

JOMAR | Interview

Iain Abernethy (Cockermouth, UK), Jesse Enkamp (Stockholm, Sweden) & Peter Kuhn* (Bayreuth, Germany)

“Follow your bliss” — Jesse Enkamp and Iain Abernethy Talking about Karate

Abstract

For this JOMAR | Interview Iain Abernethy's and Jesse Enkamp's talks from 2013 and 2018 were combined in order to show both development and consistency in their perspectives on Karate. But this is not the only reason for this JOMAR | Interview's focus. What is addressed between the lines is the fascinating journey an ancient Asian martial art took from the far east across America to Europe and back again over the last hundred years — and this journey is still going on. What we can study here is kind of a transcultural flow in which the flowing subject is de- and reconstructed by millions of people practicing, teaching, and researching on it.

Zusammenfassung

Für dieses JOMAR | Interview wurden die Gespräche von Iain Abernethy und Jesse Enkamp aus den Jahren 2013 und 2018 zusammengestellt, um sowohl Entwicklung als auch Konsistenz in ihren Perspektiven auf das Karate zu zeigen. Aber das ist nicht der einzige Grund für den Fokus dieses JOMAR | Interviews. Zwischen den Zeilen wird die faszinierende Reise einer alten asiatischen Kampfkunst – vom Fernen Osten über Amerika nach Europa und zurück – in den letzten hundert Jahren angesprochen. Und diese Reise geht weiter. Was wir hier studieren können, ist eine Art transkultureller Fluss, in dem das fließende Thema von Millionen von Menschen, die es praktizieren, lehren und erforschen, de- und rekonstruiert wird.

Keywords

Bunkai; Demystification; Enlightenment; Iain Abernethy; Invented Tradition; Jesse Enkamp; Karate; Karate Nerd; Kata; Martial Arts; Practical Bunkai; Tradition; Transculture

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1 Introduction (Peter Kuhn)

In this **JOMAR | Interview** two of the most renowned and profiled Karate professionals in Europe, Iain Abernethy and Jesse Enkamp, are involved. Both are well-known all over the planet and need not to be introduced to Karateka at least, but as many of our readers are familiar with other martial arts and combat sports I'll drop — or rather cite — some words about those two remarkable experts.

Jesse Enkamp on his [blog](#)¹ introduces himself as “The Karate Nerd”, #1 Amazon.com best-selling author, entrepreneur, traveller, athlete, educator, carrot cake connoisseur and founder of Seishin International. His story starts in the dojo in his parents' martial arts centre, in Stockholm, Sweden. After graduating high school, he moved to Okinawa (the birthplace of Karate) to study at university and explore the roots of the art. During this time, he started a blog called “KARATE by Jesse” to document his observations in Okinawa. Although the original purpose was to share my own journey, the writings resonated with so many readers that it became a platform for likeminded Karate practitioners around the world. Today, it's the #1 Karate blog in the world. Jesse left Okinawa in 2009, but I've returned over a dozen times since. After he came home to Sweden, he was selected for the national team. This was the starting point for him as an athlete, representing Sweden at international tournaments including the Premier League, Nordic, European and World Championship (WKF). He continued his travels to learn from Karate experts around the world and, by sharing his discoveries in articles, books, videos and seminars, he built a community of fans who embraced the full spectrum of Karate – regardless of stylistic preference, political agenda or dojo dogma. Empowered by passionate Karate Nerds around the world, he launched global projects (like KNX) and companies (like Seishin International) to supercharge the Karate community.

Iain Abernethy, as you can read on his [website](#), has also been involved in the martial arts since childhood. He holds the rank of 7th Dan with the British Combat Association (one of the world's leading groups for close-quarter combat, self-protection and practical martial arts), the British Combat Karate Association, and the English Karate Federation. Iain regularly writes for the UK's leading martial arts magazines and he is a member of the “Combat Hall of Fame”. Being one of the leading exponents of applied Karate, Iain has written a number of critically acclaimed books on the practical application of traditional martial arts and is well known for his work on the pragmatic use of the techniques and concepts recorded in the traditional kata.² Iain's seminars, books, DVDs and articles have proved to be very popular with those groups and individuals who wish to practise their arts as the pragmatic systems they were originally intended to be. As [Geoff Thompson](#) said, “Iain Abernethy has shown us the real beauty of Karate with his innovative and pioneering work”. In [Dan Anderson](#)'s view Iain “teaches functional application of traditional kata. The ‘secret applications’ of kata are laid bare by his hands on, practical instruction”. And the [Traditional Karate Magazine](#) rates “Iain's work [as] always professionally produced, excellently presented, thoroughly researched and eminently practical”.

For this **JOMAR | Interview** we decided to combine Iain's and Jesse's talks from 2013 and 2018 in order to show both development and consistency in their perspectives on Karate. But this is not the only reason for this **JOMAR | Interview**'s focus. What is addressed between the lines is the fascinating journey an ancient Asian martial art took from the far east across America to Europe and back again over the last hundred years — and this journey is still going on. What we can study here is kind of a transcultural flow in which the flowing subject is de- and reconstructed by millions of people practicing, teaching, and researching on it. I myself could experience how strange it feels to be part of this flow when [teaching the Karate kata “Kanku-dai” to students of the Tianjin University of Sport in 2007](#): A humble German black belt travelling to China bringing back a tradition that started off there,

¹ The links in this paper were checked before submission in Jan, 2019.

² The formal patterns of movements in which Karate stances, techniques, and moves are preserved and passed on are called “kata” (jap. 形 or 型), which means “form”. To dig deeper read [Iain Abernethy about kata](#) and [Jesse Enkamp about kata](#).
BTW: All footnotes in this paper are written by Peter Kuhn.

was brought to Okinawa by a grandmaster called Kushanku, developed on this island, was brought to Japan by another grandmaster called Funakoshi, from there took its way around the globe to Germany and now – filtered through hundreds of thousands of students and teachers and embodied by just one of them who himself owes being a Karateka to his eight year old daughter (Kuhn, 2014, p. 211ff.) – returned to its very roots.³

While writing this I could be producing one of the uncountable myths that accompany the martial arts in general and especially Karate. Why especially Karate? Well, just because there is an uncountable variety of styles in Karate, there is an uncountable number of sensei who base their lives on teaching Karate, which means selling Karate for money for living — and on this market 'truth sells'. And what could be a better truth than a myth nobody can argue against? This connects fairly perfect to terms like 'authentic', 'original' or 'traditional', and claiming to have found the 'missing link' seems to be the ultimate brand core of 'true Karate'. In order to "convince in- and outsiders of the validity of their techniques, tactics and training methods, martial arts tend to talk about themselves in mythical narratives, to 'mythify' their origins" (Wetzler, 2014, p. 1). However, as Bowman (2014, p. 18) states,

"neither traditionalist martial arts like taijiquan nor anti-traditional martial arts like KFM are necessarily any closer to the 'truth' or 'reality' of combat. They are both merely performative embodiments of different theories, organised implicitly or explicitly by different premises or presuppositions about the nature of the event".

To capture this phenomenon, Hobsbawm and Ranger (1992) established the term "invented tradition". Meyer explains that "cultural imports are often re-labeled as native after their adaption. Usually, their pseudo- historical tradition obscures the original heritage with taboos and myths" (2016, p. 25).

In both the introduced Karate experts you'll find none of that stuff.⁴ Iain just calls his work "[practical bunkai](#)"⁵, and if you ever joined one of his classes you'll find that it just works. And you'll find that he's just one of us. He would show and explain something joyfully and — tongue-in-cheek and a bit suggestively — ask us "Agree with that?" and motivate us with "Play!" to explore and find out what fits best to our own way of doing it. And following Jesse on his [YouTube channel](#) you will find just the same pleasant pragmatism. Both are seekers, yes — in a way — researchers. Nevertheless — or for that very reason —, both are highly passionate, dedicated, inspirational, and captivating — as you will also see in the following pages.

³ I wanted to give my hosts back some of what their ancestors gave the world — because the roots of the Kanku-dai lie in China. In Werner Lind's "Lexikon der Kampfkünste" one can read that the Kanku is a Japanese variant of the Okinawan Kushanku, is practiced in many schools of Karate and also in the Shotokan ryu (= the most widespread Karate-dō style) a representative Kata represents. The name Kushanku is said to be derived from a Chinese martial arts expert of the same name from Shaolin Quanfa. It is assumed that Kushanku came to Okinawa as a Chinese military attaché in 1756 in the course of the Chinese-Japanese trade relations and stayed there until 1762. The emperor of the Ming dynasty chose "36 families" from the Chinese Fujian area, whose members were trained in various professions and arts, who settled on Okinawa near the city of Naha in a Chinese settlement (Kumemura). One of them is said to have been Kushanku, a well-known martial arts expert of his time. The kata Kanku-dai is the Japanese main form of the old Kushanku. In the Japanese styles the Itosu no kushanku prevailed. It was taught especially by the masters Funakoshi Gichin and Mabuni Kenwa in Japan and spread afterwards in all Shotokan ryu and Shito ryu related styles, but with some changes. The name Kanku was introduced by Funakoshi Gichin, the founder of modern Karate-dō, in the 1930s. It is believed that this form was his favorite kata, because when he was asked to present his art in Japan in 1921, he demonstrated the kushanku (Lind, 2001, p. 168f., 288f., 362f.).

⁴ Though both use the term 'traditional' they won't utilize it to enhance their points of view but would take it as a means to explain their search for roots and their connection to a heritage they draw upon.

⁵ Bunkai (jap. 分解) "analysis" or, literally "disassemble into parts". The term refers to the process of analysing kata (see footnote 2). To dig deeper read [Iain Abernethy about bunkai](#) and [Jesse Enkamp about bunkai](#).

2 The talks (Jesse Enkamp and Iain Abernethy)

2.1 [Jesse Enkamp interviewing Iain Abernethy in 2013](#)⁶

2.1.1 Intro (Jesse Enkamp)

Jesse Enkamp (J): Thirteen. That's how many letters Iain Abernethy's name contains. Thirteen is also the number of letters in the phrase "awesome bunkai". Coincidence? I think not.



Iain Abernethy (Credit: Jesse Enkamp)

You see, when it comes to applying the techniques of Karate's kata (bunkai), few people have the same passion, grit and experience as Iain Abernethy – UK's leading proponent of practical Karate. Having hustled on the bunkai corner for years, steadily converting regular Karate people into serial bunkai addicts through his numerous videos, articles and seminars, sensei Iain truly embodies the ideal [Karate Nerd™](#). If you ever meet him, I'm sure you'll agree. So...

Since the response to my last article ([The Bunkai Blueprint: A Simple Framework for Applying the Kata of Karate in Practical Self-Defense](#)) was so great, I figured – why not keep rolling on this whole "bunkai bandwagon"? I mean, people are obviously thirsty for unlocking the secrets of kata! Therefore, I decided to hook up with sensei Iain Abernethy today – for an informal chat about the role of "ancient kata" in modern Karate, the value of understanding their bunkai, and how we can use this information to increase our growth in this wonderful, yet sometimes too complex, art of Karate. Without further ado, let's get this bunkai discussion going, shall we? Enjoy!

2.1.2 Interview

Jesse (J): Let's start from the beginning: Why should "regular Karate people" care about bunkai? Can't we all just practice kata without the headache?

Iain Abernethy (IA): "Well, whether you should care or not is ultimately down to what your training goals are: Karate is not a single all-encompassing entity. "Karate", as a term, has become a lot like "athletics" in that it covers a wide range of disparate disciplines. What I think of as Karate, and what another person thinks of as Karate, can be as different as pole-vaulting and marathon running! Sure, we are all Karate-ka – just as practitioners of all the various types of athletics are all "athletes" – but it is a common error to think that Karate is a unified whole with common aims and concerns."

⁶ Published first by Jesse Enkamp on <http://www.Karatebyjesse.com/iain-abernethy-Karate-kata-bunkai-pt-1/> and <http://www.Karatebyjesse.com/iain-abernethy-Karate-kata-bunkai-pt-2/>. This is a literal reprint authorized by Jesse Enkamp himself.

