

Sensei's Corner

What is Kihon?

Kihon, which means “basics” or “rudiments,” is made up of two characters. Ki means “foundation” or “root.” At the bottom of the ideogram is the radical tsuchi, which means “earth.” Hon means “base” or “at the foot of.” It is made up of the ideogram for “tree” with a dash at its bottom indicating its base. The two characters repeat a single, basic idea. This redundancy is an indication of the importance Japanese place on mastering the basic knowledge and skills of a discipline.

Japanese educators have traditionally believed that only by thoroughly mastering the basics can a student develop the skills and knowledge necessary to move on to more sophisticated, creative levels of a discipline. It is therefore not surprising that a traditional Japanese martial art such as karate also stresses the importance of basics. Like the two characters that make up kihon, basics in karate also work from the ground up. The foundation of all karate techniques lies in the way in which one stands. Karate stances are designed to teach students to fully utilize the lower torso in both training and actual combat. The difficult stances strengthen the legs and hips, and by mastering them you can generate more power in your kicks and punches.

In fact, not so long ago a beginning student of karate would not be allowed to practice anything but a handful of stances. All karate stances can be painfully tiring when held over a prolonged period of time, and the student had to learn to endure this pain and exhaustion before going on to further study. This period sometimes lasted weeks, even months, after which the student devoted an equally long period to just walking back and forth. Only after mastering standing and walking was a student taught to block, punch, and kick. As you can imagine, this curriculum tested the student's patience to the extreme, Instructors felt this developed character and at the same time weeded out those lacking the mettle to succeed in karate.

In recent years, especially in the West, there has been less emphasis placed on basics. Certainly it would be difficult for a proprietor of a karate school in today's fast-paced society to attract or retain new students if all they were taught for the first few months were standing and walking. However, just as building cannot stand without the proper foundation, and as a tree falls over without its roots, advanced karate techniques cannot be mastered without mastering these basics first. As you are taught a variety of techniques, therefore, you should constantly keep up your practice of your stances and footwork—your kihon, or base.