

WELCOME TO KARATE | THE BEGINNING

Welcome To **KARATE**

Unlocking the Wisdom of
the Beginner's Mind



BRUCE COSTA

Foreword by Grand Master Teruyuki Okazaki
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ISBN: 9781594398414 (print) • ISBN: 9781594398421 (ebook)

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Edited by Doran Hunter.

Cover adaptation by Axie Breen based upon Bruce Costa's original design.

Photography and photo editing by Aaron Mitchell Photography.

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Dachi, Tai Sabaki, and Embusen diagrams by Bruce Costa.

Illustrations provided by the author unless otherwise noted.

20210901

Publisher's Cataloging in Publication

Names: Costa, Bruce Guido, 1961- author. | Okazaki, Teruyuki, 1931-2020 writer of foreword.

Title: Welcome to karate : unlocking the wisdom of the beginner's mind / Bruce Costa ; foreword by Teruyuki Okazaki.

Other titles: Unlocking the wisdom of the beginner's mind.

Description: Wolfeboro, NH USA : YMAA Publication Center, [2021] | Series: Welcome to karate.

Identifiers: ISBN: 97815943988414 (print) | 9781594398421 (ebook) | LCCN: 2021941401

Subjects: LCSH: Karate--Handbooks, manuals, etc. | Karate--Training. | Martial arts--Training. | Stretching exercises. | Muscle strength. | Qi (Chinese philosophy) | BISAC: HEALTH & FITNESS / Exercise / Stretching. | SPORTS & RECREATION / Martial Arts / General.

Classification: LCC: GV1114.3 .C67 2021 | DDC: 796.815/3--dc23

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CONTENTS

<i>Foreword by Teruyuki Okazaki</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>Gratitude</i>	<i>xi</i>
<i>How to Use This Book</i>	<i>xiii</i>
<i>A Style Guide</i>	<i>xv</i>
<i>Banzai!</i>	<i>xvi</i>
Chapter 1: What Is Karate?	1
Chapter 2: Empty Your Mind	5
Dojo Etiquette	6
Comportment	7
Bowing	9
The Dojo Floor	12
Class Structure	14
“Mokuso!”	16
“Dojo Kun!”	20
Arriving Late	22
The Zen of Giving Service	24
Dojo Etiquette Guide	27
Chapter 3: Basic Techniques	29
Seven Aspects of Kihon	30
Chapter 4: Stances	33
Shizen Tai	34
Heiko Dachi	37
Musubi Dachi	38
Zenkutsu Dachi	39
Kokutsu Dachi	41
Chapter 5: Blocking	43
Age Uke	44
Chudan Soto Ude Uke	45
Barai Uke	46
Shuto Uke	47
Chapter 6: Striking	49
Making a Fist	50
Choku Tzuki	52
Gyaku Tzuki	54
Kezami Tzuki	55

Kentsui	57
Shuto Uchi	58
Chapter 7: Kicking	59
Mae Geri Keage	60
Chapter 8: Body Shifting	65
Hip Rotation	66
C-Step	67
Uke and Tzuki with C-Step	69
Mawate	71
Chapter 9: Sparring	73
The Value of Structure in Sparring	75
Aiming	77
Regions of the Body	77
Sambon Kumite	79
Chapter 10: Kata: Heian Shodan	85
Focus Points for Heian Shodan	88
Chapter 11: Encouragements	95
Awaken to your Imaginary Opponent	96
Develop the Nobility of Zanshin	98
Smile	98
<i>Appendix 1: Written Exam</i>	101
<i>Appendix 2: Practical Exam</i>	105
<i>Appendix 3: Ranking</i>	109
<i>Appendix 4: Your Uniform</i>	113
<i>Homage: The Mountain</i>	119
<i>Postscript</i>	127
<i>Glossary</i>	131
<i>Pronunciation Guide</i>	135
<i>Student Journal</i>	139
<i>About the Author</i>	149

FOREWORD BY TERUYUKI OKAZAKI

Founder, International Shotokan Karate Federation

It is with pleasure that I submit the foreword to this handbook by Mr. Bruce Costa. It is always heartwarming for me when a student of mine not only continues to train but also makes the decision to share their experience and training with others. Bruce first began his Shotokan karate training with me as a student at Temple University. Many university students, once they finish their academic commitment, discontinue their karate training. However, it is fortunate for the many students Bruce has guided in the karate community that he remained true to this martial art.

This manual is a helpful tool for the beginner student. It explains the proper *dojo* etiquette as well as the basic *kihon*, *kata*, and *kumite*. It is always beneficial to guide the beginner student to what they can expect on a journey they will hopefully continue for their entire lives. What is most important for them to remember is that we never stop learning.

Studying martial arts is a life-long endeavor. You are never finished, and there is no graduation. This is because the hardest technique you will ever have to study diligently is to do your best to strive to attain your main goal, which is perfection of character. This can only be achieved if you do your best to live by the *Dojo Kun* and the *niju kun*. These guidelines will help you to be a good martial artist and a good human being. When you open your mind to accept these precepts, you will then begin to learn how to be a

true martial artist. In the dojo, you are learning the tools to protect yourself and your family. But you are also learning the tools to be a good human being. You must train hard and keep your Dojo Kun not only in the dojo but also in your everyday life. When you treat others with respect and courtesy, they will respond to you in the same manner.

Respect and courtesy are contagious. When we treat each other this way, we will be making a contribution to making the world a better place. This is our ultimate goal.

Author's note: Throughout his adult life and throughout the world, Grand Master Teruyuki Okazaki (岡崎 照幸, June 22, 1931 — April 21, 2020, student of Gichin Funakoshi and Masatoshi Nakayama) was respected not only for his position, but for his legendary skill in kara-te. During the four decades I benefitted from his mentorship, I came to understand how his generous grace and good humor were equally deserving of such high regard. For all these reasons and more, his willingness to compose a foreword for this small book has been my profound honor.

Early in my practice, "Sensei" (as we all singularly called him in those days; every other teacher was "Mr." or "Ms.") provided my first exposure to the concept he called soshin ni kaeru, wherein we were to conceptually return to a time before having learned, in order to have the most receptive possible attitude. To this day, such open-mindedness enables me to attend classes I'm supposedly overqualified for and pick up new information. It works every time. I have used this skill in countless areas of my life. It is the reason for the subtitle of this book.

