Karate’s Ikken Hisatsu: The One Strike Kill

The karate philosophy of ‘Ikken Hisatsu’ is one of the most important in the art. Sadly however, it does not enjoy widespread endorsement due its misinterpretation.

Predominantly it is translated as ‘one strike kill’ which although is a fair description, is not entirely what it refers to. There are two reasons behind its misinterpretation. Firstly, because karate’s Japanese heritage is shared with the Samurai. The Samurai used to use the term ‘Ichi Geki Hisatsu’, which referred to maxim, ‘one strike he’s dead’. Secondly, the karate lover’s cult classic ‘Bloodsport’ starring Jean Claude Van Damme back in the 80’s made popular the Chinese technique of ‘Dim-mak’ (death touch). In actuality, the more relevant karate term referring to these interpretations is ‘kyushou’ (vital point striking). So if Ikken Hisatsu is not about a killing ‘technique’, what is it? It’s about attitude!

The Truth Of Ikken Hisatsu

While it’s possible (although improbable) that a person could kill another with one strike, Ikken Hisatsu was a teaching tool for ‘attitude’ rather than ‘technique’. It really refers to the commitment and concentration of the warrior rather than a literal single strike kill. When old masters promoted Ikken Hisatsu, predominantly they were implying that one should treat every punch as though it was a finishing punch. By ‘finishing’, it did not necessarily imply killing, but one that put a person completely out of commission.

» The attitude of Ikken Hisatsu was relevant for both attack and defence. In attack, it involved committing completely to a technique, and putting absolute intent and focus behind each strike – an attitude of destroying whatever it hits. In defence it referred to treating every oncoming strike as though your life depended on it (indeed it could).

What Makes Ikken Hisatsu So Relevant?

Ikken Hisatsu is just as relevant today because the need for self-defence still exists. In any self-defence situation, the mindset of the potential victim should always be one of Ikken Hisatsu. In real defence, one must realise their attacker will not be pulling their punches. Therefore, one must treat each strike thrown with great respect – as a potential finishing strike. Equally, each attack they execute must be accompanied by intent to ‘finish’ (not necessarily kill) the bout.

» It’s a fact that the longer a fight lasts, the more opportunities an attacker has of getting a surprise strike on you, or otherwise wrestling the fight to the ground. These only serve to keep your attention away from other possible dangers – such as accomplices.

The Weakest Link

Like a chain, the human body is only as strong as its weakest link. In any self-defence situation, the focus of the potential victim should be on the attacker’s weakest links – the eyes, nose, throat, solar plexus, groin, thighs, shins, fingers etc.

» In karate, kata is fundamental to self-defence because it aims to bring an imaginary opponent down by way of attacking the weak links of the body. The actual moves of the kata may not necessarily be used, but the philosophy of attacking weak links, along with kata’s attitude of putting Ikken Hisatsu behind each attack should be adopted.

» When people focus too much on kumite as a means of self-defence they can forget these two essential facets. Unlike kata, kumite doesn’t aim to attack weak links for risk of injuring a sparring partner, and while technique may have kime (focus) once again for safety reasons, they are not accompanied by an attitude of Ikken Hisatsu.

Delivering A Finishing Blow

Delivering an Ikken Hisatsu technique is of course possible. A single finishing blow requires the perfect combination of technique and precision. Technique, that is correct, implies it has whole body involved to generate power (ultimately technique must equate to power), enough power in the right place to shut the brain down causing unconsciousness.

» A powerful blow to the skull for example, causes head to fling back. When it does, the brain moving in cerebrose fluid, flies to the back of skull resulting in trauma from behind. After this it then propels forward inside the skull hitting the font causing damage from both sides. Neuro transmitters fire and an electrical storm shorts out the nerves.

» It is not only a strike to head that can disable the entire body. A powerful and direct strike to many of the weak links causes ‘ectopic discharge’ (the uncontrolled firing of electrical signals). Receptors in the brain become overloaded with message of pain and circuit’s overloads, calcium and potassium flood the body – and with this storm of electrical charges, the entire body shuts down. Certain points have greatest density of nerve endings - they’re like bundles of exposed electrical wires. And the larger the cluster, the easier they are to short circuit. To the martial artists in self-defence, only these should be the target area.
Knowing Where And Understanding How
As discussed, for Ikken Hisatsu to actually occur, it requires the combination of technique and precision. Scientists refer to the perfect technique as “Kinetic linking” (a perfect flow of energy throughout the body). The biggest error in judgement karate-ka make is to put too much focus on single limbs to generate power. Power relies not only on the entire body, but it having traction with the ground below. Much like the perfect golf drive, only when these are all present, and, only when they work in perfect synchronicity can maximum power be generated.

Here is how a powerful punch should be executed:
Any punch starts in the feet, the rear foot must first drive itself backwards into the ground. Upon driving energy down into a solid surface (such as the ground), energy then flows back from where it came – but in double amounts!

This mass of energy then flows up into the legs where the calves and quads fire immediately after. As the energy flows into the hips, the hips fire forwards (hence power from energy flow and muscle contractions in the hips). It then moves up into the larger muscles of the back, chest and shoulders. If they fire at the precise time, with the precise technique, they also add muscular strength to the already flowing energy. Like the coiling then cracking of the whip, the energy multiplies through leverage and flows through the body and travels out through the arm and fist and snaps into the opponent. You can appreciate now why it takes years to master a punch.

Making Ikken Hisatsu Work For You
First understand the attitude of Ikken Hisatsu and realise its importance in self-defence. Second, apply the attitude of Ikken Hisatsu to the weakest links of the body - remember the secrets to this are found in kata. And finally, attack weak links with precision accuracy, clean technique and power that is generated form the entire body.

Why Does GKR Not Train In Conditioning?
Full contact fighters spend countless hours conditioning their shins. In Thailand, fighters kick banana trees up to 1000 times per day to deaden the nerves in their legs. Japanese Kyokoshin fighters use rolling pins to roll up and down their shins and kick into heavy bags to achieve the same goal.

» Many of these fighters criticise non-contact stylists who opt to avoid shin conditioning. So why do we not spend time conditioning our shins? What many full-contact fighters forget is that the majority of their conditioning training is not for the art – it’s for sport. These people train to enter tournaments where the goal is to stand toe-to-toe with an opponent, round after round, and win by way of attrition. GKR’s focus is not to see training for sport, but for life. Let me elaborate:

» In a real life confrontation, your aim should never be to stand toe-to-toe and win by way of attrition. Your aim is to strike fast, and strike powerfully to a vulnerable area. In such a situation conditioning is not required.

» Additionally, many of the fighters in Thailand retire in their early 20’s because they are unable to walk properly due to years of heavy conditioning training. This is not a criticism, as many have no choice, it being their only way to make money. A karate-ka on the other hand should be able to train well into old age, and conditioning training hinders the likelihood of this.

» There is nothing stopping any karate-ka from setting up a makawara (striking post) at home, or purchasing a heavy punching bag to punch and kick into.