Some Notes on Training Power and Focus[1]

Uchi Waza

The importance of training uchi waza with power and focus cannot be too much emphasised. A karate maxim familiar to most people is *ikken hissatsu (ichi ken hissatsu;* 一拳必殺) – "one blow, certain death." Needless to say, the idea of killing somebody with one blow (or at all!) is not be taken literally; nor must one ever lose sight of the principle that karate does not strike first: *karate ni sente nashi* (空手に先手なし): the karateka must never be the aggressor. The point, however, is that if you are attacked you will need and want to defend yourself as quickly and decisively as you can. The worst thing you can do is allow yourself to be drawn into a slugging match with someone stronger than you (and it is prudent always to assume that anyone who attacks you *is* stronger than you). If attacked, it is vital to seize the advantage as quickly as you can and use it to the full. The ideal, therefore, is to strike once but to make your one strike so effective that only one is necessary. This principle – strike once and strike with complete effect – should be kept always in mind. To have to strike at all is bad. To have to strike more than once is worse.

"One blow and it's over" is, of course, an ideal from which it may be necessary to depart in "real life". Even an accurate and well-executed strike may not be enough stop an assailant who is anaesthetized by drink or drugs or fuelled by anger and adrenaline. Anyone with any experience knows this. One should therefore always be *prepared* to retaliate with multiple strikes and/or locks and restraining holds if necessary, and for that reason practising combinations in partner work is an essential part of the development of effective karate. One should certainly not train in such a way as to develop an invariable, robotic "block and strike

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[1] This article is adapted from M. Cowie and R.W. Dyson, *Kenkyo-ha Goju Karate Kempo: An Introduction to the Way of Karate* (Kenkyo-ha Budo Renmei, 2012).

once" response as a conditioned reflex. Having said this, though, it should be remembered that criminal codes generally specify that only "reasonable force" may be used in self-defence, and that courts (certainly in the United Kingdom) tend to be very narrow or conservative in their interpretation of what "reasonable" means.[2] Even someone who has been subjected to an unprovoked assault can find himself in trouble if the court can be persuaded that he used more force to defend himself than was "reasonable." This is one reason why the principle of one strike only, or at any rate of minimum necessary force, is a good one to adopt. Train your uchi waza, therefore, with a view to securing the desired effect with as few strikes as possible.

It is important that, when training your strikes, you should for most of the time make contact with an actual target. "Air" strikes against an imaginary target will (a) tend to harm your joints in the long run by hyperextending them, and (b) will not teach you anything about power and focus. This is where the item of traditional "hojo undo" equipment called the makiwara comes in. Its responsible and careful use is very important to the development of accurate and powerful uchi waza.

Makiwara (巻藁) is literally "straw roll," because that is what the original ones, used for cutting practice with swords and as archery targets, were (and still are). The traditional karate makiwara is mounted on a wooden post some eight feet long,[3] three feet or so of which are buried in the ground. When this is done the buried end is nowadays usually embedded in rough concrete. This method has obvious drawbacks. It is not always convenient or possible to

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2 The meaning will, of course, depend on the circumstances. What is reasonable against an unarmed attacker will be different from what is reasonable against multiple attackers or someone with a weapon. It is important to remember, though, that – rightly or wrongly – the judiciary (at least in the United Kingdom) seems not to like self-help or to approve of martial artists. This statement is supported by anecdotal evidence only, but it as well to err on the safe side.

3 The exact length of the post will depend on the desired height of the makiwara, which should be roughly at the level of the karateka's chest.

practise out of doors, and when the post wears out or breaks there will be the chore of digging up a large lump of concrete. Instead of burying it, it is a simple matter to attach a post of suitable length to the dojo floor by the sort of metal bracket illustrated below, which can easily be bought or fabricated. This is the usual modern form of the makiwara. The post should be of sound, knot-free 4" x 2" (10 cms x 5 cms) timber. In use it should be flexible enough to "give" when the makiwara is struck, so that the hand and arm are not always jarring against an unyielding surface, but resilient enough to provide the user with "feedback" about the quality and dynamics of the blow. Japanese cedar is the wood traditionally used, but experience shows that oak or ash usually give the right degree of flexibility (though just what degree of flexibility is "right" will to some extent depend on the individual). The post (or the unburied part of it, if you are going to have a garden makiwara) should be tapered down to 0.5" (12 mm) at the top. An outdoor makiwara post should be thoroughly treated with a good quality waterproof sealant. The striking pad at the top was in earlier days made of rice-straw rope (strictly speaking it is this pad, rather than the whole apparatus, that is the "makiwara"). Rope is still used, but nowadays a leather-covered pad of dense foam is more usual, and much more durable. The pad should be perhaps 6" from top to bottom and extend across the whole width of the post.[4] It is possible to buy wall-mounted striking pads that are less fuss to install, but the practitioner may find that these lack flexibility. Also, if you miss such a pad (and it is easy to miss so small a target, especially for the beginner) you will strike the wall to which it is attached.

