

# GKR KARATE JOURNEY

## KUMITE TIPS

### 1. Show Your Knowledge

As Blue belt insinuates that you have begun your journey as an advanced karate-ka, it's vitally important that you start to bring your knowledge to the fore. Your ability to flow between stances should be relatively instinctive and be apparent when you spar. An example of this is to go from fighting stance, shifting forward to strike or kick, then shift back to a deep centre stance (to display zanshin) and then back to guard again. It should also show up in your ability to avoid toe-to-toe combat (getting in and out).

Other pieces of knowledge that can show up in your kumite could be implementing principles of Taigyoku Shodan, Taigyoku Nidan and Saifa into your kumite:

### 2. Perfect Your Timing And Distance

It's not just the technical aspects that you should be showing marked improvement in. Bruce Lee wrote that the two most important ingredients for combat are timing and distance.

» With experience you should be starting to fine-tune your timing - knowing when to attack, when to defend and when to retreat.

» But getting the timing right is only half the battle. Distance is equally important. To time your attack perfectly but start too far away means your opponent will have too much reaction time. If you start your attack too close and you risk being struck before you begin your own attack.

Distance does not simply involve falling short or being scored upon. It also entails:

- a) Your power output. If you strike a target but are too close, your technique will not have room to develop full momentum. The result is less power. By contrast, if you strike a target but have had to over-extend your arm or body to reach it, you have passed your range of optimum power and will again result in a weaker strike.
- b) Your self-defence habits. Good distance does not always imply good control. Your knuckles might fall short of an opponent's chin by 1cm. While this is ideal it does not represent good control if you only fell short because your arm could not reach any further. Good control means that you fall just short of a target with a well-bent arm.

## Blue Belt (5<sup>th</sup> Kyu)



Hence the only reason why they were not injured was because you chose to pull the punch short.

The only thing you want to change for self-defence is your arm. That is, you extend it in real life. Nothing else should change. If however you tend to strike at full reach during kumite then the only way you will be able to hurt a real-life attacker is by stepping closer (hence, adjusting your footwork). Changing habits in self-defence will not be easy. If however you create the perfect habit with your stance and footwork, and always pull your techniques short to ensure the safety of your opponent, in self-defence you only have to tell yourself one thing - "extend the arm!" The rest will take care of itself.

### 3. Set Goals

Whenever you spar it's vital you have goals that you are working towards. Your goals should be progress and development focused rather than on dominating or winning. Setting goals will help your kumite journey by:

- a) Keeping kumite new and exciting.

- b) Give you specific things to focus and work on.
- c) Allow you to assess your progress and development.
- d) Allow you to measure your overall progress.

Prior to Blue belt, each of your gradings were only 3-4 months apart (assuming you've been consistent with your training etc). The time between Blue and Red belt is greater than all previous belts and as such, students can find themselves without a carrot to motivate them. This is where goal setting comes in, not just in kumite, but also in every area of your karate.

» As karate is a Way of Life, you need to implement this strategy to improve your overall quality of life. You can set goals for your health, your attitude, your personal life, work, schooling, family etc. There are numerous articles on goal setting in the Life Category of the Articles section of this website.

#### 4. Faster Hip Rotation

Bassai-dai focuses on dynamic hip rotation. This is because the hips play an enormous role in self-defence. Some of these include:

- a) Adding power to our techniques.
- b) Adding reach to our techniques.
- c) Adding speed in the transitions between stances.
- d) Keeping us protected from an opponent's strikes.
- e) Breaking free from an opponent's grip.

Allow this focus on hip movement in Bassai-dai to transcend into your kumite. Aim to use dynamic hip movement in your strikes (and also the rapid retraction of the hips immediately after the strike).

» If you have tight hips, then you will need to speak with your instructor about setting up some extra stretching exercises at home, so that you can work to improve the flexibility and mobility in and around your mid-section and hips.

#### 5. Introduce More Combination Attacks

Up until now we have recommended that you keep your combination attacks to two techniques. By spending ample time on singular and double techniques we could ensure our footwork, weight distribution, stances, power output etc were not being compromised while attacking.

» Now that you have reached Blue belt you should be getting a good grip on this. While you may be far from an expert you can look to introduce multiple attacks, perhaps 3, 4 or more attacks in a burst.

» Attacking in bursts will help you to develop muscular strength and speed, coordination and confidence. Once again you need to assess whether or not you are compromising important principles of attack while doing this.

