

# ELEVATED ELEMENTALS

## Martial Basics as Advanced Budo

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# Introduction: BASICS TO ADVANCED STUDY AND BACK TO BASICS

**I**n my opinion, *Kihon* are *Okuden* (Basics are Advanced Teachings). Basics produce advanced knowledge and advanced knowledge returns to basics. I teach this way and try to use this same circular structure when writing.

I hope to address the unsatisfied needs of the intelligent martial artist. This is my personal reaction to the picture books of the 1970s and early 1980s, that explain “this is a fist” and here is how to do a correct punch — books that tout a specific style, that expound a “correct” method while subtly portraying it as *the* correct method. The book you have in your hand is the closest I have come to writing a book about correct methods. But I think you will find that this book is far different from the average “Let me show you my style” book.

*Elevated Elementals* is about basics, but it is also about advanced budo. It can fit either at beginning or at end of a series. In fact, it could be read as one’s first serious martial arts book or as one’s last.

I try to make my publications address both the Physical and the Spiritual via the major developmental stages (*Kihon, Kata, Henka, Genri, “Banji-wa Budo Desu”*) that I first introduced in *The Road to the Mastery: An Explication*

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of the Benefits of Budo. Below is a suggested reading order of my martial arts books as they currently stand with, for each, the aspect of budo I address.

1. the present volume, *Elevated Elementals* (Kihon)- *physical* (Aiki & Karate but can be applied to any budo)
- 2a&b. *Cracking the Kata Code* (Kata)- *physical* (Karate) & *Comparative Aiki in Action* (Henka)- *physical* (Aiki)
3. *Principles of Advanced Budo* (Genri)- *physical* (Aiki & Karate but can be applied to any budo)
4. *The Road to Mastery* (Wakari-hattatsu: Self-Development: method)- *spiritual*
5. *Tales of the Dojo* (Wakari-hattatsu: Self-Development: examples)- *spiritual*
6. *The Dojo Files* (Wakari-hattatsu: Self-Development: examples)- *spiritual*
7. the present volume, *Elevated Elementals* (Okuden)- *physical* (Aiki & Karate but can be applied to any budo).

Another study list including videos appears in the appendix of this volume.

If we charted the emphasis of each book, the results might look like this:

BOOK▼	Aiki "physical"	Aiki "spiritual"	Karate "physical"	Karate "spiritual"	easily applicable to any budo
Elevated Elementals	✓		✓		✓
Cracking the Kata Code			✓		
Comparative Aiki in Action	✓				
Principles of Advanced Budo	✓		✓		✓
The Road to Mastery		✓		✓	✓
Tales of the Dojo & Dojo Files		✓		✓	✓

I expect future volumes to round out the above matrix (for example a *Comparative Karate in Action* or an *Accessing the Aiki Enigma*) might lead off in tangents that could create a larger or more fully informative matrix. But, as I see it now, *Elevated Elementals* will be able to come both at the beginning and end of a serious study of traditional budo in modern application.

Kihon are the fundamentals of Okuden. Okuden are reflections of Kihon. That is the simple theme I am positing. But simplicity can become quite complicated before it can be understood once again in simple terms. As the old Chinese saying goes, "Before I studied Zen, a mountain was a mountain, a river was a river. While I was studying Zen, a mountain was much more than a

mountain, a river much more than a river. After I had understood Zen, a mountain was a mountain, a river was a river.” Bruce Lee, in the 1970s paraphrased this saying by urging his followers to avoid getting bogged down by the “Classical Mess”. He said, “Before I studied the martial arts a punch was a punch, a kick was a kick. When I was studying the martial arts a punch was much more than a punch, a kick was much more than a kick. Now that I have understood the martial arts, a punch is a punch, a kick is a kick.” He encouraged his followers not only to use what works but also to peel away the non-essential. May I ask a related question? From what do you peel away non-essentials? To simplify, you first must have something complex.

In this work, I am not trying to unduly complicate the lives of martial artists. I am simply saying, “Don’t miss out on the middle step.” You have to understand something fully, deeply and in all its ramifications before you can say you know enough to summarize, reduce, simplify, or peel away. Too many martial artists, out of sheer innocence (sometimes a kind way to describe laziness or ignorance), think that what you see is what you get. I suggest that idea could not be further from the truth.

The journey of understanding the depth and breadth of what Kihon can be will lead one to Okuden. The journey of organizing and categorizing one’s understanding of Okuden will lead one back to Kihon. Before one studies, the basics looks like basics. While one is studying in depth, the basics hold so much more than basics. Once one has understood, the basics are just basics.

