those which are non-consensual such as muggings and assaults.

This seems to be the same distinction Itosu made over 100 years ago in the above quote. We need to remember that Karate was not originally designed to fight a single assailant in a consensual bout. Rather, it was designed to be used in a non-consensual context where you do not want to fight; rather you want to avoid injury to yourself.

Key 2 – Desired Outcome

"Do not think that you have to win, think rather that you do not have to lose."

- Gichin Funakoshi

Key 2: The Desired Outcome

We now need to understand our desired outcomes in that context. Master Itosu noted that we should be using karate to “avoid injury”. Later on Gichin Funakoshi in his 20 precepts on karate wrote the following: -

“Do not think that you have to win, think rather that you do not have to lose.”

I believe the message the past masters were trying to convey when dealing with non-consensual violence, is that we should not try to “win the fight” rather we should focus on escaping the situation with as little injury as possible.

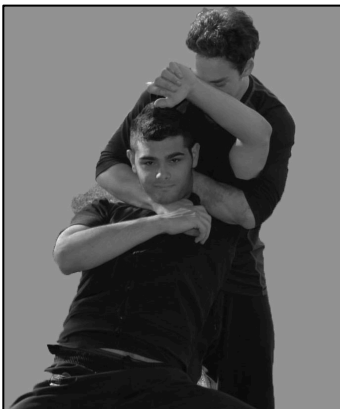
Escaping can be split into two main methods. Firstly by causing unconsciousness therefore the opponent no longer poses a threat, and secondly by creating enough

distance between you and the opponent so that he is also no longer a threat to your safety.

Method 1 is usually the one most people focus on as it is more line with their pre-conceived ideas of how to win a fight. Causing unconsciousness is usually done via a strike to the head or neck, a strangulation or chokehold. Practical Kata Applications will include all of the above.



In this photo defender has trapped the opponents left arm and struck the jaw with his left fist in attempt to cause a knockout.



In this photo the defender has positioned himself behind the attacker and is applying a chokehold to cause him to pass out.

Method 2 is equally as important, especially for those dealing with stronger opponents. If the Kata Application does not leave the attacker unconscious, it will either put the defender in a position of great advantage so he can cause unconsciousness in the attacker or so he can cause enough pain and space, so that the attacker is unable to continue the fight, therefore allowing the defender to make a safe escape. Examples of this method include throwing the opponent, breaking limbs and striking vulnerable & weak areas of the body.

Key 3 – Nature of Non-Consensual Violence

" Having been involved in thousands of live encounters the pre-emptive attack was the only consistently effective technique I could find."

- Geoff Thompson

Key 3: Nature of Non-Consensual Violence (NCV)

The concept of defending against a *Karate-Style* Attack or against a trained fighter can be important parts of your training, but the skillset needed for that is vastly different to the skillset needed for Non Consensual Violence (NCV). One of the reasons, among many others, is that NCV scenarios require different strategies and tactics is that the distance is a lot closer.

NCV takes place at a closer range, usually within 1 arms length and the distance closes rapidly and frantically. In NCV there is no time for the use of guards, fancy footwork and other mutual consent combative concepts.

The nature of NCV also interferes with our physiology. We are likely to be in a state of high stress and techniques and motions that require pinpoint accuracy or fine motor skills are going to be incredibly difficult to use. In order for our techniques to be practical we must

take into account the mental as well as physical nature of NCV.

There have been numerous studies on NCV throughout the years and one of the best books on the subject is *Dead or Alive* by Geoff Thompson. This book is one of the most important books in my martial arts library. The book, ironically, covers little in martial art techniques; rather it focused on the non-physical side of violent confrontations. I bring you to one of the conclusions Geoff reached:

"Having been involved in thousands of live encounters the pre-emptive attack was the only consistently effective technique I could find."

Obviously striking first can bring forth both ethical and legal questions and not everyone is willing to strike first, despite its effectiveness.

With regard to the legal aspect, I recommend you research the law in your jurisdiction. For those reading

this from England & Wales, I suggest you check out my book, UK Self-Defence Law: A Practical Guide to Understanding the Law of Defending Yourself, for an in-depth look at this subject.

