



ROKUDAN EXAMINATION REPORT

SHUTO-UKE

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The Hidden Aspects of Shuto-uke

Shuto-uke means “knife/sword hand block”. It is the first open-hand block taught in Shotokan karate. This technique is found in many of our katas, such as Heian Shodan, Nidan, Yondan, Bassai Dai, Bassai Sho, Kanku Dai and Sochin.

As a junior karate-ka, I often wondered why this technique was used so often in kata but hardly in free sparring. Here are a few of my findings:

Shuto-uke is an inside-outward type of block (Gaihō-uke).

In Shotokan, a basic shuto-uke is usually done in kokutsu-dachi. I have seen different styles of karate use variants of shuto-uke in shiko-dachi, neko-ashi-dachi and even zenkutsu-dachi.

Since shuto-uke is almost always used in kokutsu-dachi, I will explain its execution in the back stance. To have the maximum efficiency, it is essential to have a good solid stance.

By using shuto-uke in a back stance, it enables us to block while simply shifting our weight away from our opponent while keeping our upper body away and still being at the proper distance for a counter-attack. Using a back stance provides the advantage of angling away from the opponent.

One of the main advantages of blocking with the open hand is the ability to use the edge of the hand or the wrist to strike and block. By blocking with the wrist, it is easy to grab with the intention of pulling, unbalancing, twisting and locking.

When using shuto-uke, Sensei Yaguchi always teaches that it is the wrist that initiates the block. As with most other blocks, the wrist is a key factor as is the angle of the elbow. Although many karate-ka use mainly the edge of the hand for the initial contact of shuto-uke, I also like the principle of using the inner part of the wrist first, then rotating the hand, wrist and forearm to the maximum (Fig. 1a to 1c)



Figure 1a



Figure 1b



Figure 1c

Important points:

- The elbow of the blocking arm should be at about one fist-length from ribs (Fig. 2a).
- The angle of the elbow should be at around 90°.
- Keep the shoulders relaxed and parallel.
- Tense the muscles under both armpits and stomach (seika-tanden) at the end of the technique.
- Keep the fingers tightly together at impact.
- Chamber arms completely before blocking (Fig. 2b).
- Rotate hand, wrist, forearm and hips together as the opposite arm is pulled back.
- Proper form, alignment and connection are essential for effectiveness.



Figure 2a



Figure 2b

Like all Shotokan techniques, use of the hips is essential.

Generally, the hips rotate in the opposite direction of the block just like uchi-uke. For example, the hips will turn clockwise with a left-hand shuto-uke.

Although many years ago, Sensei Mikami showed that the hips could be used in the same direction in certain situations, like the shuto-uke after the first kiai in Heian Nidan as we use the hips to pivot, the same hip motion is used to make the shuto-uke (all towards the left).

Although shuto-uke is primarily used as a middle-level (chudan) block, it can be used to protect the face level (jodan) (Fig. 3a) by simply changing the height of the elbow, or it can even be a lower-level (gedan) block by extending the blocking arm downward (Fig. 3b).



Figure 3a



Figure 3b

Shuto-uke is the last block I teach my beginners (9th kyu) as they learn the end of Heian Shodan.

The following are the steps I use to teach my beginners:

1. From shizentai (open-leg stance) (Fig. 4a), I teach the basics of shuto-uke towards the side. The blocking hand (left) is raised toward the opposite ear (right). Meanwhile the opposite hand points towards the target (the left side). It is important to feel like the elbows are squeezing toward each other. This is what I call the "arming or chambering position". It is very important to keep the shoulders down and relaxed (Fig. 4b).
2. Using the action of the shoulder and elbow, whip the blocking hand diagonally down and out at maximum speed as the forearm and wrist are rotated so that the edge (small finger side) of the hand is turned outward while pulling the front arm to the solar plexus (palm upwards) (Fig. 4c). This must be done while exhaling.



Figure 4a



Figure 4b



Figure 4c

After practicing both sides, I make the students do the same thing while staying in kokutsu-dachi.

Once the students understand the arm movements, I then show them how to synchronise the rotation of the hips with the arms with the following exercise:
(I start them in a shorter stance to finish with a deep stance)

1. Chamber the arms in a kiba-dachi stance (Fig. 5a).
2. Twist the hips towards the left as the weight is transferred towards the right. Turn the left foot to the side. Not only will the rotation of the hips help the position transfer it will help whip out the shuto-uke (Fig. 5b).



Figure 5a



Figure 5b

Once this is properly assimilated, the students rotate their hips from one side to the other (from one kokutsu to the other) as they synchronise their blocks (Fig. 6a to 6c).



Figure 6a



Figure 6b



Figure 6c

I then show them how to step forward and backwards as follows:

1. Step forward in a half kokutsu-dachi while chambering the arms and keeping the hips forward (shomen) (Fig. 7a and 7b).
2. With a dynamic hip rotation, continue stepping forward while blocking with shuto-uke (Fig. 7c). It is very important to coordinate and synchronise the hands and feet.
3. Backing up, I will make them bring the front foot back next to the back foot and with a sharp hip rotation, they will step back while the blocking hand is shot forward.



