

## *Mu-gamae* and Karate Posture

Let's consider, for a moment, the body-at-an-angle sport karate fighting posture as contrasted with the front-facing Uechi and Goju training posture consisting of sanchin with both arms to the front. In open tournaments, Uechi and Goju practitioners have learned not to use a front-facing posture since it is too difficult for them to defend, *contraposte*, or both, against a lively opponent that is also aggressing and defending using the body-at-an-angle posture.

Uechi and Goju's posture is actually closer to the *hachiji-dachi* (8-figure stance) or *shizen-tai* (natural body) used for self-defense by Shorin, Shito, Shotokan, etc. in which an opponent is supposedly aggressive without thinking of defense, and in which one's role as receiving partner is counter-aggressive rather than trying to score a point. But more than just facing the designated attacker, *shizen-tai* and *sanchin* both approach the martial ideal of *mu-gamae* (no-posture) in which the martial artist is not necessarily facing a known opponent, but is mentally aware and physically able to move to every angle.

If *mu-gamae* is an ideal, why then do we study other postures? I suggest that the postures we learn in karate came from kata and are not ready-positions as used in tournament karate, but idealized poses that we would take only upon making contact with blocks or strikes—frozen instances that make it easier for Sensei to check form. Certainly, I am not the first to point this out. But why then are karate-ka always posing in some sort of posture during kumite drills? Is it the cinema, having been inspired by the postures of traditional karate, which is, in turn, inspiring karate-ka to be cinematic? Maybe, but I also think karate-ka take postures because they think they will be more ready to fight. And to them, thanks to tournaments, fighting means sparring.

I certainly don't think every karate practitioner is ready to handle attacks from every angle, and while becoming ready to handle more angles and more attacks, I don't necessarily think he will favor a *mu-gamae*. But just as Uechi and Goju students have adopted the Shorin/Shito/Shotokan sparring posture for tournaments, Shorin/Shito/Shotokan stylists may want to experiment with an informal *sanchin* with both hands to the front or at least a modified *shinzentai* (natural posture) with both hands un-posed when practicing a multiple person kumite drill.

The karate "ready stance" used in *ippon kumite* (one-step sparring) was intended to be a sort of "unready ready-stance"; that is, it was intended to simulate a posture in which the karate-ka is not prepared to be attacked. This unready ready-stance is also conducive to settling one's lower abdomen and dropping one's upper body into the hip girdle. However, the more we practice the unready ready-stance, the more it feels like a ready ready-stance, unfortunately focused on one direction. In this way, it is similar to the sparring stance that, although it is a give-and-take posture, concentrates the karate-ka's whole attention in one direction.

In practical self-defense, there may be one direction of attack, but it is unlikely to be the direction toward which the karate-ka is facing. The only way this can be driven home to students is either to change the angle at which a practice attack is delivered or to change the number of attackers in a self-defense drill.

If nothing else, even if a karate-ka feels comfortable taking an angular sparring stance during a multiple person self-defense drill, he should have the relaxed, open-to-everything attitude that a shorter, more natural posture tends to foster. He can invest in that relaxation only if he first gets used to that which seems foreign to the customs of his style.