

IM Kata: Mindful Movement Though Our Work

Jeff Hutchings



Best-selling books have been written about the art of “tidying up” and about achieving awareness and consciousness in the workplace. Applications have been developed for practicing “mindful living.” And even science is coming onboard by telling us that vehicles to mental clarity are a means to a better work life.

Self-care, which often includes breathing exercises, meditation, and mindfulness moments, is intended to clear our mental clutter and make us more patient, more perceptive, and less stressed. The mindfulness movement advances the idea of “being all there” as you engage with your daily work agenda.

Many of the precepts and suggestions within the teachings on mindfully approaching life and its work are very relevant to information management (IM) devotees in our daily undertakings.

Consider Karate Kata

Most who recognize the Japanese term *kata* will associate it with a predefined set of movements in a martial arts demonstration, not unlike a choreographed set of precise techniques. The term, though, captures much more than that. *Kata* is a way of doing, or a pattern of behavior. It's the foundation for such undertakings as forms in the martial arts, the ritualistic tea ceremony, or a meticulous flower arrangement. All these involve mindful engagement with the meaningful and rewarding task at hand.

My practice in the martial arts started more than 25 years ago. I grew up in a small town where extracurricular activities were limited, and when I heard that shotokan karate classes were offered in a neighboring town, I was elated. From then on, I went to class twice a week to learn more about the karate style and to practice – through seemingly endless repetitions – its techniques and movements. Karate gave me physical goals to work toward, and it did wonders for my self-esteem and adolescent anxiety. At age 47, I am still a devoted practitioner and teacher of the art.

Study Shotokan for Self-Improvement

Shotokan is a traditional karate style, developed from various martial arts by Gichin Funakoshi in the mid to late 1800s. Karate do or “empty hand way” was originally meant to hone and harden the body and to perfect destructive blocks and attacks, as well as refine a person's character. At its core, shotokan embodies *budo*, a Japanese term for martial disciplines where the ultimate goal is spiritual, ethical, and/or moral self-improvement.

In the shotokan style, there are 26 *kata*, or patterns, each having a particular name and containing a series of combat techniques. These *kata* require the practitioner to study tempo, *kime* (or focused energy), posture, and efficiency. Along with *kihon* (basics) and *kumite* (sparring), *kata* is one of

the three interwoven components of the ancient martial arts.

Karate > a Fighting Art

Before a case is made for how certain principles of the martial arts can be applied to IM, there is a need to understand that karate, and *kata* in particular, go way beyond the common misconception of it being simply a fighting art. Granted, karate on the Okinawan Islands was taught as a means of self-protection in the absence of hand weapons, but it also was a vehicle to character refinement.

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are an inward journey to understanding oneself: “See what is unseeable” and “expect what is unexpected” and “the human mind is one with heaven and earth.” The *Bubishi* teaches that karate is a personal journey to inner balance, to virtuous living, to cultivating human kindness and respect.

Ancient-day monks used the martial arts not only as a means of conditioning their bodies for endless hours of meditation practice, but as a means to learning how to stay focused in their practice. Recently, in one of my dojo's classes for kids, the pupils were asked what karate means to them, and their responses were

more about personal achievements and controlling emotions than about combat. One student said, “Karate keeps me grounded. I control my breathing and my mind clears.”

Karate then is a balance of the yin and the yang, the hard and the soft principles that are relevant to everyday life and its work.

Apply Kata to IM

Even though you now have some background information, IM practice as *kata* may on the surface seem to be a stretch, but a more granular look could trigger or reinforce ideas that we can upload into our IM routine. *Kata*, after all, is about clarity in a routine, uncomplicated approach, precision, mindful engagement, *continuation* (*sanshin*), and the best use of energy and resources.

In *kata*, whether it be a tea ceremony or a karate performance, nothing begins until the approach is carefully considered. Thus, before you begin, give thought to the value to others in what you are doing, as well as the value to yourself. Is your intention to demonstrate to others or to find an internal place of fulfillment after doing something well?

In my own karate practice, for example, when I begin a new *kata*, I approach it slowly, ensuring I understand all the movements, the correct tempo, and where the most focus needs to be. Doing a *kata* well means having a thorough understanding of it up front.

In IM, a parallel practice may be considering that effectively managing e-mail means your co-workers get a quicker response from you and you have easier and quicker access to your information. In such a case, everyone is happier and less stressed. Upfront business considerations and understanding your organization's e-mail management requirements at the outset translate to a better workflow.

PERSONAL GROWTH

Careful consideration of the kata aspect – of why you do your IM work and of its fundamental value – may give you a little more vigor in that you'll believe you conduct IM best practices for a reason, not simply because they are required.