Thank you, Sensei.



*The ultimate aim of the art of karate lies not in victory or defeat
but in the perfection of the character of its participants.*

Master Gichin Funakoshi

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is meant to do a couple of things. Those things are specific and limited.

First, I hope it will make the very concept of practicing karate a bit less intimidating. You may be watching senior members of your school perform miracles with seeming ease and wondering how you'll ever reach that point. Try to understand: every one of them were once where you are now.

Almost daily in class, at the end of a drill, a blush-faced, winded new student exudes frustration. I offer some tips, perhaps a simple foot placement or shifting of weight, that will make the drill less strenuous and its lessons easier to grasp. At that moment I'll sometimes perceive *more* frustration, as if this person should have been born with such knowledge and, therefore, be performing at black-belt level immediately. When I sense this, in a voice loud enough for the class to hear, I mock gently, "Don't worry! *No* one else in this class has ever made the mistakes *you're* making!" It is always a pleasure to watch faces twist and smirk, with an affirming yet somewhat sheepish reply of "osu!" shouted most confidently by those holding the highest rank. It is one of the many advantages of becoming a Black Belt: by then, the karate student has elevated the practice of embarrassing himself to a high art.

Know that yours is a well-tread path. Forgive yourself your mistakes. Indeed, try so hard as to make many of them. Then release your critique of yourself to those who've done this for a while. Your dojo is an institution of learning, perhaps unlike any other you have attended in Western society. Remain quiet, and do

Watch for blocks of text like this one. They provide practical advice for ways to bring your training with you.

Self-Training

Fortunately, we keep our karate in a handy, portable, carry-all container. It requires no particular equipment or facility. At all times, it's ready-to-go.

From this standpoint, karate is among the easiest-to-practice skills you'll ever try to develop. You can fit it into small spaces in your life, like while you're shopping. I like sneaking in a newly learned drill while shopping in the produce section of the supermarket: plenty of space in the wider aisles. Aghast shoppers are a bonus.

all that is asked of you. When you return home, let this book (and its pronunciation guide!) provide you with the comfort of a few more insights regarding your experiences in karate class.

▮ This book's second, more important purpose is to help you bring your karate outside of the dojo. This planet needs to be populated with people possessing insights such as those you'll gain there.

▮ Imagine that you took guitar lessons and, after the first half-hour lesson, your teacher said, "Okay, leave your guitar here. Don't do anything on your own. We'll resume your practice when I see you next time." This is an approach that would guarantee failure, yet it is the one used by most new karate students. Your guitar teacher

would serve you better by expecting you to practice every day, even if just for a few minutes. The same is true of your karate teacher. All good karate students self-train. Great karate students self-train daily. There are boxes throughout this book like the one at the top of this page. They will offer materials for your self-training to supplement those received in class.

This book is not to be used without the supervision and guidance of a properly ranked Shotokan karate instructor. It is a supplement to such instruction, not a replacement for it. Indeed, there are countless nuances and details involved in the personal development realized through karate. No one book, or series or collection of books, can replace a good sensei. Active counsel must be provided by someone who has received such guidance through his or her own process of development. At best, this book will provide you with good discussion material, but you need a mentor for such discussions. Your first task, then, if you haven't done so already, is to find a good karate teacher and show him or her respect and gratitude.

A STYLE GUIDE

There are challenges that come with mixing technical Japanese terminology in an English text written for Western audiences. Choices need to be made. I've become convinced that the best possible outcome must result in numerous awkward phraseologies. Nevertheless, we made the best choices we could, two of which I'll explain here.

The plural of Japanese words normally remains unchanged from the singular. If I wanted to explain a trip to the dojo to perform a kata, I would describe the experience with the same words as if I went to several dojo and performed many kata. During a relaxed reading of this text, however, I found myself tripping with every occurrence like a track runner mistiming a hurdle. We will, therefore and not at all smoothly, be going to dojos to perform katas.

The second of these choices involves the use of Japanese. It is not a spoken or written language familiar to most people living in the West, to whom this book series is primarily directed. (Despite whatever awareness of technical terms I possess, it remains a language unfamiliar to me as well, as it does most longtime American practitioners of Japanese martial arts.) In most written works, a word from a language foreign to the reader is italicized. Were we to do that here, however, you'd find yourself in a flurry of tilted senseis, dojos, and other terms familiar even to the disinterested. Therefore, the first appearance of a given Japanese word will be italicized, but it will be presented in normal type thereafter.

BANZAI!

Congratulations!

If you've never set foot in a *dojo* (a facility for learning Asian arts, literally "Place of The Way"), you may think that opening this book is your first step into the world of karate. If you thought that, you'd be wrong about your karate, perhaps for the first time. Don't worry, you're just at the beginning of your journey. You will be wrong about your karate many, many more times.

Your first karate experience occurred when you first thought about becoming involved with karate. You no doubt fantasized what that involvement would be like, what it would feel like. Such processing was very "Zen" of you. And you were, once again, wrong. Nevertheless, you already have experience with karate, and so, congratulations are in order!

I congratulate you because the moment you stepped onto this path, you elevated yourself beyond the self that you were. There are ramifications. For example, you've taken the first step into the misunderstanding of many of your peers. This can cause indifference in your relationships, even conflict. But it can also bring opportunity and renewal to them. It is for this reason I've chosen *Banzai!* from among the many ways to express congratulations in the extraordinarily expressive language of Japanese: I wish you a long life in this wondrous adventure.

And what an adventure you've chosen! With a voracious appetite for learning, I've sought many new experiences. But I know of none that lets me experience the journey itself in quite the way, and quite so much, as karate training does. More than

anything I know of, it proves that the destination is not the thing. In my own training, any time I've gotten myself to think I know what I'm doing, I can depend on finding out I was wrong about it in short order. As I tell my students, once you're signed up and are paying tuition, I only need you to do two things:

- 1) Show up.
- 2) Try hard.

Without ever having met you, I can guarantee that if you do those two things, you will measurably—and not at all contrarily—grow in both confidence and humility. One thing doesn't take long to discover: there are so very many facets to this experience that it is, indeed, worthy of a lifetime of study.

