

Development of Advanced Goju-Ryu Technique

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The difference between a beginning and an advanced karate student should be marked by more than levels of strength, speed, flexibility and endurance. These superficial qualities can be improved with time and practice. This article considers aspects of a deeper subject: the lifelong development of technique. The focus here is on the principles of advanced blocking techniques in Okinawan Goju-Ryu and their associated applications. The article builds upon the core principles of *structure*, *movement*, and *breathing* developed in a previous article on Sanchin kata [Labbate]. The standard rising block is used as a vehicle to explain blocking principles; however, the ideas apply to all of the standard blocks.

In common with other blocks in traditional karate, the rising block has often been criticized as an ineffective fighting technique. Although this criticism is justified at the beginner's level, the advanced practitioner develops a qualitatively different technique. The advanced level block transfers internal energy into the block from the *center* of the body, uses *push-hands* to intercept, adhere, and redirect an opponent's energy, and *body-shifting* to gain a position of advantage. Correct distancing, timing, and hand-eye coordination are developed through *partner training*. The final block is a combination of hard and soft principles that allows it to serve a broad variety of defensive and offensive applications.

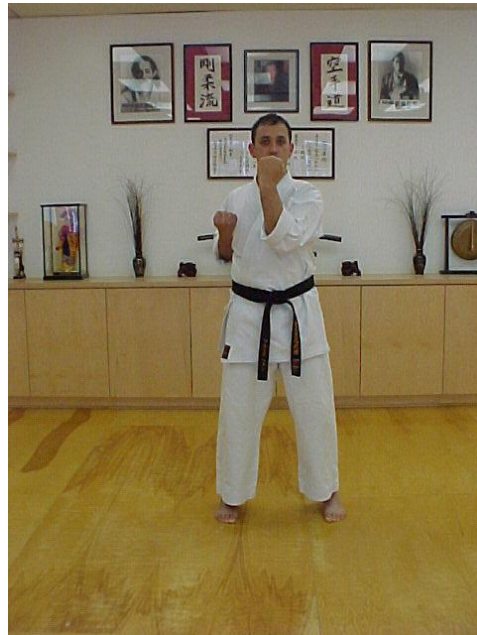
The Beginner's Level

Beginning students are generally taught a mechanical rising block that allows them to develop the gross movement and coordinate their arms [Oyama]. This basic block is shown in Figure 1. From the ready position (a), the student transitions to a simple covering position (b), then forms a cross with the covering arm and the blocking arm (c), and finishes with a lifting motion in which the blocking arm rotates into its final position, a fist distance from the forehead (d). The covering position provides a first line of defense while the lifting motion is supposed to force an opponent's punch upward and away from the face. Unfortunately, this lifting motion is useless against a powerful opponent who will simply punch right through the block with a direct strike to the face.

Figure 1



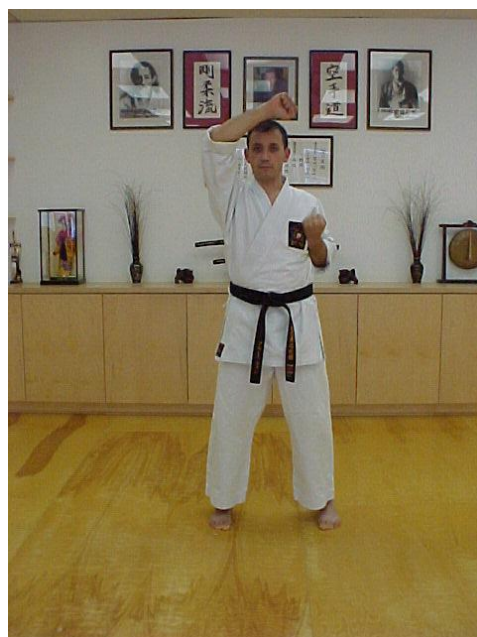
a



b



c



d

Building on the basic level block, an intermediate level is then taught in which the student begins to develop deflecting skills. In this block, rather than crossing the covering arm with the blocking arm, the blocking arm takes a direct, 45-degree path from the chamber to its final position. Although slightly more difficult to grasp, this alternative block deflects an opponent's punch rather than opposes its force. The intermediate block is practiced in both stationary and moving two-man blocking (*tanshiki*) drills where the defending student steps backward to block an attacker's blow. These two-man drills provide reflexive training and begin to develop hand-eye coordination, timing, speed, and distancing.

