



# GKR KARATE JOURNEY

## KUMITE TIPS

### 1. Your Body Must Work As A Team

A karate strike involves the entire body. When you observe a lower grade attacking during kumite, you generally witness each limb working individually. For example, a kick encompasses little more than the power and momentum of the leg, and a punch encompasses little more than the power and momentum of the arm.

» Most karate students understand that each strike involves the entire body, but to know and not do is to not really know. As an instructor, you would rather see a student move a little slower but involve their entire body into a punch than to see them throw out an arm (without the body) at lightening speed.

» In self-defence, an attacker will likely be bigger and stronger than you. When a smaller person uses their entire weight in a technique they can cause significant damage.

» Having reached Green belt, it's time to develop your understanding of this, and to start focusing on making sure you use it during kumite. It's imperative that your body begins to work as a cohesive team. An instructor should be able to watch a student spar and see an entire body moving in unison in everything it does.

» Using the entire body in a strike or kick adds reach, power and stability. The power of a punch or kick starts from the ground and works up through the body. It requires a number of muscle explosions to fire in perfect sequence.

- There are many articles in the Training Category of our Articles section that discuss Power. Most of which relate in some way to this subject.

Using the entire body in a technique also allows for a quick exit as the more weight we throw forward into a strike, the more the muscles in our front leg are activated to execute a fast escape.

If you were to video your kumite and then watch it back:

- a) Would you observe a person whose weight is constantly being transferred forwards and backwards? Or would you see a still body with punches and kicks extending from this?
- b) During this transference of weight, would you see it coincide with quality stances? Or would the weight distribution dismantle your stances, causing you to

## Green Belt (6<sup>th</sup> Kyu)



start running forwards or backwards to re-stabilise your balance?

### 2. Improve Your Combination Attacks

At Yellow belt, it was recommended that students follow the principles taught in 1st kata (Taigyoku shodan). That being to practise Ikken hisatsu kumite - where we adopt the strategy of delivering singular attacks, where we put our entire body, energy and focus into the attack. We also use the principles of 1st kata where we stay in a deep rooted stance at all times, stay the same height throughout our attack and work on creating distance immediately after attacking.

» At Orange belt, it was recommended that students continue to develop their Ikken hisatsu kumite. However it was also recommended that they start applying the principles of 2nd kata (Taigyoku nidan) whereby they attack in combinations of two techniques. Any more attacks (for example 3 or 4 techniques) and the student will likely start to lose form in the stances or footwork, their form and power in their hand techniques and overall balance and kime.

» At Green belt level, it's still recommended that you continue to keep your combination attacks to a minimum (two techniques at most). You may throw the odd attack of three or four techniques, but the majority of techniques should be singular or double techniques. You should be practising double attacks more frequently than when you were an Orange belt.

» Having achieved Green belt, it's likely that your double attacks (eg throwing two hands strikes or a hand and foot combination) do still find you compromising in either form, stances, footwork, balance, zanshin etc. Before you start to develop multiple attack combinations you want to feel safe and secure that you don't compromise anything on a double attack. In essence we want to walk before we can run.

» You must appreciate that while multiple attacks in kumite (chasing an opponent across the dojo) may appear impressive, a real life attacker will hardly run away. By contrast they will likely be right in your face. Therefore your best attacks will be singular attacks or double attacks. And as stated many times, if you throw multiple attacks on the spot then it means you have engaged in toe-to-toe sparring, and this is unwise against a larger, stronger opponent.

If you find that you cannot reach your opponent unless you unleash a flurry of hand attacks (eg 3, 4 or more) then it implies you are falling down in one of these areas:

- a) Footwork. You are likely running in (running uses small steps) rather than using footwork. Proper footwork (moving from one quality stance to another) covers far more distance and in a much shorter time frame.
- b) You are not striking in stance. While footwork focuses on moving through in stances, striking in stance only focuses on the stances we use upon striking. One reason why students fall short (thus having to chase after their opponent) is that they strike in a very short stance. Like 1st kata, our strikes should be hitting the target while we land in a long forward like stance. It doesn't have to be a picture perfect long forward stance, but the principles the stance promotes should exist. These include being two shoulder widths long, the front knee over the front foot and the hips square (for a reverse punch). These all add greater reach and power.
- c) You are telegraphing your intentions. If it is obvious to your opponent that you are about to attack, they will edge backwards, requiring you to cover more ground to reach them. Instead of chasing them down, postpone your attack and focus on minimising your telegraphing next time. Examples of telegraph are:
  - i) The Head - Clenching the teeth, closing the mouth, taking a deep breath, narrowing the eyes or tilting the head forward. The face should remain calm at all times during kumite.
  - ii) The Arms - Closing one or both of the hands, moving the guard to a more attacking posture, pulling the front hand back closer to the body or tensing up the arms.

