

Matsumura's Bassai Dai: A Deadly Kata For The Very Worst Case Scenario



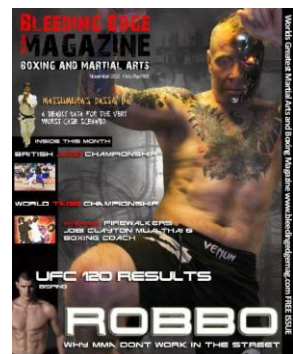
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This EBook looks at the history and circumstances of the Okinawan Karate master, Sokon Matsumura who is believed to be the creator of the kata Bassai Dai. It looks at the factors that would have driven him, the kind of techniques he would have needed and then looks at Bassai Dai to see how it fits these requirements.



Question: What do you do when you are out-numbered and unarmed against heavily armed men? Worse still, you can't even run away, because you have to defend somebody else!

Answer: Bassai Dai!

Bare with me as the explanation is hidden in history. For those of you who do not practice Karate or Tang Soo Do, Bassai (also known as Passai or Patsai) is a very central kata to many styles of Karate and Tang Soo Do, often being the kata required for 1st Dan gradings. This exalted position makes Bassai Dai worthy of a deeper look to understand its meaning, what it was created for and what it is meant to teach us.

But before we look at Bassai Dai, it is useful to look at the man who created it and the circumstances which must have influenced him in formulating his methods. Bassai Dai is believed to have been authored by the Okinawan Karate legend, Sokon "Bushi" Matsumura.

Born in 1796, Matsumura was a prime mover in the development of the Okinawan style of Shuri Te and the main teacher to Azato and Ituso who in turn taught Funikoshi.



Matsumura began his training at the age of 14, with the ambition of becoming Okinawa's best fighter. By the age of 25 he was widely acknowledged as having achieved this. He is also believed to be central in the development of linear karate as linear movement is present in the teachings of most of his students, yet it is barely present in previous teachings or lineages not influenced by Matsumura. He was a central figure in developing the Karate that 2 generations later, Funikoshi introduced to Japan and spread

around the World.

Matsumura's outstanding ability and fearsome reputation led to him being appointed as Chief Of Security to the Okinawan King. In effect; he was head bodyguard. Although being a high honour, this would have been an unenviable task. At that time, the Okinawan King was little more than a puppet government to the Japanese overlords, who banned the carrying of weapons on Okinawa (except for Japan's occupying Satsuma Samurai Clan). Even the bodyguards to the Okinawan King were not allowed to carry weapons. They were the only bodyguards to a head of state in history who were not allowed to carry weapons.

So who were the main threats to the King?

Well one threat could of course be Samurai, armed to the teeth with katana's. More surprisingly though, a bigger threat would have come from Westerns! American and European whaling boats would want to trade with Okinawa to top up their supplies from time to time. However, the Japanese overlords banned the Okinawan's from trading with these Western "barbarians".

This sometimes led to conflict, when a boat load of hardy seamen in need of supplies would get angry at being re-buffed and might decide to go and sort out this little King. Seemed a safe bet on an island where nobody carried weapons. The Japanese would melt into the background and let the Okinawan's deal with these situations. The unfortunate Okinawan's knew that if they got it wrong, if the Westerns did not kill them then the Japanese Satsuma might. A very tough position to be in.

The main flashpoint came in 1853. It is widely known that Japanese isolationism was forcibly ended by an American fleet led by Commodore Perry. What is not quite so well known is that Perry stopped at Okinawa before going to Japan. Perry's behaviour would seem very arrogant by our standards, but Perry understood the Japanese mindset at that time. He realised that they respected force much more than diplomacy. As such, he deliberately set about "bullying" the unarmed Okinawan's, so that when he arrived at Japan he would arrive with a reputation as a hard-man.

The Okinawan's had no way to know what Perry's larger goal was; they would have just seen it as an invasion. Especially when Perry led a parade up to the Shuri Castle (King's centre of government) consisting of 2 companies of armed US marines, 50 naval officers and 2 brass bands. Oh yes, and some big cannons from the ships! This was Matsumura's nightmare scenario. Had Perry

decided to take over and ordered the king's detention, how could Matsumura and his unarmed men possibly protect their king against such overwhelming odds?

One strategy we do know is that everybody working for the King, whether they were a Head Of State or just a Clerk, would be required to be a very competent martial artist. If a situation broke out, everybody would be expected to jump in and help out.