Key 4 – Starting Points

" The techniques of kata have their limits and were never intended to be used against an opponent in an arena or on a battlefield."

- Choki Motobu

Key 4: The Starting Points

Earlier I discussed that in NCV the highest chance of survival is to strike first and if that does not work then it is time to use the motions in the kata. When starting bunkai it is a good idea to remember the concept of being pro-active. Below is a drill designed to get you understanding the likely starting points that can arise when the pre-emptive strikes goes wrong.

Stand in front of your partner and slowly punch towards his face, the defender will then raise both his hands up to defend against the strike. Now one of two things is likely to happen depending on the trajectory of your strike and the positioning of your partners limbs. Either a) your striking arm will clash with the inside of your arm onto the outside of the opponents arm or b) the outside of your striking arm will strike onto the outside of your opponents arm. Note: There are other ways but the two outlined above are the most common.



Photo showing a clash on the outside of the arms. For this photo, the context" has been removed to demonstrate the arm positions.

These positions are what I call "bridges". Although our initial strike has failed we have still gained connection with your partners body. From these two positions we can begin to apply the motions of the kata so that we can defend ourselves and escape safely.

As well as the "pro-active bridges" we can also use the kata motions should we find ourselves in a bad position to begin with. Kata motions deal with what happens should we not get the chance to (or if we morally choose not to) use the pre-emptive attack.

Sensei Patrick McCarthy of the International Ryukyu Karate Research Society put forward the Habitual Acts of Physical Violence (HAPV) Theory, which looks at the

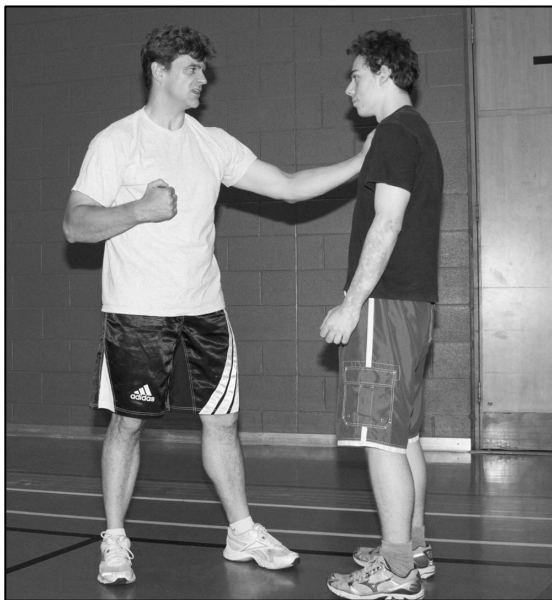
36 most common forms of attacks in NCV Scenarios.

These attacks are:

1. Straight kicks
2. Angular-type kicks
3. **Straight punches**
4. **Circular punches**
5. Downward strikes
6. Upward strikes
7. Knee & elbow strikes
8. Head-butt/biting & spitting
9. Testicle squeeze
10. Augmented foot/leg trips
11. Single/double-hand hair pull from the front/rear
12. Single/double-hand choke from the front/rear
13. Front neck choke from rear
14. Classical headlock
15. Front, bent-over, augmented choke
16. Half/full-nelson
17. Rear over-arm bear hug (& side variation)
18. Rear under-arm bear hug (& side variation)

19. Front over-arm bear hug (& side variation)
20. Front under-arm bear hug (& side variation)
21. Front/rear tackle
22. **One-handed wrist grab (same & opposite sides-normal/reversed)**
23. Two-handed wrist grabs (normal/reversed)
24. Both wrists seized from the front/rear
25. Both arms seized from the front/rear
26. Single/double shoulder grab from front/rear
27. Arm-lock (behind the back)
28. Front arm-bar (triceps tendon fulcrum up supported by wrist)
29. Side arm-bar (triceps tendon fulcrum down supported by wrist)
30. **Single/double lapel grab**
31. **Single/double-hand shove**
32. Garment pulled over the head
33. Seized & impact
34. Single/double leg/ankle grab from the front (side/rear)
35. Ground straddle
36. Attacked (kicked/struck) while down

The attacks highlighted in bold are my recommended attacks to begin your bunkai journey with in the forefront of your mind. This is because as they are the more likely acts of violence which you will need to defend against.



