

**Formal kata**  
**By Robert A. Trias**

Centuries ago the formal kata were conceived and developed by the masters as a system of prearranged technique including the usage of personal weapons as well as the techniques for walking, stepping, pivoting, stances and blocking. Since the formal kata lend themselves so well to individual practice they should be considered as a Manual of Technique, and this is undoubtedly what the masters had in mind. In addition to working the kata for technical perfection (or form), the practice may be varied by concentrating on power or speed, although they are usually performed in rapid succession with equal use of power, speed, and form. The kata also provide a unique discipline in that each kata is sufficiently similar to the preceding or succeeding one that the karate-ka who does not have his mind completely disciplined may find himself slipping from one to the other unconsciously, to his embarrassment. The kata are arranged in geometric patterns along which the performer moves, executing his defensive techniques against several opponents. When performing the kata, every step and movement is precisely diagrammed and fixed so that the karate-ka will end up at the starting position. Although a kata may be properly worked, allowing about one second for each movement, the physical exertion required to perform all movements of a kata under full power may leave an experienced performer near exhaustion in thirty seconds.

Authentic formal kata exceed 50 in number and vary in types and names from the powerful Shorei-ryu and Shorin-ryu styles to the ultra-fast "poison hand" forms and the graceful slow-moving type requiring breath control (ibuki). Esthetically, these formal exercises may be quite satisfying to the beholder as well as the performer in their resemblance to formal or ritual dance. The smooth rhythm, the breathing, the tremendous power and speed, the postures, the symmetry of the kata's pattern, and other factors combine to give both spectator and performer a sense of esthetic experience.

The formal katas in this book, required forms in the Shorei-ryu style, are some of the most authentic and original kata of karate. Some are very old and others of more recent origin. The Sho katas date back to the 1400's to Sho Hashio of Chuzan in Okinawa; the Naifun-chin and Bassai katas date back to 1900 to Anko Itosu and Choki Motobu. Although the names given to katas by the different masters and, in some cases, organizations may be different and although some of the forms may be altered to suit the various styles, the objectives are the same.

The author is familiar with 49 of the slightly larger number of total katas still in existence. If interest is stimulated by this manual, another manual on katas alone may be written, and possibly a film of the remaining formal katas be made.

A black belt Shorei karate-ka should be able to perform the formal katas in this manual. The proficient sho-dan must perform the katas against opponents and must know precisely what each movement in the kata represents. The essential factors to be considered when performing katas are breathing, stances, shifting, pivoting, facing, accuracy, correct tensing and relaxing of the body muscles, strength of focus, strong snap and pullback, precise movement ending, power, speed, form, and body rhythm.

All these factors are to be expressed with harmony and unity. Before unity can be realized, certain functions and their interrelationships must operate harmoniously. First must come knowledge of the component elements, the principles governing them, and the means of controlling them. Control of respiration and circulation so that they operate harmoniously must be attained before proper tension and relaxation of the body muscles can be expressed. Without these, there can be no balance; without balance, there can be no continuity or smooth flow of movement. When those objectives are realized, they are expressed by precise movement ending, Kime (focus), strong snap and pullback, accuracy, economy, form, power, and speed.

Three physical aspects of Kata will not be mastered without constant repetition. When you are practicing by yourself, boredom often results from not understanding the relationship of unity and harmony to free expression. Thought during action is an obstacle to harmony and unity. Therefore, faith in the principles of softness (ju) and emptiness of mind must replace anxiety and paralyzing thought. Because this state of being demands tremendous effort and sincerity, there must be desire and determination, for it is extremely difficult to imagine "not imagining." Before any of the above objectives can be realized, there must be purpose: that purpose is unity.

Excerpts from  
**The Hand Is My Sword**  
By Robert A. Trias