But they are basics of a higher order.



# **PART 1.**

## **BUILDING ADVANCED BUDO:**

### **FOUNDATION, STRUCTURE & SPIRE**



# I. The Bedrock of Budo: SENSEI, WHY DO WE ALWAYS HAVE TO DO BASICS?

It's hard to go anywhere without preparation. You do basics for the same reason you buckle your belt and tie your shoelaces. Without preparation, you trip over your laces, your pants fall down and you kinda look ridiculous. Basics are not the be-all and end-all of martial arts, despite what some schools claim, but without them, where do you go from where?

The reason you can tie your shoes or buckle your belt, ride a bike or drive a car is because you have practiced those skills again and again. Literal thinkers in the martial arts (and that is about 99% of martial artists, in my estimation) figure, "Heck, I have been doing basics for a year or two now. I know them, already! What more is there to learn?"

I see their point, although I may not concur with it. What more is there to learn, after all, about tying your shoes or buckling your belt, riding a bike or driving a car? Even if you take a year off, you don't forget those skills, do you? No, you don't forget those literal skills, it's true. But a year off will force you to think of them consciously when you have to do them again. You then concentrate on a limited set of concretes to accomplish those and *only those* literal skills. What the skills imply, the higher level of applications, the more difficult executions born of those skills, do not even drift into your mind.



You do martial arts basics so that (1) you are always reviewing the skills literally and (2) always keeping your unconscious mind “alert” for adaptations and applications that, although far from literal, are nonetheless represented by the literal basics.

I hasten to add: I do not believe basics should be practiced *ad infinitum* without the accompaniment of application. Application is a necessary out-growth of basics. An application itself forms the base for even more advanced study.

Basics are called basics because you base something on them. They are called fundamentals because they are the fundament of a higher structure. They are elementals because they consist of the elements from which advanced budo is formed. Elementals are absolutely essential but they are still elements of something larger. But people may need help recognizing what the basics are at the base of. They may need help elevating their elementals.

#### SENSEI, WHY DON'T WE GET RANKED FASTER?

Children in my kids' classes ask me about why some friend, Johnny Fastsash, who is in the same grade but in a different karate school, already got an orange belt when he has been doing “karady” for only three months.

I am pretty patient with kids' questions even if I receive the same ones a bit too frequently to allow for proper gastronomic digestion on a consistent basis. I sit the kids down in *anza* (that's Indian-style for those who are unfamiliar with Japanese terminology) and slowly explain that there is a difference between McDonald's and Chez Robért. They understand my explanation about how a good meal takes longer to prepare but is more nutritionally enriching and a more complete and enjoyable experience. Then I remember that I am not talking to the few adult members who have actually been to Chez Robért. In fact, mommy will be picking up Johnny Fastsash taking both my inquiring student and his friend to McDonald's, not Chez Robért, after class. No parent in his right mind would waste the time, money, and nervous energy taking the post-karate crew to Chez Robért. No wonder kids keep asking the same type of question! I've got to get a different analogy! Kids want McDonald martial arts not because it is good for them but simply because they are not ready for the budo of Chez Robért.

Education, in my opinion, is as important as food. No parent would take their kids to McDonald's *every* night. Even frequent sojourns to those contemporary pub-style places that share the same interior decorator would

not satisfy a parent's sensibilities or a child's health, even if they are a step or two up from franchise burger joints. Nevertheless, many parents figure that the local branch of the Take-One's-Doe martial arts chain will be good enough for Johnny. It gives him what he wants. In other words, the kids become the consumers in choosing their own martial education. Would the parent choose either a nutritional regimen or a educational academy the same way? I think not.

Kids grow up. Many students, as adults, choose their martial arts school as a kid would have chosen. "This one does not spend too long on the basics and it gives ranks quickly." Good choice, Mr. John Fastsash! You wouldn't want to stay in martial arts for any appreciable length of time, after all! The quicker the promotion, the quicker you can have done with the whole experience! The less time spent on basics, the sooner you'll get to the real stuff, the flashy stuff, the dessert on the menu.

Basics are both the common fare for the fast-buck budo that does not have the time or talent for substantive study as well as *essentials elementals for advanced martial study*. How the basics are understood and represented makes a world of difference and separates "karady fer kids" (basics as rank requirements) from mature martial education (basics that reveal a lifetime of study).