An example of a common act of violence – attacker grabs the defenders clothing and attempts to punch using his other hand.

Analysis of Kata Motions

The next 5 keys look at the actual techniques found in katas themselves. Whilst there are many kata and countless variations, the motions within those kata are not so large. It does not matter what style you practice, (or even what art! Motions found in Karate Kata, are also found in TKD Forms, Kung Fu Forms etc...), the below 5 keys will look at the 5 most common components of kata motions and how they can be applied in the context of NCV.

- **Key 5 – The Pulling Hand**
- **Key 6 – Stances in Kata**
- **Key 7 – Angles of the Kata**
- **Key 8 – Kicks in Kata**
- **Key 9 – Blocks in Kata**
- **Key 10 – Turns & Jumps in Kata**

Key 5 – The Pulling Hand

"The purpose of hikite is to pull the opponents arm beyond its reach and to twist it at the same time, to throw the opponent of his balance."

- Gichin Funakoshi

Key 5 -The Pulling Hand (Hiki-te)

Most Kata motions have a dominant hand and a secondary hand. In a basic punch for example, one hand punches out (dominant) and the other goes on to the hip (secondary). In fact, in a majority of basic techniques the secondary hand is placed on the hip or nearby. Sadly, this hand is often placed on the hip for no reason, or as “preparation” for the next move, or in some unscientific way of developing power! (Yes, some people actually teach that pulling your body away from your punch can increase power in your punch....).

Sensei Funakoshi wrote in his book Karate-Jutsu that this hand (or as he called it the hand that pulls back to the hip) is used to *“pull the opponents arm beyond its reach and to twist it at the same time, to throw the opponent of his balance.”*

Lets take a look at an example using the standard forward punch. We will start in a “pro-active bridge” and take hold of the opponent’s wrist and twist it to our

hip whilst at the same time delivering a straight punch to the head of the opponent.



Basic Application of Hikite using a forward punch, found in many kata, as described above.

An interesting side note is that once the opponent is twisted off-balance our straight punch which looks when performed solo to be punching the chest of the opponent, can now strike a far more vulnerable and effective location, such as the jaw, neck or base of the skull.

Bonus Key– The Second Hand

Sometimes the second hand is not used to pull something back to the hip, however we must always be conscious that we use the secondary hand to help with the technique, there is a phrase in karate called “mother and father hands”. This means that both hands should be in action. It is important to note that NCV is fast and chaotic and there is no time for guard positions, therefore ensure that each kata motion uses both hands effectively and they are not wasted.



Application for "Yama-Uke"(aka mountain block) found in Kanku Dai Kata and Jutte Kata. Instead of pulling the hand to the hip, the second hand in this application pulls the opponents arm upwards to enable an uppercut-style strike to the opponents jaw.

Key 6 – Stances in Kata

" Stances are not something fixed or static or something assumed before a technique is executed. They represent positions we flow to and through during the execution of a technique."

- Iain Abernethy

Key 6 - Stances in Kata

When training practical bunkai make sure you **use the stance** instead of just doing the stance.

In his book Bunkai-Jutsu Sensei Iain Abernethy explains the major purposes of stances in kata. The first one is to put our bodyweight behind the technique. If we take the basic front punch in front stance for example, the purpose of using the stance is to get our weight into the punch. When we punch we are in motion and it is only once the motion is completed that the stance is formed. The Stances in kata represent a snapshot in time after the technique has been applied.

Therefore, we must remember that during our training we should not be in fixed positions when striking. We should be injecting our weight into the technique through movement, the outcome of which will be a stance.

A back stance/cat stance for example is used to pull our bodyweight back. Lets take an example from with the Morote Uke (Two Handed Technique). Starting from a “pro-active bridge” you shoot your arm over your opponents and pull it back **using** the back stance whilst at the same time driving your forearm into the side of the opponents neck. (Notice how this technique also demonstrates key 5!)



Example of Morote-Uke, as described above.

The next purpose of a stance is to limit the opponent's movement – thus disrupting the opponents posture. Similar to the concept of hikite (pulling hand), stances

can also be used to break the opponents posture and disrupt their balance.

