



GKR KARATE JOURNEY

KUMITE TIPS

1. Kizen Kumite

Kizen is the Japanese term for 'continuous and never-ending improvement'. As you work towards Black belt, your kumite needs to show improvement at each belt level. This does not mean that you must have developed every technique suggested, but the basic principles should be present. Some of these include:

Zanshin. Your zanshin after attacking or during defence should be instinctive by now.

Weight distribution. By Red belt a student should be getting a strong grasp on the concept of using their weight in everything they do. This implies launching the weight forward to attack and quickly bringing it back to centre immediately afterwards.

Quality guard. Lower grades often start with a sound guard but only because they are following instructions. By Red belt, a quality guard should feel natural. You should maintain a quality guard throughout the sparring bout rather than for the first 30 seconds or so.

Stances. An observer should be able to see traditional stances in a Red belt student's kumite. For example they might see the principles of zenkutsu dachi when the student strikes, or the principles of kiba dachi when they defend.

Staying low. Lower grades often pop up and down (in height) during kumite. This especially applies to their attacking. By Red belt a student should be able to stay low during their kumite.

Using footwork rather than running (in attack and defence). One reason why students raise in height during kumite is because they run (to attack or to retreat). By Red belt a student should be using ashi sabaki (footwork) instead of running. This will add speed, power, reach, mobility and solidity to their kumite.

» At this level you should have a sound concept of your parameters (attacking from correct distance and landing at correct distance). You should always aim to finish hand attacks with a well-bent arm and kicks should also show good distance.

» There are of course many other qualities we have suggested for you to develop on your journey thus far and

Red Belt (4th Kyu)



each of these should be worked on and improved, (such as counter-attacking, distance, minimised telegraphing etc).

2. Start To Really Develop Your Sen-No-Sen (Anticipation Techniques)

It was only at your last grade that we first suggested adding anticipation/pick off techniques (sen-no-sen) to your defensive arsenal. Up until that point we had suggested you use one of two defensive senjutsu (combat strategies). To recap, these were to either a) create distance, or b) use go-no-sen (block and counter).

» A more advanced method of dealing with the attacker's vulnerability is the anticipation strike, or pick off. The Japanese term for this is 'sen-no-sen'. To develop this technique requires:

- i) Acute timing
- ii) Quick technique (free of any excess movement)
- iii) Quality zanshin (continued state of awareness)

It involves reading your opponents body language (one reason why it's an advanced technique). Then, when the opponent starts their attack, before they can put it into full

swing, move in with your own technique. Your technique should not only land first, it should prevent them from ever finalising theirs.

» This technique will take years to develop but is highly effective in self-defence. It's worth noting that it is much easier to use in self-defence because:

- i) You will unlikely be up against a trained attacker.
- ii) Your attacker is unlikely aware that you train in martial arts.
- iii) Your attacker will likely throw swinging techniques, which are much slower than the karate Lunge or Reverse Punch.

Your Red belt is a catalyst to start developing this technique. Sen-no-sen becomes valuable in self-defence because a smaller defender can identify the opportunity to strike their larger attacker's vulnerable points mid-attack. This means they do not have to try to block, absorb or retreat from the larger attacker's heavy blow.

» Having trained with Bassai-dai for some months now, a student would be starting to well-equip themselves with principles required to perform an effective sen-no-sen technique.

Some of the principles of sen-no-sen that Bassai-dai develops are:

- i) Developing straight line attacks. This enables you to quickly bridge the gap between your attacker, and ensures all your energy (mass) travels directly into the target area.
- ii) Developing explosive movements from the very beginning of a technique and continuing this through until the technique has been completed.
- iii) Landing in a strong stance with a technique encompassing full kime (a focus of energy).
- iv) Putting full kime into techniques in a short space. This is essential for close quarter combat.
- v) Moving forward with strikes that can - if needed - be turned into blocks (eg, knife hand block/strike in kokutsu dachi).