J: Right. Like sensei Lucio Maurino [once told me](#): *Marathon runners and 100m sprinters are both "runners" – but they train (and look) completely different!*

IA: "Exactly. There are many different reasons to practice Karate, and there are also many different "Karates". Whether individual Karate-ka should care about bunkai or not is dependent on what they are training for. For the person who practices Karate as a form of physical and social recreation – which is an entirely legitimate reason to train – then bunkai may not be something they trouble themselves with. Likewise, a person who is interested in Karate for artistic or cultural reasons is unlikely to find themselves caring about bunkai. Modern Karate athletes (i.e. sportsmen) are also unlikely to care about bunkai as the application of the kata have little relevance to competitive kumite. The same is true of most kata competitors. For the purposes of clarity, I should make clear that the highly skilled displays of kata bunkai in [team competition finals](#) are not what I mean by "bunkai", so even they will find themselves unlikely to care about bunkai as you and me define it."

*(A short clip of sensei Iain teaching basic bunkai drills in his dojo
<https://youtu.be/Vw-wnObCc3U>)*

J: So, who SHOULD be interested in bunkai then? Just "weirdos" like us?!

IA: "The Karate-ka who is interested in Karate with genuine relevance to self-protection should be very interested in bunkai! As should the Karate-ka who wants a deep understanding of kata. Within kata we find all we need for dealing with the physical side of self-protection in a logical, structured and highly effective way. Through the deep study of kata bunkai we can practice a version of Karate that includes striking, gripping, throwing, trapping, chokes, strangles, takedowns, cranks, etc. We can then take those methods, and their underlying principles, into our compliant and live practice. We then have a holistic, highly pragmatic system, with a deep heritage, that is great fun to practice! A lot of modern Karate is limited to long range kicking and punching. The older types of Karate – the Karate of the kata – is much more holistic and effective when it comes to civilian self-protection. If Karate-ka want to practice that kind of Karate, then kata bunkai is something they need to care deeply about."

J: Spot on. And if people just did a tiny bit of historical research, they would quickly realize this!

IA: "Correct. In 1908, Anko Itosu – one of Funakoshi's main teachers, and the creator of the Pinan / Heian kata series – wrote down his ten precepts. The second line of the first precept is what I regard as the most important sentence in the history of Karate: "[Karate] is not intended to be used against a single opponent but instead as a way of avoiding injury by using the hands and feet should one by any chance be confronted by villains or ruffians." What this tells us is that Karate of his time – the Karate of kata – was not intended for a consensual fight or duel against a single opponent. That is, however, how most Karate is practiced today. Instead, Itosu tells us that the Karate of his time was for avoiding injury if one was confronted by villains and ruffians. In plain English, Karate is not for consensual duels, but for real world self-protection against the criminal element.

(Jesse's note: Read all 10 lessons of grandmaster Itosu – Karate's most valuable historical essay [right here](#).)

Choki Motobu, another famous pioneer, is also said to have expressed this view. Shoshin Nagamine, a student of Motobu, in his book *Tales of Okinawa's Great Masters* tells us that his teacher said: "The techniques of the kata were never developed to be used against a professional fighter in an arena or on a battlefield. They were, however, most effective against someone who had no idea of the strategy being used to counter their aggressive behaviour." Much of what is referred to as "bunkai" today is highly choreographed Karate-ka vs. Karate-ka displays; such as one would see in team competitions. What I mean by "bunkai" is the no-nonsense methodology of the past masters that the kata were created to record. Bunkai, as I see it, is not something we do with a partner (or partners), but something we do to an enemy in the context of civilian self-protection. As I say, this is not for all

Karate-ka. But for the Karate-ka who believe that Karate should work in self-protection situations, the study of kata bunkai is extremely valuable. The Karate-ka who wants to understand kata also needs to study bunkai, so they know why the kata is the way it is."

J: To study this, it's almost mandatory to look outside of 'The Box of Karate'. Like the saying goes: "You cannot see your own mountain fully unless you climb the mountain next to it." So, what are your thoughts on mixing modern martial sports with traditional Karate? I mean, our bunkai are clearly not what many people would call "traditional" Karate (i.e. stepping zenkutsu dachi lunge punches!) anyway, right?

IA: "A lot depends upon one's definition of "traditional". The irony is, I feel I'm extremely traditional in my approach to Karate and bunkai! Much of what passes for bunkai today is not traditional. It's predominantly from the 1940s onward and has been hugely influenced by the modern sport version of Karate. I would say that my take on bunkai is very traditional, and what is frequently called "traditional" is in fact a modern creation. I'll give a few examples to explain where I'm coming from."

J: Go ahead.

IA: "First of all: Most bunkai that people call "traditional" has a hero standing in the middle while the bad guys attack from prescribed angles. But that's not traditional at all! Kenwa Mabuni wrote the following in the 1930s: "The meaning of the directions in kata is not well understood, and frequently mistakes are made in the interpretation of kata movements." In extreme cases, it is sometimes heard that "this kata moves in 8 directions so it is designed for fighting 8 opponents" or some such nonsense." So, what is called "traditional" today was called "nonsense" by one of modern Karate's pioneers! Mabuni goes on to say that the angle does not represent the angle of attack, but the angle we shift to in relation to the enemy. I agree! My take on things is therefore fully in accord with what Mabuni said. Much of "modern traditional Karate", however, is not."

J: Right – bunkai should be simple!

IA: "As another example, my take on bunkai contains lots of close-range methods; including throwing and locking. Some may see this as being untraditional or modern revisionism; but they would be wrong. Again, Mabuni wrote the following in 1938: "The Karate that has been introduced to Tokyo is actually just a part of the whole. The fact that those who have learnt Karate there feel it only consists of kicks & punches, and that throws & locks are only to be found in Judo or Ju-jitsu, can only be put down to a lack of understanding [...] Those who are thinking of the future of Karate should have an open mind and strive to study the complete art." I therefore feel I'm being traditional, and it is those who omit close-range practice who are not being traditional. Mabuni was not alone in this either of course. In Karate-Do Kyohan (1938), Gichin Funakoshi, founder of Shotokan, wrote: "In Karate, hitting, thrusting, and kicking are not the only methods; throwing techniques and pressure against joints are included [...] all these techniques should be studied referring to basic kata". Funakoshi shows a number of throws in his books and makes reference to where these can be found in the kata on occasion. For example, when explaining his Spinning Top throw, he states that the gedan-barai (low block) found in the kata Tekki-Shodan is an arm-lock. There is even a picture of Funakoshi performing said lock on Ohtsuka (founder of Wado-Ryu Karate) in the original edition of the book. So, using the method to block a kick, aside from being impractical, is also not traditional!

(Related reading: [The 9 Lost Throws of Funakoshi Gichin: Karate's Forgotten Takedown Techniques](#))

More recently we have the likes of Shigeru Egami (a student of Funakoshi) writing: "There are also throwing techniques in Karate [...] Throwing techniques were practiced in my day, and I recommend that you reconsider them".

Most modern kumite revolves around the methods of modern competition. But people see my students sparring in a way which involves striking, gripping, locks, chokes, strangles, groundwork, multiple enemies etc. and think it's not in keeping with traditional practice."

J: Same here! If a sensei truly claims to teach practical Karate, I believe his kumite classes should look like an "intelligent brawl", rather than modern ("traditional") sport kumite – which sometimes tends to resemble a game of tag more than actual combat.

IA: "Actually, we even have historical photos of Mabuni posing in full-contact protective equipment (see illustration). Also, in Karate-Do: My Way of Life, Funakoshi talks about fending off multiple attackers in live drills and states: "I can think of no better way than this to learn to defend against multiple opponents". He also discusses grappling to unconsciousness or submission in street-fighting bouts of his youth, and remarks that such bouts offer "a unique opportunity for training". I would therefore suggest that the way we practice has more historical grounding than modern kumite does."

J: Amen to that. Got more?

IA: "Well, more recently we have Henri Plee – who was the first European Black Belt in Karate – writing as recently as 1967 that: "One must not lose sight of the fact that Karate is "all-in" fighting. Everything is allowed [...] This is why Karate is based on blows delivered with the hand, the foot, the head or the knee. Equally permissible are strangulations, throwing techniques and locks." I could go on, and may already have laboured the point. The bottom-line is that the way we approach Karate – and the way those like us do – is very traditional. I should probably also make clear here that I am not one of these people who looks at competitive Karate with disdain. I like most forms of martial sport. There is so much good stuff under the umbrella of Karate and there is more than enough room for it all. The problem is when people divorce method from context, and present methods designed for one environment as the solution to another environment. There is no reason at all why people could not compete and practice the self-protection angle too. Just don't get them mixed up or think they are the same thing."



Classic picture of Mabuni Kenwa (seated), the founder of Shito-ryu Karate, experimenting with full-contact sparring gear (bogu) during the golden age of Karate. [Read more](#) (Credit: Jesse Enkamp)

J: That's why I make SUCH a big deal of adopting the [Karate Nerd™](#) mindset [end of part 1]. [Beginning of part 2] Now, consider this: You and me love the challenge of figuring out bunkai. We love solving mysteries. But NOT everyone does! So... wouldn't it be easier for people to go "truck this!" and start MMA instead? Or [Krav Maga](#)? I mean, if people want effective and deadly techniques, why should they "waste" time trying to make sense of "ancient artefacts" like kata?

IA: "You're right that I love analyzing and researching kata! It's great fun... so that can definitely be one reason to do it! But you are also right – that it's not everyone's cup of tea. In my case, my research into kata convinced me that kata are highly pragmatic and hence to be valued. That is why I value kata so much and why it is so central to what I do. If I did not believe it to be practical I would have dropped it in a heartbeat."



Sensei Iain's classic "shuto-uke" drill (Credit: Jesse Enkamp)

J: So, more precisely, what kept you on the kata/bunkai path?

IA: "What I found was that the kata recorded, in a logical and structured way, everything that was needed for the close, chaotic and extremely violent world of civilian self-protection. This is what I teach to my students. If they come to me to learn practical material, kata is what I'm going to teach them. That being said though, it would be wrong of me to tell anyone to "work the bunkai out for yourself!" What is the point of going to an instructor to be told, "I don't know, you tell me"? My students don't have to work out what the kata means, because I tell them unequivocally what it means – to me. They will also be taught how to "read" kata so they can reevaluate for themselves, and they also know that other people have other views on what specific motions represent."

J: Still, some instructors openly teach kata without knowing the meaning of the moves – because frankly, it doesn't matter to them. I feel bad for the students.

IA: "Me too! If I were to tell people to figure it all out for themselves, there would be no point training with me – and they'd be right to go find someone who will actually teach them. It's not up to the student to work it out; it's up to the teacher to teach. If teachers do what they are supposed to, the students will get what they need. As regards existing Karate-ka who want to make bunkai part of what they do, but don't want to start from the beginning, the good news is you don't have to! There are hundreds and hundreds of Karate-ka out there who are more than happy to share information. You and me have our websites, and many others have theirs too. There are books, DVDs, podcasts, articles, courses, study groups, online forums etc. There's a huge community of likeminded Karate-ka out there all helping each other to practice their own Karate in a more holistic and functional way. Karate-ka looking to adopt a more pragmatic approach are therefore not alone; there is a growing army of pragmatic Karate-ka who are only too happy to have people join us. The more people there are looking at Karate in this way, and sharing their findings, the better it is for all Karate."

J: Indeed! So, let's get pragmatic then: What are the most common mistakes, or assumptions, you've encountered during your years of teaching bunkai?

IA: "The main one must be a failing to understand the problem that kata is the solution to. Kata is all about the type of violence associated with civilian conflict. It has nothing to do with defending yourself against formal Karate techniques from a distance. Because people don't get this, they are trying to bash the square peg of kata into the round hole of "Karate vs. Karate" and it does not fit. To make it "work" they have to resort to pretty outlandish explanations such as simultaneous blocks, very unusual "guards"..."

