

Tactile Drills: A Critical Component to Traditional Karate

By Chris Denwood

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In this short article, I'd like to discuss the idea of developing tactile awareness and reaction in the art of karate. I personally consider this an important aspect that sadly seems to be overlooked in the large majority of our regular training, even though the elements necessary to expand this useful skill are embedded in almost every traditional technique we execute. The driver for adequate tactile skills lies within the practice of karate for use as a civilian self-protection system. By comparison, when training in karate for sport competition, the need to polish close combat skills would simply not be necessary, since the control and responsibility over this range is usually given over solely to the referee of the bout. Consequently, it then becomes more obvious why so little emphasis was/is placed on tactile development within most 'modern' karate dojo. Traditional karate on the other hand is based first and foremost on practicality, with the emphasis focused directly on self-protection. Therefore, it becomes important for those who practice traditional karate to proactively withdraw the tactile concepts from the kata and incorporate drills to help increase the chances of successfully controlling a close range encounter.

Our physical senses

As human beings, we all have a number of physical senses that are used to link ourselves with the outside world. Without our senses, we would quickly become imprisoned within our own bodies and find it impossible to interact with what's outside our own corporeal boundaries. In terms of self-protection, the three physical senses of most importance are sight (visual), hearing (auditory) and touch (tactile). Sight and hearing are quite self-explanatory and help us to successfully employ awareness as the backbone of our protection strategy. The sense of touch however, only really comes into use if we have made enough mistakes to be burdened with a close-range physical encounter or if a violent attack has been so ferocious that other alternatives to dealing with the assault are simply no longer valid.

The term 'reaction time' can be defined as the time it takes for your brain and body to react after a stimulus has been presented or in other words, the time that elapses between a specific stimulus and the response to it. When countering a strike in punching range for instance, it takes time for your eyes to first see the strike coming toward you, your sensory nerves (neurons) to send an informational message to your brain and your brain to recognise, process and confirm the required reaction. In the environment of a close-range encounter (i.e. a distance of less than one arms length); the chances of successfully responding to visual stimuli are severely impeded. Therefore, space becomes a chief deciding factor between successful or unsuccessful reaction. So simply put, the further away you are from an object, the more chance you have to react before that object can touch you.

Tactile self-defence

Practically speaking, there are a number of ways to protect against an attack at close range. The first and by far the most effective is not to be there in the first place (i.e. maintaining distance), thus removing the hazard altogether. The second is to utilise a pre-emptive assault before your attacker can initiate the first strike. In this way, if your attack is successful, the chances of a positive outcome (control) are increased and you will have bought valuable time to either make an escape or if this is not possible, continue with your onslaught. Only the last option would be to control the hazard at close range. If all else fails and since everyone, everywhere makes mistakes, then it becomes easy to see that the ability to respond and control using the physical sense of touch would be invaluable during such a situation.

Reacting to a change in movement using tactile awareness is very different to responding to a purely visual stimulus. When something is in actual contact with you, it becomes possible to feel the amount, direction and subsequent adjustment of the force being applied. Consequently, it is reasonably achievable to react very quickly with an appropriate response. This is why close range fighting always looks much more 'hands on'. When someone is completely in your face, a subconscious natural urge will undoubtedly compel you to lift the hands to protect the face. Therefore, a physical connection between you and your opponent with the upper limbs is both probable and necessary to ensure a realistic chance of reacting to any force being applied against you.

The requirement for touch awareness in Karate

Karate, as a complete hand-to-hand combat art, encompasses the whole body and covers every conceivable empty handed combat range. For karate to be useful as a civilian self-protection system (as it was originally designed), then principles for dealing with close-range combat must be analysed and realistically interpreted. As practical karate-ka, we are clearly most comfortable at punching range since a large part of the art focuses on striking with the upper limbs and quite rightly so from a self-protection perspective. However, punching range if not controlled can quickly move into close combat (or trapping) range. Furthermore, close combat range if not controlled, can move even quicker into grappling and this is the distance we must avoid at all costs. Therefore, techniques and drills for increasing skill on a tactile level must be extensively incorporated into the syllabus to help back up our striking so that your abilities to control the altercation standing up are developed and thus increasing your potential for success.