#### 6. Start Feinting With Your Legs

At Green belt we recommended you start developing

your feinting with hand techniques. We did 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).

Now you have reached Blue belt you can start using your legs to feint. Just a few examples of this include:

- a) Feinting with one kick (eg, a front kick off the back leg) and once the opponent reacts to this (eg, by lowering their guard), turning it into an entirely different kick (eg, a round kick off the same leg) and aiming for an unguarded area.

This technique is often called a change-up. The key to success is to make the first kick convincing to draw their guard away. In order to get the most of this technique, don't stop mid kick and change techniques. Allow it to flow from one kick to the other fluently.

- b) Feinting with a kick (eg, a head level round kick off the front leg) and once the opponent reacts to this (eg, by raising their guard and leaning back slightly), to quickly drop the leg straight back on the ground and then extend the same foot out quickly and punch to the body.
- c) Feinting with one kick (eg, a front kick off the back leg) and once the opponent reacts to this (eg, by retreating back), to quickly step this leg forward (closing the distance) and launch a secondary kick off the back foot.

#### 7. Start To Develop Your Sen-No-Sen (Anticipation Techniques)

In terms of defence, throughout your kumite journey to date, we have suggested you develop two senjutsu (combat strategies).

- a) Create distance:

This can be done via retreating or using tai-sabaki (side-stepping). The upside to this strategy is that it keeps you safe from an attacker's strike. The downside is we have not inflicted any pain on them; therefore you can be sure a follow up strike will soon follow.

- i) If you find that your movements to create distance generally have the attacker launching follow-up technique after follow-up technique, then it suggests you need to start breaking on a sharper angle. The sharper your angle the more you can get to the outside of your attackers body (toe-to-side combat - a principle of Saifa). An opponent will find it difficult to launch a follow up technique if their opponent (you) is on a 90-degree angle to them. So if you do not move far enough back, or break on a poor angle, your opponent will still see an opportunity to score and continue striking.
- ii) If however you do find that you create enough

distance so that your opponent does not bother to attempt a follow-up technique, but you yourself find yourself too far away to counter strike, then you need to minimise your movement.

In short, if you move too far then you risk being able to take advantage of an opponent who lacks zanshin after their attack/s. An advanced karate-ka can always maintain good distance, far enough (or sharp enough an angle) to de-motivate their opponent from follow ups, but still close enough to be able to launch their own counter strikes.

» Achieving this balance take lots of practise and is a useful tool for self-defence.

b) Go-no-sen (block and counter):

The disadvantage to this senjutsu is that your block must be successful or your opponent will succeed with the attack. The advantage of this senjutsu is that should your block be successful, you are in a position to take advantage of many open targets.

We have said on more than one occasion that a person is never more open and vulnerable (both mentally and physically) than when they attack.

» 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'. We have not suggested developing this technique until now because it requires:

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

If any of the above ingredients are missing you will find yourself in deep water. This is why we have only suggested for you to develop your counter-attacking abilities until now. Having reached Blue belt is not a sign to switch from go-no-sen (counter attacking) to sen-no-sen (anticipating). It's merely a sign to suggest that you start thinking about this technique.

It involves reading your opponents body language (one reason why it's a more 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 finishing 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.

## 8. Develop Your Ibuki (Breathing)

With so much to think about during kumite, students often find themselves tiring very quickly. The problem may not be their fitness, but rather because they are holding their breath.

The Japanese term for 'breathing technique' is Ibuki-waza. Correct breathing enhances a number of things:

- a) Energy conservation - Oxygen is fuel for your muscles. By feeding your muscles ample supplies of oxygen your endurance will increase greatly.
- b) Muscle relaxation - Which in turn increases speed, power and mobility.
- c) Concentration and focus - When our body is starved of oxygen we lose our ability to focus and strategise. The body's natural preservation takes over and it focuses on one thing, oxygen supply.

While you have been told to 'breathe' your entire karate life, it's time to put some focus on this.

» One simple formula is to always ensure you put as much oxygen in as you put out. This is a formula students get drastically wrong in every aspect of their karate (kihon, kata and kumite). They expel big breaths when they strike but focus too little on deep breaths in.

» A better formula would be to focus on consistent breaths in and expelling only a small breath out when striking.

» Next time you spar, take some time to assess your breathing. Do you rarely breathe in? Do you breathe out too much when striking? Do you hold your breath at all?