J: ...they have to change the kata, or add "secret techniques".

IA: "Exactly. But if people genuinely understand the nature of civilian conflict, they can see why the nature of kata is the way it is. It all makes sense. Another very common error, which is related to the one above, is that bunkai represents choreographed battle against multiple opponents. As I alluded to earlier, if a person's interpretation of kata demands a specific attack from the enemy, at a specific time, from a specific direction – it should be thrown out. Good bunkai does not require the enemy's consent or cooperation. I sum that up in my classes and seminars by saying that, "Bunkai is not something you do with a partner; it is something you do to your enemies."

(Related reading: [7 Reasons Why Your Bunkai \(Probably\) Sucks](#) & [5 \(More\) Reasons Why Your Bunkai \(Still\) \(Probably\) Sucks](#))

There are loads more, but all misconceptions stem from the fact that people fail to grasp that kata is a record of a solution to civilian conflict, and then also failing to appreciate exactly what civilian conflict actually looks like and what the goal is. Too many people think "fighting" and "physical self-protection" are the same thing. They are not. They are very different beasts and hence the nature of the solution will always elude them if they fail to understand the problem."

J: And unless people are on this same level of understanding about Karate, it's hard to even discuss kata! Here's another dilemma: [In ye olde days](#), people learned "bunkai" first, and then proceeded to practice the solo pattern (kata) by themselves, just as a memory aid. Today, it's the complete opposite: We learn the kata first, and then grope in the dark for an understanding of the moves (bunkai). How can we reverse this process? Should we even?

IA: "It goes back to what I said earlier. Instructors – who wish to teach Karate as an effective physical response to the problem of civilian violence – should always teach the meaning of kata. Not just give it lip service, or give the odd example, but to fully integrate bunkai in to their practice, drills, kumite, etc. Teaching the kata and then telling the student to work it out for themselves is not acceptable in my view. Teachers should teach. As more and more instructors study bunkai, and hence are then able to teach it to their students, the process will revert back to what it originally was with an inseparable link between kata and bunkai.

Sensei Iain teaching a sweet bunkai from kata Jion: <https://youtu.be/iZxgRJyXqf4>.

As an example, the first kata my students learn is Pinan Shodan. They will learn the first seven motions of that kata, and the drill that then allows them to practice the applications of those movements, in the same session. Part of my 8th kyu grading requirement is to learn the first half of the kata and all four application drills that go with it."

J: Great approach. However, many modern kata were created/changed with the goal of calisthenics or sport in mind, rather than raw self-defense. This led me to personally seek out more old-school kata in Okinawa, where I knew there were awesome bunkai. But many people don't have this opportunity; they have to rely solely on kata they are taught by their sensei, regardless of why those kata exist in the first place. So, in your opinion, should we still figure out bunkai to our modern "watered-down" kata (if they

even HAVE any bunkai) – or is that a waste of time? Do we, perhaps, need to modify some kata in order to make sense of the bunkai?

IA: “Good question! There are many ways to approach this. Personally, I think most of the modern kata we have are fine and the bunkai remains present. Kata has certainly undergone modifications to comply with non-combative considerations such as athleticism, “style purity”, aesthetics etc. over the years, but as long as we are aware of these modifications we can easily see past them. As an example, in modern Shotokan we may have kicks performed head-height because they look cool and present a greater physical challenge. But in real situations we don’t want to kick above mid-thigh (if we kick at all), and the older versions of the kata reflect this. However, so long as the Shotokan practitioner knows of the alterations to their kata, they can gain the physical benefits and enjoyment of practicing high kicks in their solo kata practice, whilst understanding that the kick should be low in application, and will be low when they practice the bunkai with a partner. The athleticism developed from high kicking could also help develop the physical attributes needed for brutal low kicks too! The problem only occurs if the Karate-ka mistakenly believes their kata is telling them they should kick head height in application. An analogy I use to further explain this is that of writing out a poem: Two people are asked to write down the same poem. One writes it down with a green crayon on a crumpled brown paper bag. The other types it onto a computer and prints it out, in a beautiful font, on crisp, clean white paper. From a distance they look entirely different... but on closer examination we see the information contained is identical. That tends to be how I see the various styles of kata.”

J: *Great analogy! I often use the analogy of a [Karate river](#) or [cloud](#).*

IA: “Actually, I don’t even believe we have Shotokan kata, Wado-Ryu kata, Goju-Ryu kata and so on. What we have is kata as practiced in Shotokan, kata as practiced in Wado-Ryu, kata as practiced in Goju-Ryu etc. It all comes from a common source and records common information, just not in a common way. If we understand the nuances of the style, then we can access the information just fine without the need to amend kata or change style. There are some exceptions to this of course. I’m of the view that the youngest traditional kata we have are the Pinan / Heian series. I believe those kata represent an independent, holistic, physical self- protection system. In Karate-Do Kyohan Funakoshi wrote: “Having mastered these five forms, one can be confident that he is able to defend himself competently in most situations. The meaning of the name is to be taken in this context”. Interestingly, it is this paragraph which leads most people to incorrectly translate “Heian” or “Pinan” as “Peaceful Mind”. A Japanese reading of the characters will be “Peace and Tranquillity” and in order to tie the name in with the ability to defend oneself, people say the kata name translates as “Peaceful Mind”; despite the fact there is no character for “mind”. If you read the same characters from the perspective of a Chinese reader though (specifically Mandarin), they have a different connotation. They translate it as “safe from harm” or “free from danger”. These kata were made by master Itosu who – like everyone else of his time – considered Karate to be a system with strong Chinese roots. It therefore makes sense he would give his creations a name with Chinese roots, just like most of the other kata have. Anyhow, the point is this: Basic katas, like Pinan / Heian, were intended to be a stand-alone self-protection system and that is reflected in the name they were given. My own analysis of those kata certainly bears that out to my satisfaction. Many kata that came into being after the Pinan kata were not intended to have bunkai though. The Taikyoku kata are a good example of this. Whilst the individual motions that make up those kata have applications – because they originate from older kata – the kata themselves are not intended to present a structured whole, but a means of practising “solo kata” in the simplest way possible. So, I think it would be a mistake to look for meaningful bunkai in kata younger than the Heian / Pinan series. It should also go without saying that kata that involve back flips, dropping into splits, or are perfectly in time with the Rocky theme tune, are also not productive places to look for bunkai!”

J: *Hah! So, to sum it up...*

IA: "All modern-day versions of older kata should be just fine, so long as their more recent non-combative modifications are understood. The same information is there and it is the information within the kata that we utilize, not the kata themselves. If you think sensei Iain looks like a total badass... well, it's because he is. I use the analogy of a computer disk to explain that: Let's say I have bought a computer disk with Photoshop on it. I don't use the actual CD to modify photos; I use the information on the CD. It needs to be uploaded on to the PC so I can use it. Likewise, I don't use the kata to fight. The kata is simply the medium for recording that information so it can be passed along to others. To make use of that information I need to "upload" it into my body so it forms "combative habits" that can be utilized in the free-flowing world of actual conflict. So, all kata, regardless of its external form, are useless unless we internalise the information they contain. Solo kata practice is a part of this, but that too is useless without the drilling of the bunkai, the internalising of the underlying principles so that action can be varied and hence be ever appropriate to specific circumstance, and practicing the methodology in live free-flowing practice. The solo form – whatever its external nature – is only one part of a much larger process."

J: And once that process starts being understood, you will inevitably get a few "aha" moments along the way. On that note, please share some profound "aha" moments you've personally had, with regards to kata and their practical applications. What quantum leaps have you experienced during your years of teaching bunkai?

IA: "Man, I love it when that happens! I feel it is like a "revelation" from a long dead master. That sounds a little spooky – I don't mean a connection in a supernatural "back from the dead" sense, I simply mean that through studying their work we can have a connection with them."

J: Don't worry, I don't believe in zombies anyway!

IA: "Good! So, if I create a song to express a particular emotional state, and I do a good job of it, then someone listening to that song could be put in the same emotional state. When I'm moving in the way the past masters moved (practicing kata), and I'm trying to see those movements from their perspective, I can be guided to think what they thought. They put their thoughts into the kata, so I should be able to get their thoughts out of the kata. Sometimes that process is through long study with many dead ends and falsified thoughts; other times it is in a flash of inspiration – the "aha" moment! Both ways are valuable, but the sudden insights are the most fun! I love that feeling of having to try something out there and then, and realising that something very cool has just been dropped into my lap. The "aha moments" – while very rewarding and exciting – are generally not the ones that have shaped my thinking around kata and application the most though. It's the research and testing that has been the most profound in the long run. Bringing it all together is a long and ongoing process. So, the words "profound" and "aha" tend not to go hand in hand for me personally! One fun occurrence that sticks with me though, comes from around fifteen or so years ago when my training partner and I were engaged in a live grappling drill: The objective of the drill was simply to put your partner on the floor while you were upright. No striking was permitted so we could isolate throwing skills and practice keeping on our feet. I dropped down to scoop up my partner's leg, messed it up, but I somehow managed to throw him anyway. I had no real idea of what I'd done. My partner leapt up shouting "You just Kushanku-ed me!" I had no idea what he was getting at, so he explained the motion I had just thrown him with was found in Kushanku (Kanku Dai) kata. He showed me and he was right! We then spent the rest of the session analyzing that movement, consistently finding that the closer we got to the way the kata wanted the motion done, the better it worked.

(Want more "aha" moments? Here's some ideas: [58 Bunkai to Kakete](#) – [42 Bunkai to "Monk's Salutation"](#) – [11 Useful Bunkai For The Kusanku Ninja Move](#) – [11 Practical Bunkai For Karate's Jump Kick \(Tobi-Geri\)](#) – [72 Bunkai to Juji-Uke](#))

The super cool thing was that the only kata we had practiced that night was Kushanku. I guess it was “fresh in my body” (or maybe I just lucked out) and “fresh in his mind” and it was great to have a shared “aha moment” like that. Although it happened fifteen years ago we still light-heartedly argue about who came up with that application! He claims he recognized it. I claim I did it first. It’s probably nothing that will ever be resolved.”

J: Love it! So, let’s wrap this up: What place do you think bunkai will have in the future? With an increasing global demand for sport Karate, athleticism and showmanship, along with economical forces supporting that specific development, how do you see bunkai and the more practically oriented Karate training methods playing out in the future?

IA: “It may be the circles I move in, but I don’t see an increasing demand for sport Karate, athleticism and showmanship! Just the opposite, in fact. I see a huge move back toward an older approach to Karate which, perhaps paradoxically, has greater relevance to the modern world. Twenty years ago, you could tell someone that a gyaku-zuki was the most deadly technique there was and they would buy it. In the “information age” people can quickly see past that. People coming to the martial arts are more aware than they have ever been (it could still be better though) and they know what they want.



Sensei Iain considers ne-waza (ground techniques) an integral part of Karate. But you [already know that](#). (Credit: Jesse Enkamp)

Only a tiny minority get into Karate for the sport; and fewer still with an eye on competing at an elite level. I have never bought the “shop window to the world” argument that states sport Karate is what brings people into the dojo. That’s never been my experience. In fact, in all my years of training and teaching I’ve never yet met a single person who decided to take up Karate after seeing a competition. That’s probably because it’s only Karate-ka and their families who watch competitions! What I see is masses of people getting on board with what Mabuni said around eighty years ago; “Those who are thinking of the future of Karate should have an open mind and strive to study the complete art.” That’s what I see; people want a Karate that is a complete and holistic system; just like the Karate of the past.”

J: But are folks really SEEING that future?