A good place to start developing your sen-no-sen is against:

- i) Kicks. This is because they must travel further. Therefore it's often a good opportunity to step in and strike before your opponent gets their knee up and attempts to extend their kick.
- ii) Opponents who make their intention clear (telegraph) that they are about to attack. Many students will rise in stance before attacking. Others might pull their hand back etc. You can start to really hone your sen-no-sen skills against these opponents. As you become more proficient you can start to implement them against more highly skilled opponents.

3. Practise At Home

At Red belt your focus will be on refining all the kumite principles and techniques you have learned to date. It's also a great time to really start developing your ability to apply some of the kata senjutsu (combat principles found in kata) to practise.

» If you really wish to develop your kumite skills and achieve all this, it is advisable to start training at home. Home training allows you to focus purely on yourself rather than sharing your focus between yourself and an opponent. This means you can make giant leaps in your progress in a short space of time.

» Home kumite training does not necessarily mean invite a friend over and spar - although you could of course do this providing you have a safe environment to do so. Home kumite predominantly involves practising techniques and principles by yourself to develop your ability and confidence to use them. Things to work on are:

Shadow sparring: This can involve moving around in a small space and sparring an imaginary opponent. Moving around a small space develops your ability to work in a confining space (more similar to actual self-defence).

Footwork drills: This can encompass using different footwork drills to attack. Always focusing on staying low, and in a well-balanced stance.

Breathing: Training for half an hour or longer on kumite at home will test your fitness. You can help to control this by supplying your muscles with ample amounts of oxygen. Correct breathing is a great habit one can develop through home training because we often hold our breath out of anticipation for what an opponent might do.

Attacking drills: Your favourite attacking drills can be done slow, medium and fast multiple times so they become instinctive.

Defensive drills: When these become instinctive you will feel an enormous lift in your confidence to block, side-step, counter, pick off etc.

Kicks to a target: One reason why students don't kick often in kumite is that they do not trust their control. When you practise kicking a target (eg a tree branch, a mitt hanging on a string etc) you develop confidence in your ability to control your kicks.

Bag work: Hitting a bag (eg punching bag or kick shield) will develop your fitness, technique, strength, speed and technique.

4. Develop Your RTBP (Relax Tense Balance Point)

With so much to think about, it's often difficult for students to relax during kumite. A busy mind tends to confuse the muscles into tensing up.

» We introduced you to the concept of ibuki waza in the Blue belt section of 'The Journey'. Working on correcting

your breathing will play a large role in helping you to relax more during not only kumite, but also your kihon and kata.

» Now that at Red belt our primary goal is to refine everything we know, and embed it in our instinctive subconscious, we have room in our mind to really work on relaxing our body.

» If you are not aware of the benefits of being relaxed in your karate; there are many:

Energy conservation: Enormous amounts of energy are wasted because muscles hold excess tension. Students will often say, "I'm not fit enough." But the real culprit is not their fitness, but rather the excess energy lost through excess tension.

Speed: Tension in the body is like driving a car with the hand brake on. Learning to relax will allow your muscles to move at full speed.

Power: Power comes from the combination of both mass (weight) and velocity (speed). If you can move faster you can strike harder. What's more, excess tension prevents the small movements that are required for extra power (such as hip rotation) from taking place.

» Having achieved a fairly sound level of mastery over your body, you can start to develop your RTBP (your relax tense balance point).

So what is your RTBP?

You have probably been told to relax a hundred times or more during your karate. But you can't completely relax. If you did you would literally fall over! How can you hold your guard up if you are completely relaxed, would your arms not swing by your sides?

» This is where your RTBP comes into play. It's developing an understanding of each muscle and how much tension actually needs to hold. In essence, you need just enough tension to hold form. Any less tension and you lose form, any more tension and you will lose speed and power.