iii) The Legs - Lowering in stance, raising in stance, shortening the stance, altering the angles of the feet, adding a bounce or ceasing bouncing. Many students wind up their attack before they commit to a strike, so this is an obvious one to look for.

iv) Strategy - If you are predictable in your strategy then your opponent will always be one step ahead of you. For example, if you always throw a reverse punch followed by a front kick, they will prepare for this.

d) You are starting your attacks from poor distance. If you start too far away your opponent will have too much reaction time. If they are an advanced karateka they will take advantage of this and score on you (you won't get a combination attack off). If they are not experienced they will back away leaving you unable to score unless you go after them. Rather than going after them, postpone your attack and focus on starting from a perfect distance next time.

### 3. Opening The Rear Hand

You were permitted (if you chose) to start opening the front hand of your guard at Orange belt. Having achieved Green belt you may open your rear hand if you choose. This implies that you should be versed enough in combat too, if you have an open hand, close the fist and shape the wrist correctly in a very short period of time should you chose to strike from guard.

### 4. Improve Your Counter-Attacks

The benefits and importance of the counter-attack was listed in the Orange belt section of 'The Journey'. Be sure to visit the Orange belt section if you would like to read about this.

» In short, it's most likely that in a real life confrontation that the attacker will throw the first strike. When this happens a defender has three options.

- a) Block and do nothing. This will put the attacker in good stead to launch a follow up technique.
- b) Retreat, evade or side-step. While this creates distance for us to live to fight another day (which will likely occur in a matter of seconds), it also makes our opponent aware of our skills; hence they may adapt their tactics.
- c) Block and counter. A person is never more open and vulnerable than when they are in the process of attacking. Their 'T' line (our most vulnerable areas are found in an area resembling a capital 'T': our temples, eyes, nose, mouth, chin, throat, solar plexus and groin) are all exposed, as are the floating ribs, knees etc. Furthermore, because our focus is on striking rather than defending, receiving a blow affects us mentally as much as physically.

Because of the importance the counter-attack plays in self-defence, it should start to become a major focus in your kumite journey. To score a successful counter attack a student needs the following:

- i) Maintaining a well-balanced stance. This does not imply you must stand your ground and block. In fact, where an opponent is larger and heavier, it is wise to shift your stance either back or on an angle as you block. This serves to either absorb some of their energy or so their weapon (the foot or hand) has extended beyond its ideal power area. As you become more proficient you may even move forward as you block to snuff out their technique before it builds full momentum.

What this point does imply is one of the following:

While you are moving in your stance, you do not compromise the quality of the stance. Both feet should slide evenly into their new position; hence the stance still maintains the same proportions, strengths, balance etc.

While you are moving in stance, you may choose to move from one stance to a different one. In other words, only one foot might slide (eg the front foot slides back to a stance similar to Cat stance). But as you transition yourself from one stance to another, you don't lose your posture, balance etc.

- ii) Use 'economy of movement'. In combat, nano-seconds count. Therefore any excess movement needs to be culled. This is why it's often said that the further one travels in their karate journey that it becomes as much about culling as it does about adding. Examples of people using excess movements are:

Over blocking. For a block to be effective it often requires only the smallest of movements. Over blocking may still be successful against the attack but it leaves you exposed for a follow up technique. Beyond this it reduces your opportunity to counter strike and can leave you to unbalanced to counter strike.

» Over preparing your strike. During Kihon (basics) we often practise bringing our striking hand to our floating ribs prior to striking. During kumite (especially for Green belt and above) we should have the ability execute a quality strike directly from our guard position. Students often make the mistake of blocking, and then preparing their hand at their floating ribs prior to launching their counter-strike. This takes up time you don't have!

» Anticipation strikes (like the pick off) are not suggested at Orange belt because they are highly advanced techniques that rely on precise timing and shifting of the body weight.