It is also known that Matsumura was good at psychology. One story tells of how another Okinawan who was already adept at Karate asked Matsumura to teach him. Matsumura refused, so the other man challenged Matsumura to a duel. Matsumura, knowing that the other man was superstitious agreed, but set the time and place for the dual at dawn by a graveyard. A very spooky setting for a superstitious man. When they met and confronted each other, Matsumura issued a loud kiai (shout) and the other man surrendered without a single blow being struck.

In another incident, the King of Okinawa (who was a bit crazy) issued a proclamation that Matsumura was so good that he could defeat a bull. He therefore (without consulting Matsumura) set up a date for a duel (yes, with a bull)!

We can only guess at Matsumura's reaction when he heard of this. However, Matsumura knew the keeper of the bull and made a secret arrangement with him. Each night for a week preceding the dual, the bull would be penned up so that it could not move. Matsumura would arrive and stab the bull's nose with a pin. The bull would go mad, but could do nothing, whilst Matsumura just glared at it. Come the day of the dual, the bull was released into the ring where Matsumura stood waiting for it. Matsumura glared at the bull, who took one look and run away in fear.

Matsumura was a clever psychologist who could out-think his opponents and find novel solutions to problems.

Before Perry and his men marched on the Shuri Castle, the king was invited (in a way that he could hardly refuse) to attend a meeting on board Perry's boat. Matsumura as head bodyguard would have gone with him. He would also have noted the Americans were used to being served by male stewards who

would have been low down the pecking order. In Okinawan culture, women would be the ones to serve food and drink.

Most records of this time were destroyed by American bombing of Okinawa during World War Two. However, an irony of history is that records taken by Perry and his crew during this time do give us vital clues. Paintings and photographs taken by Perry's expedition show that when Perry lead his parade to the Shuri Castle, it was Okinawan men who were serving drinks and food to the Americans.

Who would these men be? It would be a safe bet to assume that it was Matsumura's bodyguards, mingling in amongst the American's. Lion's in sheep's clothing, ready to jump into action at the first sign of a hostile takeover. Matsumura knew that the American's were used to being served by their stewards and would have thought nothing of being served by his own men. As mentioned earlier, anybody working for the king would have had to have had Karate training.

So should Perry (or any invading Westerner) give the command to seize the King, Matsumura's men would be poised to strike with the all important element of surprise. Trained and armed US Marines would not be expecting very much resistance from a bunch of stewards, so at the first sign of resistance, they would be likely to try to grab and restrain them.



OK, back to Bassai Dai! Imagine you are one of Matsumura's bodyguards. You've trained every day for years on the makiwawa and you are capable of killing with your bare hands. Your opponents move casually forward to restrain you, not expecting much resistance! Somebody gives the signal and you jump to action. I've seen a number of applications for the opening movement from Bassai Dai, (where you place your right fist into your left palm) which is quite unique in all of the kata's. Imagine that you close your right fist around the windpipe (not the neck, just the windpipe) of your

first assailant and to stop him moving back your left hand restrains him round the back of his neck. This looks just like Bassai Dai's opening salutation.

You follow the kata, knee your opponent wherever is available then slide forward and push. Your opponent is thrown backward and goes flying into a group of his comrades. Suddenly this casual takeover is thrown into confusion.

The surprised Marines around you move in to grab you from all directions. This is where Bassai Dai rapidly moves to the rear with 2 chudan (mid level) blocks, then returns to the front with 2 chudan blocks, then moves to the side with a scoop and 2 chudan blocks.

Conventional wisdom tells us that we block 2 straight punches to our body, turn and block 2 more straight punches to the body, turn to the side scoop a kick and block 2 more straight punches to the body.

Matsumura would likely have known that these Western barbarians would be unlikely to attack with straight punches to the body. None of them would have practiced Asian fighting arts. If anything, they would be more likely to jab and cross to the head. **So why would Matsumura put so much emphasis on blocking an attack that was not likely to occur?**

Could it be that Matsumura did not know how Westerners were likely to fight. Matsumura was a natural psychologist who was shrewd enough to get all the women out of sight and have his highly trained bodyguards infiltrate his opponents in the guise of humble stewards. He has already shown that he had an idea how his enemies thought, so he would have very likely had an idea how they fight.

Could it be that these movements are more to do with self development and character building? Part of a “Do”



martial art. I do not think this is very likely. Matsumura is known to have been a practical man and a martial arts fanatic. **It is inconceivable to me, that he would have authored a kata that was not very practical, direct and efficient.**

So now picture this. You've just sent the first opponent flying backwards with your opening move. Your surprised enemies are all around you and

somebody grabs your shoulder from behind, you spin round and move into him. You are too close for a full extended punch. However, your first “block” can be used to strike his grabbing arm and disengage it, whilst the second “block” is used as a strike to his nose chin, throat or sternum.

