

The Development of the New Art of SHINDEN

Creating Kata with Tommy Morita

by Aaron Hara with
Charles Morita

Tommy Morita is best described as a contemporary "scholar warrior." He is a veteran martial art practitioner as well as a martial art scholar who has done extensive research, and his years of practice, teaching and study have led to the development of a new art, known as Shinden.

Morita's talent lies in his ability to compose kata or forms. "It's a matter of experience," he says, with over fifty years of martial arts behind him. "The more experience one has the more katas one can write." Morita was prompted to develop his Shinden forms when he became head of the Hawaii Karate Federation in 1960.

Morita's prolific kata writing comes mainly from his sincere desire to pass on his knowledge. Like most scholars, he has a strong sense of history and would like to share what he has learned as well as what he has created with future generations.

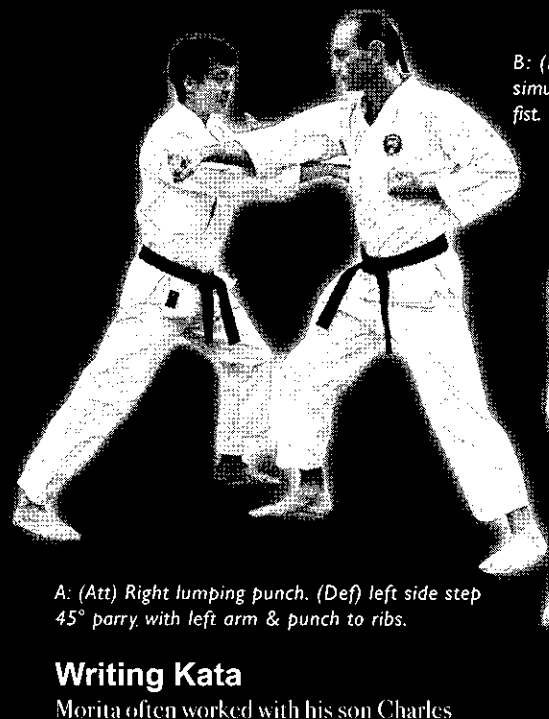
Shinden forms are choreographed movements aimed at fending off imagined opponents. The forms are designed to be practiced until the kata becomes a part of the practitioner, and during an actual attack, the practitioner reacts naturally, defending himself in an instinctive manner.

A: (Att.) left hand grab a punch.
B: (Def.) grabs attackers wrist with left hand.
C: (Def.) right backfist (side) to ribs
D: (Def.) left low side kick to attack left knee.

Shinden forms also make individual techniques and combinations easier to teach. Like a good book, a kata has a beginning, a middle and an end. The Shinden practitioner trains his mind and body to respond to the narrative that lies within the kata.

"When practicing the kata, we must incorporate in each move the mind and body without excessive conscious effort," writes Morita. "This is possible only through concentrated practice, and through this diligent practice we become part of the kata's intricate and inspiring cycle and its movements."

Morita has spent endless hours logging his ideas, writing extensive notes, and refining each technique, one movement at a time. He describes the choreographing of kata as an ongoing process that has consumed most of his life. "It was all my lifetime. It was a lifetime of practice," recalls a graying Morita.



A: (Att) Right lumping punch. (Def) left side step 45° parry with left arm & punch to ribs.

B: (Def.) Right stomp to attackers right foot simultaneously striking chest with right hammer fist.



C: (Def.) Hop back and stomp an attackers right foot with left foot.

Writing Kata

Morita often worked with his son Charles Morita and his assistant instructor Mitchel Shimamura to refine the details of each new idea. "I work on it during the day and then I go home to put it together. And we try it out when Mitchel comes to practice," explains Morita.

He was often inspired and awoke in the middle of the night to record his new ideas. Morita also oftentimes worked things out in his head while sitting because there was never enough room to experiment in his small apartment. Morita worked and reworked his forms until each kata exhibited promise.

Morita has even devised his own system of shorthand designed to note the individual kata movements. Stuart Ching in his 1996 *World of Martial Arts* article on Shinden describes the process: "Providing a framework for his kata, (Morita) created the Shinden Directional Chart, which, in addition to establishing a philosophical foundation, positions eight imaginary attackers around the practitioner: at north, south, east, and west; and at northeast, northwest, southeast and southwest. Within this framework, Morita's choreography enables the martial artist to defend and

counter in all eight directions and to begin and end in the same spot."

