

NIHANCHI KATA

Nihanchi, Naihanchi, Naifanchi, Nifanchin, NaiHanchi, Nifunchi

To begin looking at Naihanchi it is important to understand that there are actually three Naihanchi katas. These are normally understood as a series, Naihanchi Shodan, Naihanchi Nidan and Naihanchi Sandan. Some have chosen to drop the Nidan and Sandan versions and only practice the Naihanchi Shodan. One reason for this is that the main essence of the kata is contained in the first kata.

The originator of Nihanchi is unknown but it is known that the three katas were practiced as one single kata by Master Matsumura around 1825. Many traditions believe Matsumura created Nihanchi or based his version on older forms known to him. Nifanchin was brought to Okinawa from China, at some point it was believed to be broken into three distinct segments. Itosu is reported to have learned the kata from Sokon Matsumura, who learned it from a Chinese man living in Tomari. Itosu is thought to have changed the original kata. The form is so important to old style karate that Kentsu Yabu (a student of Itosu) often told his students 'Karate begins and ends with Naihanchi' and admonished his students must practice the kata 10,000 times to make it their own. Gichin Funakoshi learned the kata from Anko Asato. Funakoshi renamed Naihanchi by the name Tekki, meaning "Iron Horse," which refers to the stance used in it. "Iron" refers to its strength and stability. "Horse" refers to the fact that it resembles a man riding a horse. There is more than one possible meaning for the word Naihanchi, and they are both very plausible. The pronunciation of Naihanchi was originally Naifanchi, because that is the way it was pronounced in China. The particle 'Nai' means "inner" or "inside" and probably refers to pointing the toes inward. 'Fan' means a clawed foot of a certain animal. 'Chi' means the soil or foundation. So the original name probably meant something to the effect of being rooted to the ground in correct stance.

Nihanchi is a karate Kata, performed entirely in Kiba dachi, Horse stance. This kata is a special one because it is the only kata that is performed with the practitioners back against the wall. The kata is linear, moving side to side, starting on the right side. The kata is very useful in limited space. The techniques can be applied against

attackers at any angle. The side to side movements in a low stance builds balance and strength for fast footwork and body shifting. The kata also develops effective hip movement. The kata are intricate strategies of attacking and defensive movement, done in the kiba dachi, for the purpose of conditioning the legs to develop explosive power. The form makes use of in-fighting techniques ,whole body movement and grappling. It is also the first kata to start with a technique to the right instead of the left. Like Zen Shin Kotei. Some researchers believe that it was originally one kata broken into three separate parts. The fact that only Naihanchi/Tekki Shodan has a formal opening suggests the kata was split.

Naihanchi contains many highly effective techniques & concepts that are of great value to today's martial artists. Few modern day students value the kata due to its simplistic appearance and fail to give it the attention it deserves. All the sideways steps in the kata are there in order to position you to strike an opponent who is now off centre due to the preceding technique, or to move you inside the effective range of an opponent's strike. It must be understood that each kata was intended to be applied as a stand alone self-defence system and were not designed to be used in conjunction with the others (although there is no reason why they could not be). Itsou believed Naihanchi to be so effective that even if it was the only thing the student ever learned they would be an able fighter.

A distinct characteristic of the kata is the technique where the circular movement of the arms protects the head in a block, while simultaneously setting up the opening for the uraken, back fist. The appearance of the kata can be seen as simple, but from careful study and practice of the bunkai, it is very rich in techniques, and is seen as an effective fighting system. The punching and blocking motions are short because space is very restricted. The short techniques make Naihanchi a very difficult kata to master, and some consideration might be given to thinking of Naihanchi as a more technically advanced level form. When performing each of the Naihanchi kata, once the practitioner drops into the horse stance it is critical to keep their height consistent throughout the entire kata. The practitioner's height should not fluctuate up and down. The only way to build power is a strong stance for defence from the front and rear of the practitioner. However, it is extremely strong from the left and right sides of the practitioner. The weight distribution is equally spread between the two legs. If the weight is ever transferred to one leg the student loses all strength in the stance from the sides

and is vulnerable to attack from the left and right sides of the body. Therefore, when stepping over to move in the horse stance in a sideways direction, the student must try and shorten the time the weight distribution is over the supporting leg. This is one of the primary skills developed in the three Naihanchi forms.

Naihanchi was intended to be a stand alone fighting system it is supported in the writings and teachings of Choki Motobu (1871-1944) who was one of Okinawa's most feared fighters. In 1926 Motobu wrote, 'The Naihanchi, Passai, Chinto and Rohai styles are not left in China today and only remain in Okinawa as active martial arts.'" Motobu believed all the katas listed to be systems in their own right. Hironori Otsuka (who received instruction on the kata from Motobu) points out the amount of knowledge contained within Naihanchi in his book, 'Wado-ryu karate.' In the book, Otsuka states that the kata would take more than one lifetime to master and that, 'there is something deep about it.'..."