Building further upon the intermediate level block, a more advanced level can be developed through body conditioning. Stationary and moving two-man forearm-conditioning drills are used to develop resilience and strength in the arms. At this point the block is often considered as a *deflecting strike*. The strike occurs with full power using a strengthened arm capable of withstanding the speed and strength of an opponent. This block represents the classical *go-form*: a hard technique issued with strength and speed to confront the aggressor. Unfortunately, this hard technique is of little value if the opponent is simply stronger or faster: clearly more is needed.

Transferring Internal Energy

The next stage of development involves the transfer of internal energy into the block from the center of the body (*fajing*). This concept has already been discussed from the viewpoint of transferring internal energy into punching movements in a previous article on Sanchin Kata [Labbate]. The idea can also be employed to transfer power directly into the rising block using a *shaking* motion. To teach this movement a progressive sequence of drills is used that exaggerate and train the motion of the body. As a student becomes more proficient, these exaggerations gradually decrease until the motion becomes an *internal* element of the blocking technique.

The preliminary drills focus on the development of the *karate drum* shown in Figure 2. Standing in a loose ready stance (a), the student quickly swings the arms and shoulders clockwise and counterclockwise as far as possible to the right (b) and left (c). This swinging motion serves to exaggerate and develop the necessary motion of the hips. A second exercise is then used in which the student *drives* the swinging action from the hips while holding the arms and body loosely. This latter exercise transitions the student to focus on movement of the hips rather than the shoulders. A third exercise completes the development of the basic *shaking* motion: the hips are driven backward and forward while the shoulders are held in position aligned forward.

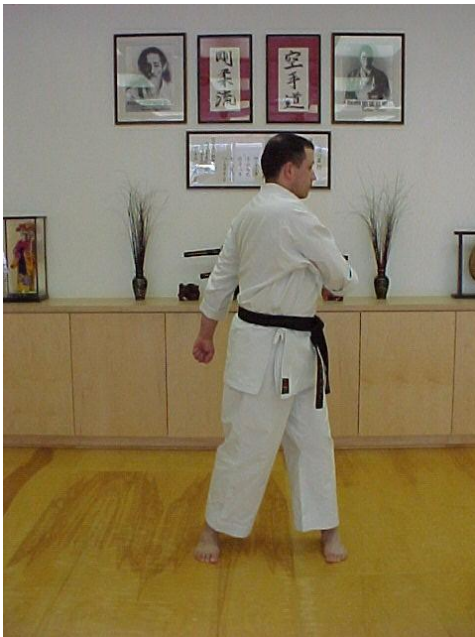
Figure 2



a



b



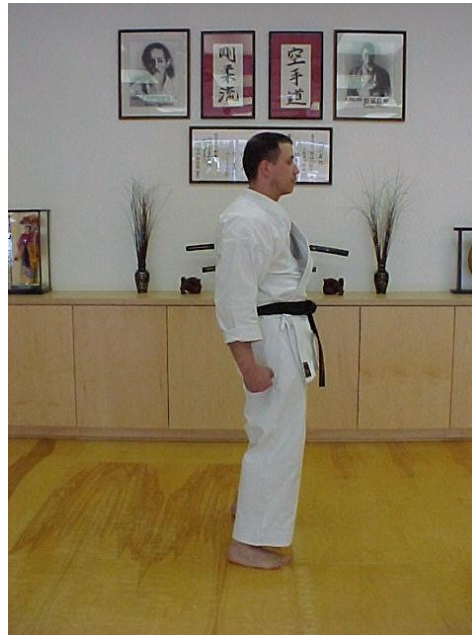
c

Sanchin style locking is next added to the progression of drills and is shown in Figure 3: from the ready position (a), the body is forced through focused tension (*kime*) directly into the locked position (b). The body becomes firmly rooted to the ground, the body weight is lowered, and each muscle group is brought under tension in a single motion.

Figure 3



a



b

Putting these exercises together, the student can finally develop a complete karate drum technique: the hips are driven forward, then allowed naturally to reverberate or *rebound* back into their final position aligned forward, and finally Sanchin style locking occurs at the close of the technique.

Principle #1: The karate drum drills teach the fundamental principles of loading, shaking, locking, and rebounding.