IA: “I obviously may have a warped view of things as, by definition, all my time is spent with Karate-ka who are pragmatically oriented! So, I accept I could be wrong, but what I do know is that I am kept very busy helping others to adopt a more pragmatic approach. I’ve been invited to teach all over the UK, Germany, Denmark, USA, Canada, Australia, Norway, Ireland, Belgium, Sweden etc. and as we do this interview I am fully booked for seminars all of this year and almost all of next year! Last year I was even invited by Chuck Norris’s group to run sessions in Las Vegas for their instructors and black

belts so they could take parts of what I do and make it their own. From personal experience, I see a huge desire for a more realistic approach to Karate.”

J: I sense a Chuck Norris joke in there somewhere... but I'll let it go for now. Indeed, there is a huge shift going on in the world right now, not only in Karate – people are gradually moving away from the industrial mindset; becoming self-employed, learning stuff (like nutrition and sport science), taking charge of their own development and empowering themselves to impressive degrees – all through the leverage of online connections – in ways we could never have imagined twenty years ago. Do you see this same shift going on in Karate?

IA: “Yes! I’ve been lucky enough to play a small part in what I feel is going to be another seismic shift in the way Karate is practiced. See, around one-hundred years ago, Karate shifted away from being a pragmatic system in order to popularize itself and fit in with the prevailing cultural trends. But today, I feel it is shifting back the other way for the same reasons. I’m pretty confident that in the next ten to twenty years it will be the more traditional, pragmatic version of Karate that will be the most widely practiced. All that said, as I said at the start of this interview, there are many types of Karate, and people need to find the one that best addresses their needs. Ultimately it does not matter what the masses are doing, as long as the individual is getting what they need out of their Karate. Whatever way the prevailing wind ultimately blows; all kinds of Karate will always have their passionate supporters and “Karate Nerds” like us. Which is just how it should be.”

J: And with those words we end this interview. Thanks a lot for sharing your thoughts, insights and experience with my readers Iain sensei. Good luck with rockin’ the bunkai world – keep keepin’ it real!

IA: “Thanks for having me Jesse-san! I had a blast!”

2.2 [Iain Abernethy talking with Jesse Enkamp on Feb 17, 2018](#)⁷

2.2.1 Intro (Iain Abernethy)

Iain Abernethy (IA): Hello everybody! I’m Iain Abernethy, and welcome to our latest iainabernethy.com podcast. In this podcast we’re talking to Jesse Enkamp of KARATEbyJesse.



Jesse Enkamp as he displays himself on his website www.Karatebyjesse.com

⁷ Transcribed by Peter Kuhn. Authorized by Iain Abernethy. Special thanks to Amy Hotchkiss for proofreading.

Jesse is truly one of those people who needs no introduction but as it's a tradition with these things I shall introduce him anyway. Jesse, as you know, very prolific on social media, has a great website, has a real high energy and enthusiasm about him, I think he does a great service to the Karate community, he's one of the few people who provides content right across the borders well, it doesn't matter what elements of Karate you're interested in, Jesse has something for you, you know, whether you're a sport practitioner or a traditionalist or you like the culture a bit or the bunkai a bit, Jesse is one of the guys that truly seems to be into all of the various strands that Karate has. So, we'll be chatting online and we decided that it would be nice to kind of get Jesse onto the podcast. I mean, if I've wouldn't have known him for a very long time. We were chatting online quite regularly but this is the first time we'd actually have a talked talk, if you know what I mean. So, it's kind of nice to have it recorded, and I sat with Jesse, "Now what would you like to talk about?", because he's one of these guys who covers all the various strands, and he said "Anythin'! ... Anything Karate!" So, it was obviously a wide-ranging conversation, but I think you'll enjoy the content that we've got. Again, as you'll see, he's a great speaker, very, very eloquent, has lots of insightful things to say, and I'm sure you'll enjoy listening to Jesse's insights in all thing's Karate. (...) So, I think that's all of this introduction. Let's now talk to Jesse of KARATEbyJesse.

2.2.2 Interview

IA: Okay, so here I am with Jesse Enkamp of KARATEbyJesse. So, it's great to have you on, Jesse, I'm really pleased you could join us for the podcast.

Jesse Enkamp (JE): Thank you very much, sensei Iain, it is my absolute pleasure to be here. I'm so happy that we finally get to speak after so many years of chatting online. It is just crazy that we've never actually spoke in real life, so I'm super happy to be here and share a little bit of my journey with your audience.

IA: That's really kind of a, that's true, that's a little bit of a martial history this, you know, and the fact we're recording it, the first ever real conversation we ever had.

JE: Yes, it is. For sure.

IA: That's pretty cool, so, obviously the vast majority of the people who listen to this are very familiar with your work, you're very prolific, you got a great YouTube channel, great website, lots of good content you put out. Maybe could you start with just telling people about how you got involved in the martial arts, what you've trained in your kind of super hero origin story if you like.

JE: Yes, my pleasure absolutely. So, the way I started practicing Karate was pretty much because my parents practiced, and so that's I got my start. Me and my brother would spend our days in my family's dojo kicking each other butts and watching the different classes that were going on, because it was like a martial arts centre. So, it was not just Karate but it was many different martial arts like Muay Thai and Brazilian Jiu Jitsu and you name it. And so, from my very early age I was exposed to a wide variety of martial arts. But the one that I started practicing myself was Karate, because that's what my parents did originally. And that is why they started the dojo. But they basically had to have other people teach other martial arts to make the money go 'round so to speak. So, which is why I started with Karate and then I just kept it up because naturally if your parents tell you to do something you want to do it, right?



Jesse Enkamp and his brother learning from their mother (Credit: Jesse Enkamp)

Or you have to do it. But then of course I grew out of that and became sort of my own thing and not just something I did because my family did. And then so me and my brother would practice but then he went off to the more modern combat sports-based martial arts like Muay Thai, Kick Boxing, and now he's a UFC fighter. But I tried to stick to the roots and stay on the traditional path even though I always strive to progress and develop myself in many different areas, right? But I always want to stick to what I know best which is this traditional Karate—but in the modern sense of the word.

IA: Yes, you know I would agree with that. I'm quite the same in terms of exposure on a variety of systems. I've enjoyed them, I've found them useful, but there's something about the Karate that really captures my attention and I can't quite put my finger on what it is. I know I like feeling part of a tradition and a law, like something we... Have you ever been able to identify what it is about Karate that held your attention so much?

JE: Yes, and this is exactly why I call myself a Karate Nerd™. Because it is not just one aspect. It is all of these different, wide varieties of things that you can do and still call it Karate, which, to me, it makes it so fascinating. Now, which truly makes it an art because you can study the history, the language, the culture, the terminology, sport science—everything from one end to the other, and you can still improve your Karate but in so many different ways. So, it is an endless possibility of ways to improve yourself if you have this open-minded 360-degree view. And for the practice too you can do kata, kihon, kumite, kobudo, bunkai, self-defence, ground work, whatever. It's like an endless possibility. It's like a "Smörgåsbord" like we say here in Sweden, right? You can just pick and choose and it's all Karate. And which is also one of the reasons I don't like to limit myself to one certain aspect or style or way of doing things. To me it's why it makes it so fun and fascinating, and a part of the tradition is to enjoy the benefit of collective knowledge of generations, of people that have come before you, and you just keep on building this tree of knowledge, right, which makes it so cool to me at least.

IA: Well said, yes, I agree with that. So, what is for myself I know I have a fairly short extension span. So, this is why Karate really works for me. Because if you say now one day I want to train the one element, the next day I want to train another element, but overall it all progresses together, so, yes, I can fully relate to what you're saying. So, what are things, I certainly know this from your work, you

mentioned about this idea like a tree, you know, you draw upon your roots, you're happy for the tree to continue growing, you know, we not try to preserve it as it is. We see that Karate can evolve, it can develop. I personally think that there's more openness to that idea now, whereas if you go back maybe ten, fifteen years, twenty years, there was this idea no, no, the traditional styles are fixed and can't alter, you know, they're perfect as they are and can never change. So, I just want to know have you kind of seen that trend, is that something you've observed that people are getting more open or is that just something I'm seeing?

JE: No, absolutely. And I strongly believe it is... the reason for that is the internet, right? Technology. We can expose our practice instead of practicing for exposure. This means that we have this possibility of just seeing so many different ways of doing the same thing, which provides us with something we didn't have before and that is perspective. So, I do like to Karate as this huge mountain, right, and there are many different paths or ways of getting to the top. But ultimately like Bruce Lee said there's only one moon to be seen when you reach the summit, right? And so, I believe that be seen this Karate as this mountain sometimes you have to climb the mountain next to yours to see you own mountain better. And with the internet and with technology and social media we have this ability without even leaving our homes.

IA: *Yes, I agree. I can't think there's been a better time to learn the martial arts, because, again, not a long ago you had books you can maybe pick up, magazines if you were lucky and then your instructor and that was it. They were your only sources of information. But now you type the name of any given kata into Google and you can spend hours exploring on their variations and it's interpretations and that's bound to be one of the positives of the modern age. But do you see...*

JE: But also, this is interesting. This is also one thing that we have to think about. We have what's known as the "curse of knowledge". Because now we have the opposite problem. We don't have too little information—we have too much. There is so much noise out there, that it's hard to find the signal in the noise. That is why I think people like you do such valuable work helping people find these hidden diamonds, right, in the dirt. So, we know what to believe.

IA: *Well, I'm not certain if that's my hope. Anything I come across that I'd like and things of value then I do my best to share. Opposite that has been kind of you to do that with me as well and I think that's as you say that we can boost each other's signal a little bit. That's how you can get it. But again, that is a problem. I think, again, if we think about the trends that we see, critical thinking I think is needed more than ever when we look at the internet because there is so much out there. And if you look at the first video you come across and go: 'oh okay, that's the definitive answer you have a problem. What we need is people who think critically about everything they hear and see what makes more sense to them.*

JE: Absolutely, and I believe one of the best ways to know who to listen to is to look at the track record. Like how long have these people been saying these things or did they just come up with this yesterday.

IA: *Yes, I think that's definitely true. If we get used to the idea, you know, everything that everybody says, you know, I want to see if it holds true for me. I mean because occasionally you may get the guy, as you said, you know, didn't have a presence yesterday it says something today and it might be bang on the money. But I think all about critical... people have got a good track record of coming up with consistent information, that's an indicator that maybe what they're saying this point is consistent as well. But yes, a wonderful thing the internet, can't have been a better time to learn martial arts if we kind of, as you say, apply that critical thinking and zero in on the good material.*

JE: Absolutely.

IA: *So, what are the trends that you see at the moment? This is where I think that's one of the things as you just said that makes you unique really. You do have a following across the piece. I think all Karateka of all stripes see value in what you do and that's a pretty remarkable achievement. Because you know you got some guys that are very sport focused or self-defence focused or they're focused on the art whereas your passion for all of it definitely shows through and then, so I think you're probably in a*

unique position to see the big picture really. So, what kind of—as Karate is—what kind of positive or negative trends are you seeing on your travels or when you communicate with people?

JE: Yes, well, that's a big question. You know there is the macro and then there is the micro and I believe that many people like to divide Karate—like you said—into the sport side and then into the traditional side. And for many years people thought that these were different things. But I believe that a lot of more people are starting to bridge the gap, like you say. And for someone like me who's been in the national team for many years in two different countries and then also been travelling and even living in Okinawa which is the birthplace of Karate it is so interesting to see this trend that it is not about old and new. I think it is about good and bad. When if you understand the human body and its biomechanics then you can apply that to any type of Karate, because if we go back to this idea of Karate being a mountain, right, the higher you climb on the mountain the closer all of these paths get to each other and ultimately, it's all the same at the highest level. But if you're at the bottom of the mountain then all of the different paths to the top they look like they're all very far away from each other. So, at just starting out everything looks very different, but the more you practice the more you see the more you expose yourself the more you start realizing that we are just doing the same thing but in our own ways, right? And so, there are many ways, for example to get to the number ten you can take five plus five, you can take seven plus three, you can take nine plus one—different ways of getting to the number ten, but is one more right than the other? I don't think so. And this is something that I believe more and more people are starting to discover.

