

I learned to Kumite by....

Throughout my four years of training at the JSKA of Rochester, I have found that Kumite is the composite form of Karate training, for the mind and body. While we don't often think about it, Kumite is the perfect blending point for all the principles and elements of basic karate training. It is also physically demanding, because it requires fast, strong movements, and mental concentration. Kumite is the closest we get to actually fighting in some back alley. To me, Kumite teaches not only the skill to perceive, anticipate and counter your opponent, but also the perfect synchronization of the mind and body.

Kumite is the ultimate application, or Bun-Kai of all karate training, including Kihon and Kata. Kihon is extremely important to Kumite because every technique, stance, block and strategy has its roots in Kihon. Kihon relieves you of the need to stay on your toes and forces you to instead accustom your body to various exercises. This basic training, teaches each part of your body to be used to its full extent. It teaches endurance to the legs for long, strong, and movable stances. It teaches the hip to rotate back and forth to drive a punch or kick and enforce a block. It even teaches you to keep your elbows tight when kicking, tucking the rear to maintain posture and the squeeze force between your legs, and even to Keai at the finish of a technique. Kihon takes your body back to basics and trains the body to perfect each and every technique to minute detail. Sensei Barrett once told me, "If you do every technique slowly and perfectly many times over, then when you want to do it fast for real it will be perfect." This holds true when applying the basics of Kihon to Kumite when finishing a punch or making a block work, or bending your knee just enough to reach jodan.

Kata has great influence on Kumite as well. Kata is like the framework for application and defense. It groups together effective techniques to counter an opponent. Many creative and effective uses can be derived from basic katas and be put to use in the strategic element of Kumite and Kumite-like encounters. For example, the down-block lunge-punch combination in Heian Shodan can be used to counter a kick to the stomach and catch the opponent mid-air in the kick with a lunging punch. The inside-outside block, front-snap kick, and reverse punch combination in Heian Nidan is also an effective assault tool. Just like these examples, thousands and thousands of applications exist in the few techniques of our katas, many of which can not only be used in Kumite but in real-life self-defense situations. To almost every technique an opponent can throw at you, there exists at least one counter derived from a known Kata that can be utilized effectively. In fact my Sensei has demonstrated this on unlucky volunteers, deriving more than five different versions to counter an attack with the same combination. Along with Kihon, Kata is the base to effective Kumite but these two elements of effective Karate Training are not enough to fully attain perfection in Kumite.

Kumite requires more than just proper use of Kihon and Kata. It also requires you to learn four basic principles to sparring and even street fighting: Balance, Distance, Timing, and

Technique. Each principle is so essential, that without one element, your technique is failed and will not be effective in time of need. Balance refers to strength of a stance, and the control you possess over your legs to shift, shuffle, step, and adjust your position to avoid a fearsome attack, or perform an even more deadly one. Balance also refers to the ratio between your state of mind and flow of thoughts. Both forms of balance are broken with a simple foot sweep, which is waiting if you don't obey the second principle of Kumite; Timing.

Timing is all about strategic planning and execution of techniques. When set in perfect time, your techniques can storm the opponent and take him or her off guard. There are three different timings practiced in Shotokan Karate: Go-no-sen, Sen-no-sen, and Sen-sen-o-sen. Go-no-sen refers to "after time" or timing after the technique has been made. Sen-no-sen refers to "same time" or during the technique is being executed. Sen-sen-o-sen or "before time" is the most difficult because it requires you to create a moment in which you can induce an attack, anticipate it, and "counter" before it is actually executed. This superior control over the fight, and although it is difficult to perform, it is the optimal timing.

Along with timing, Distance is the key to making or breaking your Kumite. Distance refers to the actual distance between you and your opponent. To make closer-range attacks, you must shorten your distance with a shift, shuffle step, even a grounded stance, in order to make the technique reach its actual target. Or if your opponent shifts away enough to avoid your punch, you can adjust for the loss of distance by performing a kick. Keeping a considerable distance from your enemy is necessary to ensure that you can still attack your opponent, but also be able to block incoming attacks.

The final, and perhaps most important principle of Kumite, is technique. When performing Kumite, and even self defense, the most important part of a technique is its actual effectiveness. For example, if your opponent throws a Mei-Geri at you, one possible defense is a down block. But to be even safer, and avoid a possible second attack, it is better to shift your center of alignment off to the side so that the kick misses you and leaves targets on your opponent open for a quick jab or Gyaku-Zuke. Any block or punch that does not protect your body or reach your opponent is a useless technique this is true when winning points in Kumite matches as well as serious self-defense.

These are some of the lessons that I have thus far learned when doing Kumite. There is more mental and physical work to Kumite and self-defense fighting than many may think, because of the necessity to coordinate mind and body as such to keep one's head during the action. For me, Kumite draws upon all the Karate knowledge I have, and is the most difficult but rewarding part of my Karate training.