

The Decelerating Move

Performance of kata at the tournament level requires special attention to the precise way in which certain movements are executed. We have already discussed an aspect called “the freeze” which can be beneficially applied to many of the movements in almost any kata. Another useful concept is the “decelerating move.”

A good kata performance in most systems will involve some variety...fast and slow sequencs, straight-line and circular techniques, big and small movements, etc. (in fact, the Goju-ryu system holds this sort of contrast as a central tenet: “Goju” means “hard/soft”). In the techniques which are performed slowly, the slow speed may be mandatory in the kata, or the performer may choose to do a certain move slowly as a matter of personal interpretation and style. In any case, it is the slow moves which offer the greatest opportunity for artistic expression and personal style. A martial art is, after all, an *art* which necessarily involves some personal interpretation at the highest level. The fast movements convey primarily power and “fighting spirit” whereas the slower movements emphasize the performer’s grace and artistry.

Performing a given move with grace and artistry requires a step above technical precision, and there are numerous ways to achieve this. A common feature at the highest levels (national and international championships) is the execution of a movement in such a way that it starts out moderately fast and then decelerates smoothly to a stop. Only certain moves in a kata will be appropriate for execution in this way, usually the “dynamic tension” movements which combine slow speed and powerful muscle tightness, but others may work as well.

The precise mathematical “curve” of the deceleration is critical to the execution. The deceleration must be smooth, perhaps with some accentuation toward the end. Imagine that you are drawing a powerful bow, preparatory to shooting an arrow, and that the bowstring requires more and more strength to draw back each additional inch until you have reached your limit and can pull it back no further. Or imagine that you are compressing a big spring sticking out from the wall; it is easy to compress at first but fights back harder with each inch of compression until finally it will budge no further. These examples illustrate the mathematical nature of the ideal deceleration, and can be used as visualizations during performance.

The deceleration performed as if pulling or pushing a powerful spring and then locking it in place presents an image of harnessed power just waiting to bust loose upon the opponent. So, naturally, the first move *following* the deceleration is usually an explosive one, the effect of which is magnified by the preceding deceleration. The momentary pause before the explosion allows your focus on the target to achieve maximum intensity, while attracting the judges’ attention in anticipation of what will come next. All of these effects can greatly enhance your performance (and your score).

Interestingly enough, the reverse type of action, an *accelerating* move, is rarely used. This may be because a move which accelerates perceptibly appears to lack power in comparison to the same movement executed with maximum speed from the start. And any technique which starts out intentionally slow will “telegraph” your intent, giving

unnecessary forewarning to an opponent. So it is just not logical, and not impressive in a kata performance.

Experiment in front of a mirror with certain techniques performed with powerfully controlled deceleration and see how it feels and looks. The punches in *Sanchin* kata, the concluding double palm-heel strike in *Bassai Dai*, the open backhand strike or scan in *Anaku*, or the tiger form in *Wansu* (right before the dump) are good ones to try. See if it doesn't add a new dimension to your performance.

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from Essays on the Martial Arts

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