#### SENSEI, IS IT NECESSARY TO GO INTO SUCH DEPTH?

Back at Chez Robért, the senior chef has not only mastered his basics perfectly but has also developed them so their application has become invisible both to his fellow chefs and, especially, to his dinner guests. To him, basics are practiced every day, but they are never obvious and seldom boring. Skipping a fundamental step is unthinkable: the resulting culinary masterpiece would suffer and that is unacceptable to him. He has learned to take joy in the details and, in doing so, has found many variations that produce desirable results — different taste sensations for different palates.

To vary the basics is to vary the result, to vary the result allows applicability to different tastes — or situations. In order to vary the basics, one must have a clearly understood set of basics.

French cuisine may differ in detail from German cuisine, but basics are basics. You do not have to do basics my way to respect the *idea* of mastering basics. But you have to respect mastering basics to get a martial masterpiece.

Basics are the bedrock of budo.



## YOU DON'T BUILD THE SPIRE FIRST

Why do we call basics *basics*? Because we base other things on them. Why are fundamentals called *fundamentals*? Because they serve as a foundation, a foundation for other items.

When I was about to be introduced to Tsutomu Ohshima, the founder of Shotokan karate in America, at my instructor's dojo in 1972, I caught a glimpse of him practicing before class. He was repeating a front stance in the mirror. How many years had he been practicing a front stance? More than I had spent practicing breathing. Still, he practiced and practiced basics!

If he had been practicing a difficult sweep, leg check, gap-closing technique, avoidance, or counterattack, one would not have been surprised. But *surprise!* He was doing just that! All of those more "advanced" techniques are based on the front stance. In building his own mansion of budo, Ohshima Sensei was starting at the bottom. At his level of experience he could easily have practiced something more lofty, something more spectacular, something that rose above mere basics to assert itself like a spire into the sky, but what can you build on a spire?

Spires get built last because they are less essential than foundations and because the spire rests, ultimately, on the foundation, not the other way around. I am not suggesting you should ignore practice of those spire-like techniques; rather, I am noting that by practicing the difficult spire-like techniques, you are practicing only those unique fine points that make the spire what it is. Spire-practice is refined practice and thus specific practice. It is necessary, of course, but inefficient. Try practicing every specific you have learned in martial arts just 10 times each. See you next week.

## THE OTHER ANALOGIES

By the way, the analogies I now use with both kids and adults to explain why we do basics every class and simultaneously why Johnny Fastdash is welcomed to his 18 month black belt, thank you, have to do with either *automobiles* ("If you had a choice between a Geo and a Cadillac, which one would you prefer?") or *universities* ("If you could go either to State U. or to Harvard which one would you prefer?").

To secure the Geo, it takes a shorter time to earn the price tag but the

resulting transportation is less valuable. It may take more work to get into a Cadillac but, once in, the Caddy takes you where you want to go in style and it provides a better sense of self while getting there. Not unimportantly, its “resale value” is much higher.

To get into State U., it takes a shorter time to earn the tuition but the resulting education is less valuable. It may take more work to get into Harvard, but the resulting education takes you where you want to go in style and it provides a better sense of self while getting there. Not unimportantly, your “employment value” is much higher.

People know that Cadillacs are good machines and that Harvard provides a fine education. Geo’s and State U.’s might be just as good for your purposes but, if you had a choice, if all other things were equal, which would you prefer?

The Geo’s and State U.’s provide the basics. Middle models provides bells and whistles without paying close attention to the basics. The Cadillacs and Harvards provide the basics elevated to a new level and that is why they provide so much more.

#### PROGRESSING WITH THE BASICS: FROM BASICS, TO BASICS

If basics are the bedrock of budo, how do we make sure that the basics we practice are a strong enough to provide a stable foundation? Tradition helps. Usually a traditional martial arts has a predetermined set of basics handed down. Admittedly, because a set of basics are from a traditional art does not mean they are the most well chosen basics known to humankind. However, it is reasonable to think that, if they have produced good martial artists for decades upon decades, a traditional set of basics are at least a reasonable place to begin. (I do not assume, by the way, that even traditional martial arts have basics which are literally 500 years old, despite myths to the contrary.)

I have seen very talented non-traditional martial artists who had a variety of techniques drawn from a variety of studies and who could apply them in much more realistic situation than those in which traditionalists commonly train. I have also seen these non-traditionalists fall over because they did not understand a basic training aspect such as stability in stance. They had all the fun advanced applications and none of the fundamentals.

Let me quickly add that I have seen the same thing from traditional martial artists who simply did not understand their training traditions in enough depth. These students took pride in being a part of a long history, but did not