An Excerpt From: The Character of Goju-Ryu

by Rich StamperAn Excerpt From: The Character of Goju-Ryu
Kata Implications for Experienced Practitioners

Chapter 12 - In The Beginning - Movement

Movement is pretty basic to martial arts practice and often taken for granted. By movement I mean stepping from stance to stance, but I will also discuss movement within a stance.

We tend to emphasize the completed stance – the posture, balance, weight distribution, being locked in, being rooted and so on. We tend to neglect the transitions from stance to stance or within a stance, and tend to view these as simply the movement required to get from one good stance to the next. When doing this we severely limit our effectiveness for practical, actual application.

Most instructors teach a smooth, quick transition from stance to stance. This is good and appropriate. But then many of the instructors insist upon a fully established stance prior to executing a hit, kick or block. This becomes a sequential action and the momentum of the stance movement does not carry into the technique. This reduces the effectiveness because it uses strength only, not a combination of strength and momentum.
Another factor is lack of understanding of focus. Focus does not mean locked or tense. When locked or tense at the instant of impact, a lot of the energy is held back by the locking action. While the lock-in is important, it should occur well after impact. For example, when breaking a board, one should punch through the board with the tensing well past the board’s surface. If a lock or tensing takes place when contact is first made with the board, much of the energy will be lost. The locking-in is only important from a form standpoint and as a defense if the hit is not successful. The lock makes it difficult to be thrown by one’s opponent if she evades the hit. But focus is another topic and we’re discussing movement here.

Let’s consider normal walking. When taking a step, the body moves and then the foot moves forward under it. To move the foot first and then move the body over it is unnatural and results in the “keep on trucking” step. Most of us do not stick the foot out first when walking.

Think about a baby’s first steps. The baby usually reaches out with his arms in the direction he wants to go and his body leans in that direction. He will then fall forward and either take a step or do a nose dive. Walking is a series of falls interrupted by taking steps. This is why we fall up the steps when our foot hits the edge of the step. If we placed the foot on the step first and then moved the body over it, we wouldn’t fall. We’ve become so used to walking that we lean and step at the same time in most cases.

Because so much emphasis is placed on foot positioning and the mechanics of stepping in karate, we tend to become very foot conscious and may lose the natural way of moving the whole body. Before the feet move the body should be driven forward.

This is different from normal walking where the body simply leans slightly before stepping. For fast, powerful stance transitions, the body should be driven forcefully while the feet are still planted, much like a sprinter at the starting blocks. To put the foot out first or even to just lean in the direction of travel is slower and less dynamic than to drive the body first. To do this requires that the body be relaxed just prior to movement. All the driving muscles must be allowed to perform without resistance from opposing muscles.

After driving the body forcefully, the soon to be supporting foot must move quickly. The impact of the hit or kick should take place while the body is at its highest speed prior to establishing the next stance. This action makes use of both strength and momentum. Usually the movement slows as the stepping foot reaches its destination.

Consider an arrow shot from a bow or a bullet from a gun. These projectiles do not need a strong stance or contact with the ground to be effective. They do need a solid foundation to push from initially, and this equates again to the sprinter at the starting blocks. The most powerful punch or kick starts relaxed, drives the body forward, and uses all of one’s strength in the application of the technique - prior to locking in well after the point of impact was passed. The foot that is not stepping should be solid and driving throughout the execution of the technique.

Most of the kata have many steps or body movements. Why? If the purpose of kata was to teach us a strong stance and hit, kick or block, that could be accomplished without stepping movement. Naturally, it is understood that it is necessary to be within reach of the opponent. How to use the necessary movement is one of the things kata teaches. Some kata teach different ways of moving.

Master Jack Dempsey was known as “Jack the Giant Killer”. He weighed about one hundred and eighty pounds and routinely beat boxers who were well over two hundred and fifty pounds. He used what he referred to in his book as a falling punch. He would drive his body forward and down when punching as though falling. This added momentum to his strength.

The same concept is used when evading an attack. One of the most important things that is often not emphasized is getting our vulnerable body parts out of harm’s way. We tend to rely on blocks to deflect and don’t move our bodies out of the range of the attack. If our head or chest is the target of an attack, the foot should not move first. The target area should be driven forcefully out of range and the foot moved along with the body. The foot should move first only if it is the foot being attacked. A deflection may accompany the body movement. Boxers don’t stand and block, they move. When defending or attacking, the body should move first or at least along with the stepping foot.

This same rationale applies to cases to “toe-to-toe” close-in situations. Here, the feet may not move, but the body should move in and back or to the side as appropriate. These movements should be forceful – in to add momentum to the attack, and out to evade the opponent’s attack. A standard practice routine is to shift from shiko-dachi to zenkutsu-dachi with a reverse punch, and back to shiko-dachi. This usually only teaches half of what’s intended. It teaches using momentum without stepping for a punch, but not the very important aspect of driving the body forcefully out of harm’s way. This exercise was intended to teach dynamic body movement in both directions.

One way to help beginners become effective is to require that stances and hand techniques start and stop at the same time. Usually what happens is that the stance movement is half completed before the hand technique starts. This gives the illusion of speed, but is not the fastest way to close and hit. Better to start the hand and foot at the same time and force the foot to keep up. Ending at the same time helps assure that impact with the target occurs prior to locking-in.

New students are usually taught to step and then punch, or step and then block. This is so that they can concentrate on the step first and then concentrate on the punch or block. As soon as possible, they should be taught to step and punch or block at the same time.

All of this might be obvious to you, but the fact is that I often see very experienced practitioners who attack sequentially rather than with simultaneous movement and who can’t get out of harm’s way.

The kata teach us how to move, but we tend to learn only how to have strong stances. We need to study our kata textbooks with a direction and a desire to learn from them.

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