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KUMITE TIPS

1. Work On Your Weaknesses

It's a natural human tendency to practise most often...

- i) The things we are good at: This is because they make us feel good about ourselves and our abilities.
- ii) The things we enjoy: It's a lot easier to be motivated by something we enjoy.

Very often these are one in the same because by practising those things we enjoy most, we soon become competent. In kumite terms, whether practising at home or sparring in the dojo, students will generally use the techniques and strategies they are good at or enjoy the most. Let's look at an example of this attitude in practise.

» Johnny constantly attacks because he is good at attacking. When his opponent attacks back, instead of trying to block (an area he lacks confidence in) he retreats away and circles, hoping to soon launch another of his favourite attacks. He also attempts to score with a Hook Kick frequently because he enjoys the new and exciting challenge this advanced technique brings.

» One day Johnny comes against an opponent (perhaps in the dojo, a tournament, or even on the street) who doesn't give him the time or room to set up his attacks. He is constantly on the back foot and his lack of defensive practise is coming back to haunt him. He is unable to adapt to the situation either, because he only knows one strategy and it is not working.

Does This Attitude Sound Familiar?

As a 2nd kyu have you ever found yourself going from being the big fish in your pond (dojo) to suddenly being a small fish in the ocean? Remember there will always be someone better than you, or someone whose strategy works perfectly against yours. This is why we must work on our weaknesses.

So Where Do You Start?

Give yourself a rating for each of the following out of 10.

- Rate your attacking out of 10?
- Rate your blocking out of 10?
- Rate your counter-attacking out of 10?
- Rate your footwork out of 10? (there are many types and you may wish to rate each)
- Rate your ability to score with kicks out of 10? (you may wish to rate each kick separately)

Brown Belt (2nd Kyu)



- Rate your zanshin out of 10?
- Rate your ability to put your whole body into your strikes out of 10?

There are of course many other questions you could add and you can note these yourself. Once you have your answers, look at the areas you rated yourself the lowest. Are these areas you hardly practise? It's likely they are.

» The answers to the questions above will give you an indication of what you need to start focusing on. Of course it might be a few areas; for example, you may want to start kicking more in kumite. Don't worry if your kicks don't score because they won't get better unless you practise. You may also need to start working on your counter-attacking and your ayumi ashi footwork when attacking (see Blue belt Kumite Tips for the descriptions of the various footwork).

» By working on your weaknesses you can start minimising your weaknesses. Remember, a good opponent will be able to identify these and exploit them; therefore our goal is to develop ourselves into a well-rounded kumite exponent who has numerous techniques and strategies for a variety of situations.

2. Develop Your Fukutsu no Seishin (Never Give Up Attitude)

With most sports we compete against other people/teams; sometimes we win and sometimes we lose. Karate, being an individual sport, means we only compete with ourselves. As long as we are always pushing ourselves and focusing on what we are doing, we are always going to improve. Therefore, we are always winning; we are always better than the person we were a month ago, a year ago etc. This develops self-confidence and our self-esteem.

» Self-confidence gives us the courage and belief to try new things and chase our goals. But no worthwhile endeavour is all smooth sailing. Worthwhile endeavours push our comfort zones and ask that we grow in some way to achieve them. Therefore, any worthwhile endeavour is bound to give us some challenges and test our resolve. This is where another essential self-defence technique is required, fukutsu no seishin (a never give up attitude).

» Kumite is an excellent way to develop your fukutsu no seishin.

- When you start to tire does your guard drop or compromise in any way?
- When you start to tire do you come up in stance?
- When you start to tire do you go on the defensive?
- When you start to tire do you forget to strategise and become predictable?
- When you accidentally receive a knock do you want to stop sparring?
- When your opponent is too good do you retreat every time they attack or do you try to block or try to anticipate?
- And most importantly, when you are completely exhausted do you stand there and let your opponent win?

Kumite is supposed to challenge us. It is supposed to be a battle. Not so much against our opponent (although we do try to win) but primarily it is a battle against ourselves. When you understand that kumite is really a battle against yourself you can start to assess your development based on how you fared against the inner opponent. Rather than how good you are because you were able to dominate a Green belt, or how hopeless you were against a Black belt.