Most martial arts that emphasise practical close-range combat will use some form of tactile exercises designed to increase the ability to use touch reaction. A typical example of this would be the 'chi sau' of wing Chun gung fu or tai chi chuan. Traditional karate too has its own type of push hands called 'kakie', which is more popularly seen in styles such as goju ryu. Although at first this practice seems on the surface much less 'sophisticated' than its Chinese counterpart, kakie still does at the very least serve to indicate the necessity for karate-ka to become familiar with using touch awareness in close-range encounters. In addition to and for those styles that don't practice a traditional form of push hands, similar tactile drills can also be extracted directly from the close-range fighting principles and strategies of the traditional kata. It becomes quite eye opening to many individuals, that once the underlying principles of the forms are understood, they begin to exhibit a whole myriad of applications based around the effectiveness of close-range tactile awareness. One of these principles, which is perhaps the most extensively taught within the art (although its most applications not understood correctly), is that of hikite.

The non-striking limb

The word hikite literally translates as 'pulling hand' and is the term usually used to describe the motion of retracting the non-striking limb during the large percentage of techniques used in karate. Many practitioners will spend years repetitively learning how to pull the rear hand back to the hip or towards a mutual strike without even fully appreciating the huge impact this simple movement can have within close-range combat. The practical applications of hikite are typical examples of how tactile awareness can be used to great effect in close-range encounters and it is for this reason that I'd like to elucidate this idea in a little more depth.

Generally (and practically) speaking, suitable applications found in karate must never be singular in either development or implementation. By this I mean that both sides of the body must be 'live', active and used extensively at all times. The reason behind this idea is twofold. Firstly, fighting at close-range is extremely difficult to begin with. This complexity would increase even more if you were foolish enough to deliberately limit your effective arsenal by half! In addition to this, we have also established that when all else fails in close range, you need to have a tactile awareness of where your opponent and his/her weapons are in order to have even a slight hope of reacting in time to any amendments made during conflict. Therefore as one hand should strike, the other (non-striking limb or hikite) should be actively and positively utilised in order to achieve one or more of the following three outcomes:

Increase the net effect of the mutual strike: If a car were to hit a brick wall at 30mph, then the resultant crash speed would be 30mph. In contrast, if two cars, both travelling at 30mph were to crash head on, then the resultant crash speed would double to 60mph. This simple paradigm shows how much more effective your strike can be if your target (the opponents head for instance) is travelling towards it. This idea becomes even more critical in close-range practical applications where distance (to create power) is certainly not a luxury that's readily available. Therefore the non-striking limb can be used to forcefully pull available targets directly towards your attacking tool to increase the net effect of the strike.

Eradicate barriers within the intended strike path: A clear route to the target is desirable to help ensure that any strikes delivered would stand a greater chance of being successful. If a clear path does not present itself then it may be necessary to 'manufacture' one by employing the non-striking hand to clear any obstacle(s) before a strike is launched. This can be achieved in number of ways i.e. using a trap for instance or even incorporating an initial strike in an attempt to damage the opponents covering limb beforehand. This is what the Filipino's would call 'to de-fang the snake'.

Obtain tactile reference points upon the opponent's body: Real close-range fighting is a nasty and unpleasant business. In the midst of combat, targets move uncontrollably and the chances of successfully striking accurately become severely limited. This problem is further enhanced if you have happened to suffer strikes yourself and may be disorientated (realistically probable) or if your eyes are full of tears or blood. In situations like this, having a tactile awareness of your opponent's vital areas is to your clear advantage. As an example, if you seize the back of your opponent's head before striking, then the target becomes much easier to control. In addition, if the target does happen to move, then you will have the ability to quickly alter your strike to suit without having to solely rely on a visual appreciation of where the target is. In addition, it's possible to locate with a sufficient degree of accuracy, many vital areas on the opponent's body by creating a 'reference datum' with the non-striking limb. By acquiring a connection with the forearm for instance, you know that unless you happen to be fighting an extraterrestrial, and then at the end of every human forearm is an elbow. At the end of every upper arm is a shoulder and at the end of every shoulder is a neck and face. Although it's obvious that the opponent will not

stand still during conflict, these bodily connections will always remain constant and therefore serve to feed an exploitable advantage.

It's useful to note that the three methods for using hikite above require you to first physically touch the opponent. This, as we have already discussed, is a must in close range fighting. It would also be interesting to point out at this stage that the basic 'blocking' techniques found in karate (including the commonly practised 'soto uke', 'shuto uke', 'gedan barai', 'age uke', and 'uchi uke') can all be practically applied to devastating effect by correctly utilising hikite against various reference connections. Although this subject would constitute a whole article in itself, I would recommend that you have a go at applying these with an open mind during your training in order to see for yourself how far away from a 'block' these movements really can become!

