

# Functional Training with Kettlebells for Karate's Hojo Undo (Part 2)

By Chris Denwood

Copyright © ESKK® 2007 All Rights Reserved

# Functional Training with Kettlebells for Karate's Hojo Undo (Part 2)

By Chris Denwood

## The Kettlebell Swing

The most fundamental movement for all kettlebell lifters is the swing. It is a movement unlike any other performed with dumbbells or barbells and has a fantastic effect on the body to enhance functional power, especially in combat arts. The swing is primarily a lower body, hips and core exercise that targets and stimulates practically every muscle group situated on the back of the body, especially the posterior chain, in a very ballistic fashion. The posterior chain consists of the large muscles at the rear of the body, namely the glutes, hamstrings and erectors in the lower back and is regarded as being an important source for ballistic functional power in the human body.

The kettlebell swing also allows you to develop the ability to generate force in order to manipulate and project an object outwards away from the body. This force transference is directly relevant to power generation in strikes, throws, kicks and the like. Rather than simply driving the weight with your upper limbs, the swings teaches you to take power from the ground, transfer and enhance that power with the core and send it out efficiently into the limb or limbs in question – exactly as you would execute almost every technique in karate.

Another great benefit of practicing the kettlebell swing is that it requires you to be able to smoothly absorb the free fall of the weight rather than simply bracing yourself and hoping for the best. The end of each phase (downward & upward) provides the impetus for the start of the other. This is very 'Yin Yang' and a smooth transition provides the most efficient movement because you are using opposing energies, rather than fighting against them. Also, like karate, you should train with bare feet so that you can maintain a good connection with the ground and feel the subtle weight shifts made by the body during the exercise.

To perform the swing, stand with your legs a little more than hip width apart and dead lift the kettlebell in both hands. Next, perform a short explosive 'prep-swing' to get the weight moving by flexing primarily at the waist and then explosively driving the hips forward. If the arms and shoulders are relaxed, the kettlebell should move upwards away from the body. Almost like a pendulum on a large grandfather clock, keep with the momentum and absorb the fall of the weight, flexing again at the hips and bending slightly at the knees. Move the kettlebell again using a powerful thrust from the hip, core, thigh, and lower back muscles. Repeat the movement continuously and add direct rhythmical breathing, making sure that your weight is centred over the heels of the feet and the back is kept in a neutral position at all times.

When practicing the kettlebell swing, observe the following important points:

- Make sure that the effort originates in the lower body. If your shoulders are tiring then you're involving the upper limbs far too much. The hands should act like hooks, connecting the weight to the source of power.
- Be sure to practice with a heavy enough weight. This may sound a little strange to begin with, but using a kettlebell that's too light will activate the wrong muscle

groups and make the exercise much less worthwhile. As a gauge, after practicing the technique, you should be swinging a weight that you can't laterally raise in front with the shoulders alone. This will help ensure that the lower body activates correctly and that the upper limbs don't naturally take over (as with a light weight).

- Concentrate on powerful hip thrusts to move the kettlebell. The hips should be the main point of flexion and extension, not the knees.
- At the end of the downward phase, emphasise the weight passing through the legs and rather than focussing towards the ground, visualise it travelling into the wall behind you (not literally of course!). This movement will more effectively load up the elastic potential in your hamstrings and stimulate the posterior chain further, to be released and projected into the next movement.
- Really focus on transferring energy and momentum far out and into the kettlebell. You should feel like one of those demolition balls that easily knock buildings down!

Initially, practice performing 10 to 20 repetitions and then rest before the next set. With regards to beginner's weight; men should try a 16kg and women an 8 or 12kg, moving up from there as appropriate. It only takes a few swings with the correct technique to realise the sheer potential of this movement.

The force generated within the swing starts at the ground. As you extend the posterior chain, you are in fact kicking hard into the ground and because the floor is immovable, a great resultant force travels from the feet, upwards into the waist and then transfers into the hands. This is how ballistic power is generated and the more you train the swing, the more your body will innately transfer this mechanism into your karate in order to enhance technique.

In most cases, it's also important that you have a 'waist and limb delay' when striking. This makes sure that recoil is built and provides more acceleration. Performing the kettlebell swing is no different. Once the elastic potential has been achieved at the end of the downward phase, the posterior chain should fire initially and then the hips should be emphasised and thrust hard, with the limbs lagging behind slightly. During the downwards phase, the opposite should occur. The hips should not start to flex until the hands have fallen at least half the distance. This will help to absorb the free fall from the weight and load the hamstrings for the next repetition.

### **Progressions & variations**

To add some variety, you can try the progressions below once you have become fully competent at the static two handed swing. These vary in level from the easiest to the most challenging and allow you to really mix things up. For those who don't own a kettlebell, try the exercises with a dumbbell. You won't get the same experience, but you'll definitely get the idea. Then go out and buy a kettlebell – I believe it'll be one of the best investments you'll ever make towards your martial arts training.

### **Variations of the standard kettlebell swing:**

- Single handed swing – this add a degree of asymmetry to the exercise and forces the core and grip to work harder.

- Alternating swing – changing hands at the top of the upward phase adds elements of some co-ordination and complexity, as well as enhancing good timing and rhythm.
- Moving swing – practice the two handed swings whilst stepping either forwards, backwards or sideways. Just remember to move at the top of the movement and not when the kettlebell is between your legs!
- Double KB swing – pick up a kettlebell in each hand, widen the stand to a typical horse stance and experience a whole new world of hurt! You need to really ground your body during this exercise and focus on keeping your weight over the heels. Also because there's no physical connection anymore between each hand (i.e. the handle), it becomes much harder to ensure that both limbs are moving together in unison.
- Double KB swing with uneven load – This has to be one of the most challenging variations ever! Because you have two different weights, the body has to really work hard to ensure stability and good sequential movement. Make sure that you swap the KB's over and practice the same amount of repetitions on 'the other side' too.

You can also perform the swing within numerous high intensity drills. For instance, try the 'Tabata' style workout. Swing for twenty seconds and then rest for ten seconds. Repeat for eight rounds. This is a very demanding workout that is especially useful when time is of the essence. In addition, try working for 2 minutes continuously, seamlessly changing exercises every 30 seconds. First, perform the two handed swing. Next, remove a hand and undertake 30 seconds of single handed swings. For the 'third phase', perform a 'hand to hand pass' for single handed swings on the other side before finishing off with 30 seconds of alternating swings. This can be used as a fast and effective warm up.

### **To conclude**

For karate-ka and in fact all martial artists, the kettlebell truly is a formidable yet thoroughly enjoyable training device, which aligns itself perfectly to the physical attributes that the traditional arts require. It allows you to train a wide range of qualities at once, cutting down on workout times (leaving more time to devote to technical training) and supporting the facet of the muscles in the human body to work as one synchronised unit, instead of forcing a series of unnatural isolated motions as is often seen in other aspects of resistance training. This of course, helps to make your supplementary training regime much more functional, with high transfer effects to carry over into your art.