- It does not matter if your opponent is too good. What matters is that you keep trying - that is fukutsu no seishin.
- It does not matter if you are exhausted. What matters is that you do not compromise your guard or your stance because these are what you will rely on in self-defence. That is fukutsu no seishin.

3. Start A Strength Training Program

Developing our fukutsu no seishin is about developing our karate spirit. But remember that karate is a journey of the body and mind. If you spend a lot of time at home developing your kata and kumite you will most likely

experience something very common, namely, where your technique improves but you don't feel that you're getting any more explosive, faster or stronger.

» If this situation is frustrating you, then it's time to start a strength training program. You might think, but I'm already training every spare moment I get? If that is the case, then you need to balance out your training to spend a little less time on technique so you have a little time to work on developing your body.

» Before we get into it, it should be noted that there are many side-benefits to starting a strength training program. Some of these include:

- a) Your kihon and kata will improve enormously.
- b) Your speed and explosiveness in kumite will give you enormous confidence to attack more often in kumite - rather than being hesitant because you expect your opponent will anticipate you and strike first (sen-no-sen).
- c) Your overall confidence will improve in both your karate and personal life.
- d) Strength training burns far more calories than aerobic training, so you will lose weight. So apart from getting stronger you will also get lighter (adding more speed to your movements).

There are a number of misconceptions about strength training. You will find a number of articles relating to developing strength in the Articles section of this website (in the Training category). So let's just look at a few of these and give a brief summary.

i) Strength training will make be big and bulky:

No it won't. People get big and bulky when they regularly lift extremely heavy weights and take in plenty of protein. By starting a basic strength program you will tone up.

ii) Strength training is expensive because you have to join a gym:

No you don't. Push ups (press ups), squats, sprints, plyometric training can all be done free of charge at home (or in a nearby park). If you wish to develop strength in your arms, lift grocery bags, oil canisters etc. You can also by a punching bag and hit that to develop strength and power.

iii) Strength training is time consuming:

No it's not. In fact, the longer you spend time strength training the less efficient it will be. This is because to maintain a long strength training session means you are not giving 100%. Think about it, at the end of a marathon the runners are all exhausted. But even at the end of the 100 meter dash, sprinters are also exhausted. It may only be 100 meters but the intensity put into each step was far greater.

Do some basic research on Google, read some related magazines or even go to Youtube and type in 'home strength training' for ideas. You will find plenty of easy and free ideas to get you started.

4. More Than Ever, Relax

It only makes sense that after promoting a strength training program that we recommend you work more on relaxing. When people get stronger they tend to use too much strength in their karate. Strength is great but it can't be the major contributor into your power. Strength will help you develop dynamic, explosive movements, but if the body is tense then newly acquired strength won't help you with your kata or your kumite.

» Remember, relaxed doesn't mean losing form or coming up from stance. Like a sprinter, a tennis player or goal keeper, our stance is imperative as it provides the platform for us to launch from. So stay low, keep form and relax - then you'll be able to utilise your speed and strength.

5. Find A Training Partner

You have a Black tip on your belt; you have come so far, but in many ways you still have a long way to go. And what's worse, improvements don't come as fast as they used to. What's more, you want to spend ample time developing different kumite techniques, combinations, skills etc. But you just don't get the time to really develop them. With these thoughts in your head it's easy to lose focus and become discouraged.

» If you want to get yourself to the next level, one key is to find yourself a training partner, someone who shares your passion for progress.

» They may be at your dojo, they may be at a nearby dojo or someone you met at a seminar and found common ground with almost immediately.

» You can start to help each other in more ways than one. The following are a few examples:

- i) You can train at one another's dojos (if you don't already) and push each other.
- ii) You can get to class early or stay back and do some extra training together.
- iii) You can meet up at a park or someone's home and train together. The advantage of home training is that you can decide what you will work on and for how long.

While karate is by and large an individual activity, it can be made easier by having someone who is working with you on a regular basis, and who is willing to do the journey with you.