After mastering the basic karate drum drills, the student may move forward to drills that cause power to be *directed* into a particular technique as shown in Figure 4. In the case of the rising block, this is called an *up-shake*. Swinging the arms in the style of the karate drum, the rising block positioning is integrated. For a block with the right arm, the body is rotated as far as possible to the right, the right hand is chambered, and the left arm covers (a). The shoulders are then rotated, as far to the left (b) as possible, the left hand remains in the cover position, and the right hand transitions upward in an intercepting motion (c). The body reverberates back into a final position with the hips aligned forward, the left hand chambers, while the right elbow rotates upward into the block in a redirecting motion until reaching its final position (d). This cover, intercept, and redirect motion is coordinated and driven from the hips. Figure 4 exaggerates the body motion to develop the required form, as the student progresses the movements become incrementally smaller until they are an internal aspect of technique.

Figure 4



a



b



c



d

At the end of this technique, the student applies the locking motion taught as part of the karate drum drills. The student must focus on aligning the hips forward at the end of the block, with the body tightened as in Sanchin kata. Putting these pieces together, the deflecting strike is enhanced to become a powerful strike driven from the hips by internal energy. After the block is complete, the body is locked down as in Sanchin for a split second at the moment of contact when the block completes.

Principle #2: Develop power in the rising block by directing internal energy.

The up-shake is just one of four basic shaking motions that can be applied to *all* of the basic karate techniques. It can be used to transfer power into any upward movement toward an opponent, for example, rising block, uppercut punch, and elbow strikes. A similar down-shake is used in techniques that move downward into an opponent, for example, down-block, downward strikes and punches. For techniques that involve forward motion of the same hand and leg, such as a lunge punch, palm-heel strike, shuto etc. an open-shake is used. In contrast, a closed-shake is used for techniques that involve opposite hand and leg movements, for example, a reverse punch, palm-heel strike, etc. Collectively these shaking motions form the principles by which internal energy is transferred into every aspect of structure and movement. These gross movements are practiced only to train the body; eventually the hips are coordinated with every technique and the associated movement will happen naturally.

Principle #3: Up-, down-, open- and closed-shakes allow power to be applied to *every* karate technique.

To develop hand-eye coordination, speed, timing, and distancing, the blocks are practiced with a partner. Each level of partner training progressively adds new principles from those listed above, first in stationary, and then in moving drills. In these exercises the timing of the attack is organized by the attacker to be at uneven intervals so that the defender is forced to track and intercept the incoming blow with precision.

Principle #4: Two-man partner drills, conducted at uneven intervals, are used to develop hand-eye coordination, speed, timing, and distancing.

Push-hands

To make further progress, the advanced student must make a substantive transition to combine the hard techniques of Sanchin with new, soft techniques. The basis of this transition is push-hands (*kakie*) sometimes called sticking techniques, a concept that has always been at the center of developing advanced Goju-Ryu Karate [Higaonna]. The essence of this concept is to make contact with the opponent and retain this contact until the opponent is defeated. In combat, the first point of contact is typically through a block. Having made contact, the opponent's every move can be sensed through feeling so as to

maintain control without having to watch his/her movements. This control also makes it possible to confront additional opponents while engaged in combat.

A number of two-man drills are available to develop this skill. A variety of these drills, that illustrate the basic progression, are explained here to give a feel for the training methods. The drills are cumulative, each building upon the previous to develop and enhance the training process. It is important to practice the drills *softly in a relaxed stance*: they are intended to develop sensitive, fluid motion rather than force and strength.

Principle #5: Practice push-hands slowly and softly to develop the ability to sense and anticipate an opponent's movements without watching.

The first drill is illustrated in Figure 5 and is concerned with learning to maintain contact by grabbing and sticking. Two students begin in the open-hand middle block position with hands positioned so that a hook is formed at the wrist. The students touch by locking these hooks together (a). From this grabbing position, both students rotate the hand from outside to inside forming a hook on the opposite side of the wrist (b). This process is repeated backward and forward. The object of the drill is to develop the sense of sticking to an opponent, grabbing with the hook of the hand, and controlling the contact at all times.

