

# On-Ko-Chi-Shin- Respect the past, create the new

By Chris Denwood

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“Examine that of the past, and create new knowledge, experience and opinion thereafter.”

In traditional karate circles there is an old Japanese proverb that explains we should all aim to examine and take lessons from those masters who have gone before us, and then use our individual experience as a basis to create new knowledge and opinions thereafter. This maxim is summed up using the four kanji of On (温), Ko (故), Chi (知) and Shin (新) to remind us of the importance of not only respecting our past, but also of realising our own unique potential to expand and develop positively towards future growth.



(Fig 1: Otoshi Uke. The fundamentals of karate are all important in order to build a strong foundation)

Karate's historic roots are in part, shrouded in mystery due original emphasis on oral transmission and the fact that a significant proportion of historical karate evidence in Okinawa was destroyed during the Second World War. Unfortunately, this means that a large part of the modern study of the art has to be based around the principle of reverse engineering. That is to use what little information we do have, to work backwards in order to come closer to what may or may not have been originally practiced. Generally speaking, the recent popular interest in kata bunkai is largely based around this idea and also a genuine belief in three historical truths. The first is that karate was originally intended for use as a civilian self-protection system. Secondly, that kata was seen as the most important part of practice and lastly, that the time spent studying these kata spanned many years of intense training. From these particulars we are able to obtain a number of 'sign posts' that will help direct our analysis further towards a common goal.

Now inevitably, we may find that as a result of our analysis, many applications are developed that were never even considered by the founder(s) of the kata themselves. Because of this, some people tend to believe that this process (based heavily on individual

opinion) goes in some way against the grain of karate's historical past. In addition, while some also may accept the clear benefits that sound kata analysis provides the practitioner; they still only resort to see it through 'modern' eyes and not from any firm historical or traditional point of view. While this may be true in a number of aspects, I personally find this notion hard to agree with entirely for the simple reasons that (1) the realities of empty handed combat (in essence) haven't altered at all since the conception or early development of karate and (2) even the very first pioneers of Okinawan karate were known to have practiced and passed on forms that had been handed down through many former generations, such as those kata with historical roots in China.

What I'm trying to say is that even though our modern analysis may fail to reveal an original or historical application for a technique to which the creator of the kata had in mind, it nevertheless displays an adaptable or malleable approach to the art. This not only falls in line with how we should effectively train for self-protection i.e. not to be inherently limited, but it is also (ironic as it may seem) a traditional practice in itself. At the end of the day, karate was born out of a desire to become safe from physical harm and as generations past, that which was deemed useful was retained and that which wasn't, discarded. For that reason, traditional karate to me is simply a fine representation of the natural human ability to adapt or evolve towards the achievement of a challenging objective by the simplest possible means. I would presume in some circles this may be called laziness, but really, it merely expresses the innate human efficient adaptation to adversity. If a karate-ka chooses to develop his/her own individual applications through sound bunkai, then is this not just the same and therefore by definition, just as traditional as the original? In addition, are we not also successfully applying On-Ko-Chi-Shin?



(Fig 2: A typical modern day long-range karate application. Not at all practical, however good kihon is still enforced)

Shu (守) Ha (破) Ri (離) is another term used in Japanese martial arts that represents the path taken by a student (with respect to his/her teacher) towards the lifelong individual mastery of an art and seems to fit quite well with idea of On-Ko-Chi-Shin. Each of the three characters define a particular stage of training that a student undergoes along with the teacher/student relationship that accompanies each part. All stages are mutually dependent on each other and therefore, no part is achievable without either the past experience or future aspiration of the others.

The first stage, 'Shu', means 'to protect or obey' and represents the initial/basic training for the karate-ka. During this process the student will attempt to copy the teacher just as a

small child would copy their parent. Although their individual physical make-up may differ slightly, a large emphasis on correct or unwavering kihon is still encouraged in order for the student to develop 'strong roots' and a solid foundation. The more technically correct a student can be during the period of 'shu', proves to be a great asset for future development in the art.