Combination attacks and combination defences are generally where students tire themselves out through poor breathing. They will either:

- i) Hold their breath through an entire combination (of attacks or blocks).
- ii) Breathe out deeply on each and every technique.

The key is to expel very small and light breaths through a combination, so that the total of each breath would add up to one regular breath with a single technique.

- There are many articles on breathing in the Articles section of this website. You will find them in the 'Training Category'.

## 9. Take Down Your Opponent's Guard

At Green belt we introduced you to the strategy of feinting. One of these involved feinting an attack in one direction to draw your opponent's attention and guard away from your actual desired target area.

» Another way to get to a protected target is to push their guard out of the way. In the kata Bassai-dai this occurs a number of times where we crescent kick an opponents guard to open up their head and floating ribs (note this is just one bunkai for these techniques).

» While this technique can be done with kicks, it's far

more effective and simple to use your hands to attack the guard of your opponent, clearing the path for the follow up strike.

You can come up with many ways to achieve this in kumite. The following are just two simple examples:

- a) Altering your lunge, reverse punch combination. Instead of executing the lunge punch in its normal fashion, extend it out just above the opponent's front hand, then pull the hand down a level, opening the way for a reverse punch to the head. This is actually a bunkai of the first two counts in Taigyoku Shodan.
- b) When your front foot is directly in front of your opponent's front foot, use your front hand to push your opponent's front hand across their body (opening up the ribs) and then execute a reverse punch to the body.

## 10. Developing Various Types Of Footwork (Ashi Sabaki)

In terms of attacking footwork (ashi-sabaki), thus far in your journey we have recommended that you focus on:

- a) Start from a fighting stance that evenly balanced between mobility and solidity.
- b) Staying low at all times.
- c) When striking, moving quickly into a quality stance similar to long forward stance (eg, two shoulder widths long, front knee well bent, front knee over the ankle, implementing hip movement).
- d) Immediately after striking, ripping the hips back with the arm and returning to a solid stance (similar to sumo, horse riding or back leaning) for a short period (representing zanshin). This will allow to defend against a strike, grab or tackle in the close range you are, or to launch a powerful follow up attack. Then moving quickly out of this back to fighting stance.

What we have not offered you to date is the many means for getting to your striking stance (although many of these are found in the kata and are covered in drills during class).

» Having reached Blue belt, it's time you really started to develop your footwork.

» In cricket, footwork can be the difference between smashing the ball to the boundary and nicking it behind to the wicket keeper. In soccer, footwork can be the difference between putting the ball in the top corner of the net or a mile over the bar. In tennis, it can be the difference between hitting the ball into the corner for a clear winner or have it sail over the baseline. There's no denying footwork plays a monumental role in any sport – including karate. When it comes to kumite, footwork (ashi sabaki) is everything! It's a karate-ka's greatest weapon or most costly liability.

### The Test

If you were to randomly pick 100 students of all ages and grades, then run through the 'Basics' with them, the

difference (in terms of speed) between the fastest and slowest punch would be a millisecond. So if this is the case, why then in kumite will one person score eight times out of ten and another score once out of ten? The answer is very simple, footwork! Despite its paramount importance, it is still the single biggest thorn in the side of most karate-ka. And if it lets you down in the dojo (and in a tournament), then it is likely to let you down in real life.

### Why Ashi Sabaki Eludes Most Karate-ka

If footwork is so important, why is it so underdeveloped, even amongst high grades? We've been moving around since infancy. We chased after our friends when playing tip, ran away from waves at the beach, ran to catch the school bus, we dodged, we tackled and played numerous sports. And regardless of the activity, we never needed to change our movement; the simple act of running served us perfectly each and every time. And then we stumbled across another activity – kumite. We were standing in our spot and our opponent was standing in theirs, some feet away. Somehow we needed to get 'over there' to attack, or somehow we had to get away to avoid their attack. It seemed so logical, just do the very thing that has served you all your life...run!

### Ashi Sabaki Won't Improve Until You Appreciate It

If you were to watch a video of yourself sparring, would you see yourself running in to attack? Would you see yourself running away to avoid attack? If you're 80% of all karate-ka, you'll be answering, "Yes" to both questions. So the first point to note is that running is NOT footwork. Running may serve you in most sports, but it is completely useless in combat (unless of course you are literally running away). Now at this point you may be disagreeing. You run in strongly for your attacks and they seem to serve you just fine. The problem is, we don't feel the negative impact of running in the dojo so it often appears to work in our favour.