6. Economy Of Movement

2nd kyu's grade kata, Empi, is a dynamic kata where our goal is to develop straight line, explosive movements. But this is not solely achieved by the speed of our muscles; it's also achieved by minimizing any excess movement. In Empi, a student seeks to trim each movement to nothing but what is absolutely essential. This habit should also be taken into a person's kumite.

a) Economy Of Movement When Attacking

As a higher grade you likely have a wide arsenal of

techniques, some of which enjoy regular success while others rarely achieve their objective. There are many reasons why our less-favoured techniques rarely score (less practice, slower movement, poor coordination, poor footwork etc) but one common reason is that our less successful attacks have excess movement.

» This can involve telegraphing before attacking (which is still considered part of the technique) or excess movement in the technique.

» A student should practice all their attacks often enough with the goal of "trimming the fat" off any excess movement. Two key areas that often contain excess movement include:

- Don't go back before you go forward. Many students will pull their hand back before striking. In essence, their first movement is to go backwards before finally going forwards. Trim each of your hand attacks so that the first movement is in the direction of the target.
- No lazy stances. Many students will alter their fighting stance before striking. Be sure that your fighting stance is in a position that you can spring from at every given moment. To stand tall, then drop in a stance you can launch an attack from is one extra movement too many.

a) Economy Of Movement When Defending

All of the blocks in kata Empi are short and precise. They must start from and finish in the exact position. That said, many students when sparring will not use sharp, precise blocks.

» A forearm generally only needs to move a few inches to execute an effective block, and then snap back to position. That said, many students will use large blocking movements. Even if an excessive block is effective, it will leave you open for a follow up strike.

» The focus of a novice defender will only be to block the incoming attack. Meanwhile the focus of the advanced defender will be to block the incoming attack and any potential follow up attacks. Liken it to a good pool or snooker player who sinks a ball with the next shot in mind.

» When shadow sparring, practice defending in kumite with short sharp blocks, quickly moving them a few inches and then snapping them back to position. Note that a block should never leave you exposed or vulnerable.

» Then when sparring an actual opponent, constantly assess your defensive economy of movement. This will help you to tighten the screws on your defense and help you eliminate unnecessary excess movements.

7. Develop Empi's Defensive Senjutsu (Combat Strategy) Of Karakuri (Evading)

As far as defensive skills go, so far in the journey we have covered the ability to:

- Hold our ground and block/counter (go-no-sen)
- Anticipate their attack and strike as they start their attack (sen-no-sen)

- Edging. Which involves edging back allowing your opponent's strikes to narrowly miss only to launch your own attack the moment they stop.

Kata Empi introduces us to the defensive senjutsu of karakuri (evading). In kumite terms, it's not advisable to follow the exact technique used in the kata (in part because these have been formalised and also because many involve defense against a grappling technique). But the concept of evading is one that you can start to develop. Karakuri (evading) is the most advanced defensive skill because:

- i) It requires you to move your body rather than your arms. And our body will generally move slower than our arms.
- ii) It can land you in hot water if you evade the wrong direction. The last thing you want to do is duck what you think will be a punch but turns out to be a round kick.
- iii) With poor footwork one might evade a strike but be off balance, leaving them vulnerable to be knocked, pushed or tackled to the ground.

That said, evading (karakuri) has many benefits:

- a) Sometimes your opponent is very fast – too fast for your blocking. Therefore to evade or duck the moment they begin an attack means you don't have to wait to start blocking.
- b) It can frustrate an attacker because every time they try to attack, their target area (eg your face or stomach) moves and they strike nothing but air.
- c) While you are safe from their strike, you are still very close to your opponent, thereby able to bob back up and quickly counter strike.

Keys to evading (karakuri) are:

1. Stay in a quality stance.
2. Keep your hands up. While your goal is to move your body, your hands are there to block if necessary.
3. As you evade, lean slightly forward. If you lean slightly back you can be easily pushed back or over.
4. Drop in stance by bending your knees. You don't just tilt or lean your body. You must also bend your legs in your stance.
5. Don't stay down for long. You must pop up straight away before your opponent can take advantage of your weak position.
6. If you don't pop straight back up, your other choice is to evade/duck and move in stance to a new position before popping back up.