Figure 5

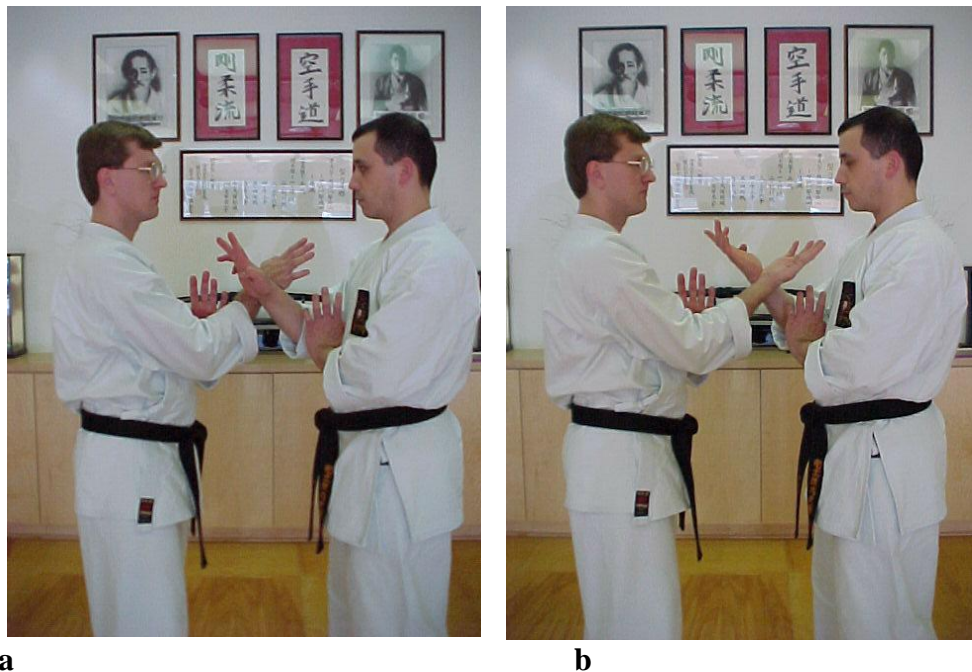


Figure 6 shows a second drill in which the range of contact is extended to include a palm-heel strike. One partner strikes slowly and carefully (a) while the other carefully follows the strike inward maintaining light contact at all times. The defender guides the strike to a cupped hand positioned just off the body. The defender then becomes the attacker (b) and returns the palm-heel while the partner practices the same technique. This drill begins to develop the feeling of *following a blow*. The attacker determines the speed, power, and direction of the blow while the defender simply focuses on maintaining contact. Through drills of this type, students learn to adhere in the presence of motion and to follow a partner's movement rather than block and lose contact.

Figure 6



a



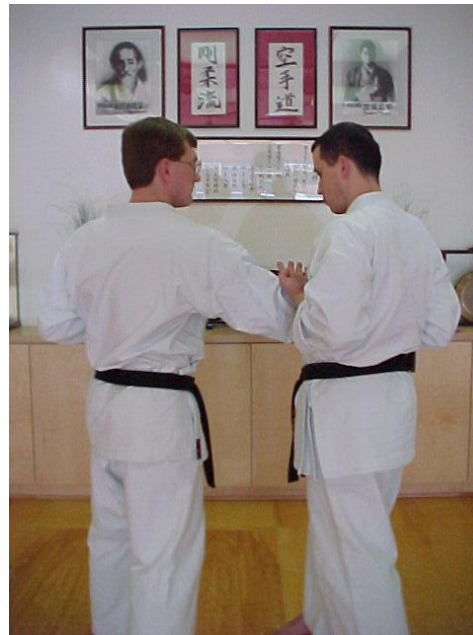
b

Figure 7 shows a drill that is intended to develop the skill of *redirecting* the energy of an opponent. Like the previous drill, one student uses a palm-heel strike to attack while the other follows the inbound motion to defend and maintain contact. However, at the last moment, prior to the strike making contact, the defender redirects the blow by rotating the hips away causing the blow to miss the body entirely (a), following which the roles of defender and attacker are reversed (b). This is more difficult than the previous drills in that it requires the attacker not to over-commit and the defender to sense when the attack has terminated in order to begin a return attack. Through gentle soft motions it is possible to develop a sense for redirecting the opponent's energy away from the body and loading the internal energy into the body. Notice that the basic hook developed in the first drill is used to control the direction when redirecting the incoming blow.

Figure 7



a



b

Figure 8 illustrates a final drill bringing together the skills of sticking, sensing, loading, redirecting, and rebounding. As before, the drill begins with a palm-heel strike by the attacker (a) in which the defender sticks and follows (b). The strike is then blocked, loading energy for a counter while redirecting the opponent's energy (c). Finally, the defender counters with a palm-heel strike (d).