The long hours spent developing his kata have resulted in forms that flow well, and have great depth. Each movement contains effective simplicity while the flamboyant, made-for-the-movie stuff is eliminated. A Shinden kata has a "good feel" of being strong, smooth and effective.

Contemporary Kata

Morita's goal was to put the self-defense aspect of martial arts back into the forms, but in a way that is less physically demanding. Many traditional karate forms were composed during an era when martial artists were extraordinarily strong people. They spent their lifetimes becoming human weapons. Today, most people hold desk jobs, work with computers, and cannot be expected to physically outpower a strong attacker. As a result, many traditional techniques are often too difficult or ineffective for today's practitioner.

Morita does not expect that a Shinden student spend his time doing intensive conditioning. He feels it is not necessary to toughen your hands and feet. Few people

spend their time conditioning their fists by punching the makiwara. He feels excessive training may lead to injuries that plague a person and, in the long run, do more harm than good. In fact, Morita would always remind his students that family, school and work should take priority over martial arts.

Morita challenged himself to come up with ways for the smaller person to protect himself. His search led him to study kendo, boxing, kenpo, judo, karate, tai chi and kung fu. He borrowed and adapted ideas from each art. He borrowed karate's hip-generating power, blended it with quick boxing movements and added fluid tai chi techniques. The blend of the "hard" and "soft" movements have resulted in an effective martial art that feels natural.

"It's all a matter of speed," he explains. With speed and good techniques, a smaller person can defend himself. Shinden, for the most part, is designed as a practical martial art. The objective is to take out the attacker with minimum effort. "Exert only when you have to," is Morita's maxim.

Principles, Weapons

Morita concentrates on the opponent's eyes with eye strikes and on the feet with leg sweeps, foot stomps and low kicks.

He reasons that a person cannot find you if he cannot see you: "If the guy can't find you then he can't do anything. Take away his eyesight and then he's finished. That's the principle of Shinden. And take away his footwork and he's finished too. That's why you go up down, down up."

The high and low counters are noticeable in the prearranged sparring routines or "tricks" that number in the hundreds. While the "tricks" are important, Morita devised the forms because he felt it is easier to pass on his knowledge through forms.

Much of Morita's Shinden techniques are designed to provide a person with an "edge" that will ultimately allow him to survive an attack. While empty hand techniques are Shinden's foundation, Shinden also has a large repertoire of weapon forms. Shinden weapon forms utilize traditional Okinawan weapons like the nunchaku, sai, kamae, and tonfa, as well as various lengths of sticks, such as the shortstick, club, cane, jo and bo (staff). Much emphasis is placed on stick weapon forms since a broom, an umbrella or even a dinner fork could substitute for a stick if necessary. The idea is that a person trains with various weapons so that in a real situation he can improvise, using whatever is close at hand. Morita feels that it is easier to defend yourself with a weapon than with your bare hands. There is always the risk of injuring your hand when punching someone.

A Shinden weapon kata is both beautiful and deadly. A jo kata, for example, looks like a warrior's dance from a distance. A four-foot wooden stick slashes and strikes its opponents. On closer inspection, a sword-like draw is a slash to the opponent's temple, an overhead strike is a bone-breaking blow to the collar bone and a downward jab is a strike to the opponent's knee.

Shinden also places emphasis on forms that involve two people. These forms involve an attacking and defending side. There are empty-hand "two-man" forms, a bo versus bo kata, a sai versus tonfa kata, and many more. These dynamic forms help students gain a feel for what actual fighting may entail. And as students improve, the forms become more realistic.