» Before we discuss the downsides of running, here are two questions. How many GKR kata have us 'run' from technique to technique? None! How many GKR kata have us move from technique to technique using a footwork methodology? Every...single...one! There must be some reason why we spend hours practising kata and combinations that have us moving through our techniques with footwork.

### Running Versus Ashi Sabaki

There are countless downsides to running. Hopefully once you grasp any number of these, you will embark on some ashi sabaki training for your kumite. From a defensive point of view, when we run away to avoid attack we raise our centre of gravity. This works in the dojo for two reasons. Firstly, because we have ample room to move and secondly, because our opponent is abiding by the rules of kumite.

» Considering kumite should train us for real life self-defence, it's not enough to say, "It works fine in my dojo." In real life, you may have limited space (like your kitchen, a car park etc). As running raises your centre of gravity

and takes you out of stance, in a limited area you will find yourself in a vulnerable position – an easy target for a strike or tackle.

» Martial artists from grappling styles often use the argument, “Most fights end up on the ground.” Probably true, but how many fights entail a person who understands the importance of stance and centre of gravity? Beyond this, a martial artist should be ready at all times during combat. If you are running away, from where can you launch a telling counter strike? Contrarily, if you use footwork you will always have a low centre of gravity and be in stance, implying, not only can you avoid attacks in small areas, you can execute a powerful counter strike the moment the opportunity arises. But what of the offensive perspective?

### The Goal Of Any Attack

When attacking, you should have a number of goals in mind. These are:

**Defence:** Always attack with defence in mind.

**Speed:** Be faster than your opponent’s reaction.

**Power:** Aim to finish the opponent with one technique (ikken hisatsu).

**Reach:** To maintain your karate advantage, avoid moving into their ‘grappling/tackling’ zone when striking.

**Zanchin:** After your attack, be in stance, at good distance in case defensive measures or further strikes are required.

So let’s compare how running in to attack measures up with our goals.

**Defence:** Running raises your centre of gravity; hence outside the ‘rules of the dojo’ you’re vulnerable to be tackled to the ground. This is why most real life fights end up on the ground, one attacks standing tall and the other goes back to their rugby habits and tackles them to the ground. In simple terms, they attacked without any thought for their defence.

**Speed:** Running is drastically slower than footwork (once practised). This is because multiple small steps will not be faster than one or two large steps.

**Power:** Running zaps almost all your punching power. Try running at a punching bag and hitting it – you’ll find it hardly moves. This is not how power is derived. Power is best achieved by short, sharp bursts (as with footwork). Maximum power is only really achieved through a low centre of gravity (as found in footwork).

**Reach:** When you run you are virtually standing, and so your reach is drastically reduced. From a long zenkutsu-like fighting stance, you can add 15-30cms to your reach.

**Zanchin:** When you run, you are unable to stop at a point of your choosing. People who run to attack rely on their opponent to run away. While this often occurs in the dojo, it almost never occurs in real life. Using footwork on the other hand, allows you to execute a faster, more powerful strike, with more reach, and still enables you an opportunity to stay in karate distance (leaving them no opportunity to

grab you and take your karate advantage away). Coming in with footwork also allows you the opportunity to quickly retreat.

» The purpose of footwork is to economically shift our body, creating speed and force to techniques in attack. It allows us to be in the right place at the right time, and to be in the right position to do something about it. Footwork also allows us to quickly create distance in defence while maintaining balance.

» Hopefully by now you’re enlightened to the advantages of ashi sabaki and have become more sceptical towards your current habit of running during kumite. If so, then take the following footwork exercises on board and work on them until they are instinctive. Remember that running is natural while ashi sabaki is not; so don’t be discouraged if things don’t click right away. You may even be fighting months or years of bad habits. Be patient, as it will not only prepare you better for self-defence, it will dramatically improve your kumite in the dojo and tournaments.

### Footwork Drills

#### Footwork Drill One: Oi Ashi

From fighting stance, your front foot extends out to a Zenkutsu-like stance. Upon completing the attack, the same foot comes back to its original position. Oi ashi (lunging feet) is the most basic of all ashi sabaki and the ideal technique when an opponent is in 1-2 feet away (making it an excellent technique for real life situations). Its aim is to enter with a powerful strike, then escape before a grab or counter strike is forthcoming.