IA: *Yes, I would agree with that, because I think all these elements can be trained and they can all be trained effectively. No need to say we've got to crossover. It's just always to be mindful of what's the ultimate objective of what am I wishing to train for. I don't think, again, I don't think it's healthy to cut yourself off from any element of it, which, again, I'm starting to see less of that. For me in the circles that I came from like the BCA and heavy self-defence-focused background if you like, what I did see—not from the leaders of that again if you think of Geoff Thompson and your Peter Consterdine they would never like this, but from people that came after that have this idea that or anything that would work in the street is fantastic and anything that like that we do for the art of it, of the history of it, or the sport of it, or the I'll fight another martial art or just for the fun of it would instantly get rejected. And I think you're a poorer martial artist, you have a poorer Karate experience as a result of that you see. I'm pleased that you're seeing that seems to be winning a little bit, because I see that too so it's always nice to have that confirmed. And is there anything else you're noticing or would that be the key thing really?*

JE: No, another trend that I see is that people more interested in going back to the roots in understanding why we're practicing what we're practicing, right? They want to not just do that punches and kicks but they want to know the reason for those exact punches and kicks then and there. And of course, we're all connected by our roots and so what I mean by roots is this self-defence aspect especially the type of Karate we practice in Okinawa which is one of the reasons that I love going back there all the time. And I believe a key ingredient in this trend is MMA, because suddenly people wanted to know if Karate would work in the cage, right? Because they saw that the sports-based version of Karate was not really effective maybe in a fight against a trained opponent who could do takedowns and chokes and all of these things that sports Karate doesn't really include because is it too dangerous, right? And so, this led a lot of eyes back to Okinawa. People thought of looking at the original way Karate was practiced even though it is not rule-bound like MMA is. It still has a lot of value for people who want to make their Karate more all-round with the kata bunkai especially like we have these throws and chokes and takedowns and joint locks right there in the kata and they are here all along—we just didn't know it until MMA showed it. You know which is why I think this is also a trend that is now coming back that people want to go full circle, they want to go back to the roots, to Okinawa, to kata bunkai.

IA: Yes, I think that's definitely true and obviously in the circles I'm moving that's definitely the case. And I agree, I think we do owe MMA a debt of gratitude for that, because you know it's empirical and it shows the value of an holistic approach and then the message, is a lot easier to get that message out but maybe there's more to this Karate than we would first think, at least some would first think as well. So, yes, I totally agree with that one. One thing I know that we do have in common, we said about this idea of you know many paths of the mountain and keeping this open view so, you read a superb [article](#) on your website on giving up your style and you argue that you other should do that. I wrote a piece for one of the UK magazines called "[Styles — are they killing Karate?](#)" you see, so, again this is something we have in common. So, would you mind talking about that a little bit what you see is the styles and the benefits and the pitfalls?

JE: Yes, so, I believe this goes back to the principle of "[shu ha ri](#)", the natural progression of mastering of anything, not just Karate. And this is a Japanese philosophy that I believe is very important when you want to get better at Karate, because we all need a starting place, we all need something to attach to, and in Karate that is a style. A style is a way or a method of trying to learn the fundamental principles of Karate. But the principles are the same across all styles. It's just the expression or the manifestation of them that are different. But in what end do you want to start, what priorities do you have in your style? These are the different things, right? And it is equally important, I believe, to let go of your style once you reach a certain point in your journey as a Karate practitioner, right? Because a ship is safe in the harbour but it was not meant to be there, it needs to sail, right? So, once you've started on your path—what's known as "shu", the beginning, right?—you go to "ha" and then "ri", if you want to follow this traditional idea of progression, right? So, you transcend your style and you're certainly looking outside of your own world view basically. Somebody who only does one style is like a person who is in the same city that they were born in or their own village or their own town their whole lives and never go outside. They never see anything else. So, to them that's the whole world, right? But they are missing so many cool things that might even suit them better if they'd just have that courage just to look outside of their own style, I believe.

IA: I totally agree. So, what the problems are about is I'm a martial artist first, a Karateka second and have no idea what style I am. So, I take it, you know, these days you would attach to any styles at all or do you see yourself as a Karateka now or...

JE: So, obviously I started with a style like we all did. But at that time, I didn't even know there were styles. There was just Karate, right? It was just I'm doing Karate and look at me, right? Then I start researching. I start travelling. I start talking to other people. I discovered there were several ways of doing the same thing. Of course, I'm fascinated. I've never been held back by anyone but I've always been encouraged to look outside of my own dojo, bring back knowledge and improve our own students. It's just a natural way of improving my dojo—do just travelling, gain more knowledge and, you know, it's interesting, some people think that a style is like a religion like "There is only ONE RIGHT WAY!" and that's the only way to do it and they defend their own way of doing it. But I think that it's important to look outside of that box and your own style. But still, it is important to start with a style because you need some type of starting point.

IA: Yes, that's true I think. We can't have a free for all from day one. It's like beginners coming to my dojo, you know, they'd suddenly started saying well I'd like to do this way. Well I don't care what you would like to it, you're going to do it this way. But at a certain point of course they have enough experience to making informed decisions and, you know, what always worries me, like you say about the "shu ha ri" model, I think sometimes the traditional Karate it's "shu, shu, and more shu", you know, it's like you never diverge, never transcend. So, I mean obviously you say that you've seen benefits from stepping out your own style. What would you say some of the key benefits you found from that and maybe people are missing out if they stay stuck to one particular way of doing things.

JE: Yes, well, to be honest, one of the hardest and the most common questions that I get is: "What style do you practice?" I get that all the time and I never answer it because—let me be honest here—I

don't even know what style I'm practicing. I start with one style, but that was when I was like three years old when I started practicing. After that I've been practicing with so many different cultures, experts, instructors, grandmasters, you name it from all across the world because that's all I do right: I travel, I practice, I teach, I learn. And these days I don't even know what style I practice. So, you tell me what the style is. Because, honestly, it is so hard to say and which is why I just say that I practice Karate because I don't like the idea of limiting who I can practice with when and where. I am simply too, you know, I'm too artistic to just stick to one thing. I have to explore all of the options maybe because I'm young and reckless or maybe because that's just the way I grew up. I don't know but I love the idea of being able to practice with anyone anywhere at any time and just enjoy the shared experience of improving ourselves through the path of Karate, no matter what style or what label it's on.

IA: Yes, I agree. Somebody who is middle aged and reckless. I could relate with that fully. Like you I never had that from my teachers. My instructor would get other instructors in from other styles all the time, have a look at this, what do you think of that, you know, so we were always encouraged of that open-minded view, but as I travel I find it some aren't so lucky and we do get this no, no, no, the world ends at the four walls of the dojo, don't leave because nothing good. Everyone starts learning in the only dojo in the entire world is doing right, you know.

JE: Exactly. But know I think it all comes down to the instructor having an ego problem and they are too insecure about their own teachings. Perhaps I'm just speculating here and so they don't want people to go away and perhaps find something that is better and then maybe they won't come back and I can't pay the bills and I don't have food on the table and my dojo is going to burn to the ground, right? That's what they think. But I believe if one of my students goes somewhere else and practises another style of Karate that suits them better than I hope they stay there because that's better for both of us. They get what they need and I get room for another student who might enjoy what I teach instead.

IA: Yes, you know, that's a very healthy way of looking at things, you know, I would agree.

JE: It's a win-win.

IA: That's it. None of us can be all things to all men. I have that with my own dojo. I know the kind of Karate I teach and I know the kind of people it appeals to and if it doesn't then you know we've got to find if it doesn't appeal to them then hopefully we can find somewhere that's good for them as well.

JE: Right, and you're armed for that in what you're doing. You don't have this scarcity mindset. There is enough students for everybody.

IA: Oh, yes, there's seven billion of them out there potentially.

JE: Right.

IA: Yes, that's really good. One other thing I would like to get your thoughts of. We were talking a bit about the internet and obviously that helps people I think in terms of looking at the options, it helps people seeing what's out there and looking beyond the core of style, and I'd love how prolific you are on social media, you know, with the website and your videos and everything. It's something obviously that I aspire to use as well to use that too to get the message out there, you know. So, I just wonder if you got any thoughts about how social media can help people and maybe things that people, if they have got something useful to say, some tips for them?

JE: Yes, I believe it is very important to take social media seriously. It is not just something that "THE KIDS DO", it is not hype, it is not something that's going to disappear tomorrow. It is the current state of the internet as a whole. People spend so much time on social media and there is a reason we call today's economy the attention economy because money flows where attention goes. Everybody needs to be on social media if you have something that you want people to know about. And there is this great quote that the most important thing in the world is to do the right thing but the second most important is to let everybody know that you're doing the right thing. Which is why I'm all over social media. I can't get enough from it. But I do it and I take it very seriously. It is not fun to be honest

at all times. It is like a job. It is work. And you got to put in that work ethic that you have in the dojo: one more rep, one more post on social media. And that is the quantity, right, but there's also the quality. Don't just put out anything that's on your mind, right? Think about it! Be serious! Be professional! And post what's on your mind and be authentic about it. Not just posting for the sake of it but see it as a long-term strategy and not just a random cat pic (cat picture) every other day but some type of... some idea of what you want to achieve but use social media for that because that is where the attention is these days.

IA: Yes, that's really good advice. I think I can relate to that as well because as much as I enjoy interacting with people via social media it is hard work to keep getting that content out there.

Sometimes you know I've heard it about you and me, you know, sometimes people are critical of our use of social media but as you say it's the only way you going to get that message out there.

JE: Yes, and I think people who are critical—for sure you can be critical, you can criticise and I hope that criticism is constructive, right—but there are also these people who are just trolling, who are just hating, maybe they are jealous I don't know. I would like to call them losers instead of haters that most of them are—let's be honest—a winning mindset is not going around criticising people. There are two ways of building the greatest building in town: Either you build it or tear down everyone else has built, right? Which one is the winning mindset? I don't know. I think it is the one who would focus on their own stuff and try to build the tallest building. And this is one of the big problems with social media. And unfortunately, I see a lot of great Karate experts and masters who get their hearts broken. They can't share their knowledge online even though they have a lot of great knowledge because these haters and these trolls and spammers just break them down. They can't stand the criticism. You got to have thick skin if you want to social media again? You know this! You should see the list of people I have banned and deleted from my different platforms online. That is like my favourite hobby next to Karate. If you can't handle that criticism from random douchebags from around the world than maybe you're not ready for social media. Maybe you need to deploy some more humility and just let go, ban them and move on with your day.

IA: Yes, that's it. Well, I'm always up for debate and discussion because I think that's healthy. You know, somebody goes 'You know I have an alternative view to you and I want to thrash it out I'm always onboard for that I think it's good, but when it becomes I just want to have an argument with somebody on the internet from very dogmatic entrenched positions. I'm like you: I got better things to do with my time. But I came across people with that as well—as you said—that put the head above the parapet to share some information they get this negative criticism and it can sometimes be off-putting to them but again that is exactly as you say: it's just the nature of the beast.

JE: Yes, for example, one example is this: I won't mention the name but he's a great Karate sensei, he's a world champion and he's also a doctor, a real fricking doctor in biomechanics and sport science. He decides to share a little bit of knowledge about if you should rotate on your heel or the ball of your foot when you do Karate techniques. He explains the scientific principles behind it, the biomechanics why it works and then people start criticising him because "THAT'S NOT HOW MY SENSEI DOES IT!" But dude, this guy's a doctor in biomechanics and he knows how the human body works way better than your random ass sensei does. And so, he can't take the criticism, he stopped sharing his knowledge, and I tried to get this sensei to share more stuff because I think he is so awesome but he's just like "Who are these people? How can they criticise me?" This is not how it works in academia which is what he's used to, right? And I see this across the board which is why I consider it as one of my duties to travel around, find these hidden awesome senseis and share their knowledge with the world through me. I can be the filter. It's KARATEbyJesse. That's why my website has my name because it is not "THE TRUTH OF KARATE", it is filtered through my experiences travelling around the world and meeting these different masters and sharing their info with you.