'Ha' means 'to detach or digress' and describes the phase of training after a strong foundation is built and the student begins to break free from the binds of the fundamentals in order to apply the principles learned in ways more akin to their individual interpretation or aspirations. Here, the student starts to become more malleable and uses a questioning attitude to uncover answers that may have been previously 'unclear'.

The rank of shodan is sometimes referred to as the transition between 'Shu' and 'Ha', but in reality, this period is usually a much slower, progressive affair. Some people for instance may not reach this level in their training at all, despite becoming a very senior grade. It's a harsh and unfortunate reality that what you have around your waist has no real relevance when it comes to expressing this type of accumulated experience. In addition, it becomes quite easy to misinterpret the freedom experienced at beginning of 'Ha' to indicate some form of self-mastery. As a result, we see many students completely separating from their association after only a few years or a single Dan (rank) in order to set up schools on their own. Nothing could be further from the truth; it is something that must be resisted, since a strong bond must still always be present between the student and teacher – at all but the most advanced stage.



(Fig 3: Another 'classical' type application – this time using more close-range practical analysis to help make the movement come alive)

'Ri' represents the last part of training and means to 'leave or separate'. Again, this stage is widely misinterpreted to mean that the student becomes the expert and therefore no longer requires the teacher. In actual fact it's not that the teacher becomes useless, it's the role of the teacher that changes to more like that of a council or 'detached observer'. The student has managed to absorb everything from the teacher and may even have surpassed him/her in both skill and knowledge. This is a very positive occurrence for both parties because it will mean that the art can constantly strive and flourish in a positive way. Without any students attaining this level, stagnancy of the art will surely set in. At this point in time, the student will most likely be a high ranking teacher in his/her own right and with their experience able to visualise a clear progression for the art that both the student and teacher have made a lifetime commitment to.

Going back to the proverb On-Ko-Chi-Shin, we can easily see relationships within every stage of Shu-Ha-Ri. During the period of 'Shu', teacher and student must both have the greatest respect for the fundamentals that bind the art together and that have remained solid since the art was conceived. In addition, the teacher is 'creating the new' by beginning to proactively shape a new life in the martial ways. It is therefore important for the teacher to be mindful and responsible enough to teach with honesty and integrity.

Once the student has reached the stage of 'Ha', it becomes very critical that he/she maintains a deep respect for kihon, since this is the crucial time that the leash is slackened in order for a more adaptable process to take place. It therefore becomes very easy at this level for a student to lose his way. This is a time for initial experimentation/creation based on the underlying principles so that a glimpse of an individual approach to the art can be seen by both the teacher and student. The teacher at this point should be very open to allow the student to 'walk off the straight and narrow'; with a light shining brightly enough so that it becomes easy to find a safe way back.

If a student ever becomes competent enough to reach the level of 'Ri', then the integration between what is old and what is new can be easily seen. Just as a pond becomes stagnant without a supply of running water; any system will become stale without the flow of new ideas or opinions. From this we can see that what is 'old' and what is 'new' really aren't a million miles apart. After all, a pond is still a pond no matter how much the eco system may have evolved within it. It's crucial to remember that one would simply not survive without the other since they constantly build upon themselves. So for those who believe that true traditional karate is not in any way innovative by nature, then think again.



(Fig 4, 5, 6 & 7: Using the principles gained in a more pragmatic and free-flowing way in a response against a typical clinch hold)

Every human being gifted with physical life on Earth has the potential to make good use of the precious time they have. Learning from the past is productive because it allows you to move towards your aspirations without making the same mistakes as those before you may have. Living in the past however is something completely different and in actual fact creates nothing at all. Why would you want to live something that's already been, when you can have the chance to live something that's desperately yearning to breathe.

To properly equate to the historical roots of karate would mean to respect what we have learned already and through this respect, gain aspiration to develop new ideas and methods. From a practical point of view, which karate should really always advocate – you can't get much more traditional than that!

Thanks for taking the time to read this article; I sincerely hope that you found it both useful and worthwhile.