## 5. Develop Your Defensive Zanshin

At Orange belt we introduced you to the awareness of developing your zanshin (continued state of awareness) when you are attacking. Having reached Green belt it's important to start honing your defensive zanshin.

Examples of a student who lacks defensive zanshin are:

- a) Turning the head away from the attacker. This 'flinching'

movement is simply a subconscious reaction that can be eliminated over time.

- b) Closing the eyes while defending. This is another subconscious reaction that can be eliminated over time.
- c) Ducking the head (to a foetal position): The foetal position is instinctive to every human being. You don't have to train someone to go into 'full protective mode'. We naturally revert to it because it protects our vulnerable areas and has a subconscious feeling of safety associated with it. Even an advanced karate-ka may occasionally find themselves naturally reverting to this defensive position. The key is however, that once there, you do something rather than stay there.
- d) Giving up once scored upon. Many students try to block but once scored upon, immediately 'switch off'. They give up, dropping their hands and coming out of their stance. You must understand that in real life self-defence you may be struck (and struck hard) but that does not mean it's over. You have to keep fighting on.

The key is to try your best to defend. And if scored upon (even multiple times) to keep defending until your opponent stops and moves away. At this point in time (signalling the end of that engagement) you can bow and start again.

- e) Coming out of stance. This was mentioned in the point above, but it does not solely occur when a student gives up. It's another natural reaction. Students might tell themselves over and over to stay in stance but each time they find their subconscious takes over and they come out of stance.

In terms of self-defence, you need to train yourself to stay in stance. This will ensure any attacks you make have power and reach. It will also enable you to withstand pressure (eg by way of a tackle).

Some might argue that defensive zanshin is more important than offensive and should come first. The reason it has not is because of the natural progression most students go through with their defence. This includes:

- i) Initially, the student will back away and retreat whenever their opponent attacks (this is most often a subconscious response to an attack as the student does not feel confident in their blocking ability).
- ii) Understanding the importance of blocking in self-defence, they start to remind themselves to hold their ground and try to block. This is a period of trial and error and they may often find themselves overwhelmed (both physically and emotionally). This results in them often ducking their head or turning their head to face away from their opponent. This 'flinching' is perfectly natural and a subconscious reaction.
- iii) Over time they learn to hold their stance and block competently. When this occurs they can start to apply focus to minimal stance shifting whilst blocking and their zanshin. To expect it too early will only cause frustration for the student.

Having reached your Green belt, your defensive skills should be a part instinctive reaction. This means that whilst blocking your mind is free to think of other things. One of these includes defensive zanshin.

» As you develop throughout your kumite journey you will find that other principles become instinctive (such as footwork, stances, counter-attacking, multiple attacks etc). The more these technical areas become instinctive the more you can work on overcoming natural emotional reactions (such as ducking, turning the head etc).

## 6. Develop Your Ikimi And Itsoku

Now you are a Green belt, you have most likely developed a few favoured attacks for kumite. Your goal will often be to execute these quickly. Two vital ingredients required for any attack are Ikimi and Itsoku:

Ikimi is the principle of floating. When you are in the process of attacking, you should avoid any excess tension in your body. This applies especially to the legs. They should move through light and swift as though floating.

» Itsoku is the principle of being glued to the floor. The moment you make contact with the ground (and punch) you should adopt itsoku. This ensures you land in a rock solid stance. This will not only add enormous power to your strike it will give you a greater ability to change directions immediately after striking. Finally, it will make it much harder for your opponent to unbalance you (either through the process of blocking, sweeping, pulling, tackling etc).

Many karate-ka make the habit of adopting only one principle.

» Some are forever too tense in their kumite. While this serves them well when they are defending or the moment they land after an attack, it hinders their speed and power because tension slows the body down. The equation for Power is ' $P=M+V$ ', meaning, Power is derived from Mass times Velocity. Therefore to have your body slowed down by excess tension equals less power.

For their opponents in kumite, while they are strong, their lack of speed means they are easier to retreat from, easier to counter-attack and they lack agility.

» Some students are forever too relaxed in their kumite. While they will generally move with speed and agility, they never really add kime (the focus or harnessing of ones energy into a single moment) into any of their strikes or kicks. What's more they are easy to counter strike and overbalance. If you ever attack and find yourself unable to stop yourself from travelling forwards after you have finished, then it implies you have too much ikimi and not enough itsoku.

» Balancing these two principles is part of the life-long journey of karate. Your time to start focusing on this is now.