That's quite a bit to get your brain around. I will like it very much if, every ten years of your training or so, you come back and reread this page to see if you agree. For now, simply know there is a path before you that leads up a very tall mountain.¹

Good job showing up.

Now try hard.

Bruce Costa
Bucks County, Pennsylvania

¹ See the story, "Homage: The Mountain," on page 119.



Chapter 1

What Is Karate?

...since karate training has stressed humility and overcoming oneself as fundamental principles from ancient times, even though one may not be aware of the development, it contributes substantially to the polishing of character.

Master Gichin Funakoshi
from Rentan Goshin Karate Jutsu, 1925

Karate is open mindedness.
Karate is humility.
Karate is learning.
Karate is sweat, endurance, excellence.

Yes, karate is a martial art. Those of us who practice *karate-do* think it is the best of them, distilled by great masters from millennia of personal development to the efficiently focused power that is available to us today. We are invited to train hard; I've never seen a martial art practiced with more intensity than ours. We hone basic techniques with tens of thousands of repetitions. We then strive to bring that level of quality to actual encounters with challenging opponents. Finally, these concepts of focus and intensity must be present when we practice the predetermined sequences of techniques called *kata*, wherein we simulate combat against many antagonists. Through developing technique, conditioning, and clarity of mind, we continually reach new heights we'd never imagined were even possible. This experience is as available to newcomers as it is to senior students, which is one reason the only people impressed with a newly appointed Black Belt are those who are not yet Black Belts

themselves. Karate is the practice of beginning, the bringing forth of the truth: we are all beginners.

Happily, there are also things karate is not. It is not arrogant. It is not bigoted. Karate is not stubborn or aggrandizing or violent. Those who bring these qualities into the dojo are not practicing karate while they're there. There is no place in karate for these things.

Karate is good exercise, positive discipline, and productive camaraderie. Most of all, karate is the search for perfection of character.





Chapter 2

Empty Your Mind

DOJO ETIQUETTE

Welcome to Japan

To those of us living in the West, used to hugs and handshakes, Eastern etiquette may feel a little ... unusual. It seems at times appropriate that our Asian brethren are placed in geographic opposition to us: a Westerner would need to go off-planet to find a culture more dissimilar to his own.

Our use of this etiquette is advantageous because such unfamiliarity offers us a remarkable opportunity. We all start in the same awkward place—entering what may be the largest empty room in our daily lives, bare footed, sporting funny white pajamas, and probably having a look of anxious discomfort. It might be downright embarrassing. I hope you can find reassurance in the understanding that every single person in the *dojo*—from the *sensei* to the most senior *senpai* to the fellow in line next to you wearing the white belt who joined just a few days before you did—*all* of them started with the same unfamiliar feeling. You are invited to do as we did, to see all of this as an invitation to adopt new ways of expressing your humility and to open yourself to a learning method that will let you become your absolute best.

Our humility is found immediately upon entering the karate facility. Traditionally, in Japan and the islands that surround it, one removes one's shoes before entering a home. Here in the West, one can typically enter a facility and locate the appropriate place to remove and store shoes. When I visit a dojo I've never been to before, I take off my shoes before entering. It's just good manners

to do so and will save you potential embarrassment if the shoe-removal zone isn't obvious.

After removing shoes and storing any extraneous items, you may need to take care of some administrative business. There may be a sign-in sheet or attendance booklet. Some schools have a computer-entry system, enabling you to record your presence with a keyboard or a card scanner. Our school has a simple index card file box, from which students pull their cards before class. Whatever the method, don't miss this important step. At exam time, you'll want all your attended classes recognized when Sensei is determining your qualifications for promotion.

Your next step will be to "bow onto" the dojo floor. You will learn this very important part of Eastern etiquette in a moment. There are a few details of your participation to be mentioned first, however.

COMPORMENT

Traditional *Shotokan karateka* (karate practitioners) wear pure white uniforms. This can be puzzling to parents of karate kids who have long considered white a color to be excluded from their child's wardrobe. But your uniform is important in that it signifies the purity of our art. There is no pretension in the dojo; no one practitioner is better dressed than any other. There is only what we bring to the training floor. As is the case everywhere in life (though we sometimes behave as if it isn't so), we are fully responsible for the way we present ourselves. Once we learn these few concepts, the dojo becomes a place for us to comfortably and courteously practice that presentation alongside our peers. We all have the same, clear system of etiquette.

- ❖ Your **gi** (uniform) should be neat, clean, and odor free. You'll be working closely and intensely with your friends in class; you want them to consider you a friend *after* class as well! Heavier, twelve- to fifteen-ounce cotton uniforms, while preferred for training, are prone to wrinkling. They can be pressed if so desired. To avoid ironing, develop the skill of pulling your gi out of the dryer before the heavy wrinkles set in.
- ❖ All **jewelry** should be removed, not only because not all of us can afford jewelry but, more importantly, because of safety, primarily your own. Nothing should be worn around your wrist, even a hair band. If removing and replacing a piercing is infeasible, covering and securing the piercing with athletic tape is permissible.
- ❖ **Fingernails and toenails** *must* be kept short. In the heat of class, when you've been exercising heavily, your skin will be moist, soft, and easily cut. Causing a laceration to a partner with an unkept nail is not only unhygienic, it's just plain inconsiderate. A nick by your nail would require your partner to bow out of class, clean his wound, and bandage it before waiting to be allowed back in, after he went through who-knows-what in his personal life to be present for class. As his partner, you would feel badly costing him any of his training experience because you injured him through discourtesy. At a minimum, groom your nails weekly.
- ❖ **Hair** should be clean and restricted. Longer hair must be tied up or somehow contained. I've seen flailing hair cause a slight eye wound more than once. More often still, I've seen it occlude vision, resulting in loss of awareness and potential injury. I consider it enough of a safety issue to keep a basket of clips, ties, and bobby pins at the edge of our training floor for this purpose. Courteously restrain your hair and make it a non-issue for yourself and others before class begins.

Chapter 3

Basic Techniques

Before you are through being a White Belt, you will already be required to have competence in four stances, four blocking techniques, six strikes, and four front kick variations. There will be moments when this eighteen-item checklist will seem like an overwhelming amount of material to swallow in a very short period of time. There are, however, a few key qualitative generalizations to be made about virtually all techniques. As you enjoy class training in *kihon* (technical fundamentals), you'll want to continually check the following seven preliminary items to ensure they are driven deeply into your muscle memory. Your ability to grasp them will make it easier to develop effective karate. They are presented in the order in which most students are able to develop awareness of them, *not* in order of their importance. For now you should consider them equally important, which is why they're not numbered.

