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SUDDEN ATTACK DEFENSE

TRADITIONAL ONE-STEP SPARRING FOR TODAY'S WORLD

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Learning to Prepare/ Preparing to Learn

“Ippon Kumite formation!” insisted the man with the fraying black belt. Sixteen students sprang to their feet and found themselves facing each other down the center of the dojo.

“Beginners, measure off!”

Four of the students, all with white belts, raised a leg to their partner’s belt knots to determine by measurement what they could not estimate by sight. A young man, one green stripe on his *obi* (belt), raised a hand. His fifteen counterparts froze. Two or three took a barely audible gasp. You do not question Sensei in the middle of preparing for a drill.

The frayed belt walked behind the youth: “Yes, Mr. Thomas?”

“Sensei, sorry to interrupt; but, can I ask a question?”

“You just have, Mr. Thomas. Would you like permission to ask another?”

“Yes, Sensei.” Not realizing that he had not yet asked permission for the second question, the youngster continued, “It seems to me that no one really attacks this way. Aren’t we supposed to be learning self-defense?”

This time Sensei did not respond directly. Instead he commanded the group, “*Kiyotsuke* [attention]! *Otogai-ni, Rei* [bow to each other]!” Weapons

were not used in this karate class but there were some visual daggers thrown at the inquisitive fellow.

“Let’s make a circle on the mat,” said Sensei, “Sit down in *anza* [cross-legged informal position]. Relax, but listen carefully. This is not your average karate. What you see is decidedly *not* what you get. *Ippon kumite* [one-step sparring] is a formal and therefore somewhat phony drill. Tough! We do it anyway! To do it any *other* way is akin to trying to drive a sixteen-wheeler because you can negotiate a tricycle. I know you don’t believe me right now, but just listen....”

What followed was a short version of the rest of this book.





1. Kumite as Requirement

Your training partner stands a foot or two away from you in a karate stance. He lunges toward you, launching a powerful punch at your face. You defend. It is called one-step sparring. It is not something that students on the timid side would volunteer to do, nor is it something that students on the aggressive side would think worthwhile. In many cases, the karate student is first introduced to one-step sparring as a requirement for rank.

For the timid who may be taking karate to improve their courage, *ippon kumite* is a major challenge. This is the first time someone is actually punching at them! Those more seasoned in physical interaction through sports, roughhousing, or actual fights, *ippon kumite* seems not only tame but actually useless. “When,” Joe Jock thinks, “are we going to get to the real stuff?”

By “real,” no doubt, one should infer *jiyu kumite* (freestyle sparring). But, as we will discover later on, freestyle sparring has only a peripheral connection historically and practically to self-defense. For both the timid and the aggressive student, *ippon kumite* serves as a careful, gradually more challenging introduction to an attack encounter, despite its many unrealistic qualities. That is why nearly every style of karate uses some form of *ippon kumite*.

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Each style, of course, will have its own preferred one-step sparring or associated drills that often double as requirements for rank. Some styles prefer a *yakusoku ippon kumite*, that is, an agreed-upon or pre-arranged sparring drill in which the attacking partner (called *seme-te* in Japanese) attacks with a predetermined technique at a predetermined target at a predetermined speed. The receiving partner (called *uke-te* in Japanese) must perform a predetermined defensive technique, then counterattack. In some schools (dominantly kempo systems) these interchanges are memorized sets that are numbered or named. In yet other schools, they are created on the spot by the teacher for immediate imitation by the student during that class only. These memorized and imitated solutions to symbolic martial problems introduce the student to skills of distancing and reaction without his having to consider myriad possibilities a more realistic “martial problem” might present.

Some styles prefer a semi-free one-step sparring in which the attack is predetermined but the defense is only moderately limited or completely free. Once again, the attack is artificial from a real world standpoint but the defense serves to develop skills and attributes in the student via an initially challenging but relatively safe interaction.

Most schools seem to prefer freestyle sparring to one-step sparring. They believe any preliminary requirement of one-step sparring is meant to lead to the mother load of freestyle sparring and that, once freestyle is achieved, one-step is too trivial to practice. Many schools that emphasize freestyle sparring early in the student's career, manage to save *ippon kumite* as a sort of separate traditional requirement left over from the “old days”. They practice it so students have some sort of link with the old masters' training before freestyle was developed.