IA: Yes, you do a brilliant job on that I think. And the point that I wanted again also to pull out is, as you said, the amount of work ethic involved. So, one guy recently wrote to me that "I want to do what you

do. I think I've got some interesting things to say. I've set up this blog and for whatever reason it's not getting attraction and would you mind taking a look at it for me and see if there's anything can improve?" So, I take a look and I said "Oh, I think you were just sending me an old link. I can only see two articles and that's all I've done so far. So, come back to me in twenty years!" You know if that's still that working for you we chat about it then you know it's...

JE: Exactly. And I get, you know—I'm sure you get a lot of these too—people who start a blog or some type of podcast or whatever they start. They do one or two posts—like you say—and then they reach out and say "Hey, can I interview you or can you write a guest article for me?" I check out their stuff and—like you say—they haven't even put in two or three hours into this project and just expect it to be an overnight success. But I'm sure you know this: You need a lot of work to become an overnight success. I started blogging ten years ago. Nobody read my stuff in the beginning. But here's the secret: I didn't for anyone else. I wrote because I enjoyed writing. It was just scratching my own itch. I wanted to share and document my experiences of being in Okinawa. I just wanted to put my thoughts down on paper because that was a way for me to be creative and express what I feel and think and see, right? And I believe that all great work starts by scratching your own itch. You want to do something so just start doing it and then you start loving it and then becomes better automatically and then people find it because you have had that passion to begin. You got to fill your own cup before you start to pour it into other people's cups. And that is what keeps me motivated because—let me be honest to you—I do most what I do for ego-based reasons. I just love it too much to not do it and I'm pretty sure it's the same with you. It's great if other people love it too, but at the end of the day if you didn't like it you won't have been doing it.

IA: *Yes, that's exactly right, you know, I absolutely agree with that. I originally started writing all the books and the magazine articles and things and that was just again because you know I enjoyed the process of writing. And then that was I think my first book was seventeen years ago now, eighteen years ago and then obviously the years go by that time builds up so I think that's something that we can both agree on: If people want to get the word out there than they can't expect that to happen overnight they've got to grind away, they will get there but they've got to keep grinding away. And I see that passion as well I think that's important too.*

JE: Yes, for sure.

IA: *Because that's one thing that I do find you're quite infectious in that regard because the material is great, but it's never dry, always very energetic, it's very humorous, you display a lot of enthusiasm in what you do. So, what do you do... is it... does it come natural to you or how do you keep your motivations so high for all that you do?*

JE: I honestly believe life is too short to be boring. That's just the way it is. For example, the worst thing I know of is a boring salad. If I go to a restaurant and I order a boring salad I just want to go home and jump into bed and hide under the covers, right? I just don't like when people don't express their humanity like which is want to be like everybody else and fit in and not be the nail that sticks out, right? But I believe that's not what you are born for. You're not born to fit in but to stand out and, unfortunately, today I believe a lot of people especially the ones in Karate who follow the traditional path believe that the most important thing in tradition is to do exactly what the previous generation did, right? They want to preserve the ashes instead of keeping the flame lit. But there is this great old quote—and I'm sure you're familiar with this—that the whole idea is not to follow in the footsteps of the old masters but to seek what they sought, right? This famous Japanese poet Matsuo Bashō. And I believe this principle is what I apply in everything I do—not just Karate but outside of Karate too—because life's just too short and I don't have time for repeating the same old stuff. I want to innovate and grow and expand and break through my limits and see how far I can get in this short time span we have on this earth. Basically, that's it. I'm motivated by the fact that I will not be there one day. I will be dead one day and what difference did I make if I just tried to be like everybody else.

IA: Yes, that's a lovely way of putting it, I think it was Newton, I think Isaac Newton, who's got a skull on his desk to remind him of the same thing. Time is short. I remember reading this and thinking that was great as I'm sitting here talking to you I'm in my office there's a statue of a grim reaper.

JE: That stuff. People are afraid of this. They don't want to think about it. But for me it motivates me. You want to go and get it because I know that it's not unlimited this opportunity of being here. And so basically this is the Latin idea of "memento mori", right? Have you heard about this phrase before?

IA: That's not what I'm familiar with, no. Please go on!

JE: So, it basically means that you are a mortal. You are not immortal. And I think that it was like a... was is some Greek or Roman emperor. He had his slave following him around whispering in his ear that "You are not immortal". Just so that he could have perspective and not... so he wouldn't lose perspective basically. Not feeling that he was above the people, right, that he was one of the people and he was going to die like everybody else and he could not waste time on stupid stuff like answering to trolls and haters on social media.

IA: Yes, brilliant, yes that's exactly right: We do have a short amount of time so find something that you love to do it lots so and that definitely comes across with the way you do your..., you know, well everything. I think I'm always impressed by your words it's the one thing you have done as well but the Seishin lab of start with the gi. There the gis I view. To be honest I hate normally when I train with my friends a couple of instructors as well we normally just train in regular clothing because none of us is particularly a great fan of gis. Gis can be functional but can often be uncomfortable but you've created something there that is genuinely functional and is comfortable to wear, doesn't restrict movement. So, how did you have the idea of that? What made you to decide that you wanted to create a unique form of gi?

JE: Well I have this idea or this philosophy—let's call it this philosophy—that if I'm looking for something outside in the world and I can't find it then I try to create it on my own. So, this is the reason I started my blog. I was looking for cool Karate blogs, I couldn't find any, so I started my own. It's the same reason why I wrote my first book. And it's also the same reason I do my Karate Nerd™ experience seminars, right? If I'm searching for something and I can't find it I try to create it on my own and the exact same principle was behind the Seishin Karate uniform. So, one day I was sitting outside of my dojo with my friend Marcus, who's a student, he's a black belt at my dojo. And he has a little bit of business background and we started talking and I started complaining about my Karate uniform because I'm something of a perfectionist, right? I've never found the perfect Karate gi that fit me. I always felt like a freak: It was too big, it was too light, too skinny, too whatever, right? And so, we started talking and I said "Hm, I wonder if it is possible to make a better Karate gi". And my friend Marcus said "You know what: Let's try. I know a little bit about business". And I don't know anything so it was a perfect match so we started researching and developing and at that time crowd funding and crowd sourcing was this big thing, right? Instead of trying to do something by yourself you try to connect a lot of people from around the world to help you do this project or thing. And so, we crowd funded the whole thing and we crowd sourced it to know exactly what this perfect gi should consist of, right? It should look like a heavy-weight gi but it should feel like a light-weight gi. It should be easy to iron, it should be affordable, yadayadayada, you know, the list goes on and what people wanted to see in a perfect gi. So, we tried to put together a gi that consisted of as many of these points as possible. And the result was the Seishin gi—but of course it is very expensive to develop physical products, right? It is not like a digital product which is basically free. So, we had to crowd fund it and a few hundred people from around the world just decided to trust us to make this thing for them. They paid us upfront which meant that we could kickstart the production of the Seishin gi and now it is a world-wide phenomenon, there are multiple products and distributors all around the world, different countries, and, in fact, this is something that a lot of people don't know because it was revealed today: We just opened our first physical flagship store in Okinawa...



Jesse Enkamp teaching at one of his annual Karate Nerd Experience (KNX) camps (Credit: Jesse Enkamp)

IA: Oh, wow!

JE: ... yes, which is so cool.

IA: Yes, I see them a lot. And that are the things you do I've never seen before. Like I was teaching in Germany at the weekend just gone and we were getting changed like the high waist on the trousers. It's something that's totally unique and it was one of those things that first time I put those on and why hasn't anyone thought this before? You know this is actually comfortable to wear. And then the pocket on the inside of the gi.

JE: Right. That's where I keep my iPhone when I shoot my videos.

IA: Yes, I thought... I called it the gum shield pocket but I use it for the stop watch. That's where I have the stop watch when I'm teaching for when we're doing drills that's where it goes so... Yes, I know, really good, and one of the... You see I've heard some people trying to make a virtue out of the fact that the gis are uncomfortable. So, they go uuh it's uncomfortable, it makes the training harder for me because it's an impediment to hard training. I don't want that. It restricts my movements at the point. I want free movement so I can be as dynamic I can, move as fast as I can, expend as much energy as I can, and if this thing is sticking to me and reducing that movement it becomes an impediment to my Karate. I see no virtue in being uncomfortable when training. So, I think you've done a good job on that and I'm pleased it's going well because I see them everywhere that I happen to go.

JE: Thank you very much.

IA: Oh, no, no, welcome, it's a good bit of kit. So, what of the projects you have on the go at the minute then? So, I see you're doing a lot on YouTube, I see the blog is still going strong. Is there anything that we should know about on the horizon?

JE: You know what: I'm pretty strange. I don't plan that far ahead to be honest. I plan maybe one or two months ahead what I would like to do. I have ideas of what I would like to do or try but I don't have any concrete plans because I like to go with the flow and see what opportunities pop up. So, I try to adapt to the situation at all times but of course since Karate is in the Olympics, which is in 2020, at the moment I have to compete in a lot of specific tournaments to rank, because maybe if I'm lucky, and if I'm skilful, I might be able to compete in the Olympics for my national team, right? So, which means I

have to gather these points, these ranking points and so I'm going to be travelling a lot these upcoming months specifically for competition, not so much for seminars or other crazy projects.



Jesse Enkamp competing at the 21st World Karate Championship in Paris 2012 (Credit: Jesse Enkamp)

But then after that I will be giving a keynote in the US at the MPower Summit on the east coast about how to combine business with martial arts. And I'm really looking forward to that because I honestly have never shared a lot about how I manage to have this type of lifestyle business that me and you have, right? Being fulltime Karate instructors, doing our own thing, and I'm going to be there sharing that sharing my secrets with people because I don't do martial arts to make money, I make money to do martial arts, and I believe it's a big difference, right? And that's what I want to share how I managed to do that. And then I'm actually planning on going back to Okinawa and shooting season two of my mini web series called "[Karate Nerd™ in Okinawa](#)". So that's basically what I have planned for these upcoming months, so I'm pretty excited.

IA: Yes, they are very exciting projects, so I wish you well with the Olympic, that's really cool, I'm sure everyone listening to that is also wishing you well on that. And the business thing sounds very interesting. Would you expand that a little as well or obviously I don't want to talk about what you'll be talking about at the event but I think that is a key difference because like again you know what we were talking before you know criticism, that's what I'll sometimes get, yes but he's a full time instructor and therefore that invalidates anything of what we are saying you know because I do for a living. And it always make me laugh because it's not like I sat down one day and thought how am I going to get me some of these bunkai billions you know and then decided I was going to take up Karate to do that just like you, as you say, it was my passion, I really enjoyed it, it got to a point where it was work is getting in the way now I need to find a way to make this pay and provide for the family and provide service that I hope enough people find valuable, you know, so...

JE: Right, right.

IA: Yes, because that's an interesting one how people: As soon as money and the martial arts combine I see to me it's no virtue to be the best martial arts instructor you are if it's not serving anybody because you can't put the light s on and nobody knows where you are you know if you got three students you aren't able to spend the money on the advertising and generate that stuff so I always think it's good for Karate as a whole as well so...

JE: Yes, I think that's spot on I totally agree. And I mean if you want to make money and you start teaching the martial arts then you're probably a little bit stupid because there's a clear path to the money, it's called wall street, right? You don't want to go to martial arts to make money. If it's your passion you'll probably make money as a by-product because when you do something that you love a lot you tend to become good at it. And when you're good at something other people want to pay you to become good as well. Which is just a natural progression of doing what you love for the sake of, you know, following your passion, following your bliss, so to speak.

IA: Yes, I like that, that's Joseph Campbell's line like: Follow your bliss, yes.

JE: Exactly.

IA: I'm conscious of the time that we got here for you so is there areas you'd like to discuss or you'd like to tell people about?