The RTBP Test

A good test to develop your RTBP is to do a few push ups (press ups). Get into position and tighten every muscle you can think of (your feet, calves, hamstrings, quads, abs, back, arms, neck, face etc). Tighten every single muscle as tight as you possibly can and then maintain 100% tension while performing 2 or 3 push ups. You will find it not only exhausting but extremely difficult to do. This is obviously an example of excess tension to the extreme.

» Next relax every single muscle to 100% relaxation. Ok, now it's impossible to get off the floor.

» So therefore somewhere between full tension of every muscle, and no tension in any muscle, there is a balance point. For the push up example, you can work out which muscles you need tensed, and which need no, or little tension, to get the job done.

Do I Ever Need 100%?

It's often said, at the very end of a technique, when you

apply full kime that you need to tense up every muscle as hard as you can for a milli-second. For lower grades this is probably quite accurate because if they don't tense up they are likely to injure themselves.

» As you progress through your karate journey you will come to realise that you never need 100% tension. Not even in your fist. You will actually be able to hit harder than you ever have while remaining quite relaxed - even at the point of impact. This is not something for you to develop right now, its something to look forward to in the future. Right now, just look to remove excess tension in every area outside of impact in our karate.

5. Implement Kata Senjutsu Into Kumite

Kumite is a physical expression of your karate. It allows you to demonstrate your knowledge of technique and senjutsu (strategy).

Taigyoku Kumite: While you may not be an expert, a Red belt should be able to demonstrate the principles of the Taigyoku kata in their kumite.

Saifa Kumite: With different types of movement and principles, a Red belt should be able to demonstrate to some degree, Saifa in their kumite.

Bassai-dai Kumite: We did not recommend that you work on implementing Bassai-dai into your kumite at Blue belt. This would have given you too much to think about; especially seeing Bassai-dai was not instinctive to you.

» Being Red belt does mean that you know Bassai-dai quite well and that you can start to think about implementing it into your kumite. This will not only develop your understanding of the kata, it will actually help your kata performance because you will be using your body in a similar way to the kata.

Examples of using Bassai-dai in kumite are:

a) Quality hip movement. During Bassai-dai we execute large and powerful hip rotations when we execute ren-uke (two blocks with alternate arms). In kumite it is a great idea to start really focusing on this hip movement when executing ren tsuki (two arms striking alternatively, for example, lunge punch followed by reverse punch).

» Some students get to Red belt and they still hardly use their hips in their kumite. This shows that they are neglecting the important lessons in their kata. Quality hip movement should also occur when you execute single reverse punches and counter-strikes. One can easily see how working on the sharp, twisting of the hips in kumite will come back and help their kata.

b) Maintaining deep, well-grounded stances while defending. Bassai-dai promotes this principle. To see Red belts forever running away when defending shows they are not thinking about the skills their kata is trying to instil in them. Of course there are times to flee, but there should be times where you adopt a well-grounded last stand.

- c) Turning the defender on their axis. In Bassai-dai, we don't just execute blocks. We block with one arm, and with our second arm, execute a follow up block (ren uke) in the attempt to either control our opponent or to turn them on their axis (exposing their sides or back).
- » Other examples of how Bassai-dai can be implemented in sparring are explode forwards in straight line movements, getting to the outside of an attacker by stepping the front foot past the opponent's front foot etc.
 - » There are also techniques such as sweeps and takedowns. But these are not yet permitted at Red belt.

6. Develop Your Own Senjutsu (Strategy)

How would you describe your sparring style? When observing a karate-ka spar, you should not see them use the same style of kumite against every opponent they face. You should see them adapt their style according to their opponent.

» There is a Japanese saying that "A light wind is unable to move an Oak tree. It stands strong and defiant. But the light wind is able to push the grass around to and fro. However the strongest of winds are able to uproot the Oak tree - who tried to stand defiant. Yet the strongest of winds are unable to uproot grass because it moves to and fro." The point is, sometimes we need to be an oak tree and sometimes we need to be the grass. This is but one example of why we need to change our style of fighting.