Practice this by yourself at home or shadow sparring before or after class. When you develop the ability to evade/duck quickly, start against real opponents. It doesn't matter if you are not successful very often because the dojo is not your place to win; it is your training ground where you develop your skills. Remember that no one defensive senjutsu is best. Each has merits depending on situation. This is why you must try to develop all types of defensive skills.

8. Develop Kata Empi's Attacking Senjutsu - Up And Down

As a lower grade you are told to stay the same height in kumite. This is because moving up and down affects you in two distinct ways:

- i) It slows you down. The shortest distance between two objects is a straight line.
- ii) It detracts from your power. This is due to the fact that your energy is not moving directly towards a target.

Embarking on kata Empi, for the first time we are encouraged to move up and down. In short, they are to minimize the opportunity of receiving an anticipation strike to the head whilst attacking and to minimize the chances of an opponent grabbing onto us while attacking.

» In real life self-defence, an attacker will mostly want to strike our face. This is a natural instinct as when a person is upset with us, they direct this anger towards our face. Understanding this means there is value in learning to attack while dropping the body - thus lowering the head below an opponent's line of sight. The key is to remember that in Empi, we do not lose power in our technique because our posture remains upright - rather than leaning forward while striking.

» In your kumite, it can be good practice to use this principle when attacking with a reverse punch to the body, dropping very low as you execute the punch, although in self-defence you would divert the strike towards the ground or shoot for their front leg. You will discover in a number of kata above Black belt that we take an opponent down by taking out their front leg (eg Kururunfa and Kanku-dai).

» You can also use this tactic when attempting a number of attacking sweeps - where you duck below an anticipation strike rather than attempt to block it and execute the take down. This is very difficult and will take time to develop.

9. Use Circles

We have all seen boxers circle one another, and to the untrained eye it is for no reason at all. To those in the know however they are seeing an ongoing strategy at work, one that seeks to put the odds of success in a boxer's favour. The very same principle applies in karate, circling an opponent and waiting for the conditions to be perfect is the ideal way to strike without being picked off or counter-struck.

» Before we begin, you should be aware that the term 'circling' does not imply you do a full circle around your opponent. Rather it implies that you circle partially (a foot or two) and stop - preparing yourself to attack if the opportunity presents itself. If it does not, we might circle again. Each time we might circle in a different direction and by a small amount. Circling has two distinct advantages:

- i) **Take Your Opponent Out Of Stance.** When we are standing still in our best fighting stance we feel confident in our ability to throw a fast devastating pick-off strike. We also feel confident to hold our ground and block - giving us the platform to launch a

counter strike from.

This is where circling comes into play. If one person 'acts' by circling around, the opponent must then 'react' by adjusting out of their stance to stay face to face. In essence, they get into their perfect stance and hold, then adjust stance and hold, then adjust stance and hold, adjust stance and hold etc. A smart exponent will time his or her attacks so that they are moving forward at a time when their opponent is not perfectly poised in stance.

- ii) **To Control Distance.** One of the requirements for a successful attack is to launch from perfect distance. Too far and you give your opponent too much reaction time, too close and they will attack you first. Yes, it's all about perfect distance. The problem is, most people will not give you perfect distance. If you edge forward to get to perfect distance, they will feel you encroaching in on their personal space and either move away or attack.

Once again, this is where circling comes into play. When we circle, we can actually edge closer to our opponent without them being aware because we are entering their personal space from the side. You can often circle an opponent and end up an entire shoulder width closer without them realising you have bridged the gap between you.

The A,B,C's of Circling

- a) Always stay in stance! Start in stance, move in stance and once you stop be sure you are in a perfect stance that is ready to either attack or defend. When you are circling, do not allow your feet to cross over, instead shuffle in your fighting stance.
- b) Maintain your guard. As circling should involve being at attacking distance, you must ensure your guard is always primed. This will allow you to both attack or defend quickly.
- c) Monitor distance. Don't allow the distance to blow out. Circle with the goal to get into perfect launching distance. On the flip side however, if your opponent is setting you up to attack you may circle and create more distance to prevent them from successfully attacking.