



PRINCIPLES OF FORM INTERPRETATION:

Seven principles for highly effective bunkai

By Scot Combs

HISTORY

Martial Arts were designed to work in the dynamic, high stress environment of self-defense. Forms were designed to give the martial arts practitioner both physical and mental tools with which to practice functional self-defense techniques.

Many American soldiers studied the martial arts of Okinawa, Japan, China and Korea after WWII. They had no way of knowing they weren't being taught the complete art. Martial secrets were protected jealously from outsiders; more so by a defeated and subjugated people in Japan and Okinawa. American GIs were taught a children's form of martial arts and allowed to think it was the complete art.

There was little or no instruction in form interpretation; grappling, throwing or pressure point techniques were simply ignored. Soldiers were taught that forms were block, punch and kick exercises. When trying to interpret classical forms in this way, one becomes aware they are a terrible way to learn free fighting; there are much more efficient ways to box with or without kicking. To put it bluntly form interpretations that utilize a free fighting paradigm are useless in real world self defense.

Free fighting is used at longer distances and can be devastating from there. The fighting found in classical forms is up close and personal. Classical forms display grappling, seizing, striking and kicking techniques designed for close quarters combat.

It has been said that classical forms contain all one needs to know about self defense and yet, until recent times, we were given only the most rudimentary tools with which to interpret or 'read' them. If classical forms contain all one need know about self defense it makes sense that the forms must contain techniques necessary for *effective* self defense. The forms must contain striking, grappling, throwing and pressure point techniques. All of these are necessary for a complete self defense system.

In this article we will explore 7 principles of form interpretation. All they are meant to do is offer a way of thinking about classical forms that can help unlock the code that has kept good martial artists in the dark for far too long.

PRINCIPLE 1: It Must Work

Any technique offered as an interpretation must work ... period. Any technique that demonstrably does not work must be abandoned for something that does work. Many of us know a lot of techniques that don't work, but this isn't necessarily a bad thing; knowing what doesn't work is valuable information. It is vital to your safety to know when a technique is not working so you know immediate change is required.

There are many factors involved in making a technique effective; awareness, vision, experience, timing, height, reach, strength, flexibility, conditioning, creativity and the technique itself. It is important to remember that a given technique may not work for you against one type of attacker but may function extremely well against another type. Or you may not be able to apply the technique effectively, but your training partner can. This is common and perfectly OK. All this means is you have to continue your search for a technique that fits your form. What could be more fun than finding a technique you can use effectively?

If a technique doesn't work...you may not have practiced sufficiently, you may be applying the technique improperly or you may have applied good technique in the wrong circumstance. Talk with your instructors and other practitioners for their insights. Practicing with multiple partners can reveal the weaknesses and strengths of a technique.

By simply requiring your techniques to be effective helps you create a personal martial art that can be relied on when the time comes to protect yourself or your loved ones.

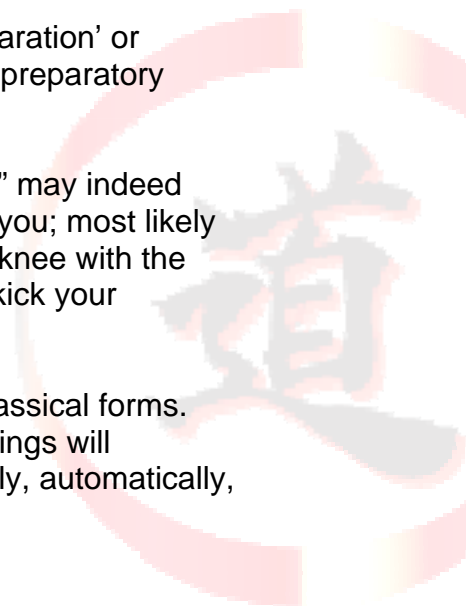
Remember, it is helpful, for interpretation purposes, to assume that you must engage your attacker in order to secure your safety or that of another; your bunkai should put you in a superior mechanical, energetic and psychological position and not just move you out of the way.