» There is an enormous side benefit to developing your ikimi and itsoku. Your kata and basic combinations when

moving through in stances will improve greatly.

## 7. Understanding The Importance Of The Bow During Kumite

By now your kumite ability would be coming along nicely and as such, with techniques becoming more instinctive, perhaps your focus has started to see kumite somewhat as competition. While there is nothing wrong with being competitive in kumite, a common pitfall among competitive students is that they often neglect to bow to their opponent when scored upon. And with the risk of stereotyping, it is often larger men that choose not to bow when a smaller framed person successfully lands a technique on them. Perhaps it's ruled by ego, perhaps the desire to win so badly clouds their judgement, or perhaps even their mindset is, "well that wouldn't have hurt me in real life anyway." Ultimately, the more competitive we become the more emphasis we must place on the importance of the bow. This is because the bowing to our opponent whenever they score extends beyond etiquette.

Values of the Bow are:

The act of stopping and bowing to your opponent serves as a reality check. The very process gives you time to think about the fact that your defences were not up to scratch (inspiring you to work harder). It also sends you a message that your strategy was unsuccessful, giving you a brief second or two to think up a new strategy (remember, the definition of frustration is to do the same thing over and over yet expecting a different result). It matters not that a much smaller person may not have hurt you with their strike in real life, because what if they struck you with a knife? You stopping to bow is not about your opponent and their abilities, it is about you and accepting your lack of abilities to inspire you to become better. If we refuse to accept our shortcomings we will never grow.

» Understanding the importance of the bow is just the first step. The second step is to understand how and when it should be done. Be sure to visit our Articles archive and click on the 'Self-Defence' icon in our 'Training' articles. Here you will find an enlightening article titled 'Even Our Bow Prepares Us For Self-Defence'.

## 8. Avoid Toe-to-toe Sparring

Avoiding toe-to-toe combat has been discussed a number of times in the kata section of each belt grade. Considering kata is designed to teach principles and techniques for real life self-defence, we should adhere to these during kumite.

» It's common to see students standing toe-to-toe and slugging it out. This is where kumite becomes a sport. While it does help develop our reactions and coordination, Green belt is not the time to do this. This is because we are still creating sparring habits and this is the last habit we want to instil.

» If a person should attack you in real life, they will likely be much bigger than you so you don't want a habit of

standing right in front of them for an extended period. Be sure to continue working on your kata principles, which involve getting in and out (cause damage and then move to safe distance to asses), or breaking the line after an attack.

## 9. Control Your Self-Talk

Karate is a pursuit of both body and mind. As a lower grade you have so much to think about during kumite (from a technical perspective) that there is literally no room for much else. Having reached Green belt and a degree of unconscious competence (to do something well without having to think about it) you have room in your mind for other things.

» While you have plenty of new techniques, strategies and principles to work on, don't forget to think about your self-talk. You may not realise this but you are talking to yourself 24 hours a day. Because of this, the biggest hurdle anyone faces when trying to be a success at any endeavour is their own self-talk. It can lift us up or drag us down.

» Because we are talking to ourselves 24 hours a day, it means we are talking to ourselves constantly during kumite. And our self-talk during kumite affects our success as much as any other aspect of karate.

The following are examples of things students might say to themselves to detract from their ability:

- a) "They are too fast," "They are too experienced," "They are too big," "They are too strong" etc. Students might even say more than one of these! Humans only have the ability to really focus on one thing at any given time. So if we are focused on our opponent's advantages, we are too preoccupied to start looking for our own advantages.
- b) "I'm too old," "I'm too slow" etc. This is very similar to the above, however rather than focusing on our opponent's strengths we are focusing on our own weaknesses. A better way to talk to yourself might be, "Ok they are big and strong. But they aren't so mobile." This self talk will trigger a new strategy. People who are big and strong are used to people just standing there like sitting ducks.
- c) "What's the point of attacking, they will just block me and counter attack." The worst thing about this is that we end up attacking and they really do end up blocking and counter attacking. But does that mean we were right all along? Possibly. But the problem is when we are worried with these thoughts, they transcend into our body. The result is we telegraph more, move slower, fail to set up our attack properly, start from poor distance etc.

A better way to talk to yourself would be. "Ok, so they have good counter attacking. So I need to make sure I stay relaxed, get to perfect distance, don't telegraph, stay low, and commit to my technique." In short, focus on solutions, not problems.

