

Origins and Thoughts about Blocking in Shotokan

The question “What is Karate and how did it come into existence?” has been asked and examined several times over the years. It is generally understood that the origins of Karate come from many different fighting systems with *kata* being the mechanism to record these and pass on the knowledge. Subsequently, *kihon* and consensual *kumite* were added to create the framework of modern-day Karate.

Looking deeper into blocking within Shotokan, we need to understand how often do we really block anything in a real confrontation? Do we ever block or is it one continuous stream of clearing pathways and attacks until the assailant is not able to further engage and we can safely escape? If we wait to block in a violent exchange then is it highly likely that we have already lost? While honing our skills in being able to react to an attack in a way that better guarantees our safety has value, we also need to be very aware of other skills as well, for example verbal de-escalation and pre-emption, to be better prepared for real self-defence. However, there may be times where we need to use our training in ‘Blocking’ to our advantage and by tilting the axis a little on our understanding of what blocking is we can apply our training effectively in a real exchange.

If we assume that *kihon* was not originally part of Karate and was only developed in order to teach Karate in more mainstream circles, it seems plausible that over time the original meaning of these techniques has been lost as they are done in isolation and do not have the context of the rest of the *kata*. In training, we regularly practice the basic blocks by stepping forward and some say that this is just for training purposes, which it may well be, however, I believe that these could potentially be deflecting the attack in the preparation stage, while static, followed by stepping forward and striking your assailant in the latter part of the technique. However, while stepping backwards to block, the end of the blocking technique could be used as a block, potentially a two-stage block where you parry initially with the preparation hands on the spot, and then continue the technique to further block or control the assailant. There is no definitive right or wrong in terms of how blocks should be used and this article seeks to explore options. Understanding that the preparation part of the blocking techniques can be the actual redirection of the attack can give a more rounded understanding of Karate.

When we examine a lot of our formal partner training exercises, these are done working on the premise that your opponent is also trained and is engaging in consensual violence. All attacks are done from formal stances with well executed *tsuki* or *geri* attacks (as per our training) whereas that would not happen in a real situation. Whilst we get considerable benefits from training in this way, should we not also do more work from very close quarters to simulate real world applications? We also really need to “stress test” our Karate otherwise if we ever get screamed at with someone “in our faces” our automatic flight response may over-ride our automatic fight response and leave us at a disadvantage. Furthermore, we want the “fight” response to be a controlled, measured response based on extensive training. These formal attacks then lend themselves to a defence where we have time to move back, prepare for a block and then block the attack. However, in most real

situations with attackers, they will not give you that time to react. Therefore, should we look to modify partner work?

Everything in Karate should have value – the preparation hands in our classical *kihon* blocks, *yoi*, *yame* etc. I see a lot of wasted training time in Karate today with a very small *yoi* or *yame*. As I understand it, the functional value of these two techniques is to stop attacks from any side to either the head or the body, again blocking. These are performed in many *kata*, *Nijushiho*, *Unsu*, *Bassai Sho*, etc. However, without this functional aspect being clearly articulated to students, most tend to think of these as a part of getting ready and stopping rather than a mechanism to teach the body muscle memory as a basis for an essential skillset. There are also potentially many ways that we can effectively use both hands in the *kihon* blocks. While one hand blocks the attack close to the head, the other hand potentially goes towards the assailant to grab or strike so you can disrupt posture, therefore both hands have value. Many just teach the preparation simply as the position you put your body and hands in to ensure they are in the right position to develop power for the block. I fundamentally disagree, instead I believe this is for blocking / disruption and has a true purpose in its own right. As a secondary consequence of this, the bodies are in the correct position in order to be able to generate power for the strike. As such, some students may think of the classically taught preparation part of the block technique as having little value or being there only to get the body in the right position to do the next part of the technique. We often hear instructor emphasising the need to prepare hands fully and correctly for blocks and giving students an understanding that this may effectively be the most important part of the technique will help reinforce correct practice. Getting the preparation hand to quickly deflect an attack should be the very first thing we do before anything else. Many times we see students stepping and then preparing the hands and then blocking. I postulate that this is incorrect and that moving the hands to the preparation position before anything else is a must. This should be the same in *kihon* and *kata*. It is interesting to see how often this is incorrectly applied in training as students concentrate more on the final position rather than the journey or, the most important part, where to stop the original attack.