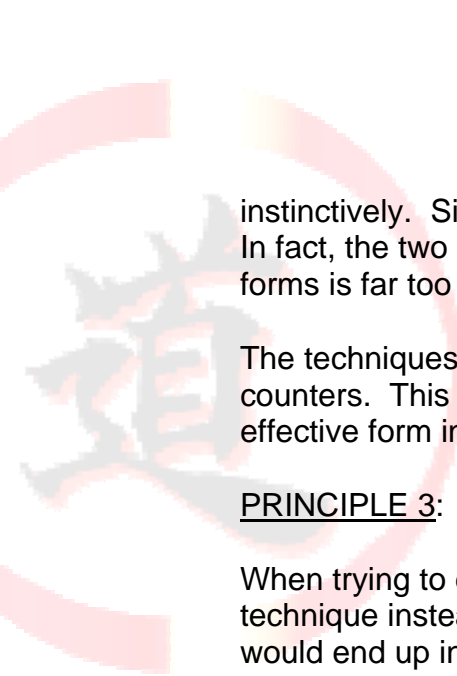
PRINCIPLE 2: There are No Wasted Moves

Every motion in a form is important. No motion is wasted in 'preparation' or 'chambering'. If you're in a fight for your life you have no time for preparatory moves.

The motion often referred to as the "chamber position" of a "block" may indeed be a strike or a grab to the first thing your attacker throws toward you; most likely his hand or arm. The motion where you touch the inside of your knee with the sole of your foot may be a mapping move that tells you where to kick your attacker.

This fits very neatly into the concept that there are no blocks in classical forms. Why is it necessary to teach blocking techniques when human beings will innately cover themselves when attacked? We do it unconsciously, automatically,





instinctively. Since blocking is innate, there is no need to formalize its practice. In fact, the two step blocking (chamber – block) technique used in most classical forms is far too slow to be of use as a block.

The techniques most often referred to as ‘blocks’ may be better thought of as counters. This helps loosen the traditional ties to old paradigms that impede effective form interpretation.

PRINCIPLE 3: Look at the Middle

When trying to determine the meaning of a given move; look at the middle of the technique instead of the end. The end may only show you where your hands would end up in your follow through. Imagine part of your attacker’s body between your hands or arms in the middle of a technique and see what you uncover. Move offline to 45° or to the side of your opponent and look at the middle of the technique again; what do you see from this different perspective?

PRINCIPLE 4: Blunt Trauma is My Friend

In the world of pressure point fighting - particularly in the Kyusho Jitsu Kenkukai, headed by Senior Master Instructor Chris Thomas - there is a saying ... “Blunt trauma is my friend”. This refers to the dual nature of pressure point techniques. If one misses the pressure point the shock of blunt trauma offers the martial artist redundancy and, often, the opportunity to apply further techniques.

Now repeat after me ... “Blunt trauma is my friend. Blunt trauma is my friend. Blunt trauma is my friend.” Good. I think you’ve got it.

PRINCIPLE 5: There is Strength in Flexibility

There are several ways to interpret forms to extract the most useful techniques. Bunkai; the interpretation follows the moves of the form precisely. Oyo; the interpretation generally follows the moves of the form; some moves might appear out of order or skipped entirely. Shorthand; one or two moves shown in the form imply moves that are not shown.

We find employing these three devices - bunkai, oyo and shorthand – allows greater flexibility of thought and expression. This flexibility allows each student to find the technique or techniques that work best for them. In this way our general art becomes a specific art tailored to each student.

PRINCIPLE 6: Forms are not Free Fighting

In our view, the interpretation of forms is a separate discipline from free fighting (sparring). Our form interpretation happens at close quarters. Free fighting is done at kicking or punching distance until the attacker closes with us and we can

utilize techniques designed for close quarters combat. Better yet, the attacker grabs us to begin with and we dispense with free fighting altogether! In my experience the free fighting model is in the great minority of assaults. The aggressor most often touches or grabs the intended victim for distance information or to steady the target before launching the ballistic assault.

The interpretation of forms in the modern era (post WWII) was based on the free fighting model. When Senior Master Instructor Chris Thomas introduced us to this kind of form interpretation all the grappling, and seizing techniques we had been taught, separate from classical forms, started to fall into place; they were techniques from the forms!

Try it; you'll quickly see what I mean.

PRINCIPLE 7: Mine all Systems for Effective Techniques

It bears repeating that there are a limited number of ways to violate the human body. All systems have something to offer on this count. It makes a great deal of sense to look for effective techniques from all styles when searching for effective techniques you can incorporate into your personal art. Refer back to the first principle of form interpretation; It Must Work; Period – tradition is irrelevant when defending your life.

That being said; here are a few sources for great information:

- Any of the books or videos by George A. Dillman and Chris Thomas
- Any of the Chi Na books or videos by Yang, Zwing Ming

Get the books and try the techniques to find what works for you.