Tactile drills in Karate

Practicing drills to help increase the ability to use tactile awareness are critical to gaining an understanding of close range fighting, in addition to learning karate in a wholly traditional way. Once the discrete applications found within the kata are fully understood, it is then necessary to adapt the principle(s) used in a more natural, free flowing way. This is an important aspect to consider and personally, I believe this is essential to both the correct and complete study of the art. How then, can we go about achieving this in our regular practice?

One aspect that's vital in the development of useful tactile drills is that the movements used should be to a greater extent, spontaneous by nature. The whole idea should be to increase your capability to accurately respond with a predominant reliance on tactile awareness and reaction. By this I mean that throughout the performance of the drill, the sense of touch should be utilised and developed to the utmost so that any changes in the angle and direction of the opponent's force are largely felt rather than seen or heard. Those drills, which for instance are either pre-arranged or are performed with a predetermined quantity of techniques on the left side before switching over to the right (or vice versa) possess an inherent flaw, since they do not rely on tactile awareness and reaction for the initiation to change. These kinds of drills can take much skill to perform, are impressive to watch and are useful in developing other key attributes. However in terms of developing good tactile awareness, they unfortunately tend to fall slightly short of the mark. You should instead aim to practice exercises that will spontaneously require you to adapt and develop according to your opponent's changes in force application, direction and magnitude.

The Barrier Drill

A very useful drill, which I routinely teach in my dojo, is called 'The Barrier Drill' and is a great way to develop a fundamental sense of spontaneity. It's used to build an appreciation of actively employing the non-striking hand, in addition to developing the essentials of tactile awareness and how it links to traditional kata. In this exercise (which should be performed at about one third of normal speed to begin with), one person takes the role of attacker and the other acts as the defender. Both stand facing each other with the forearms touching in a typical outside reference connection.

- From this starting position, the attacker's role is to remove the barrier in front i.e. the opponent's limb, in order to create an opening and then strike to the available target.

- The defender should then respond by checking and maintaining a connection with the striking limb.
- The effect of doing this will present another barrier for the attacker to overcome and subsequently strike through the second opening created.

This process is repeated over and over so that the attacker gets used to removing barriers and striking and the defender becomes accustomed to creating efficient barriers against strike paths that may become available. After a time, the roles/sides can be reversed and the drill resumed again. What's critical is that there should be no set methodology as to which techniques are used. Instead the movements should be performed spontaneously so that with practice, the drill flows naturally without too much thought.

A more advanced stage of this exercise would be to actively employ the particular applications found throughout the traditional kata when it feels most appropriate. The large majority of practical kata applications are usually based around achieving some sort of physical reference point, so once that particular reference has occurred within the drill, then those appropriate applications can be used at will. It is sometimes also very beneficial to restrict your practice of movements within the drill to those found in a single kata. For instance, it's perfectly feasible to practice the barrier drill with movements solely from Pinan Shodan (Heian Nidan). This can become somewhat mentally challenging and restricting, however it certainly causes you to stretch your imagination and appreciate the amount of information that can be contained in just a single form.

To conclude

Close combat range is a distance that we should ideally never find ourselves in. Distance is the main key to successful self-defence, however, everyone is capable of making mistakes and this becomes far more likely in a highly stressful situation such as a physical altercation. The masters of old knew this and recorded (along with other practical concepts) methods within the traditional kata to help achieve success at close range. Karate is a civilian self-protection system, with emphasis placed on attaining personal safety in the quickest amount of time.

Therefore the methods used to achieve this can often be quite brutal and damaging for the opponent. The longer our opponent remains cohesive, the more danger we are in. At close range, reacting successfully to visual stimuli is almost impossible. So instead, emphasis has to be placed on a tactile strategy. By keeping your whole body 'live' and allowing both upper limbs to work positively, you can utilise the concept of hikite to devastating effect. In addition, practicing those drills that extract the tactile principles from the kata will help you to naturally flow and become much more spontaneous at close range.

To broaden the concept

Finally (to get a little esoteric), it's always been my opinion that karate is very much an art that needs to be personally appreciated and owned. To keep a constant open and questioning mind during practice, will inevitably lead you towards a greater understanding. Even though these words only represent a single view – just like peeling an onion, the beauty and mystery will always lie behind the layer not yet removed. Karate means 'empty hand' and therefore by definition encompasses everything.

Like many other enthusiastic karate students, I always enjoy exploring the art and pondering its magnitude. Therefore, I'll leave you with something to think about that takes the subject of tactile reaction a little further:

“When your hairs stand up on end, when you instinctively make a decision that feels to be right, when you walk into a room and the atmosphere feels amiss – where does it ‘touch’ you?”

Thanks for taking the time to read this article. I sincerely hope you enjoyed it.