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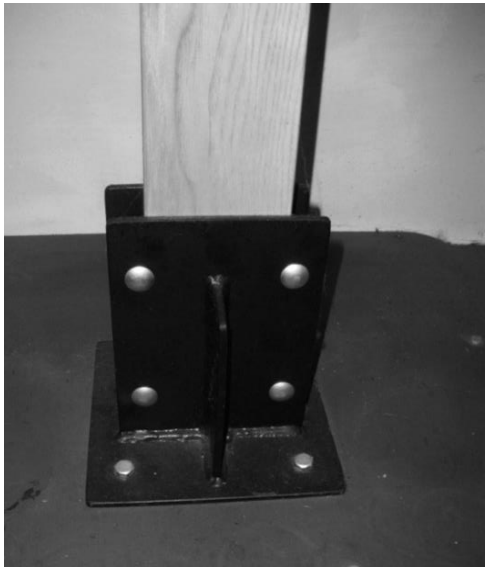
[4] In our experience, makiwara are always rectangular in cross section; though in his 1932 book *Watashi no Karate Jutsu* (trans. Patrick and Yuriko McCarthy; International Ryukyu Karate Research Group, 2002), Motobu Choki describes a "round" makiwara that can be struck from any direction. We have never seen one, but presumably such a makiwara would consist of straw rope wrapped around a cylindrical post.

It is of course not necessary to feel bound to any one design or pattern. There is no reason why the individual should not design training aids to his own specification and make them out of whatever materials come to hand. We have seen striking posts made along the lines of the Wing Chun or Choi Li Fut "wooden man," with various projections added to represent arms and legs; we have seen makiwara made out of old rubber tyres, pieces of carpet, and so forth. There are no limits to human inventiveness; and this is, after all, quite in keeping with the time-honoured Okinawan practice of improvisation using everyday objects.

The older type of makiwara post was buried in the ground and bound at the top with rice-straw to form a striking surface. The karateka in the picture is Funakoshi Gichin



Makiwara posts are nowadays more often bolted to the floor indoors by means of a metal bracket ...

... and have a leather-covered foam pad instead of the traditional rice-straw striking area

There is no reason why the individual should not design training aids to his own specifications and use whatever materials come to hand

Practice with the makiwara has two great advantages. Because the striking area is so small, each strike has to be very accurately focussed. (It is, we point out again, possible to hurt yourself if you miss the makiwara – especially if the makiwara is installed with a wall close behind it, or fastened to the wall itself. Care is necessary, especially at first.) Also, there is no psychological limit to the force that you can use against the makiwara. It is an inanimate object that you can hit without inhibition as hard and (subject to what we shall say in a moment) as often as you like. You will find that constant use of the makiwara will strengthen your wrists and thicken the skin of your knuckles. Rubbing surgical spirit or rubbing alcohol into your hands or steeping them in salt water will also help to toughen the skin (vodka will do the trick too, but surgical spirit is cheaper). The various "secret" herbal preparations that can be bought for this

purpose do not, in our experience, have much to be said for them; but there is no harm in trying them. You will probably find that the skin of your knuckles will break and bleed initially, and you should not apply anything toxic (e.g. arnica ointment) or astringent to broken skin. It used to be said that the rice straw of which makiwara were traditionally made has antiseptic properties, but we know of no reason to think this true.

Another variation on the makiwara theme

The makiwara must be used sensibly and with moderation. Resist the temptation – and the temptation is strong at first – to overdo it. Start modestly, with no more than ten strikes with each hand daily, and gradually build up to a maximum of 100 strikes with each hand. You are likely to experience diminishing returns if you do more than this, and feats of endurance that lead only to pain and damage have nothing to commend them. Use the makiwara under the supervision of your teacher, and be guided by your teacher's advice. Be especially careful at first not to let your wrist buckle when you punch the makiwara, as it may tend to: this can lead to a painful sprain injury. You will find that your wrists will become much stronger in a comparatively short time. Because of the issues of bone damage that can arise in relation to the still-developing physique of young people, no one under the age of eighteen should use the makiwara at all.