Suppose that instead of grabbing your shoulder, he grabs your upper arm or wrist? Try it with a partner, you will find that the same “blocks” will release any of these grabs whilst lining your partner up for a backfist strike. Even if your partner put his arm around your neck from the rear, lower your weight and spin around forcefully as you do in the kata and it will be very difficult for the person to hold onto you.

I believe that this sequence of double “blocks” are nothing to do with blocking at all. They are quite generic movements for throwing people of you, however they grab you. If you are grabbed, you don’t want to have to stop and check if they have grabbed with their left hand or their right hand before you decide which technique to apply. You want something generic that can be used in almost all cases, so that you can respond without thinking (or even really knowing HOW you have been grabbed, just knowing that you have been grabbed).

As mentioned above Matsumura was also a prime mover in developing linear technique. How would this have fitted into Matsumura’s requirements?

First of all, should a fight start, Matsumura would have known that the rifles carried by the marines would take about 30 seconds to load and fire the first round. Therefore, he and his men would have about 30 seconds to incapacitate as many opponents as possible and get the king out the back door before bullets start flying.

At that time most Chinese and Okinawan martial artists would have been using mainly circular techniques, relying on rapid rotation of the hips to create centrifugal force. The only drawback for Matsumura is that with circular techniques, you are (to a certain extent) relying on your opponents coming towards you. This is very effective for most self defence scenarios as you don’t particularly want to go into a fight, you want to get away from it. However, if your opponents don’t have to come to you and would rather stand back loading their rifles, then you have a problem. You have to take the fight to them.

Linear technique on the other hand uses the forward momentum of the body to generate power. As such you can move forward and take the fight to your opponent, causing them more confusion and panic (after all they only expected lowly stewards). You might even reach the riflemen before they have chance to load and fire.

Also, when surrounded by opponents (and not having the opportunity to get your back to a wall), being stationary is not a good thing. By attacking forward (in any direction) you will probably take your opponent by surprise (a mob does not expect to be attacked by it's intended victim) and you put distance between yourself and anybody behind you.

With rifles being loaded and you are outnumbered, you also need to incapacitate opponents very quickly; no time to choke them out, restrain them or grapple with them. Just one punch . . . next please . . . punch next. I'm guessing here, but this is probably where the Karate maxim Ikken Hissatsu (one stike one kill) comes from.



I want to be clear that I am not suggesting that linear techniques are better than circular. I'm just suggesting that under these particular circumstances linear techniques would give some advantages.

Fast forward to today. If fighting one on one, circular systems do generally give you more options. They include strikes, grapples and pressure point strikes coming in from all odd angles. These applications do appear in linear styles too, but with much less emphasis on them. However, if you getting attacked by a gang and are unable to run away or get your back to a wall, being able to surprise them, knock some out very quickly to balance the odds and spread them out so you can pick them off one by one obviously has some advantages too. It should also be remembered that Matsumura's linear techniques were designed to fight untrained multiple opponents, not other Asian martial artist who might be able to cope with such techniques.

If we are set upon by a gang of thugs, these people are basically cowards; not the hardy seaman or trained soldiers that Matsumura faced. Whilst a basic

stepping punch may not work well in a competition against somebody else who is trained; suddenly stepping forward to attack the leader of a gang who is expecting you to cower away is more likely to work. Especially if you use your lead hand to distract as you move forward.

Incidentally, the elite British Special Forces regiment, the SAS (and probably others), are taught that if ambushed whilst driving along, they put the foot down. Most people when ambushed run for cover, which allows the enemy to consolidate and concentrate their fire on your position. This is similar to a group of thugs closing in and all hitting you at the same time. However, when ambushed the SAS are trained to accelerate, becoming a moving target, not allowing their enemy to concentrate their fire and get out as quick as possible. That is not so different to linear Karate, stepping forward into a surrounding crowd, not allowing the thugs to consolidate and not complying with their expectations. Similar tactics from the top warriors of today and the past.

All the derivatives of Shuri Te, (including Tae Kwon Do and Tang Soo Do) have these linear features in common and their kata/hyungs/patterns more closely resemble each other than they do any of the Chinese Kung Fu styles or the Naha Te derived Karate styles. Again, I'm not saying that any are better than the other, just different in emphasis.

Historical sources: primarily Bruce Clayton's book, Shotokan's Secret.

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