SEVEN ASPECTS OF KIHON

- ❖ The physical aspect of your karate always begins with your **stance**. Of these seven, it is the one aspect that will most determine the effectiveness of your technique, so be attentive to the details presented in the chapter devoted to this subject.
- ❖ Next is the chosen **technique**. Even if it feels strange or ineffective to you at first, make no assumptions as your sensei or senpai shows you how to perform a new move. Be a blank slate, and learn properly from the start.
- ❖ **Half-face** or **straight-face**—you'll hear one of these terms constantly as you learn to orient your body for the proper application of defense or offense, respectively. Rotating into a half-faced position draws your vital organs away from your attacker, brings increased power to the blocking technique, and prepares you kinesiologically for the delivery of a powerful counterattack. Rotating into a

Chapter 4

Stances

SHIZEN TAI

Natural Stance

Stand up, right now.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

Relax.

There: you probably situated yourself into something a non-martial artist would call a normal standing position. We call it *shizen tai*, or “natural stance.” Shizen tai is actually a category of stances and, as such, it is perhaps the most important of stance categories since it is where we spend most of our time. Unless you’re more comfortable in an outward-tension horse stance while waiting in line at Starbucks, chances are you’re waiting there in something close to a variation of shizen tai.

There is more to it than this, of course. You’ll be told to revert to shizen tai following one challenging drill or another, just when you’re sucking wind and feeling sorry for yourself. The mistake, then, is to consider the command of “shizen tai!” as permission to be absent-mindedly “at ease.” Quite the opposite; I tell my students to consider shizen tai as “standing on purpose.”

The common thread of a proper shizen tai stance is that you are wide awake and ready, with expanded senses, loose joints, and

proper body alignment. We'll touch on each of these points in reverse order.

BODY ALIGNMENT — Let's conduct a self-study, starting where our bodies begin: at the ground. You should feel all four corners of your feet carrying equal weight.⁷ Consider a table: it is not optimally stable until the weight its four legs share is balanced. Similarly, you will soon see it is impossible for your body to be in balance if your feet aren't first. Invariably, we've gained a habit of putting additional pressure on one of the corners of our feet. A good martial artist can think of himself as standing on eight equal points. This is part of the reason such solid balance can be found while standing on one foot.

Your pelvis and spine should similarly be freed and centered in their own equilibrium. Your body becomes more efficiently aligned if you tuck your pelvis slightly under your torso.

Next come your shoulders and arms. Here is a method for finding the best resting place for them. Stand in a relaxed but alert fashion. Push your shoulders all the way forward and hold them there for a moment. Then pull them all the way back, as though to touch your shoulder blades together. Move them like this, fully forward, then fully back. When you've got a feel for their range, bring your shoulders to their natural center point. Your shoulder structure should drape comfortably over your rib cage, starting from your trapezius and clavicle and ending with your deltoids wrapping over the tops of your arms. This brief practice lets you gain a conscious sense of where your shoulders *want* to be.

Include your neck and head in this self-study. Your cervical spine enters the base of your skull, providing a perfect pivot point for your eight-pound head. Rotating your head side to side and back and forth slightly, you'll become aware of this attachment point right between your earlobes, and you'll enjoy an immediate sense of conscious balance.

⁷ As practiced in the Bubble Wrap exercise in chapter 3.

LOOSE JOINTS — Take the time to bring conscious control to each of the primary joints required for standing: your knees, pelvis, shoulders, and neck. These joints, especially your knees, should be straight but not locked or hyper-extended. As above, experiment with the exact positioning of each of them, playing with their range of motion and settling on the midpoint dictated by each joint's comfortable positioning.

EXPANDED SENSES — As expressed above, we practice an attitude of self-defense 100 percent of the time we are on the dojo floor. Shizen tai is the place for us to begin this practice.

Find a spot on the wall at eye level. It is impossible to focus on all spots in the room, but it is possible to have the discipline to focus on just one. Then, by use of your peripheral vision, you can observe everything else happening in the room. By isolating the one spot, the others become perceptible.

You can even train your peripheral vision to gain greater sensitivity than it currently possesses. Various exercises can develop your speed in perceiving spots on the wall as you turn, or for expanding your field of view, or for maintaining your perceptive ability under duress. All of these are worthwhile and will be studied in your karate practice. Their development might be necessary to cope with a life-threatening situation one day. And, short of such a need, their development will lead to a more robust living experience in your peaceful daily life.

With practice, it will only take you a moment each day to do this body scan, but the benefits of it are remarkable. Those of us who stand for lectures, meetings, or in lines may have developed a habit of locking our joints so our weight can be mindlessly supported by our frame. In fact, this is much more of a strain and leads to that exhausted feeling your bones have when you flop into a seat after waiting for public transportation. By contrast, shizen tai brings a feeling of being able to move quickly in any direction you need to. It can and should be consciously practiced in any of these circumstances until you develop the muscle memory that enables it to become a positive habit. You will be able to stand in shizen tai, tirelessly, all day.

Chapter 6

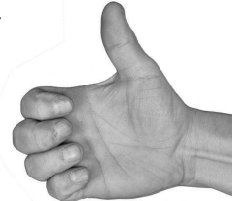
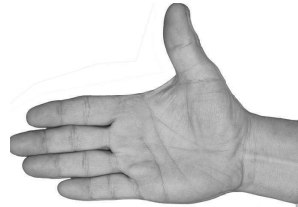
Striking

MAKING A FIST

I love to box. In American boxing, I can jab, cross, and upper cut. I use the strength and weight of my arm — a little less than seven and a half pounds⁸—to execute techniques which, when I'm on my game, can rattle an opponent.

But I prefer karate. With Shotokan, I get to choose from many more weapons. Even when I use my hands alone, they're more effective: I grab the floor with my feet, relax my muscles, rotate, and then snap them all into a moment's tension, bringing the strength and weight of my entire body through my fist. I hit with 170 pounds, not seven and a half.