JE: Wow, no, you know what, I'm pretty open to anything to... I'm just here to basically provide as much value as possible to everybody listening right now, so, there is nothing I really want to promote or talk about myself because—let me be honest—I don't really like talking about myself and I know that might sound strange to people because I do a lot of videos and I'm out there and I promote and market and do stuff but I do that because I want to share and help other people with their problems and I don't have that much to share unless anyone has anything they need help with basically so, if you there are any more questions you think your audience might benefit from then I'm here.

IA: Well absolutely, well I would have a couple of... So, what is just on now... any kind of key bits of advice you've got for people to make their training as productive as possible. Some things you've found useful or maybe you would have like to have known when you were starting out.

JE: Wow, well, this might be very specific to me, but I believe something that I would have liked to know earlier is the importance of not just tension but relaxation. And I thought it was all about tension in the beginning. I need to go harder, faster, stronger, and it came to a point where I was just being too tense all the time and I got really tired at training and I thought that was the way it was supposed to be, right, until I sort of discovered after training a lot that maybe if I put as much effort in relaxing at the right moments as I do in tensing at the right moments I could have a better balance and I can have more effortless and economic and efficient techniques. And so that is one practical piece of advice that I would like everybody to think more about: consciously relaxing, not just being relaxed whenever to feel like relaxing but strive to make an effort to be more relaxed and to be mindful of when and where you relax in your technique, in any training you do, because we hold a lot of unnecessary tension in our bodies but I believe it's not a good thing if you want to have quick, fast, snappy and powerful techniques because I see a lot of people get super tired in training and they think "SOMETHING'S WRONG WITH MY CARDIO" what in fact is being too tensed, right?

IA: Yes, that's a brilliant bit of advice. I can relate to that completely. Because I felt the more the muscles were working, the harder I was working, the better the training was, you know, that was the mindset when I was much younger. So, I would kind of say I'd hold all this excessive tension within my body. I would get told off for it you know: Relax more, relax more, but in my mind what I heard was: Don't try as hard, don't try as hard, so, I got the same thing you see, yes...

JE: Yes, so I mean the goal should not be to get tired, the goal should be to improve.

IA: Yes, absolutely, and I think as well when your movement becomes more efficient then obviously the training becomes more efficient as well, you know, you can get a lot more doing in the times. Yes, that's a brilliant piece of advice and one that I can strongly relate to. So, do you make some of supplementary

training as well in addition to Karate? What are the things that you do you, that you found that are beneficial to your Karate you know like...

JE: Yes, absolutely, this is what I think it is a great idea to combine traditional Karate with modern sports-based Karate because if there's something that Karate athletes do better than most traditionalists it is the part about strength and conditioning. Using sport science to optimise your conditioning and your power and your speed there are so many different tools and ways and training methods that the old masters had no idea about that we have access to today. So, I do a lot of strength and conditioning for this reason. Of course, the old masters did it too. We have these old "hojo undo" in Japanese, right, this strength training equipment, but there are modern updated versions of these tools, for example the kettle bell which is a great tool to use. And I like to do a lot of strength and conditioning which is my main form of supplementary training at this stage.

IA: *Yes, what is there typically involved? Is there weightlifting, plyometrics, suspension training...*

JE: Yes, exactly, what I do is another thing that is very common in sport science: It's this concept of periodization, right, so you don't always train the same way, it depends on where you are in your planning relative to a goal that you have. So, if I'm going to be competing let's say at the premier league in two months than my training would look a certain way, right? Maybe I would do more heavy resistance-based power training like deadlifts and full body compound exercises, and then as I get closer to the tournament the volume of training decreases but the intensity, but also the recovery,, which is a key ingredient, increases too, and then I will do more fast quick agility work like—you said—plyometrics using the agility ladder, different types of jumps and skips and hops and all of that explosive stuff which is common across all sports not just Karate-based. If you want to improve the human body, I mean, you don't have to be specific to Karate but of course the closer you get to a goal you should move from general training to more specific training. But just thinking about this idea of strength and conditioning from a sports science-based perspective overall is something that I believe a lot of people should take into consideration. You don't have to be a national team elite athlete, you can benefit from these ideas just by getting a personal trainer at your closest gym and learning the basics and then you can do it on your own.

IA: *Yes, that's great advice. And as you say that's one positive obviously that the combat athletes have given, because they are on cutting edge of that stuff generally, as you say. So, at the moment you say you periodized your training best to what your specific goals are. So, at the moment one of the specific goals that you mentioned you are looking for the Olympics, that's your goal as well, so I guess is that kata, kumite what are we are talking about in that regard?*

JE: Yes, so, I mean obviously when I practice Karate I do all of it: kata, kihon, kumite, kobudo—the weapons—, the bunkai, the ground work you name it, but when you compete, of course, you have to pick: either it's kata or it's kumite, right, under these certain conditions and rules. And it turns out I'm maybe not fast enough to be at an elite level of kumite but I'm powerful enough to be at a high level in kata, which is why I was selected first for the national team in Sweden where I live in kata many years ago, but since my parents are from Finland I have double citizenship, so now I'm selected for the Finnish national team instead. But it's in kata, that's correct.

IA: *Yes, so what would be any tips for students for improving their kata for breaking it down in ways which they could get into the details and help to get their kata to a higher level? Do you have any key tips you think people could find useful?*

JE: Yes, well, it's hard to say because I believe it is highly individual like I could say: "Relax more!", but maybe for one person the opposite is true. They should actually be stronger and have more tension in there moves, right? So, I try to avoid giving general pieces of advice like this, but let me share a good training method with you—that's called the "three-two-one method". So, you have a kata, any kata that you want to improve. Of course, we all know that we need to repeat it a lot. But it might be boring or difficult if we just keep doing the same kata over and over again. So, break it down first into three sections. The first part, the middle part and the last part. And then you only do each third, but three

times, gradually increasing the intensity each time. And then you do two parts of the kata, the first half and the second half. You do each part two times, gradually increasing the intensity. And, finally, you do the whole kata one time. Full speed “three-two-one method”.

IA: Yes, that’s brilliant. You know, that was the kind of thing I was always fond of: breaking it down into sections rather of doing the kata all the way through. I think if you work individual sections it’s a little bit more enjoyable, you can be a little bit more analytical on your movement and this makes it fun in your repetitions, you know, so...

JE: Yes, because you need those repetitions to make it a part of your so-called muscle memory, right? But you don’t want to repeat so it becomes boring because then your performance goes. You want to keep a high-quality level over quantity. So, by breaking it down like this you can have some more excitement in your training and focus on those individual parts and small stuff that you often miss if you just do the whole kata all the time.

IA: Yes, that’s a brilliant, brilliant piece of advice.

JE: To be honest I think it’s also very important—and this might be contrary to popular believe—that you need to understand the bunkai: the meaning behind the moves in order to make them look good as well; not just functioning but you know, the form and the function—that whole dichotomy. Because if somebody does a kata and they don’t know the purpose of the techniques then you can tell, but somebody who has an absolute understanding of how these moves can be used for self-defence will have a way different spirit even in the solo performance of the kata—as compared to somebody who just does it like a dance.

IA: I definitely agree with that. I think sometimes you can look athletic but empty, hollow, shallow, you know, whereas people who have a better idea of what they are doing it has a visceral quality to it. It can be absolutely physically scary to watch somebody who does a kata like that.

JE: Absolutely.

IA: Yes, you can see that function. That’s one of the things I always find fascinating about kata you get a real yin-yang colliding there. You’ve got this high art of beautiful movement and physical efficiency and so on the one hand it’s very beautiful and then within it are things where it’s not high art, it’s gritty, it’s dirty, it’s horrible, it’s destructive, it’s brutal, so I think that the kata, the bounce of the force between high-end art and beautiful physical movement between this destruction and this chaos and within it and I think this is one of these things that makes kata so beautiful. It’s in the same well as a thunderstorm can be beautiful or a tidal wave can be beautiful, you know, a chaotic ocean. It’s that kind of thing. It’s a force to it so...

JE: Yes, I totally agree. It’s a beautiful struggle.

IA: Yes, that’s right. So, we were coming about an hour so it’s probably time...

JE: Oh, wow!

IA: It flies, doesn’t it? But if you’re up for it we’ll definitely have to get you back on we maybe take some listeners questions next time as well...

JE: Yes!

IA: ... and I think that would be fun for them as well. Just before we’d wrap up—I just... I can remember vividly the first article of yours that I ever read... So, I just want to... Do you remember the one you did on [how Pinan Sandan was really for using in AK 47](#) (both laughing)? So, that might confuse people a bit, a friend of mine said you’ve got to read this, he sent me the link, I read it, and thought “this man’s a genius”. So, I had no idea who you were, never seen you, but the bit at the end when you’re throwing the grenades over your shoulder... I was in stitches! I thought this is so good. I get the satire in the point you try to make and the comedy and the photographs with the ninjas is brilliant. So, if anyone hasn’t seen that, that was my first Karate Nerd™ experience if you like. So if you haven’t seen that [article](#) you need to check it out, so. No brilliant—very well done. So, thank you so much for your time, Jesse, I really do appreciate . I think our listeners get a lot out of this as well. So, thank you very much.

JE: It was my absolute pleasure, sensei Iain, I'm so happy that we could finally do this and have a little chat together and I hope that the listeners really enjoyed it. (...) Take care, sensei Iain!

3 Summarising reflection (Peter Kuhn)

The topics Iain and Jesse were talking about are the meaning and scope of Karate, history and tradition, kata, bunkai, techniques, common errors, training, teachers and instructors, development of Karate, Karate on the internet and social media, current trends and future perspectives, martial arts as a business, motivation and passion, innovation, and projects. As it would definitely break the scope of this paper to discuss all of these topics extensively I shall — summarising — focus on three overarching themes: The understanding of Karate, the ongoing development of karate, and the role and work of European experts in this context.

3.1 The understanding of Karate

Both experts see — and accept without valuing — a wide range of manifestations called or calling themselves Karate. Though their approaches are estimated worldwide to be highly sophisticated they do not claim it to be the truth but instead rather refer to original — let's say: founding fathers' — texts to base their understanding of Karate on. They even recommend to take different perspectives on Karate as a high level as possible in order to understand the own perspective on Karate as deep as possible. This attitude primarily leads to profound comprehension of what Karate was designed for, as Iain Abernethy stated: "Karate is not for consensual duels, but for real world self-protection against the criminal element".

"Spot on", Jesse Enkamp would say, and in its light, we can see clearly upon the core of Karate: kata and bunkai, and their relation to each other. And here we first recognise that bunkai was first — which, though, may be wrong at the same time because bunkai before kata is not bunkai but genjitsu: real life. So, as Jesse said, "[in ye olde days](#), people learned 'bunkai' first, and then proceeded to practice the solo pattern (kata) by themselves, just as a memory aid" — which in turn means a lot for our understanding of kata. Kata in this sense is a book of situation related motions containing information — even more: wisdom — about real life, and, thus, is the living tradition in which Karate is passed on through the years all over the planet. In this context we learn what names of kata and moves in kata really mean. "Heian" e.g., usually translated as "Peace and Tranquillity" and meant for the Karate-ka's attitude as having a "peaceful mind" instead signifies their state as "safe from harm" or "free from danger" which is derived from how Chinese would read the characters 平安 and seems to be more consistent as these kata were made by Itosu Ankō who considered Karate to be a system with strong Chinese roots. Thinking ahead, bunkai seems to be a kind of martial arts research — to stay in the picture of this journal — which is striving for reconstructing the real-life situations behind kata. On this backdrop we can grasp the fact that Karate is not only punches and kicks but also implies gripping, grappling, throwing, locks, chokes, strangles, groundwork, multiple enemies etc. as both experts accord. And this again leads to profound comprehension of what "traditional" Karate really means: the way of practising kata while looking beyond kata in order to fully embody what kata may ever comprise — which I'd rather call "original", "native", or "indigenous" Karate. And, so, the question who should be interested in bunkai is easily to answer: any karate-ka. At this point I would think that even — and especially — sport Karate-ka who perform kata should study bunkai in order to inspire their performance.