For example lets take a look at an example using Heian/Pinan Sandan Kata, in the image below you can see that in addition to the pulling hand and striking hand across the chest, the stance is being used to disrupt the attackers posture and the left foot is located in a position so that when the opponent moves back to regain balance he will fall over.



Example from Heian / Pinan Sandan using the "nukite" technique in forward stance to limit and disrupt the opponents posture, as described above.

Key 7 – Angles in Kata

"In extreme cases, it is sometimes heard that "this kata moves in 8 directions so it is designed for fighting 8 opponents" or some such nonsense."

- Kenwa Mabuni

Key 7 - Angles in Kata

The Heian/Pinan and Tekki/Naihanchi Series begin with movements to the side. In these circumstances it is important to listen to the words of Sensei Kenwa Mabuni: -

"The meaning of the directions in kata is not well understood, and frequently mistakes are made in the interpretation of kata movements. In extreme cases, it is sometimes heard that "this kata moves in 8 directions so it is designed for fighting 8 opponents" or some such nonsense"

Instead, the directions in the kata refer to the angle we should take in relation to the attacker and not the angle from which we are attacked at. Lets take an example from the last motion of Naihanchi/Tekki Shodan.

From the right-to-right clash of hands the defender moves to 90 degrees of his opponent, uses the pulling

hand to off balance the attacker whilst at the same time striking with the other hand to the opponents jaw.



*Application of
Morote-Zuki/Yumi
Zuki from Tekki
Shodan/Naihanchi
Kata, as
described above.*

Without going too much into principles of Effective Fighting Methods, it is timely to note here that moving off your opponents attack-line and putting the opponent on your attack-line will greatly improve the effectiveness of your fighting skillset.

Key 8 – Kicks in Kata

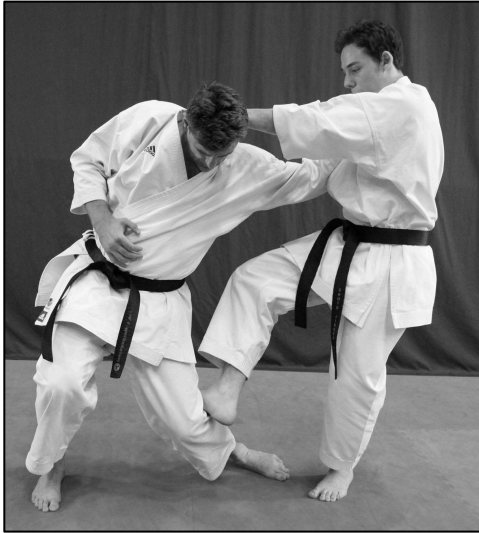
"I would no sooner kick someone in the head, then bend down and punch them in the foot."

- Bruce Lee

Key 8- Kicks in Kata

Due to the evolution of Kata and Karate as whole, many kicks are now performed at least mid-height. For difficulty, flexibility and fun training they are all great reasons to train like this. But when it comes to applying kicks in reality, we should keep them low, just like the original versions of the kata.

The shins, knees and thighs are all great targets for kicks. However, kicking low does not mean we can't kick other targets. For example, applying a wristlock the opponent will drop the opponent and a low kick can now strike the opponent's head or chest. On the following page there are a number of examples of kicks in kata being applied practically.



Mikazuki Geri (Crescent Kick) from Hangetsu / Seisan, Heian / Pinan Godan, Bassai / Passai – being applied to the outside of the knee.



Yoko Geri (Side Kick) from Heian Nidan/Yondan, Kanku Dai – being applied to the back of the knee.



Mae Geri (Front Kick) from Pinan Shodan / Yodan, Kushanku – being applied to the inside of the knee.

Key 9 – Blocks in Kata

"One must not loose sight of the fact that Karate is 'all-in' fighting... Karate is based on blows delivered with the hand, foot, the head or the knee. Equally permissible are strangulations, throwing techniques and locks."

- Henri Plee

Key 9 – Blocks in Kata

(traps, locks, chokes, strangles etc..)