A punch, properly propelled by a competent Black Belt, can devastate. But my fist must be superbly prepared to be used in this fashion, or I'll cause more damage to myself than I will to whatever it is I'm hitting.



⁸ R. F. Chandler, *Investigation of Inertial Properties of the Human Body* (Ft. Belvoir Defense Technical Information Center, 1975). 72–79.

There are five steps to making a fist properly:

1. Extend your hand, with your fingers together and your thumb out.
2. Curl the tops of your fingers down and squeeze them into a bear paw. Your finger joints are severely curved, but the knuckles on the back of your hand are still straight. Squeeze your fingertips into the top of your palm as tightly as possible.
3. Roll your fingers down into your palm, keeping your fingers curled tight.
4. Wrap your thumb tightly around your bundled fingers.
5. At this point you may feel as if your fist is about to explode. Now, without backing off on your grip, relax your muscles. Keep your fingers in this position, just don't put any effort into it.

Self-Training

Try making a fist quickly, without going through the steps listed here. Push on the striking surface of your first two fingers. See how they collapse in? Now, carefully make your fist as shown, then push on your knuckles. They're far more stable, a heartier weapon. Rather than absorbing as much force as a looser fist would, your proper fist will transmit the energy into your target.

With practice, this will become easy for you to do, even comforting, the way a seat belt becomes reassuring in a car—a proper fist will be so familiar that *not* making one will seem out of the question.

Watch what Black Belts do with their fists when they go into shizen tai. You'll catch them in the long-time habit of making their fists carefully every time they enter a natural stance. Make sure you cultivate this habit, too.

Self-Training

Practice choku tzuki at home in the fist-exchanging manner described. After ten repetitions, increase your speed, but only slightly. An onlooker would still think you're moving very slowly. Don't get bored; doing it in this way will pay big dividends later. After ten reps at this speed, increase it slightly again. After one hundred reps, you'll be snapping your fists quickly. When practicing any karate technique, always be sure you define moving at speed as going as fast as possible while still doing the motion correctly.

CHOKU TZUKI

Straight Punch

Standing in a proper shizen tai, like heiko dachi,⁹ simply place one fist in front of you, palm down. As is the case with blocking, bring your draw hand back to an upside down position above your belt. Direct your punching hand toward the center of the body of an imaginary opponent. Aim it exactly at the solar plexus of a nonexistent person of your own size who is standing opposite you. Your gaze should be on the eyes of this

ethereal karateka. Like your other joints, your arm should be straight but not locked. Relax your shoulders. Imagine a drop of water placed on the shoulder of your punching arm would be able to run steadily down your arm to your fist.

Now, slowly, exchange your fists. As one extends, the other retracts. Always be as mindful of your draw hand as you are of your striking hand; don't just worry about hitting something. Exchange fists again. Continue punching in this balanced manner. Do it in a slow, rhythmic motion, firmly feeling the end of the movement in both arms with each repetition. After each punch, do a quick mental check of both fists to confirm that each is positioned properly. Remember to keep your shoulders relaxed. Let your upper arm swing off of your shoulder like a pendulum, your elbow staying close to your body, not coming away from it, during its path.

When punching—this goes for any of the methods described in this book—your elbow should always follow your fist, never rotating out of the path of your fist. Turn your fist over only at the very last instant. When it lands, imagine your punching hand

⁹ See chapter 4.

Chapter 7

Kicking

If you've ever looked into the face of a monkey, as I have, I'm sure your shared ancestry became as immediately and overwhelmingly apparent to you as mine did to me. Unfortunately, not being simians means we have lost many of the advantages our monkey-cousins retain. We don't use our feet for eating, writing, washing, touching, and all of the other activities we are far more comfortable using our hands to perform. For this reason, you must work harder to train your legs to use them with precision.

You want your legs in your arsenal. They have four times the strength of your arms. They also enable farther-reaching attacks than do any other parts of your body. Your legs increase your range and let you defend yourself from a safer distance.

MAE GERI KEAGE

Front Snapping Kick

You would be hard pressed to find a frontal attack that is more linear from your body center than *mae geri*. It's a direct, logical, core motion. Nevertheless, most people are only familiar with the kind of kick performed in a game of soccer. *Mae geri* is much different than a sports kick.

Chapter 8

Body Shifting

Should you ever need to actually defend yourself, chances are you won't be able to just stand in one place performing karate techniques! You'll need to shift your body in this direction or that, and your karate will need to be executed in harmony with your body movements. This is the practice of *tai sabaki*.

HIP ROTATION

Look back at the animation of gyaku tzuki and kezami tzuki that you get by flipping between pages 54 and 56. You'll notice the karateka's hips face forward to execute gyaku tzuki, but they face to the side when punching with kezami tzuki. This movement is fundamental to karate. The rotation of your hips, when understood, brings both speed and power to techniques and body shifts that simply can't be rivaled by the conventional body movements we Westerners have been raised with.

Each time you execute an upper body technique in front stance, whether it's a block, punch, or strike, your primary concern should be your awareness of your hip rotation and ending position. In time you will bring this awareness to your kicks and body shifts as well, regardless of your stance. For now, though, make careful note of when you're told to be in half-face or straight-

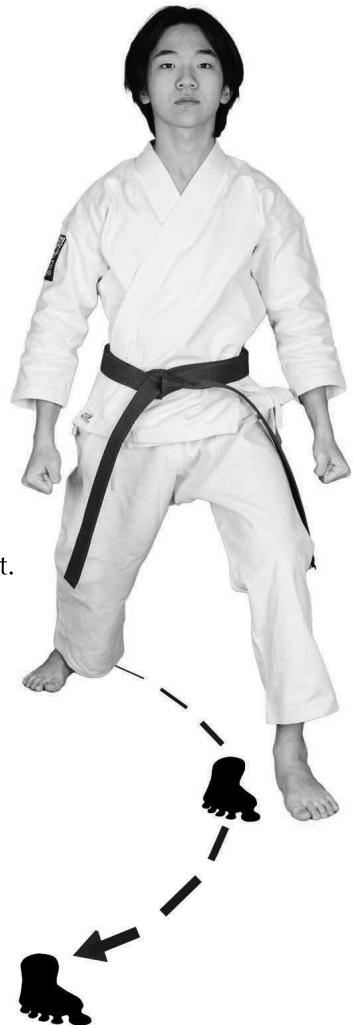
face position. Generally speaking, blocking is done in half-face, attacks are executed with straight-face. There are exceptions, some of which you've already learned, like kezami tzuki and shuto uchi. The final word on facings is given by your sensei. Point the knot of your belt wherever he or she says, consistently.

