

Kihon-waza

{Foundational Techniques}

When it comes to martial arts, there has probably been more information written about kihon than anything else. The Japanese word kihon is often translated as basic and kihon-waza as basic technique. After a recent discussion with my most senior student, Scott Dunn, in relation to the true definition of kihon, I decided to write this article.

It has been my experiences that while most students are often told how important kihon is, they still avoid devoting the necessary time and energy required to perfect them. Why would students avoid practicing something that they have been repeatedly told and assured to be extremely important? One reason could be that many times students find practicing basic techniques boring. The times that we as humans live in today could also contribute to students not being willing to devote time and energy to something they find basic, boring and tedious. Today we live in a society of instant gratification. Many people, especially younger people want everything now. It is not uncommon for younger people to expect to receive the same jobs and the same salaries as those who have been working for a much longer time. Another reason students may not devote the much needed time to practicing basic technique could be related to their being told by senior martial artist that no matter how long one practices the basics, mastering these basics will always be just outside their grasp. This type of mindset seems to be in direct opposition to the mindset required for practicing and advancing in a martial art; always seeking perfection in technique, but realizing one will never attain that perfection seems a waste of valuable time.

As stated above, kihon is defined as basic and this I feel is a major reason that students want to learn as little as possible and then move on. After all, the very mention of the word 'basic' seems to indicate that there must be 'advanced' somewhere down the line and students want to get to it as quickly as possible.

Over the years I have trained with many 8th, 9th and 10th Degree Black Belts in numerous martial arts and it is interesting to note that every single one of them are of the same opinion when it comes to the practice of kihon. I remember once when attending a series of seminars hosted by Sensei Dan Smith of Seibukan karate, Sensei Smith invited Sensei Van Horne and me to come to his home after the seminars. When we arrived all of the senior teachers were present as well as a very small group of American karate teachers who had been invited. There were several Okinawan 8th and 9th dan present as well as three 10th dan karate teachers from Okinawa. In a conversation I had with Tomoyose Sensei a 10th Dan and the most senior teacher

of Shohai-ryu (A system derived from Uechi-ryu Karate), we discussed general weaknesses of basic technique. I remember asking Tomoyose Sensei if he ever felt as if he was just having a bad day in relation to his technique or kata and that his technique just generally felt weaker than usual (just not up to par). Tomoyose Sensei smiled and said, "Of course!" I ask him what he did when he felt this way. I was somewhat expecting him to say that he practiced Kokyu-ho (special breathing methods to provide extra energy and power) well known in the Uechi-ryu system. What Tomoyose Sensei did in fact say, was simple, but contained a very powerful message to anyone practicing any martial art. He said, "I return to practicing more kihon." This prompted me to ask this same question to the other senior teachers present that evening. This same answer was repeated to me without fail from the two other 10th dan present and well as several other 8th and 9th dan teachers. I found it very interesting that these senior teachers who were in fact some of the most elite karate teachers in the world would all agree that returning to practicing basic technique to reinforce their skills was most important.

I think that looking at and defining kihon waza as simply 'basic' technique can have a negative image and a negative effect in the minds of students especially beginning students. Understanding and defining kihon waza as 'foundational' techniques gives a more precise definition of the word kihon as well as a much greater indication of the importance of these techniques. It may simply seem to be a play on words, but virtually everyone understands the importance of building a strong foundation to support what is built above that foundation. Any well informed adult understands that without taking the time to build a strong foundation a house will fall and so it is with ones martial arts skills. It is also crucial to understand that once the house is built, it is much, much more difficult to go back and attempt to build a strong foundation under the house that is already standing. The house itself will hamper the building of the foundation. This fact was reinforced in my mind many times by something that my teacher, Sensei George Van Horne told me many times. "I would rather teach a student from the ground up, when they know absolutely nothing about karate, as opposed to attempting to correct the ingrained mistakes of a student who was not taught properly from the beginning." Once a student has been taught incorrectly and that student repeats these mistakes over and over again, the mistakes become so second nature and ingrained in their minds that it makes it extremely difficult to make correction on their technique.

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For a partial list of the teachers that Davenport Sensei has trained with visit his website at:

www.chitoryu.com