

Guiding Principles to Develop Dynamic Karate

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March – 2008

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The art of karate-do has its roots in the martial traditions of ancient Asian culture. Through generations of development and various migrations, modern karate eventually was introduced to Japan in the early 1920s by Funakoshi Gichin. In the late 1940s, under the direction of Master Nakayama, the Japan Karate Association was formed, and a bold new direction was chartered in the formalized structured approach to teaching and promoting karate-do – specifically the style of shotokan karate. The Japanese approach to developing karate skills was driven and highlighted by the famous JKA Instructor’s Course. Through a new and carefully structured development process, great physical technicians were able to spread karate to the masses, both in the school systems, a wide variety of private dojo, and eventually to countries around the world.

This standardization of karate technique was first documented by Master Nakayama in his book “Dynamic Karate”. It was later expanded to the “Best Karate” series which helped define the

universal approaches to technical karate that we see in the world today.

The purpose of this paper is to outline some of the principles that I believe are crucial to the development of dynamic karate. They come from my 35 years of study, and the extrapolation of instruction that I have received from a wide variety of JKA/ISKF coaches underpinned by the guidance of my teacher, Yaguchi Sensei – Vice Chief Instructor ISKF.

The basis for this essay is taken from notes of a lecture with the same name that I gave to a class at the 2007 ISKF Master Camp in Pennsylvania.

The foundation of all karate technique lies in the understanding of body movement. There are a number of essential elements that I believe are key to this understanding. Rather than attempt to describe the names and particular attributes of a multitude of specific techniques, I would prefer to describe the common elements that are pervasive in particular types of techniques.

I will not touch upon the psychological, mental and strategic factors that are forever present in the application of karate technique. This

paper will focus its attention purely on the physiological components of movement.

Stance

First and foremost, the stance must serve the purpose of the actual technique being delivered. A stance is not a goal unto itself; rather it is a means to a particular end. Having a long deep front stance, for instance, is useless if one is stretched out – the muscles of the legs and hips pulled tight to the point where they cannot tense and relax as appropriate. Any stance must allow the hips and pelvic carriage to remain neutrally placed and parallel to the ground. The dimension (length, depth and width) of the stance should find the balance between mobility and stability – not one at the expense of another.

The length and width of any stance may have a guiding or suggested starting point in terms of distance. One often hears the description for front stance, for instance – about hip width and about twice that distance in length. Nevertheless, this is just an approximate guide. The front foot should be precisely pointed forward, and the back foot should be pointed forward as much as possible, while the feet remain flat. The final dimension of any stance is completely influenced by the body structure of the

participant. Someone with stiff ankles must shorten and/or widen their stance to accommodate their body type. This is fundamentally true for any stance formation.

The foot and knee positions must essentially be in the same direction. For outside tension stances, the upper leg must rotate outwards creating an external dynamic tension that stimulates an outward push in the stance. For inside tension, the converse is true. In neither situation however, does the knee veer from its position over the foot. It is the rotation of the thigh and the resulting hip and body's core connection that describes the internal or external attribute of the stance.

When stepping, each stance requires the flexion of the knee and ankle. This flexion should allow the hips and pelvic carriage to remain horizontal throughout the stepping motion. The feet do not necessarily need to touch each other during a step, but the moving knee must graze the support knee as the step is made.

The purpose of the neutral or horizontal hip is critical to an upright posture, but more on this later.

The practice of perfecting the stance, its shape, dimension and dynamics is so very important. It is interesting to consider that in

application, the stances must be natural, and not held with excessive tension. Indeed, the stances are essentially transitional positions, held for a moment in time, coordinated with the application of a particular technique, as one flows from kamae to completion and back to kamae again. Our basics are an essential training tool to develop strength, flexibility and precise coordination.

Generally speaking, when stepping, the moving foot should glide across the floor. The pivot foot should remain as flat as possible while the ball of the moving foot slides through. Upon completion of the stance, the weight should drop, which in turn creates the sensation of being firmly grounded. This dropping of the weight should be hardly noticeable from a visual perspective. As one lands, tension emanating from the stance and coordinated throughout the body, should be timed together and exploited to its fullest extent. As one moves from technique to technique and from step to step, a weighting/un-weighting effect takes place – light upon movement and heavy upon completion.

Posture

One's posture is a key component to the efficiency of movement. Good posture implies a certain symmetry in body positioning. Posture involves the horizontal placement of the pelvic carriage, the

upright and vertical position of the spine, and the appropriate angle of the head. All three of these factors are crucial in the contribution of good posture.

If one's posture is upright, muscles on either side of the body can work in unison. If the body is tilted to one side, efficiency of movement is compromised and the coordination of relaxation and tension cannot be balanced.