One more point: look back at the stance diagram for zenkutsu dachi on page 40. You will notice the requirement that your feet are placed hips' width apart relative to the direction you are facing. Only in a stance so structured can you rotate your hips to the extent required for basic Shotokan techniques.

C-STEP

When shifting from one place to the next during the practical application of karate, it is helpful to utilize the C-Step. This enables you to move reliably to a stance that maintains the critical hips' width foot position.

Begin in zenkutsu dachi, with your feet properly placed one hip's width apart. Then drive your hips forward. Don't push off from your back foot. Rather, pull your rear leg to you from the momentum created by your forward-thrusting hips. Allow your feet to come together, then sweep your front foot out until it reaches a position two shoulders' length and one hip's width from your other foot. Land in a perfect front stance, with your front



Self-Training

Practice moving forward in the C-step pattern, then move backward in the same fashion. In this case especially, don't wait for dojo time to practice. Practice C-step in your home, your yard, a park, wherever. Don't forget the supermarket's produce section.

You need to drive C-step deep into your muscle memory so that when you suddenly need to move away from or toward an opponent, your body will instinctively and confidently work in service to your karate.

foot's toes rotated in slightly while you hold outward tension on your front knee.

During C-Step, your stepping foot must remain close to the floor—one paper's thickness, as we say. This minimal distance lets you more quickly adjust to an unexpected need to change directions or tactics. Also important is keeping your head and upper body at the same level as you travel. Do not move up and down.

When teaching young students, after telling them to make their front stance, I reach around a doorway and pull a hidden lever. I make various machinery-like sound effects, then tell them I've just lowered the ceiling of the room until it is almost touching

the tops of their heads. I further tell them the ceiling is paper-thin, and suspended above it is hot lava. (One of the benefits of owning your own dojo: the laws of physics are subject to your discretion.) They must move from one stance to the next without coming up and down at all.

You, too, can practice this skill, and no lava is required. Simply fix your gaze on a point opposite from you, on the wall or whatever it is you're looking at. As you do your C-step, take notice whether your eyes rise relative to that spot. Utilize this technique while practicing both forward and backward C-Steps.

If you prefer, you may use two papers' thickness!

*Master Yutaka Yaguchi during the Instructor's Training Class
2006 ISKF Master Camp, Pennsylvania, USA*

Chapter 9

Sparring

The very notion of *kumite*, or sparring, creates the greatest anxiety for many karatekas' personal relationships with karate. For some, the idea of having to get close enough with another individual to interact with their sweat and aggression is so repellent it ultimately drives them away from martial arts altogether. For others, aggression against another person, whether to satisfy personal bravado or to emulate Hollywood heroics, is the entire purpose of their martial art. Both groups misunderstand the larger concept and rob themselves of the extraordinary joys offered by Shotokan karate.

While you've learned basics, you've been working through a specific kinesiological system designed to maximize your focus and concentration of power. Practicing those fundamental movements against an opponent provides remarkable benefits in many aspects of your life. Think about it: despite what the Action and Adventure section of Netflix would have us believe, few of us have fists thrown toward our faces, ever, even once, thank goodness. When this first occurs in class, as it must, it may be traumatic to you, or may saturate your system with adrenaline. Both cause a loss of control. By the time you're ready to take your first Black-Belt exam, however, you'll have had thousands of fists in your face. The experience will no longer have any power to unsettle you. Knowing this, consider the many disheartening problems that occur in your life that pale in comparison to being punched in the face. How much better will you be able to handle those problems once being punched in the face is no big deal?

Understand sparring in its intended context. If you never need to defend yourself against an aggressor, but train thoroughly, you will have succeeded in your study of *kumite*. (I unapologetically explain my intent to my students: they will become well prepared for an event that will never happen.) To learn *kumite* is to learn

budo, which means “to stop the fight,” as Master Teruyuki Okazaki often said. Therefore, fighting cannot be the purpose of training in kumite. Rather, learning to understand oneself, and then, through compassion, learning to understand one’s opponent enables more growth and achievement than any fight ever could.

THE VALUE OF STRUCTURE IN SPARRING

Many, many karate schools claim to offer “real” sparring. They do this by happily and profitably selling you head, face, chest, shin, forearm, foot, and hand protectors and sending you onto the training deck to face an opponent in a free-sparring match. Dressed like the Michelin Man with a white belt, you barely feel it when the opposing new student gives you his best shot. This renders impacts painless and, the argument goes, you can learn to execute techniques without fear of being hurt. But my experience has taught me to bet on a Black Belt trained in our unpadded method against an opposing Black Belt who came up through padded sparring any day.

There are problems with padding. First, there is reduced emphasis on learning to *not* be hit through body shifting and blocking. Students are given incentive to simply attack their opponents as often as possible; this means quantity over quality, pitter-patter over focused power. When I encounter a training partner who has learned to spar in this way, I usually find more openings than I can count. If he agrees to spar “my” way, unarmored, my friend’s typical, flinching fear response—he feels so unprotected!—effectively reduces his competence as he tries to protect his many exposed areas. What would he do in a real-life encounter?

Self-Training

Ask a friend to be your target dummy. Have him or her stand a little more than an arm's length away from you while you're in shizen tai. Punching slowly, target jodan, meaning the mustache spot, with the first two knuckles of your perfectly-formed fist. Align your knuckles so they are precisely in that spot.

Practice moving one fist from draw-hand position to that jodan punch, then the other fist, repeatedly, at that same slow speed. Be careful. A martial artist must perfect self-control, which takes years. Never hit. Ever.

Then punch chudan, so your two knuckles would, another inch farther, insert themselves precisely into your friend's solar plexus. After several slow, targeted chudan punches, punch jodan again. Then move to gedan. Then jodan again.

You are isolating the invaluable practice of accuracy. Always move fluidly and slowly. In time, and as your sensei permits, you will learn to strike with incredible speed and power, and do so within a millimeter of your precise target. Do not increase your speed without the approval of your sensei. On your own time, however, you can improve your accuracy.