Jiyu Kumite was developed around 1936 by Gogen Yamaguchi, a Japanese Goju-ryu instructor, who reasoned that karate students, after a appreciable amount of training, should have enough physical control to stop their powerful blows before actually making contact with an opponent. This freed students to spar in a less pre-arranged, less formal, and supposedly more realistic format. A half-century earlier, before karate came to Japan from Okinawa (1922) and before it was accepted in the Okinawan school system (1901), those old masters did have their students engage in the occasional freestyle contest. It was done very infrequently, however. Masters from two different schools would oversee the matches with *bo* (6 foot staves) in hand so they could cross their staves in front of the students if the match became too dangerous. At that time, freestyle was an event very close to one-on-one combat.

A century before that, freestyle was not a sparring event at all, but an actual fight. According to the late karate historian Richard Kim (*Weaponless Warriors*, Ohara Pub., 1974), there was a large rock in the city of Naha called *Ude-kake-shi* (depending on the ideographs for these words, they could be translated as Arm Resting Place or The Place for Wagering on One's Talent or The Place for Putting up Arms). Karate students would rest an arm on the rock (some say they would slap the rock) thus issuing an open challenge to the karate-ka of the area. What resulted was not free-sparring but a real fight, the results of which were often more severe than the bumps and bruises attained in closed dojo encounters or open tournaments.

Once Yamaguchi Sensei opened the doorway to freestyle, the rival, and often very competitive, Japanese karate schools jumped through it onto the sparring mat. To the young college men who populated the karate dojo in Japan prior to World War II, free-sparring was the only way to show both their personal courage and their style's merit. As a result, many otherwise traditional dojo began training with free-sparring as an emphasis, or even as an end in itself.

But, even before karate became a modern budo that emphasized personal development over combat, freestyle sparring was never the intended end goal. Back in the 1600s, free-sparring was not the purpose of practical karate training — self-defense was. And self-defense was not seen as two men facing each other on a beach, by the village rock, or on the tatami. Self-defense was extricating oneself from a real, often a surprise attack. To develop skills that address the problems self-defense offered, karate-ka invented or discovered techniques and preserved them in formal *kata* (pre-arranged forms), the applications of which reverted back to a sort of pre-arranged one-step sparring. In my book on kata, *Cracking the Kata Code: How does a Kata Mean* (BUSHIDO-KAI Publications, 1994, 2006), and the videos that complement the book, I explain ways to analyze kata and draw applications from them.

Unfortunately, few schools integrate basics, kata, and graduated one-step sparring requirements with the end-goal of developing self-defense in a manner that flows logically from these preliminaries. *Kihon* (basics) combine to create more advanced *Renraku Waza* (combination techniques) which, formalized, are called *Kata* (forms). From kata are drawn the pre-arranged Kumite called *Oyo* (applications) which can be modified to create innumerable responses to any attack. According to Chojun Miyagi, the founder of Okinawan Goju-ryu Karate: "Kata are not simply an exhibition of form; they are concrete manifestations of techniques that can be transformed at any time to any form at will and in which the essence of karate has assumed a definite form."

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Those concrete manifestations are called Oyo and they are practiced in drills called Ippon Kumite.

In the Takeshin martial arts, we use the lower kyu requirements detailed below before we introduce freestyle to the student, but I wish to make clear that these requirements, although necessary for developing coordination, judgment of distance, reaction time, and recognition of openings used in freestyle, do not exist for the purpose of preparing the student for freestyle sparring. Rather, we see developmental one-step sparring gradually increasing the skills that will be used in a real self-defense encounter. Freestyle is a valuable drill for karate students but it is just one of many drills. To our way of thinking, too often it is overemphasized at the expense of more advanced one-step sparring drills. Below are illustrated the three stages of one-step sparring taught in Takeshin Karate-do in order of increasing difficulty.

Takeshin incremental one-step sparring:

- I. *han-yakusoku jodan ippon kumite* (semi-prearranged upper level one-step sparring): Novice level: pre-determined attack; defender limited to 3 basic retaliations and distances



1-1. a.
ready position at
beginner's
distance