Next time you spar, take a moment to listen to your self-talk:

- Does it portray a defeatist attitude?
- Does it cause you to hesitate?
- Does it destroy your self-confidence?
- Does it portray your opponent in far too positive a light?

If you answered yes to any of the above, it's time to start developing your self-talk. And as karate is a Way of Life, you can do the exact same exercise in other areas of your life. The way you talk to yourself at school, or in exams, or at work, at home, in your relationships etc.

## 10. Feinting With Hand Techniques

We have not recommended feinting (pretending to strike) prior to Green belt because, as a lower grade it's important to make a decision to attack and commit to it. This will help a person refine their technique and distance.

» Beyond this, when a lower grade feints they often do it very poorly and end up getting themselves into trouble.

» That said, any grade can and should feint (or fake) during kumite. However, at Green belt we can start to really develop our feinting skills.

There are two types of feinting hand strategies.

- i) Start and Stop: The start and stop feint involves stepping the front foot out quickly (but only a slight distance) and executing the first part of the hand technique. Then quickly bringing the front foot back to fighting stance again. In essence, you start your attack and then stop, immediately retreating back to your fighting stance. This strategy serves two purposes:

- a) It allows you to assess your opponent's reactions. For example, if you fake to attack and your opponent backs away, then you can assess that when you attack, you should look to cover plenty of ground and commit to more than one strike if necessary.

If however they throw a punch, you can assess that they are poised to strike the moment you strike (the Japanese term for this is 'Sen-no-sen'). This will help you adopt a different strategy, such as to fake and then strike immediately after they throw a premature strike.

- b) It puts their focus on you. We are never at our best when our focus is on our opponent. The famous boxer, Mohammed Ali, used this tactic successfully throughout his career. Not so much in the ring, but in his talk leading up to a bout. His opponent spent most of their time thinking about Ali rather than their own training, strategies etc.

Whenever our opponent feints in a realistic fashion, our thoughts are disrupted by the urgent need to respond. In

other words, if you feint often you continue to disrupt the thoughts of your opponent, as their focus shifts to you and your potential strategy rather than their own.

- ii) Start And Change: There is no better way to reduce your opponent's confidence than to offer them no obvious openings. When an opponent does not have a target to focus on (due to an excellent guard) they will hesitate and withdraw. If you come up against an opponent whose guard offers no openings, rather than lose confidence you can create openings by applying the start and change feint technique.

The start and change feint involves stepping the front foot out quickly (but only a slight distance) and executing the first part of the hand technique, then quickly changing the technique completely, directing the strike to a different area of the body. When you change your attack you may use the same arm or use the opposite arm. For example, feint to jab (lunge) low and then change up and jab head level with the same hand, or feint to jab (lunge) to the head and then use your other hand to reverse punch low.

» This strategy is designed to open up a target area. When you cannot see an opening in an opponents guard, your best plan is to feint to one area, drawing your opponent's attention and guard to one area of their body (opening up another area).

» In the famous martial arts book 'The Thirty-Six Strategems' it reads, "Make a sound in the east, then strike in the west. In any battle the element of surprise can provide an overwhelming advantage. Even when face to face with an enemy, surprise can still be employed by attacking where he least expects it. To do this you must create an expectation in the enemy's mind through the use of a feint. The idea here is to get the enemy to focus his forces in a location, and then attack elsewhere which would be weakly defended." This principle is often credited to Sun Tzu (author of the Book of War) but texts of this existed 150 years prior to his birth. (On a side note, Sun Tzu discussed a similar idea but in relation to fire).

» The most important part of a feint is that it is realistic. Throwing a hand out is not believable. Shifting the entire body (even sliding a foot out and back) with the hand will likely cause your opponent to truly react. Practice a technique slowly and feel the movements. Then complete the technique halfway a few times. After this, complete it again only go out one third of the way. This is what your feint should involve - the exact movements of the technique one third of the way out.

» For Green belt we recommended you start developing your feinting with hand techniques. We do not suggest you start feinting with leg techniques as an inexperienced karate-ka will often bring themselves undone feinting with kicks. This is because they find themselves in a poor position (poor stance, balance, distance etc). At Green belt a student should allow their kicks to come out truly to develop their technique. This does not mean a Green belt cannot feint with kicks, these tips are merely suggestions for your kumite journey.