The principle that I want to highlight is that stopping someone hitting you, or re-directing their attack, should be the prime response and must be quick and efficient in order to stand the best chance of being effective. Therefore, it is not logical to bring a blocking arm backwards to a preparation position only to then send it forward to block; this is moving away from the attacker and taking up valuable time. Practical Karate is for use in non-consensual violence where it is very difficult to see an unprovoked attack coming and therefore your reaction time is very short. The best way to deflect an attack is the automatic flinch reaction inbuilt into our DNA. Therefore, in the non-consensual violence arena, this seems much more logical than the block being at the end of the technique. It's interesting to note, that this preparation is done without moving, which makes sense as attacks are aimed to connect with where we are at the time the attack is thrown. Parrying an attack while static is more natural than stepping forward to meet an attack. Parrying without tension to create space for the counter attack makes sense as we know that tension reduces speed, therefore if we tense on the block, we have to be very adept at immediately relaxing in order to ensure the strike is fast (this is very hard to do well). If the timing of the block is correct, that is to say we meet the attack as it comes towards us, then redirecting its trajectory just enough for it to miss (usually only an inch or two) by using the momentum

of the attacker takes little effort. This means that we do not need to be heavy with a block and we can stay relaxed and are therefore able to turn this parry very quickly into an efficient strike with the same hand. The strikes we use should be heavy with the intention of inflicting the maximum possible damage in a single strike. So, when we train to use *kime* at the end of a blocking technique, with the body weight behind it, it makes sense that this is a strike. This also makes sense of the hours we spend drilling the basic blocks going forward. I will talk about some possible options later, however, this is a principle that is adapted to the situation you find yourself in.

Whilst I appreciate that blocking moving backwards may seem to be ok, I do not think we will have the time to react with the lower body in time and therefore propose that most attacks will be intercepted before being able to move away. Used in conjunction with *tai sabaki*, the ability to intercept an attack on the spot, with the preparation hands, is extremely beneficial, and the good thing is that we train to do this all the time, even if we don't know that is what we are doing!.

Hands in Kata often drop to before going into a move or sequence and this is sometime explained as a block, for example at the start of *Heian Yondan*, however, I have an alternative thought. *Kata* is teaching us to react again a realistic attack scenario, and we have already established that it makes sense that we are in a relaxed position before an attack (not expecting it), therefore I think the positioning of the hands before a move or sequence in *kata* is resetting the body position to that of someone who is stood naturally, not expecting and attack. This again consolidates the thinking that the blocking, or deflecting, part of the classical blocks is done quickly with the preparation hands in a flinch style reaction from a relaxed position.



Figure 1: Initial preparation hands (*jodan nagashi uke*) for *sotu uke* blocking on the spot following by stepping strike to head / neck assisted by control of the assailant with the *hikite* arm



Figure 2: Initial preparation hands blocking in age uke on the spot following by stepping strike to throat assisted by control of the assailant with the hikite arm

In SKM issue 153 I introduced the idea that the preparation part of the blocking techniques is the actual block or deflection of the attack. While I focussed on *gedan barai* in that article, I now want to explore what this means for all the other key *kihon* blocks within the Shotokan syllabus. The principle can be applied to all other blocks and adapted depending on the situation and the following are some thoughts around possible scenarios. For *sotu uke* (figure 1), one possibility is that the preparation for this is actually *jodan nagashi uke*, pulling back and covering the face to redirect an attack away from the head. This can then flow into a heavy counter, with or without a step, of either *tetsui uchi* or *uraken uchi* having cleared the attacking limb out of the way. If we look at the *Tekki kata*'s this technique is used extensively. With *uchi uke*, a possibility is that the hand going forward attempts to redirect the attack and this is followed by the heavy counter to attack the assailant or further control the attacking hand further (a double tap block). *Age uke* (figure 2) could be a quick redirect above the head followed by a heavy strike with the forearm to the attacker's head, neck or to break the arm. Finally, *shuto uke* is very similar to *gedan barai* in the quick deflection of an attack to the head but with following strike points changing from down low to the assailant's neck, where a heavy blow can cause significant damage. Other variations, or combinations of the *kihon* blocks, are seen throughout kata as well, for example *kosa uke*, *manji uke*, *koshi kamae* (figure 3) and these can also have unique blocking applications.



Figure 3: Koshi Kamae redirecting an attack and controlling the assailant, primarily used with a turn of the body often followed in kata by a side kick to the legs, to destabilise

Whilst these are all good examples of the principle, the main aim of this article is to get people to think about how every bit of every technique can have value and that all our Karate training can be used if ever needed. The discipline of training and being very precise

with our *kihon* has huge benefits, however, I would encourage all teachers and students to examine all techniques for real practical function as well as good form. Remember, Karate is not supposed to be pretty, it is supposed to be effective and save you from attack. We have to be honest with ourselves as to the reason why we do Karate and seek the training that matches these aspirations. Competition is great in both *kata* and *kumite*, however, it is not aligned to the original Budo roots of our artform. Until we get messy in the dojo and truly 'stress test' our karate with more realistic attack scenarios we could be missing out on the self-defence aspect whilst convincing ourselves that we can look after ourselves.

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