Don't get too caught up in a motion being called an "uke" or "block" Firstly is because the term "uke" doesn't even translate to block! It translates as "to receive". Secondly the names of the techniques were given to them long after they were invented! Calling a movement a punch, kick or block are all modern inventions that can limit us from looking at the true meaning of the movements.

By now you will have seen how these "blocks" can be used as strikes (remember the morote-uke application from Key 6?). But there is more to bunkai than just striking. In 1938 Kenwa Mabuni wrote that:

"The karate that has been introduced to Tokyo is actually just a part of the whole. The fact that those who have learnt karate there feel it only consists of kicks & punches, and that throws & locks are only to be found in judo or jujutsu, can only be put down to a lack

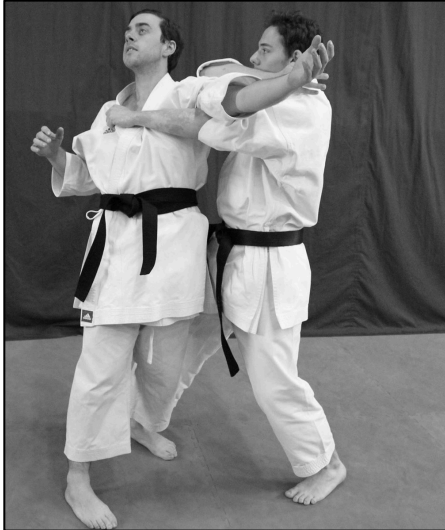
of understanding... Those who are thinking of the future of karate should have an open mind and strive to study the complete art"

Funakoshi also echoes this statement in his book *Karate Do Kyohan*, as he demonstrates standing armbar and explained that it is the application for the "low block" from *Naihanchi/Tekki Shodan*.



A further example of the "low block" being applied as an armbar. This time in a back stance from Kanku / Kushanku Sho.

As well as joint locks there are strangulations and chokeholds found in kata. For example "shuto uke" can be used to choke your opponent as seen below.



The "preparatory" motion of the technique can be used to make a grip of the opponents clothing. Notice the defender also uses his right foot to restrict the opponent's movement.



Then defender puts his right elbow on the opponent's throat and pulls his left arm to his chest. Note in the image the choke is on before the defender has finished the pulling hands movement.

Key 10 – Turns & Jumps in Kata

"In karate hitting, thrusting and kicking are not the only methods, throwing and pressure against joints are included. All these techniques should be studied referring to basic kata."

- Gichin Funakoshi

Key 10 - Turns & Jumps in Kata

Sometimes turns in kata are there to link movements together but sometimes they are actually providing the motions for a throw or takedown.

Similarly, jumps in kata can often be used to exemplify a throwing technique. When I researched the original versions of the forms, I noticed the jumps were a lot lower from the ground compared to today's athletic efforts. Much like how low kicks gradually developed into mid to high height kicks, the same has happened with stepping motions that involved a little step or little jump as they have now developed into feats of athleticism.

When studying the practical applications of kata we must ensure the application is suited to the context of NCV. Therefore doing a jump kick may be cool in the movies, but it is definitely not cool when you are defending your life! Instead look to apply these motions as throws and takedowns.



Example of a "hip-throw" as the jump in Heian/Pinan Godan Kata. Similar throw can also be used as an application for the dropping motion at the start of Enpi/Wanshu Kata as well.



Example of a turning Gedan Barai (Low Block) found numerous times in Heian Shodan/Pinan Nidan – being used as a takedown.

Finally, look out for Crescent Kicks found in Shotokan Kata, as well as being effective kicks as discussed at Key 8 of this book, they can be used to record a throwing techniques!

Summary

"You may train for a long time, but if you merely move your hands and feet and jump up and down like a puppet, learning Karate is not very different from learning a dance. You will never have reached the heart of the matter; you will have failed to grasp the quintessence of Karate."

-Gichin Funakoshi

Summary

In this book, I have outlined and described the context in which kata is to be applied and how to analyse the common components of the kata motions, whilst giving actual historical evidence and physical examples along the way. It is important to note that this book is only the first layer of the foundations, on which your practical karate skyscraper is to be built.

Thanks for Reading and I will shortly be sending out a link in my newsletter, for you to receive special access to the Beginning Bunkai Online Video Series for FREE!



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