Please take seriously the following points in connection with your makiwara training.

1. There is a Zen saying that you should want the dharma as you would want a bucket of water if your hair were on fire. One can make a similar remark about karate practice. Once you are used to the makiwara and confident with it, strike as if your very life depended on it, with all the speed and force of which you are capable. Strike as if, at that moment, there were nothing in the world but the gestalt *you/strike/target*. You cannot hurt the makiwara, and half-hearted practice is worse than no practice at all.

2. Power will be added to your strikes by giving a loud and explosive shout as you deliver them. This sort of shout is called "kiai" in Japanese (気合): a word that conveys the idea of a concentration or unification of energy/force/spirit. Giving a loud yell or full-blooded scream – a sort of "war cry" – will liberate or disinhibit you, and the sudden expulsion of breath will help to "root" your posture. In "real life" a sudden and unexpected scream will also startle and distract – will "take the mind" of – an attacker. Make whatever sound you like, as long as the full force of your intention

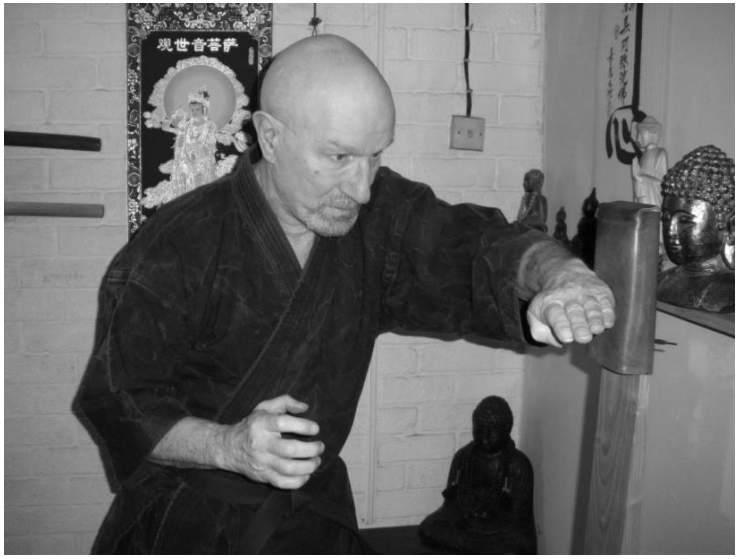
is expressed in it absolutely. Yell as loudly as you can, holding nothing back; let your shout be a "hara" shout, coming from deep inside you. "Hai!" is a good sound, and – because "hai!" (はい) is "yes!" in Japanese – suitably positive or affirmative. (One has sometimes heard people shout the word "kiai!"; but this is, in effect, to shout the word "shout," and seems a little odd.)

3. When practising your strikes a relaxed and "grounded" posture is essential. If you "throw" a punch with your arm and shoulder – in other words, predominantly using your pectoral and anterior deltoid muscles – your punch will be weak and the action of throwing it will destabilise you. Such an "upper body" punch will tend to have more effect on you than on its target; if the target were suddenly to disappear or evade you, you would tend to stagger forward, off balance. It is important that your strikes should come always from the kind of sunk, rooted posture that Sanchin kata is intended to teach you. In conjunction with that posture ...

4. ... train yourself to strike in such a way that the force of the strike depends not primarily on what your arm is doing, but on the unified energy of your whole body pushing off the floor. (Sanchin kata will help you to develop this way of striking as a conditioned reflex.) It is not easy to put this into words; but think of the sort of effort that you would exert if you were moving something like a piano. You would not use your arms only, but the strength of your whole body in a sort of co-ordinated effort. It is this sort of whole-body feeling that seems to be meant when it is said that your strength should come from your "hara." Hara (腹) is literally "belly" or "abdomen," but the word has also the connotation of "mind," "motive" or "intention." In every sense your strength when striking is a sort of "core" or central strength coming from deep within you. Do not come up on your toes when you strike, but try to feel that you are pressing your feet into the floor.

5. Everyone has "favourite" or habitual techniques – aiyo (愛用) – that suit his or her physique or personality especially; but it is a mistake to let your repertoire become too limited and hence to find yourself relying on a restricted range of responses. Do not be misled

into thinking that the makiwara is only for punching. You can and should train as wide a range of techniques on it as you can.