Figure 7a



Figure 7b



Figure 7c

Eventually, I will make them practice stepping forward (towards 12 o'clock) and backwards (towards 6 o'clock) and eventually stepping forward left and right at 45° and then stepping back left and right at 45°.

Once the students are advanced yellow belts and up, I like to make them do Heian Shodan while replacing all techniques with shuto-uke in kokutsu. Starting towards the left and then towards the right. This exercise makes even the more advance belts work on their concentration. Stepping forward as the weight is kept towards the back is not a natural movement. That is why a serious student must repeat many times for it to become natural and efficient.

Applications:

The most common kumite application is to defend against chudan/jodan zuki (Fig. 8a and 8b) by shifting backwards with either leg and blocking with shuto-uke on the attacker's (tori) wrist, and counter with a variety of striking techniques, e.g. chudan nukite, chudan kizami-geri, gyaku-zuki (Fig. 8c), koko-uchi (Fig. 8f), etc.



Figure 8a



Figure 8b



Figure 8c

Although shifting straight back is acceptable, shifting back diagonally is much more effective and allows the defender (uke) to redirect the attack more easily. It is also safer for a smaller or weaker person to side step a bigger and stronger opponent than to stay in line with the attack. Shifting sideways is important in situations when there is not much room to back up.

One very important point is when blocking diagonally to shift in the right direction. It is a common mistake to block and bring the attack toward our body instead of away (Fig. 8d). I often tell my students to imagine an opponent stabbing them with a knife, so that when they pivot or shift, it is essential to redirect the opponent's arm holding the blade (Fig. 8e) and to create an opening in order to neutralise the attack (Fig. 8f).



Figure 8d



Figure 8e



Figure 8f

Understanding kata through bunkai has always been a priority to me. If we take the ending of Heian Shodan or even Bassai Dai, both kata finish with shuto-uke.

Were these shuto-uke meant to be only blocks? I don't think so!

If defending oneself against multiple opponents. It is not realistic to leave the last opponent standing after blocking his attack. That is why I use the principle that every

block must be executed as if it was a strike. By doing so, the student will demonstrate and feel more intensity.

When teaching uke-waza, I always insist that every block should be done by arming or chambering properly. In many kumite applications, it is the chambering part that becomes the defence and the rest the counter-attack.

Over the last few years, I have been teaching this next application, to show the importance of completing and understanding each technique.

While stepping in with kokutsu-dachi, bring the right hand up to block a hook punch to the face while the left hand strikes towards the attacker (Fig. 9a) or covers the attacker's other hand. The blocking hand whips out to counter with a right shuto to a vital point (ateami) at the side of the neck, while the left hand pulls and twists the attacking arm (Fig. 9b and 9c).



Figure 9a



Figure 9b



Figure 9c

This application emphasizes quickness in the initial part of the technique. There is to be no delay between the block and the strike, i.e. it is all done in one quick continuous motion. It is the chambering motion that blocks and the final motion that counters while stepping into the opponent.

Note that by pulling and twisting the opponents arm, his head will jerk back, exposing the vital or pressure points of the side of the neck. It is important to keep the elbow of the striking arm bent to be able to hit the proper target with precision (Fig. 10a). By extending the arm, the neck muscle will most likely receive the impact (not at all the same effect) (Fig. 10b).



Figure 10a



Figure 10b

Common technical mistakes:

- Raising the arming elbow, which raises the shoulder (Fig. 11a).
- Not tensing under the armpit properly. Many students raise the shoulders and/or tense one side more than the other, in which case the block has a tendency to bounce off the attack (Fig. 11b).
- Being too tense. The muscles actually slow down the execution of the technique. (More tension = less speed = less effectiveness).
- Bad posture, leaning upper body (Fig. 11c) or sticking out buttocks.
- Head not straight (Fig. 11d).
- Elbow of blocking arm too far from body (Fig. 11e).
- Over-extending (Fig. 11f).
- Blocking too close to the body (Fig. 11g).
- Not using the hips.
- Letting the elbow of the blocking arm stick out past the body.
- Starting slow and then speeding up, i.e. bad timing.
- Blocking with the fingers spread.



Figure 11a



Figure 11b



Figure 11c



Figure 11d



Figure 11e



Figure 11f



Figure 11g

Conclusion

Shuto-uke combined with kokutsu-dachi is a technique that requires a lot of concentration and is a nightmare for many beginners. That is why I try not to rush them and teach them step by step. And I keep repeating over and over "do not give up".

It is amazing how so much can be said about one technique. I have read my karate manuals and magazines over and over. And I still have so much to learn and teach. Around a month ago, I was translating for Sensei Woon-a-Tai and he mentioned a small detail about not raising the elbow when preparing to do shuto-uke because the shoulder will also rise. I was shocked. I did not remember hearing that explanation before. I had a big smile as I realized that there is always something to learn, discover and rediscover. I then heard in my mind Okazaki Sensei saying: "it is very important to go back to basics".

The joy of training and teaching karate is the continuous discovery process. I have been training and teaching karate for close to 35 years. It has not only become my job but my way of life. My two teenagers often tease me by saying that I see karate everywhere. What can I say? They are young and I stay young because I do see karate everywhere!

OSU!

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Bryan Mattias, March 2008