» Up until Red belt you have simply been trying to get good at what you already know while trying to add to this new techniques and principles. Now that you are starting to get a hold of these it's important that you start understanding when each one can be best used.

» Let's look at defence as an example. To date we have discussed creating distance (via retreating or side-stepping), blocking and countering, anticipating (pick offs) and just recently, using the principle of Bassai-dai of turning an opponent on their axis with the use of two blocks (ren uke). The big question is, when is the best time to use each one?

» Then there is the question of attacking. For example, when is the best time to use a side kick? Is there one?

» Having reached a fair level of conscious competence, it's time to start thinking about strategy. Gichen Funakoshi had 20 precepts for training. Of these was, "Tattakai wa kyo-jitsu no soju ikan ni ari," which translates roughly as "Transform yourself according to the opponent." Funakoshi also wrote 'the secret of combat resides in the art of directing it (strategy).'

Think about each type of opponent you might come up against. Some examples are:

- Fast people
- Strong people
- Good counter attackers
- Good kickers
- Good strikers

- People who pick off well
- Offensive minded people
- Offensive minded people who generally attack with multiple attacks
- Offensive minded people who generally attack with singular and/or double techniques
- People who stand very still
- People who move around a lot

Now think about what techniques or strategies would best serve you against each type of person.

» The following is an example against an opponent who has an excellent sen-no-sen (anticipation technique or pick off):

- a) Feint attacking often to upset their rhythm and help reveal their intentions. Having revealed their intention, it will cause hesitation in them.
- b) Move around a lot. This will prevent them from getting settled in a poised stance. To pick off, most people want to feel poised in a stance they can spring out of. If they are constantly moving to adjust to your movements (eg circling) they will be unable to do this.
- c) Throw the occasional side kick off the front foot into their lower stomach. If this is done quickly, they will not be able to get in before you execute it. But it also diminishes their confidence because most people do not wish to run in to a side kick.

While there have been many articles (found in the Training category of the Articles section) that offer many strategies for kumite, it's important that you take time to think of your own.

» This will help you assess your own level of understanding of techniques and principles.

» It will also teach you to think about strengths and weaknesses of techniques and strategies.

7. Disturb Your Opponent's Guard With Your Hands

At Green belt we introduced you to the idea of feinting with your hands. At Blue belt we introduced you to the idea of feinting with your legs. One of the strategies behind feinting was to disrupt your opponent's thoughts. In short, it's hard to strategise when your opponent's movements continually disrupt your thoughts.

» Disturbing your opponent is a step above feinting and in many ways can be considered an advanced version of the feint. So what does disturbing involve?

» The Start and Stop version of the feint (see the Green Belt section) required a person to quickly step their front foot out slightly and partly execute a technique before quickly retreating back to their fighting stance.

» The disturb takes this one step further. The goal is to actually make contact with your opponent's guard. While you can step and reach out and touch your opponent's guard with your rear hand, it is advised to develop the skill using your front hand.

» This was not suggested prior to Red belt because it requires you to get closer to your opponent, and if one

is not careful they might be attacked and scored upon during the process. Having achieved your Red belt, your fighting stance and footwork should be adequate enough to allow you to tap into your opponent's guard without endangering yourself.

The three keys to making this technique a success is as follows:

- i) Be quick with your front foot step and reach out. If you are slow you will find yourself in hot water.
- ii) Zanshin. Be aware your opponent may strike and be quick to get back to your guard.
- iii) Be prepared. Being aware is not enough, you must be prepared to counter strike or retreat should your opponent attack.

It does not require any power, merely touching your opponent's forearm or hand.

» Be sure to touch from top position (rather than touching the bottom of their hand or forearm). Having your hand on top allows you to more effectively block should they attack, plus it allows you to lever their hand downwards and strike should you wish to.

» So if this senjutsu (combat strategy) is more difficult than the feint, why should we use it?