Remove What's Not Required

An essential component of a martial arts kata performance is the removal of everything that isn't critical to the routine. Anything extra, even a subtle movement, is considered waste and is disallowed. For example, when I was learning black belt katas, I would telegraph my next move with a slight change in my expression before I delivered a technique such as a *mae geri keage* (front snap kick). My *sensei* (instructor) would say "Keep your face out of this!" The thinking is that habits stick, and the more we do something, the harder it is to eliminate it later. Relating this concept to our IM practices is a little more obvious: As soon as information is not needed to meet business or IM requirements, it should go! Movement in kata is about efficiency – that is, the best usage of energy. In the ancient art of flower arranging, for example, nothing is added that isn't crucial to the arrangement: more isn't better. In IM, hanging on to unneeded, transitory records translates to cluttered storage locations, more costly storage, and more time and resources to find needed information. Poor habits like keeping copies of e-mails or paper records "just in case" seem harmless enough until something like an access-to-information request comes in.

Cultivate Routines

Another kata practice concept that is applicable to IM is that routine work.

A world-renowned karate sensei once said, "One kata, 100,000 times." He was emphasizing that practice produces permanence. Following and repeating a well-thought out routine enhances its efficiency and reduces

the margin for error. A well-documented, well-enforced method to handle incoming personal information, for example, will mean records stored in the correct place, named properly, and with the appropriate access assigned. On the other hand, an *ad lib* process will be open to inconsistencies and, possibly, breaches.

This concept in the workplace is illustrated by giving new employees sound advice on IM routines, thus bringing them into an already-proven process and mitigating newcomer errors. A great example can be found

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in our provincial records center in Newfoundland and Labrador, where employees have a well-defined process for accepting, borrowing, and transferring records. From the arrival to the subsequent disposal of records, the routine is clear, which minimizes errors and makes the process user-friendly. Records request forms solicit and contain only the bare minimum information, and they are handled and stored efficiently.

Often in a martial arts *dojo* (training hall), you'll hear "Just kata!" This means to eliminate the fluff and keep it simple. A martial artist then moves through the movements in a kata in a concise, energy efficient, and effective way. A common example in karate that defies kata is pulling your hand back before a punch; this slows

the technique and impedes power generation, thus adding nothing of value.

We can use the same philosophy in our records management storage systems: keep it concise and simple. Don't aim to capture more than the necessary metadata for each digital record type. Similarly, don't bury records in a deep hierarchy of digital storage folders that makes it unnecessarily time-consuming to put in and get out records. Using proper naming conventions and a high-level folder structure enables users to find, retrieve, and return the records they need more easily. Remember, organized clutter is still clutter!

Seek 'Continued Awareness'

An additional concept of kata we can use to blanket IM practice is *zanshin*, which is an intriguing Japanese term for *remaining mindful*, or *having continued awareness*. In essence, it is a state of relaxed alertness. In kata, the idea is to move through the tempo of the movements with alertness, always anticipating the next move; effort and energy use are steady and consistent.

As IM practitioners and their work have become more prominent in the digital age, they have more accountability for accurately and quickly handling information. Learning to stay in a state of relaxed alertness is a superb way to deal with IM hiccups and challenging trends. Being better able to look ahead to new technologies and methodologies may take the surprise out of new workplace software or incoming legislation: you can embrace the coming change or move.

Remaining alert, of course, is primarily the function of how we take care of ourselves, inside and outside the workplace. Our organization, for instance, has a wealth of knowledgeable IM professionals who have access to up-to-date resources that help when things get overwhelming or when there is uncertainty. Awareness

in this sense is when we recognize we could use a hand and we reach out for the same. Kata consistently improves when you are open to suggestions and other approaches.

Take Breaks to Breathe

Discussing zanshin, or mindfulness, in the workday for IM practitioners may seem over the top, but it can be beneficial to any workplace. Martial artists and others can effectively manage their stress levels with consistent, mindful breathing as well as deliberate breaks from their tasks. Taking time throughout the day to rise, move around, and pay attention to your breathing is not idealistic at all. With the health consequences of sitting too long now being likened to those of smoking, such actions are crucial to overall well-being.

Just as kata class starts with *moku-so* (a brief period of meditation or turning inward), the workday can be interspersed with reflective breaks to allow your eyes and mind to empty. Zanshin is about pacing yourself, which in turn allows you to handle your IM workload comfortably.

Kata then, not unlike your IM practice, is mindful movement through predefined and structured sequences while maintaining mental attention to them. It is efficiency that is born out of keeping things simple. In the end, you will appreciate and be content with a self-rewarding process. **E**



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