

# Bunkai Basics

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## Bunkai

### Overview

- Bunkai is the practical application of the movements in kata.
- Given that kata is an imaginary fight against multiple opponents, bunkai adds realism as one person takes on the role of a defender (doing the kata) and one or more people take on the role of attackers.
- Bunkai teaches us how to respond to a physical attacker using our conditioned reflexes in a controlled, safe setting.

### Purpose

#### Bunkai improves:

- Assessment and adjustment of maai (distance) as relates to our reach, height, mass, etc. in relation to different sized opponents (training partners).
- Refinement of gan (perception) by focusing on one opponent while maintaining 360 awareness (“sixth sense”).
- Overcoming inhibitions and “polite” behavior so we can confidently “move in” and take over an opponent’s space, especially in turns and combinations.
- Timing and flexibility by forcing us to step outside the formal constructs of the kata *when necessary* and respond to the opponent’s physical location when blocking or countering to an available target.
- Management and use of adrenaline (physiological response) and fear (emotional response). The ability to perform effectively under pressure.
- Deeper understanding of the kata by seeing it from both the attacker’s and defender’s point of view.

#### Additional considerations:

- Bunkai is less exact than formal kata. There will be subtle adjustments to the direction of attacks and the location of targets based on our real-life training partners.
- Bunkai is a supplement to traditional kata practice, **not** a substitute or “higher level” interpretation. It should be practiced sparingly; otherwise the inevitable sloppiness and holding back become habit.

#### Safety:

- Bunkai is only practiced in the kata we are proficient with, according to the instructor’s judgment.
- Lower rank and/or the smaller person determines the appropriate speed and power for each move. When there are multiple sized attackers, the intensity often changes throughout the bunkai. Err on the side of caution.
- Bunkai should never be performed full speed and power. Beginners should start at half speed and power.
- Participants should only use a speed and power in which they can stop a technique at the last second or strike *past* the target in order to avoid injury.
- Physical contact is the same as in pre-arranged fighting: forearm to forearm contact when blocking. Avoid injuring the wrists! When punching, do not make contact with the target. Bunkai is *not* body testing!
- Listen carefully to all instructions regarding speed and power, count or no count, etc., and communicate any injuries to your training partners. If needed wear a brace to remind yourself and others of the injury.
- Although in kata we practice saving the head, in bunkai make sure you see and verify your target before blocking or striking, especially if physical contact will be made.
- Avoid injury to yourself by *not* completely relaxing your arm until *after* you’ve absorbed your partner’s block.

## Etiquette

### Overview

“Karate begins and ends with courtesy,” and this is especially true with partner exercises. Bunkai is a collaborative exercise, *not* competitive. The person doing the kata “wins” the fight against their multiple opponents. If the attackers are the same or higher rank than the student on the spot, their job is to make that person and the kata “look good.” This means using attacks that are neither too easy nor too difficult, requiring that attackers develop an ability to “read” their opponent.

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## Procedure

### Setting up:

- Begin with the lowest rank “on the spot” doing the kata. Attackers set up in rank order with the highest rank in the direction of the first attack, the second highest rank in the second direction of attack, and so on down the ranks depending on how many attackers are in the group. All stand in formal attention stance.

### Performing bunkai:

- “Kiotseke, mawate!” is called, and the person doing the kata either turns to their training partner (if one attacker) or takes a half step back for one general bow to all surrounding attackers.
- “Ni Rei!” is then called, and all participants bow using verbal courtesies. (Attackers use the appropriate title for the person doing kata, while the person doing kata uses the title of the highest ranked attacker.) The person performing kata then automatically returns to the starting spot.
- “Yoi!” is called, and attackers assume yame dachi, as in prearranged fighting. Bunkai then proceeds with attackers moving into position as dictated by the kata, using economy of motion and distributing attacks equally among attackers.
- After the final technique (Yoi), all return to their original positions. “Kiotskete!” is called, and all return to formal attention stance and bow as described above.

### Rotating:

- If prompted by the instructor, all participants rotate: the next highest rank trades places with the person “on the spot” and then all attackers rotate position (either clockwise or counter clockwise depending on instruction). This pattern continues until the instructor ends the exercise.

## Overall Considerations

Generally, in bunkai it’s more challenging to attack than defend. The defender (doing the kata) has the benefit of both the kata’s strategy and the many repetitions they have put in. Attackers are required to improvise on technique and maai.

### Attackers:

- Kyu ranks should stick to traditional Shorin-Ryu techniques (including stances) appropriate to the move in the kata. *Experienced* blackbelts may sometimes mimic “street fighters”, but this an exception.
- Keep your blocks to a minimum. Never block the final move in any one direction as the person doing the kata gets to “win” the fight.
- Try not to attack from point-blank range. Instead, move in naturally and fluidly. This is an excellent training alternative to jyu kumite (freestyle sparring).
- Never take your eyes off the opponent, whether shifting to a new position or awaiting your turn to attack. Look for openings and cultivate the mindset that at any time the person on the spot may preemptively attack *you*.
- Be aware of how your fellow attackers are doing and be prepared to back them up. No “dead kumite”!

### Defenders:

- Respond to the *actual* attack from your training partner and *not* to the count. Timing and eye/hand coordination are critical to avoid blocking too soon or too late.
- Bunkai will be messier than regular kata. Your opponents will send you off track and off balance. Embrace this and work on making your techniques as clean and effective as possible. Find out what cannot be compromised (stepping first/foundation) vs. what can and should be adjusted (direction of the attack/height of blocks/location of exposed targets).

## Recap

Bunkai is an important training tool to enhance the understanding of kata, and how the techniques can be applied. It is not meant to show how strong and aggressive you are. For the defender, bunkai cultivates patience, imperturbability, and appropriate response. For the attacker it develops offensive skills, heightened control, and the will to stay “in the fight,” even when not actively attacking. For all practitioners, it teaches awareness, focus and natural breathing in a real-life altercation.