- a) It disturbs their thinking. This prevents them from establishing attacking strategies as they are concerned about your potential attack.
- b) Advanced opponents are very good at distinguishing the difference between real attacks and feints.
- c) Advanced opponents rarely react until a technique is inside their reach.
- d) It encourages your opponent to attack. If you want your opponent to attack (allowing you to counter strike), this technique will often draw out their attack.
- e) It sets precedence. If you get inside your opponent's range often (just to touch and retreat) they lose their sense of urgency each time you move forward. This happens subconsciously in kumite, where we start to feel we can predict our opponent's movements. When you sense they have lost their sense of urgency to react, use your disturb tactic to get in close and lever their hand down - continuing on with a strike.

8. Be A Moving Weapon, Not A Moving Target

Some people hesitate to attack in kumite because they fear being picked off. Of course one trick is to get faster, but a more simple method is to put your opponent on the defensive before you start.

» Think about the psychology for a moment. If you charge in with your body, waiting to get into range before throwing your first attack, what does your opponent see? A moving target! Hardly something intimidating to put you on the back foot.

» It can pay dividends to launch your first attack while still short of your opponent. Sure it will be short but what do they see? A weapon moving towards them! Therefore

their most likely reaction is to go into a defensive mindset (hence try to block). Now considering your first attack will land short, don't forget to throw a second attack, because this now becomes your true intended attack.

9. Empty Hand Doesn't Imply No Weapons

It is commonly known that the 'te' in 'Kara-te' means hand. The 'Kara' part originally meant China. So kara-te translated as 'China-hand'. In 1936, the Okinawa masters decided that the term China was no longer appropriate as karate no longer resembled Chinese arts. It has evolved to become its own original art.

» So the kanji that symbolised the 'Kara' component was changed to one that translated as 'Empty'. So kara-te now translated as 'empty-hand'.

» Because of this translation however, people often presume that 'empty-hand' means 'no weapons'. Therefore, when confronted with a real life situation, most karate-ka will naturally resort to focusing on using their body as a weapon in self-defence.

» While it is true that, by-and-large, karate is an unarmed form of self-defence, it does not mean that a karate-ka should neglect weapons. To begin with, a number of the old Okinawa masters (who formed the name 'empty hand') actually trained with weapons. And the majority of the weapons practised were regular household items or farming tools. Even a number of kata practised today were also practised with weapons. For example, Kururunfa is often practised as a Sai kata (Sai was a weapon taken from farming tools) and Sepai is often practised as a sword kata.

» Secondly, one must remember that karate does not teach a set of appropriate responses to a limited number of self-defence scenarios. Rather, it teaches self-defence principles that could work in any situation. Therefore, whether you are unarmed, or have something in your hand, the principles found in karate can be used identically.

» In other words, if you are ever confronted, if anything is in your vicinity that could be used as a weapon (eg a chair, a bin lid, your belt or high heel shoe, a handbag, a book, car keys etc) then be sure to grab it. The principles of karate can still come out because a weapon is no more than an extension of the body.

» Don't change the principles to your kumite. Keep your stance, use your body in your techniques, maintain zanshin etc. What you are doing is practising these principles with something in your hand. This will not only train you but help to remind you to look for weapons (big or small, sharp or blunt etc) should you ever get attacked.

10. Never Forget: Karate Begins With Rei And Ends With Rei

Having reached Red belt, it's likely that your kumite will start to become a little more competitive. When this occurs we may find ourselves getting the occasional knock. Furthermore as both we and our fellow students will be experimenting with new techniques and principles, bouts may get a little scrappy. It's important during these times



to remember that 'Karate begins and ends with rei'. Rei, represented by the bow, represents courtesy and respect.

» This is not only an important concept to remember for kumite, but for our lives in general.

» Seeing students get angry in kumite shows an instructor that the student is yet to develop their attitude. Anger clouds our judgement and causes us to act out irrationally. This makes for an unsafe kumite environment and puts us in a vulnerable position during self-defence. It also detracts from the quality of our life outside the dojo.

