An Excerpt From: The Character of Goju-Ryu

by Rich Stamper

The Character of Goju-Ryu
Kata Implications for Experienced Practitioners

Chapter 14: Age Uke

I suspect that the first karate movement you learned was age uke - rising block. And if it was not the first technique, then one of the first group you learned. You have most likely practiced it every class for many years. You can most likely do an excellent rising block. Good for you.

How often do you use rising block when sparring? Seldom? Never? How come boxers don't use rising block? If it's a good block, seems like boxers would use it.
We somehow feel compelled to justify rising block. We spent a lot of time learning and perfecting it. It must be a great move - it might not work for a boxer, and we may not use it in sparring, but it appears in Gekki Sai and we teach it in one-steps. I mean, why would we spend all those years and repetitions if it didn't have value?

Ever wonder about that? Maybe not. Or if you did, perhaps you figured the answer was there, just beyond your current level of understanding. Could it have been that age uke was never intended to be a block? Does it really make sense to leave our head in the path of danger and rely on our arm to protect us? An untrained person wouldn't do that - they'd move their head as they raised their open hands to try to deflect. Instead, we're taught to meet force with force - using the small bone in our forearm to hit - while leaving that noggin right there in harm's way. Ah, the mysteries of the martial arts.

I contend that there are no blocks in karate. Wow! That ought to raise some hackles! Okay, I state it that strongly because that comment goes directly against the grain of our early training and continuing beliefs. If we define blocks as meeting force with force while not moving our body out of harm's way, and relying on our arm (or leg) to protect ourselves, then there are no blocks except as a last ditch, desperate effort. It defies logic to train to sacrifice any of our body parts on a regular basis.

Well, then, you might say, the blocks don't really block - they deflect. I would agree, except that's not how they're normally taught. We teach to hit bone to bone and the strongest bone wins. If I hit straight down on your head with a baseball bat would you use age uke? No? Why not? Aren't we trained to block anything that comes within range of hitting us? Oh, I remember now, it's just hands we are to block - but we will respond as we have trained.

So, then, what the heck is age uke? I know, the name translates to something like up block, so that's exactly what it is. Just like Ford's Mustang is a horse owned by Mr. Ford. Well, we have to call it something, and 'old man grasps monkey's tail' is already taken.

Just for kicks, let's look at the age uke movement as if we didn't know what the movement was intended to accomplish. What it would look like to someone who had not been fortunate enough to have been trained in the use of age uke. To that unknowing person, it might look like lifting something off the table and holding it toward the light to study it. We do leave the arm hanging up there after all. That unknowing person, upon further observation, might discover that the hand is closed and turned palm out, and does eventually return from that extended position. Maybe the movement is to capture a fly on the wing. Because the head is not moved during this operation, it would not be considered to be in harm's way and that possibility wouldn't enter into the assessment. Maybe the movement is in preparation to knock on a door with our knuckles. Is all this silly? Perhaps, but it is to make a point. If it looks like a duck, quacks like a duck, walks like a duck, it's a ………….. block??

So what is age uke?

First, please understand that when we learned the movement we were in some established stance and nothing moved but the arms. The idea being that this method would allow us to concentrate on learning just the arm movement without having to think about the rest of the body. However, since we learned age uke while in some stance and not moving our head, it became entrenched that that was how it should be. This is really important: Just because we were originally taught age uke without moving any of the rest of the body out of harm's way doesn't mean that we shouldn't move our head out of the way when doing age uke. Age uke is an arm movement. Period.

The hand faces palm out. That is a natural position when raising the hand in front of the face, especially when seeking protection. If someone threw a small object at your eyes, three things would likely happen. Your eyes might close, you might move your head, and you might raise your open hand palm out in front of your eyes. Or you might get hit in the

eye. Point is, the age uke movement follows how our body moves instinctively, except the hand is closed.

Why is the hand closed? It is either a grabber or a hitter. Note that the emphasis is on the hand - not the forearm. Hammer fist is natural and works. Grabbing stuff with the hand is natural and works. Hitting things with the small bone in the forearm is not natural and not a good practice. Don't hit stuff that way. So, if it's a hitter the hammer fist it would be appropriate for impact on any hard surface like the lower jaw, or a soft surface like the throat. If it's a grabber, it will work against almost any empty hand attack by grabbing and pulling to hike-te - just as we were taught to perform the movement. And, the head and body should be free to move as appropriate during the execution of age uke. Try some of this a few times and see what you discover.

Did you try it a few times or is that just too foreign to even consider? I hope you can at least try.

This really isn't about age uke. It's really to help us learn to let go of preconceived notions and observe what the kata is trying to teach. It's to help us understand that what we learned as karate babies may not be the real intent of a movement but a dramatic oversimplification to help us to learn the mechanics.

Age uke is an easy target to use as an example, but the concept should not be limited to age uke. Uses should be discovered not dictated.

Quack, quack.

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