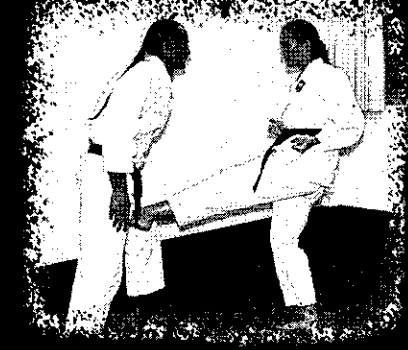
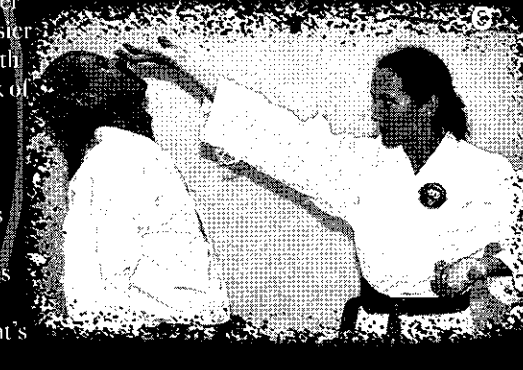
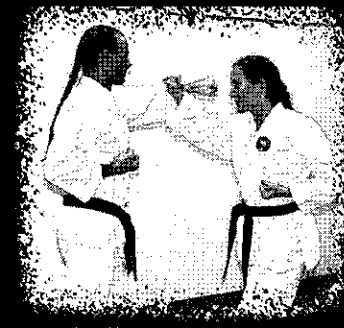
Morita theorizes about "striking and defensive" phases of the "two-man" kata. "The striking phase of the katas may be interpreted as a cleansing process in which we remove all impurities that have stagnated in our mind and body. Striking should also be the means by which we ward off impending or imagined problems that prevent us

A: (Att.) Right punch. (Def.) Left 45° step Right hand parry block.

B: (Def.) Right fingers to eyes (Claws)

C: (Def.) Right fingers to eyes (back hand).

D: (Def) Left kicks to groin.



A

B

C

D

prevent their damaging effects from entering our nervous and physiological systems," continues Morita.

Shinden kata training takes on a quality much like the meditative nature of tai chi forms. Morita, in fact, encourages students to study tai chi to enhance one's control and internal strength. Morita wants his students to be able to keep their "cool" in order to find a way to diffuse or avoid a tense situation. "Just because someone shoves you doesn't mean that you are going to blind him," cautions Morita.

Act to Defend

Nor should a person stand idly by if one's life and family is threatened: "You must act if your family is threatened," advises Morita. "Let the punishment fit the crime."

Morita once told a true story about a crazed farm hand who ran amok and attacked a family with a machete. That is not to say that Shinden would have changed the fatal outcome, but it could have provided the father, mother, son and daughter with an extra "edge" that may have helped them to survive. Morita makes his point by simply deflecting a knife thrust by leaning a staff he holds in his hand to one side.

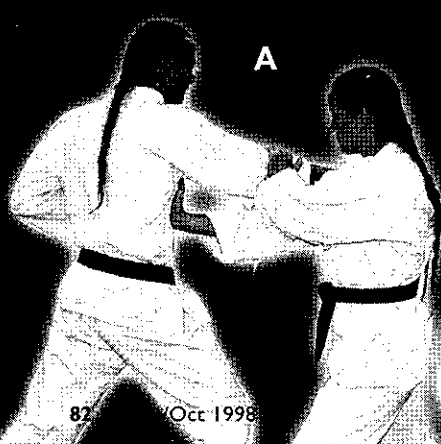
Aside from the self-defense aspect, Morita, ultimately, wants the practitioner to master the spirit of his forms. Writes Morita, "When one reaches the highest level of performance, one has attained the kara of karate and the kata's physical movements have now become a flow of controlled energy generated by the mind of kara and exerted through the motions of the kata. When a person has reached this stage, the kata is now a part of the practitioner, guiding him and existing inherently within many of his actions throughout the day."

Any long time practitioner of Shinden will discover its intrinsic beauty. Beneath what appears to be a set of punches and kicks is a system that is designed to better a person as if you were carving your image from a block of stone. The same intricacies and thought that it takes to fashion a statue went into designing the Shinden forms. Art influences art. The art of Shinden influences the art within us, ourselves, which, in turn, shapes us into better people. As Morita says, "Always make karate work for you." W

from seeing true conditions," writes Morita in his notes.

"The defensive phase of the katas should be viewed as a shield protecting us against negative forces, and as we move and block during the katas, there should be an increasing awareness of these negative forces so that every attempt will be made to

Aaron Hara and Charles Morita are Tommy Morita's students. They are based in Honolulu, Hawaii.



A: (Att.) Right punch. (Def) Left step 45°. Right palm strike and ribs.

B: (Def.) Step in right leg onto opponent's right foot, simultaneously striking attacker's jaw with palm (fingers to eyes).

C: (Def.) Step back and Left low round kick to attacks right leg.