My second concern is that all of the body's vulnerable points are covered in the same amorphous foam, detracting from the variety of applications that can be deployed for various attack targets. This provides poor practice in the subtle variety of offensive techniques we are offered during kihon training.

My greatest worry is that wearing such gear may actually be *more* dangerous. The encouragement of less precise, less controlled attacks against thin foam armor is of grave concern. Additionally, my greatest anxiety about a strong roundhouse kick to the jaw is not a broken jaw. It's a broken neck. Padding the jaw doesn't change this. Learning the control necessary during unpadded sparring does.

When visitors watch White Belts sparring traditionally in Shotokan karate, they notice it doesn't look much like fighting at all. That's because it isn't like fighting. Not yet. For now, kumite is a drill intended to teach control of kihon—the basics already learned—while under the duress of a physical confrontation. To enable the karateka to focus on the quality of his techniques, the confrontation, for now, must be predictable and safe. My insurance company is very happy to hear that our objective is to *never* hit each other. (We hit foam shields, punching bags, *makiwara*, and other nonliving targets instead.)

Over time, we develop our techniques so they are incredibly fast, accurate, and powerful. That won't seem the case when watching most White Belts. But they, like you, are at a stage where

Chapter 10

Kata: Heian Shodan

Self-Training

When you perform a kata, your steps trace a pattern on the floor. This pattern is known as an embusen, and nearly every kata has a distinct one. The embusen are individualized further: they must be custom fit for the person performing the kata. Embusen are the snowflakes of Shotokan.

You will be given a new kata to learn at least as often as you change belt colors in Shotokan karate. Now is the time to establish a place in your home where no one will mind if you use masking tape to create a pattern on the floor. Use the clarified embusen on page 87 as your guide. Mark the crosshatches first, each at a distance of twice your shoulders' width apart, which is the length of a good front stance. Then lay down the longer lines. (When you are more comfortable with the kata—when you have it “in your bones”—you might study the more complex embusen depicted on page 93.)

Practice your kata each night, even if you only do it a couple of times. If you keep to the cross marks, your muscle memory will become trained well in what a proper stance should look like. In class, you won't know any other way to stand, and your sensei will be impressed by how quickly you've learned your new kata.

Now you can begin your journey through the kata. These are forms composed of many movements to create mock battles against multiple opponents.

The kata are learned in order to provide development in specific skills at just the right time. Some kata are very old; they are considered cherished artifacts of history, each of which you must earn access to. For me, kata most embody the art of our martial art. There have been martial artists, brilliant by any measure, who *only* practiced kata. This is possible because they contain the catalog of our fighting tools. They are dances with deadly purpose.

During your time passing through the colored belts, you will learn all five of the *Heian*

kata, a curriculum originally developed a century ago by Master Funakoshi's teacher Ankō Itosu, still practiced throughout the world. The Heians, originally called *Pinans* and considered to sit within the *shorin* category of kata, emphasize light, quick movements. Heian translates as “Peaceful Mind,” a discovery made possible by their diligent practice even before you wear a

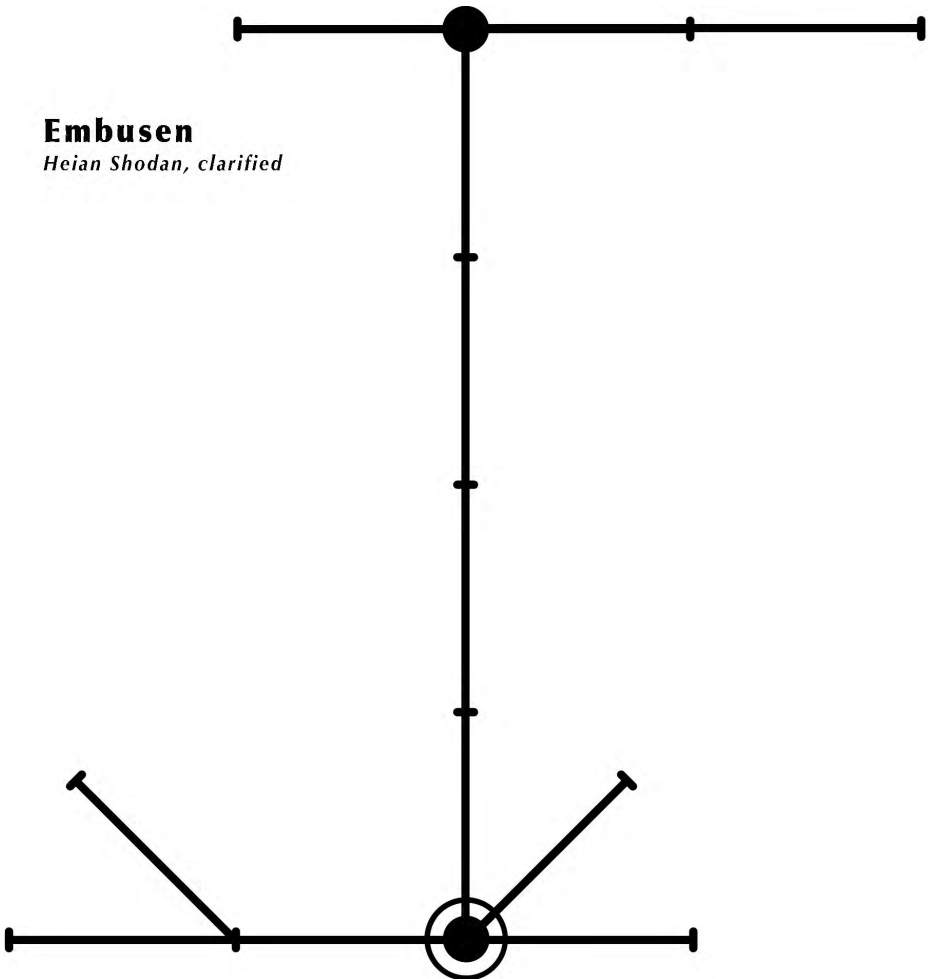
black belt. *Heian Shodan*, or “Peaceful Mind First Step,” will be taught to you after you have become acquainted with front stance, back stance, C-step, stepping punch, rising block, and knife-hand block.