Additionally, from this point of view it does no longer makes sense to talk of styles — as both experts agree with. They even confess that they don't know what styles they are practicing. This wonderfully relates to Bruce Lee's famous saying:

"You see, actually, I do not teach, you know, Karate, because I do not believe in styles anymore. I mean I do not believe that there is such thing as, like, a Chinese way of fighting or a Japanese way of fighting... or whatever way of fighting, because unless a human being has three arms and four legs, there can be no different form of fighting. But, basically, we only have two hands and two feet. So, styles tend to, not only separate men because they have their own doctrines and the doctrine became the gospel truth that you cannot change! But, if you do not have styles, if you just say, 'here I am as a human being, how can I express myself totally and completely?' ...now that way, you won't create a style because style is a crystallization. That way is a process of continuing growth."
(Lee, 1971/1994, 06:46-07:48).

And from here it's only a little *taisabaki*⁸ to the continuing development of Karate.

3.2 The continuing development of karate

In his book "Geschichte und Lehre des Karatedō", which, in my view, comprises the most profound work on history of Karate in German Language, Bittmann concludes from the study of old texts that Karate developed first in bilateral relations between Okinawa and Ming-China through the 14th century (2017, p. 63). In addition, Japanese martial arts found their way to the Ryūkyū kingdom. The author rejects the widespread narrative that Karatedō — as the way of the empty hand — resulted from a weapon ban as a legend (p. 65). Instead, it is to be assumed that precursors of the Karatedō have developed not only together with the existence or possession of weapons in the Kingdom of Ryūkyū, but also in conjunction with the practice of the arts of weapons (p. 68). At the end of the 19th century Karate — understood as "Chinese hand" — more and more entered the public, supported by its introduction into physical education at schools. What, on one hand, lead to dissemination and establishment, on the other hand made necessary an elimination of dangerous techniques, which marks from my point of view the beginning of "traditional" Karate, which is reduced to mainly blocks⁹, punches and kicks. One look into Funakoshi Gichin's Karate-dō Kyōhan of 1935 shows that original Karate instead comprises throws, locks, and weapons. As for throws Funakoshi states:

"One can say that Karate is a hard technique in contrast to Jūjutsu, but of course the hardness also contains softness and the softness always contains hardness. In other words, to become soft you need hardness, to become hard you need softness; hardness and softness are originally one. Therefore, Karate is not only simple hitting, kicking, pushing, there are also throwing and arm lever techniques. Depending on the strength of the partner, one does not use strong techniques such as kicking, hitting or kicking, but performs soft techniques such as the adapted throwing technique, in which there is an indescribable kind of grace. Furthermore, as with the previously explained Kumite and the lai, there are countless, constantly changing methods, whether throwing technique or arm lever technique. The most important thing is to transform oneself according to the opponent, which I leave to every learner. Only for beginners I will show a part by providing short explanations with illustrations as a reference. If you use this as weft thread and the basic kata as warp thread and accumulate it for each individual study and skill, you will probably achieve the state of mind of unconsciously accepting, throwing and knocking over successfully." (Funakoshi, 1935, p 221).

⁸ 体捌き, jap.; lit.: flowing body; fig.: body management.

⁹ As both experts state, "block", though commonly used as such, seems to be a misconception of the Japanese term 受 uke which originally means "to receive". To dig deeper, read [Iain Abernethy about uke](#) and [Jesse Enkamp about uke](#).

So, the separation from throws (and probably from other original techniques) happened probably in competition with Jūjutsu and then Jūdō on the developing martial arts market in the Tōkyō of the beginning 20th century. What followed was the dissemination all over Japan and, from there, to other countries. Outside Japan, karate was first taught in Hawaii in the late 1920s. The international spread began in the 1950s. In Europe Karate was introduced by Henry Plee first in France (Bittmann, 2017, p. 70) — this Henry Plee, whom Iain Abernethy quoted with “One must not lose sight of the fact that Karate is ‘all-in’ fighting” (see above).

It didn't take Karate a long time to become a sport, which means: submission under an international rulebook. Jesse Enkamp, as being a member of Sweden's national team is currently preparing for taking part in the Olympics 2020 in Tōkyō by gathering points at international tournaments. Iain, though, believes that “only a tiny minority get into Karate for the sport; and fewer still with an eye on competing at an elite level”. He has “never bought the ‘shop window to the world’ argument that states sport Karate is what brings people into the dojo. That's never been my experience. In fact, in all my years of training and teaching I've never yet met a single person who decided to take up Karate after seeing a competition. That's probably because it's only Karate-ka and their families who watch competitions!” However, sport Karate is an important vehicle to transport this martial art around the globe and it definitely constitutes a strong factor for its universal presence.

The “sportening” of Karate to me is one of the mega trends Karate developed in within the last hundred years. As a newcomer Karate now has to prove its readiness for being a long-term Olympic discipline. And there is another trend in which Karate can show its hardiness: Mixed Martial Arts. MMA is a field in which Karate obviously shows its ambivalence in a positive sense, being both able to submit to a defined sports rulebook and, on the other hand, to prove its fighting value by just bringing the “forgotten” techniques of those “olde days” into public awareness again. “And so”, as Jesse said,

“this led a lot of eyes back to Okinawa. People thought of looking at the original way Karate was practiced even though it is not rule-bound like MMA is. It still has a lot of value for people who want to make their Karate more all-round with the kata bunkai especially like we have these throws and chokes and takedowns and joint locks right there in the kata and they are here all along—we just didn't know it until MMA showed it. You know which is why I think this is also a trend that is now coming back that people want to go full circle, they want to go back to the roots, to Okinawa, to kata bunkai.”

And Iain confirmed:

“I agree, I think we do owe MMA a debt of gratitude for that, because you know it's empirical and it shows the value of an holistic approach and then the message, is a lot easier to get that message out but maybe there's more to this Karate than we would first think, at least some would first think as well.”

What results from that for trainers and instructors is not easy to put in a nutshell, but, as both experts agree with is two things: be open-minded and pragmatic, which means keep your eyes on the reality Karate was originally derived from while looking out of the box. And this leads me to my last aspect of reflection: The role and work of European experts in the context of understanding and development of Karate and ancient martial arts as a whole.

3.3 The work and role of European experts in the context of understanding and development of Karate and ancient martial arts as a whole

In my view there are three tasks martial arts teachers — and maybe any teachers at all — should dedicate themselves to: Enlightenment, encouragement, and empowerment — clear the things and strengthen the people, so to speak. And this is what I see when watching Jesse and Iain at work both really and virtually.¹⁰ Their presence on the internet and social media is amazing. And this is because they work hard on it. They regard it as a gōngfū — if you allow this analogy: High level of craftsmanship as a result of persistent effort, endeavour, labour and time spent, not only for the matter but also against the critics.

As a result, for us as learners and researchers and for the development of Karate and martial arts as a whole, we can draw from almost unlimited resources they provide as texts, pictures, and videos. Both trace this back to their intrinsic motivation and unsatisfiable passion for Karate which lets the money they earn from it take a backseat. In the examples of these two professionals we can study what martial arts as a business can be: a platform for information as well as for innovation. So, this is where the development engine works these days. YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter are where the debate is going on and where the physical encounters are stimulated. And when we then meet on the mat we can drive our discussions further to even deeper insights and broader knowledge. What I missed — and that's frankly the only topic I missed — in these talks is the question of responsibility. Of course, I know why they didn't talk about that: It's because thinking and acting responsibly is a matter of course for both. Being responsible and therefore taking care of their output is so obvious for them that they don't need to talk about it. They just follow their passion, which naturally includes their followers' bliss.

4 Conclusions (Peter Kuhn)

Responsibility in the context of understanding and development of Karate and ancient martial arts as a whole seems to be just an academic question — but worthwhile, as worthwhile as debating the transcultural flow and the roles of the agents within this flow as such. So, what I, as a consequence from this **JOMAR | Interview** shall conceive is a **JOMAR | Debate** on the transcultural flow of both academic and body knowledge in martial arts taking the example of Karate with particular regard to the agents acting and the media used in this flow.

According to Slimbach (2005) "transculturalism is rooted in the quest to define shared interests and common values across cultural and national borders" (p. 205). Its attitude is characterised by thinking "outside the box of one's motherland, seeing many sides of every question without abandoning conviction, and allowing for a chameleon sense of self without losing one's cultural center" (p. 211). Lewis provides some characteristics which shed light on this process:

"Transculturalism is distinguished, in particular, by its emphasis on the problematics of contemporary culture, most particularly in terms of relationships, meaning-making, and power formation. However, transculturalism is as interested in dissonance, tension, and instability as it is with the stabilizing effects of social conjunction, communalism, and organization. It seeks to illuminate the various gradients of culture and the ways in which social groups 'create' and 'distribute' their meanings. Equally, though, transculturalism seeks to illuminate the ways in which social groups interact and experience tension. It is interested in the destabilizing effects of non-meaning or meaning atrophy. It is interested in the

¹⁰ Unfortunately, I haven't met Jesse Enkamp personally yet, but I met Iain Abernethy when attending one of his seminars in Nuremberg.

disintegration of groups, cultures, and power. In other words, transculturalism emphasizes the transitory nature of culture as well as its power to transform. (...) Transculturalism does not seek to privilege the semiotic over the material conditions of life, nor vice versa. Rather, it accepts that language and materiality continually interact within an unstable locus of specific historical conditions."
(2002, p. 24-26)

As in martial arts language and materiality, concretised in movement, play decisive roles both on their own and within their relationship — see the questionable translation of “uke” as “block” e.g. — a transcultural approach seems particularly promising with regard to explaining developments in the field of martial arts. And as Karate is estimated to be a martial art with an extraordinary amount of variations it seems to be smart to focus on this art or at least start off with it.

One who has widely worked on martial arts in cultural contexts is Paul Bowman — and I hope he will join the planned **JOMAR | Debate**. I'd like to shortly introduce some aspects. In his article “The Globalization of Martial Arts ” Bowman states that “today, deracination and commodification are arguably the dominant forces acting on martial arts” (2010, p. 436).

"Deracination means that ethnic or cultural characteristics are 'uprooted' and sometimes sanitized for external consumption; commodification means that goods or services that were never originally intended to be bought and sold are transformed into things that can be bought and sold. Thus, traditional martial arts have been uprooted from their historical locations, new hybrid forms have emerged, and in the process, the places, roles, and functions of martial arts have changed considerably." (Bowman, 2010, p. 435f.)

In addition, whereas martial arts originally developed and disseminated “in the cultural epochs and contexts of war, colonialism, and imperialism” (p. 436) these processes today — in peacetime — are mostly influenced by media and “self-reflexive and deliberately informed by research” rather than “springing from the urgencies and exigencies of a particular conflict” (p. 437). In this context new perspectives on martial practises arise: “health, sport, discipline, self-actualization, cultural artefact, and simple fun become more significant” (ibid.). Karate, in that respect, seems to play a specific role. Although, like other arts, it “was spread communally at first, by practitioners often associated with clan, military, or paramilitary training, it first entered into a global circuit of representation and discourse with ‘mythologized’ media representations” (p. 438). As such, our view on Karate — and with it on any “Eastern” martial art — from the very beginning is reshaped by the “Hollywood” filter. Finally, at present we can watch “two forces, homogenization and fragmentation, operat[e][ing] simultaneously, pulling in opposite directions” (p. 440). Homogenization e.g. shows in international belt rank systems or sport rulebooks, whereas fragmentation means splintering and producing diversity, which is crucial for players to define themselves and being identified on the market.

On this backdrop the debate shall bring together both academic researchers and practical instructors from both the eastern and the western hemisphere and ask them for statements first on the topic as a whole and then on during the debate arising subtopics. At this point my special thanks go Iain Abernethy and Jesse Enkamp for having ceded their interviews to **JOMAR | Interview** and, thus, built the springboard for a new exciting experience. In addition, I wish you all the best for your future projects in terms of Karate and in general! And now, let's look forward to what will develop on this path...

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