#### Footwork Drill Two: Yori Ashi

From fighting stance, the front foot moves out (lengthening the stance) then the back leg quickly comes up behind, snapping you back to fighting stance again. When practising yori ashi (sliding feet), try to avoid the common mistake of simply pushing forward off the back leg. To get more power, reach and speed, simultaneously use your front leg to pull your body forward. Once your front foot hits the ground, don’t drag your back leg up behind it. If the back foot drags behind, it works like an anchor, taking away from the technique. The back leg must race back into place, allowing you the ability to reload another technique and move again.

» Yori ashi is the most common method of footwork and the quickest for bridging the gap. Ideally used with a head-level lunge punch when your opponent is only 2-3 feet away, or to begin a combination of attacks (such as a lunge/reverse punch combination). It is a wise choice of footwork when your opponent is good at pick offs or when they are likely to back off slightly when you attack. Being the quickest, it is also the weakest. The goal behind yori ashi would be to move into and take your opponent’s space after your technique.

#### Footwork Drill Three: Sugi Ashi

Sugi ashi (shuffling feet) works the opposite way to yori ashi (sliding feet). From fighting stance, bring your back foot up first (either all the way or halfway, depending on

the distance between you and your opponent) to greatly shorten your fighting stance. Then like a chain reaction, launch out oi ashi. Your front foot shooting out to a zekutsu-like stance with the attack, and upon completing the attack, bring your front foot back slightly coming back to a very low sumo-like or back-like stances.

» Sugi ashi is a little slower than yori ashi but it covers more distance and adds far more power. Ideally used when your opponent is on the back foot or momentarily off rhythm. It is a wise choice of footwork when your opponent is likely to block or move back slightly instead of picking off. Most karate-ka only use sugi ashi when executing kicks off the front foot, but it is best used with a reverse punch.

» It is vital when bringing the back foot up that you don't come up too much in height as this will take away power and slow you down. It's also imperative you finish in a low sumo-like or back-like stance as this prevents an attacker from grappling you and puts you in position to launch another attack. The goal of sugi ashi is not to replace your opponent's position, but to come in and out again.

#### **Footwork Drill Four: Ayumi Ashi**

Ayumi ashi (walking feet) resembles the most common footwork found in kata and combinations. From fighting stance, the back leg steps right through to become the front foot. Unlike walking, as the leg steps through, it is the balls of the feet that hit the ground first, not the heels.

» Most karate-ka only use ayumi ashi when kicking off the back leg, but is most devastating when used with punches. It is rarely seen with punches as most karate-ka believe it to be the slowest of all footwork techniques. But this is only the case because most do not understand the timing. In combinations and kata, we hold our technique back until the foot is landing. In kumite however, the objective is to land the strike before the feet even cross. The methodology behind the technique is that by committing to step through, it adds enormous power to the technique, plus it has the ability to hunt down a quickly retreating opponent.

» Ayumi ashi allows one to move quickly and smoothly into the opponent's space. It should feel as if riding on wind. Be careful not to come up in height or it will leave you susceptible for a pick off, not to mention that it will slow you down.

#### **Footwork Drill Five: Yori Ashi, Oi Ashi Combination**

This is a two-punch combination consisting of a lunge punch followed by a reverse. While many karate-ka can exercise this punching combination, many fail to get the footwork correct, the result, less speed, distance, power, balance and zanshin.

» The front foot pushes out with a lunge punch, the back foot quickly comes up behind completing yori ashi (sliding feet). The moment the back foot hits the floor, the front foot explodes out with oi ashi (lunging feet) with a reverse punch. After the reverse punch, the front foot comes back slightly to make a deep centred stance (a stance strong enough to prevent a would-be counter-tackle).

#### **Ikimi And Itsoku – The Final Ingredient**

When executing combination attacks, it is your goal to

minimise the time taken between the first and second technique. The longer this pause the longer your opponent has to prepare a counter or follow up block. It is also the goal to utilise two karate principles – Ikimi and Itsoku.

» Ikimi is the principle of floating. When moving through with ashi sabaki you should avoid any tension in the legs. They should move through light and swift as though floating. The moment you make contact with the ground (and punch) you should adopt itsoku.

» Itsoku is the principle of being glued to the floor. Many karate-ka make the habit of adopting only one principle. They either use ikimi right through, hence they are light and fast but never achieve full power or balance. Others are habitual with their itsoku. These people are strong and stable, but lack speed and agility because they are stiff throughout their movement.