The diagram pictured on page 89 is meant to be an aid as you as you review your kata at home. The pattern it follows is not the *embusen* (see sidebar) but is designed by the respected German karate teacher Albrecht Pflüger to enable a readable flow on a single page. It is quite accurate. Recalling what you’ve already learned in class, see if you can follow it along like a pictograph.

Then get up and do it.

Embusen

Heian Shodan, clarified



After you've memorized the pattern of Heian Shodan, your chief concern during its practice should be the quality of the techniques that compose it. Look into your imaginary opponent's eyes rather than at the floor or some other place that doesn't hone your focus. Drive into stances that are consistent and correct. Rotate to straight-face when punching and half-face when blocking, and use a C-step when driving from one technique to the next. Keep your fists tight and your draw hand in its place. Strive for full relaxation. The more you relax, the more you will enjoy the snap of a powerful technique.

As any sincere martial artist would admit, that's a lot to absorb. But there is help to be found. A respectful request for help after class from a senpai will almost always meet with a positive reaction. Also, I encourage you to purchase Master Masatoshi Nakayama's definitive *Best Karate* series. You want these in your possession; we all refer to them often in our karate career, and you will, too. The Heian katas are contained in Volume 5.

Finally, practice often, incorporating these elements as much as possible. You need to get to the point where you're accustomed to the techniques you are called upon to perform in Heian Shodan, and at a level of quality that renders those techniques effective. At that point, your practice will benefit to the extent that you can imagine their use in a real situation. Really feeling the need for a strong block as you deploy it, yanking your wrist away during the escape, driving your punch in fully, and other attitudinal adjustments make the difference between those who go through the motions of their karate requirements and those who generate truly powerful focus.

FOCUS POINTS FOR HEIAN SHODAN¹³

- ❖ **#1: Gedan Barai**—The first movement of a kata is always vital, setting the tone for every subsequent movement. Experienced examiners can tell what to expect from the entire kata by watching a student's first technique. Make yours count. Collapse your structure nimbly, then drive

¹³ Use the numbers on the Pflüger diagram, page 89, when referencing these focus points.

Chapter 11

Encouragements

There are many elements to karate training left outside of a technical discussion of the art. Some of those elements can make a meaningful difference in your capacity to absorb and enjoy your training. Here are a few.

AWAKEN TO YOUR IMAGINARY OPPONENT

By practicing karate, you are training to be ready at any moment to defend yourself efficiently. You cannot defend yourself unless you recognize you are being threatened. The drudgery of daily tasks, poor nutrition, distractions, and other internal and external factors bring us in and out of alert awareness. Therefore, you must practice awareness. The dojo is an excellent awareness training center.

As you bow onto the dojo floor, wake up to all that is around you. Strive to maintain that consciousness until the time you bow off of the floor for the night. Your awareness should be at its utmost when you are practicing your techniques.

The next time you are standing in line waiting for a command in the dojo, set your eyes on a point on the wall opposite from

Postscript

A PERSONAL NOTE

As of this writing, I've been training in karate for over four decades. It remains an exhilarating activity for me. Compared to a more youthful time, with too many memories of being bullied, karate now brings a sense of control and serenity. As a result, facing another person in sparring is far from the source of stress and tension it once was. Indeed, it is among the most thrilling aspects of my martial art—and not because of the violence of it. Relationships progress in such confrontations. Strangers become friends, friends become confidantes. Invariably, I come away from a karate encounter closer to my training partner than I was when I began it.

I am proud to be able to tell you that my only confrontational use of karate in my entire life has been in such matches.

I take pains to express this pleasure to each of my students at the beginning of their time with me. I tell them a good martial artist understands the true lesson of tai sabaki—of simply not being in the path of a blow. This can involve body shifting in the moment of an attack or walking to school along a different route than the one where thugs linger.

There is another reason I avoid fights that is more important to me than my personal safety. As any competent karateka will tell

you, the self-control Shotokan brings also enables an extraordinary focus of power. These techniques can crush bones. By any reasonable interpretation, this is not cool. It's destructive. Here is the way I explain this to classes of young children:

What would I try to do if a big, scary man tried to hurt me? First, I'd talk to him. My mouth is more agile than my hands, so my words will always express myself better than my fists will. Only by talking will I discover the truth: Maybe he's upset about something. Maybe I can help him. Because, you see, if I hit him, it wouldn't be like it is on TV. After I hit him, his eye wouldn't work, any more, ever. He would have to go to the hospital. His friends would visit him there and feel sad. His mom would cry. If you cover one eye with your hand, you'll see what the world would look like for him when he came out of the hospital. It would look like that every day, forever.

I don't want to do that to anyone. I want to be nice. I want to lead a peaceful, helpful life. I want that for you, too. Refrain from violent behavior. Use your karate to learn how to learn. With it, you can unveil the best person that already lies within you.



Sensei Rick Hotton's Winter Keiko, Sarasota, Florida.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bruce Costa has presented and taught throughout North America and Western Europe, and has been privileged to train with some of the finest karate instructors and practitioners in the world for over four decades. He is the father of three happy adults, all of whom are Shotokan Black Belts. You can read more at BruceCosta.com.

In 2002 Sensei Costa established Granite Forest Dojo. Today its membership includes focused preschoolers, spirited tournament champions, hearty senior citizens, superb instructors, and many high-achieving Black Belts. The facility was hand-made by these people over the course of two years. Granite Forest Sangha is hosted there, offering mindfulness meditation in the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh, with whom Mr. Costa has practiced since 2007. Along with its faculty, students, and their families, Granite Forest Dojo helped The Christopher Court Foundation raise hundreds of thousands of dollars for pediatric tumor research in honor of Sensei Costa's young student. You can visit this welcoming dojo personally in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, or virtually at GraniteForestDojo.org.

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Bruce Costa, 5th dan in Shotokan Karate under Grand Master Teruyuki Okazaki, continues to train with many of the best instructors in the world. Costa is founder and chief instructor of Granite Forest Dojo, which has specialized in traditional karate instruction, mindfulness meditation, philanthropic fundraising, and community-building for decades. Sensei Costa teaches and resides in beautiful Bucks County, Pennsylvania.

Cover and author photos: Aaron Castro Cover adaptation: Axie Breen



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