

Bassai Kata

In Japanese, Bassai means "To Extract From A Castle" or "To Remove an Obstruction." Gichin Funakoshi describes Bassai as "Breaking through an enemy's fortress." Generally regarded as being one of the oldest (400 plus years) and the most representative kata of Okinawan karate, the kata's originator is unknown. However, the oldest versions have been passed down by Soken Matsumura, the chief bodyguard to the King of Okinawa. Matsumura, who was later called 'Bushi' Matsumura (Bushi meaning warrior) studied under Okinawa's Sakugawa and China's Kusanku. There seems to be no evidence of either of his masters teaching the kata.

The Matsumura version has a distinct Chinese influence, whereas the Oyadomari version is more "Okinawanized". It was further modified by Itosu, and is thought to have created a "sho" (Passai sho) form of it. Gichin Funakoshi of Shotokan took it to Japan and taught them as Bassai dai and Bassai sho.

We know that it was passed down by Okinawan master Sokon Matsumura and it may have been taught to him by a man named Oyadomari Peichin. In turn, Matsumura taught it to his student, Anko Itosu, who is often credited with creating Bassai Sho sometime in the late nineteenth century. It is thought he created it from a version of Passai that was popular at the time.

It was Sensei Anko Itosu's teachings that made the kata popular when he introduced them to the Okinawan school curriculum. One of his students, Gichin Funakoshi, would later take them to Japan and make some adaptations, including changing the name from Passai to Bassai.

Bassai is the Japanese name of a group of kata practiced in different styles of martial arts, including karate and various Korean martial arts (Taekwondo, Tang Soo Do, Soo Bahk Do). There are several variations of these kata, including Passai sho (minor) and Passai dai (major) . In karate, the kata are known as Passai in Okinawan styles and Bassai in Japanese styles. The kata focus on the idea of changing disadvantage into advantage by strong and courageous response, switching blocks and differing degrees of power.

Unlike most kata whose lineage is traceable back to one master or city, this kata is found in almost all styles descended from two of Okinawa's major cities (Shuri and Tomari, which are 5km apart). This unique occurrence is placed back to Matsumura. Being the head of Law and Order in Okinawa, there would have been much cross-training between government officials.

Bassai was purposely chosen to introduce students to the Goju element of karate. Goju" translates literally as "hard-soft." "Hard-soft" refers to the hard motion of exhalation and the soft motion of inhalation. It encourages correct breathing and rhythm. As a self-defence aspect it trains students in three new stances; shiko datchi (sumo stance), sanchin datchi (Pigeon toe stance) and neko ashi datchi (cat stance), and includes some basic grappling techniques. It trains a student to move with explosive speed and to move without telegraphing. It trains a student to turn their opponent around from a deep rooted defensive stance and incorporates some unique attacks such as kicks to the knee and double punches.

Because of its spread and popularity in Okinawa, there are a number of Bassai kata, the most common being Bassai-dai, Bassai-sho, Matsumura Bassai and Tomari Bassai and each display a similar embusen, (where the kata starts and stops).

Considering all this, there are three schools of thought on the name Bassai.

1: Some suggest as its true name 'Passai' may represent a person the kata's true creator.

2: Many speculate also that the castle/fortress reference goes back to the kata's lineage. Considering its original teacher was chief of the King's team of bodyguards, it was used as a training kata for bodyguards that taught how to penetrate and wreak havoc among a crowd posing a potential threat to the king.

3: Another popular theory uses the fortress reference as the body. During combat a person experiences an adrenalin rush. When the body is full of adrenalin it can withstand extreme amounts of pressure. The face and frontal torso (where most strikes land in combat) can be struck without regard. In this way the body becomes a fortress, covered by an adrenalin coating.

Bassai-dai focuses on maintaining a deep, well-grounded stance while blocking. It then executes ren uke (one arm blocking followed by the other arm blocking the same technique in the same direction).

Performing ren uke from a strong stance allows a person to turn their opponent around, exposes their sides. A powerful blow to atemi (vulnerable points) found on the sides of the torso can instantly wound an opponent, even one full of adrenalin. It does this by applying pressure to an area that will send signals beneath the adrenalin coating, in essence, breaching the fortress.

The Bassai kata are believed to have been designed to complement each other as the first, Bassai Dai, (Dai means major/large) represents getting into a fortress and the second, Bassai Sho, (Sho means minor/small) represents getting out again.

The Okinawan versions include powerful blocking and angular defense against attacks from multiple directions. The creator of the form was left-handed. If the student keeps that in mind, some more of the hidden techniques of the form will become visible.