Using the makiwara to train shuto uchi and uraken uchi: remember that the makiwara can be used for much more than punching

A valuable supplement to the makiwara is a heavy hanging bag. The chief advantage of the bag is that it can be hit from a wide variety of angles and hence used in combination with realistic footwork. Also, because it can swing towards you and "oppose" you, it will give you a kind of instructive experience different from what is obtainable from the static and relatively rigid makiwara. You can in a certain sense spar with it. In addition, the bag can be used to train kicks much more satisfactorily than the post-mounted makiwara can, though one sometimes sees a lower pad attached to a makiwara post and used for a limited form of kicking practice.

A heavy hanging bag is a useful supplement to the makiwara

The karateka should for the most part train his or her strikes to have short-range *penetrating* power. You will find that a heavy bag will help you with this aspect of practice very specifically. As with the makiwara, you can hit the bag as hard as you like and without inhibition; but you will probably be able to visualise penetration far more easily with the bag than with the makiwara. Imagine that you are aiming not for the surface of the bag, but for a point several inches inside it; visualise your punch tearing through the fabric, and your hand inside the bag grabbing and pulling out the stuffing (it is hardly necessary to comment on how easily this visualisation can translate into a picture of what you might do to an attacker). The bag will give you a kind of feedback unique to itself. You can see the fabric dent under the focussed force of your strike, and you can see and hear the bag "shudder" on its hangings. If it swings away from you rather than "shuddering," you are pushing rather than striking/piercing it. The difference between pushing and striking is often surprisingly difficult to feel, but it is important to understand and master it, and the bag will help you greatly in this respect.

As with the makiwara, do not overdo your use of the bag. Make haste slowly, gradually increasing the force of your strikes and the duration of your training. When you feel confident and "at home" with it, train with all your heart; but never forget that every well-trained strike is potentially lethal, and be mindful always of the responsibility that this imposes on you.

Tameshiwari

Karate is associated in many people's minds with the breaking of hard objects by striking them with various parts of the body (including the head). The Japanese word for such exploits is tameshiwari (試し割り), "testing by breaking" (with a sort of connotation of chopping or splitting firewood). As part of a ruthlessly single-minded approach to their discipline, generations of martial artists have prepared themselves for combat by putting their limbs through gruelling routines of "conditioning" – plunging

their hands into pans of sand and gravel, thrusting their fingers into bundles of bamboo, and so on – with a view to desensitising them and toughening the skin and bones. Uechi Ryu karateka condition even their extended fingers and big toes to deliver damaging strikes. Tameshiwari is both a part of this conditioning and a way of testing it. It is said also that tameshiwari builds self-confidence and increases the accuracy of strikes. Objects broken include bricks, concrete blocks, paving stones, roof tiles, baseball bats, wooden boards – even coconuts (coconuts are said to have tensile properties similar to those of the human skull). It is nowadays possible to buy "rebreakable" objects made out of hard plastic that have similar properties to bricks and boards but can be used without the waste and expense of smashing up piles of the real thing.

It has to be said that spectacular displays of breaking are often illusory, or at least a good deal easier than they look; there is a good deal of room for fakery and illusion. Even with this qualification, however, our view is that tameshiwari is a harmful and dangerous practice. Perhaps this is a heresy to some, but we speak in the light of our own – sometimes painful – experience. If tameshiwari is done at all, it certainly should not be done with the elbows, knees, extended fingers or head. Knees, elbows and fingers are easily injured, perhaps irreparably, and the unwisdom of hitting concrete blocks with your head perhaps needs no elaboration. Apart from the immediate risk of injury, tameshiwari is an almost certain way of storing up trouble for yourself later on. Anyone who thinks that kendako (拳ダコ) – enlarged and heavily calloused knuckles – are a badge of honour (and plenty of people seemingly do think this) has probably got a nasty shock coming in later life. Osteoarthritis is a painful and disabling condition that can arise both from wear and tear of the joint and as a result of injury.

Tameshiwari is in any case a largely pointless practice in the modern world. Its rationale, if it has one, dates back to the days when an unarmed Okinawan might have had to defend himself against an attacker wearing wooden armour. To use tameshiwari as part of a training regime for self-defence in the twenty-first century is like preparing for a darts match by trying to throw darts

through a wall. They don't have to go through the wall; they only have to stick in the dartboard. In short, we would strongly discourage anyone from practising tameshiwari or undertaking the gruelling conditioning that is often associated with it. There are healthier and more effective ways of building confidence and developing strong and focussed strikes.

Osteoarthritis is a painful and disabling condition that can arise both from wear and tear of the joint and as a result of injury[5]

[5] Photo by courtesy of James Heilman, MD.