If the hips are parallel with the floor and the posture is upright, rotation, vibration, stepping and spinning will all be balanced and efficient. Even the head plays an important role in good posture. If the head is tilted to one side, any resulting movement will run the risk of being thrown off balance. One has to look at the speed of a skater in a spin - the straighter the posture, the more efficient and quicker the movement. Tilting off centre would throw the skater off balance. The same is true of karate.

Hand Techniques

As mentioned earlier, rather than describe the myriad of techniques that make up our lexicon of punching, striking and blocking

movements, I will touch upon the essential elements that are common to all arm movement.

We consistently utilize the notion of action/reaction in the movement we perform. The draw hand, which sits at one's waist, should always be in a state of equality with the action (punching, striking or blocking) hand. Hard and fast strikes or punches must be balanced and coordinated with the reaction or draw hand. They must start together, move together, twist together, and complete together. Generally speaking, the draw hand moves on a linear plane, but the action hand can follow a variety of paths to its target. The elements and attributes of good posture I described earlier really come in to play in the coordination and delivery of arm or hand techniques.

Elbow connection, indeed, wrist and forearm connection, all form a vital part of the path of a technique. The shoulders should remain down and neutral while movement takes place. The chain of tension from the stance, through the body's core and finally into the shoulders should all be focused upon impact and the completion of technique.

Various body positions, shomen, hanmi and gyaku-hanmi for instance, are sometimes misunderstood. Hips that are placed in the half-front-facing position, is only the first part of the picture of a body

posture. The waist, torso and shoulders must all rotate to various extents, depending on an individual's body type and flexibility. It is the combination of these links of rotation that must come into play. Therefore, it is something of a misnomer to exclusively use the term 'hip rotation' as this describes only part of the overall picture. The tension and thrust of the legs initiate hip rotation, but just as importantly, the torso and shoulders must also rotate. I would hasten to add that the final shoulder position, whether in shomen or hanmi posture, is rotated slightly further than that of the final hip placement.

Kicking Techniques

It is fair to say that the correct utilization of one's hips is critical to any kicking movement. The hips act as a swivel between the kicking leg and the support leg. They can move as a pendulum, forward and backward for front or back kicking; they can also rotate in multi dimensions for round house or crescent kicking. The control of the hip movement, coupled with balance and counter-balance is the key to correct movement.

Of course the stance is somewhat limited when the kick is in the air. By its very nature, there is only one leg on the ground. Nevertheless, the support foot should be flat with the supporting

knee and ankle somewhat flexed. The body should be tilted enough to maintain balance while allowing the kicking foot to point to its target. Each kick has its set position, but regardless of any specific technique, the kick should be fully chambered with the heel close to the back of the leg. Snapping movements must have the emphasis on the pull back or retraction of the kick. Thrust kicks can be said to have more of a pull back element to them as their energy is more depleted upon impact.

The fulcrum for any kick could be described as the base of the hip that corresponds to the support leg. The mobile swivel action of the hips, coupled with the body's core tension of the abdominal area, control the delivery of the overall kick. Regardless of any body tilting, the head should strive to maintain an upright position.

Ideally, any kick will have momentum in its favor. Any kick should gather momentum from its start, through its chambered set, all the way until the kicking foot retracts and reaches the ground again. Although one's posture may change during the kick, it should be immediately reestablished when the kicking foot lands.

Power Generation

Each of the above described attributes is part and parcel to a training and teaching methodology. They can be systematically broken down into their component parts to be described and practiced.

For the effective use of any technique, these attributes must all be controlled and come together in unison. This sets the foundation for kinematically correct movement. There are other general factors that always come into play. Methods of power generation such as rotation, vibration, accelerated stepping or shifting movement can be applied together.

Beginners are taught to step forward with the hips remaining square. At an expert level, the hips finish square, but elements of rotation, vibration, accelerated finishing, and dropping of the weight all contribute to efficient and effective technique.

When simply rotating the body, the fulcrum point is at the base of the hip that equates to the front leg. This creates the effect of bringing the centre of gravity of the body forward as rotation takes place. The thrust of the rear leg and the pull of the front leg all contribute to this factor. When rotating forward, the weight drops naturally.

Body vibration is key to overall power generation. The large muscles of the legs and hips generate a wave of momentum that is transferred to the upper body. The muscles of the torso harness this energy which in turn, drives the arms to form their movement.

Each of these elements combined, make up the dynamics for overall power generation.

In conclusion, the study of movement in karate is very much a experiential journey. It is a very personal discipline. The hundreds of thousands of repetitions necessary to develop ideal 'technique' really define the way or path of karate. The effort, rigor, determination and focus of the movement are the basis for defining karate spirit. Success can be described as the journey of discovering how one, as an individual, moves. We sometimes hear the phrase 'make the movement your own'. When one has consumed, digested and absorbed karate movement to the point where it has been adapted to fit one's body type, then one is on the path to mastery of movement – essentially the principle of shu-ha-ri.