Figure 8



a



b



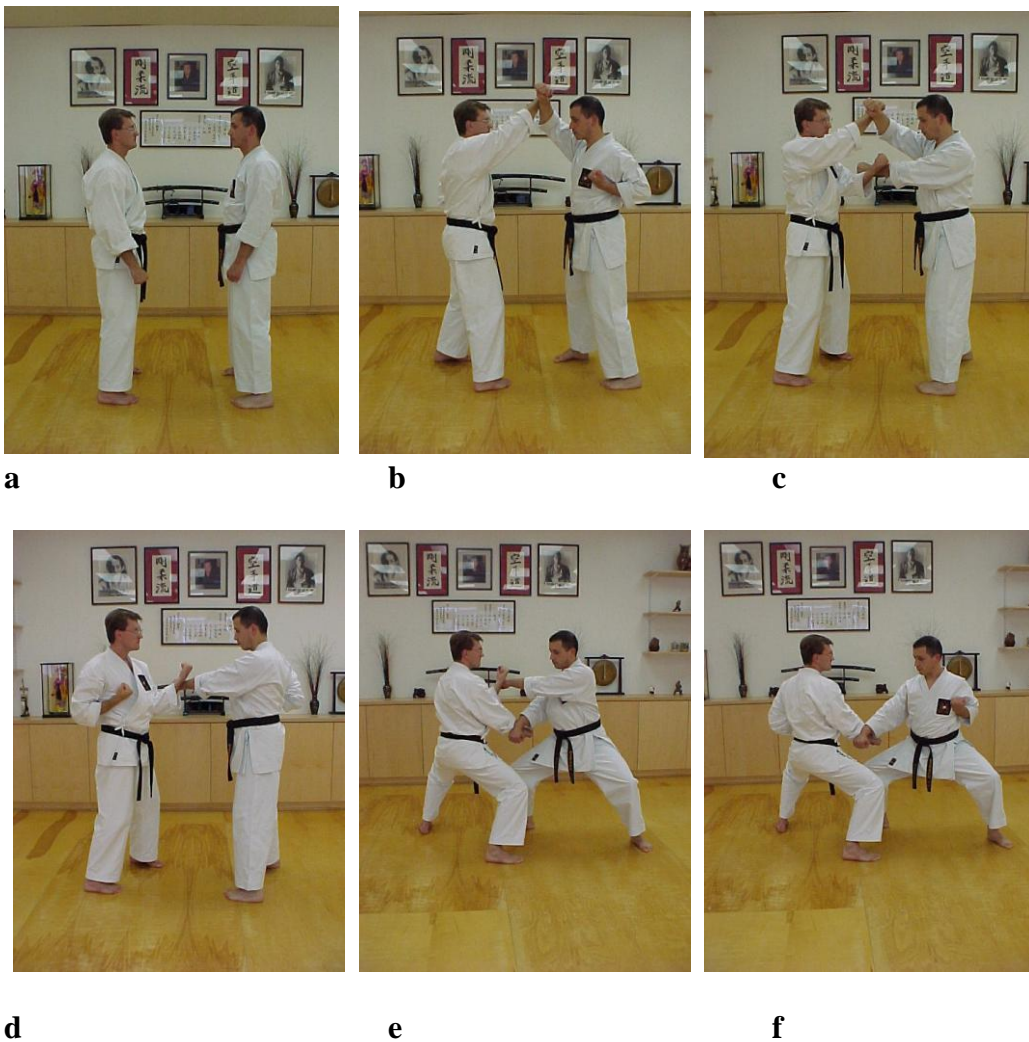
c



d

The principles of sensing, sticking, and redirecting must be now used in all of the standard partner training drills. However, these drills are utilized to focus on maintaining contact rather than delivering the appropriate sequence of blocks and blows. Figure 9 shows a blocking drill conducted in this manner. First the students practice these drills with their eyes open, then with their eyes closed. The object is to maintain contact at all times, anticipating the opponent's movements by sensing the position of their body. The drill begins from the ready stance (a): in this case the initial attacker is on the left of the figure. The attacker strikes to the face and the defender makes initial contact through a rising block (b). The defender then counters to the body and the attacker senses this movement. The attacker maintains contact, feeling the motion of the defender to intercept the incoming blow. At the point of interception the attacker is touching in two places (c), allowing the point of contact to move to the new block and allowing the right hand to be chambered while maintaining contact (d). After this attack to the body, the attacker strikes to the groin (e), and is in turn blocked by the defender who maintains contact (f). Then roles then reverse with the defender striking to the face.

Figure 9



Principle #6: Practice push-hands in blocking drills with a partner with the eyes closed to develop the senses.

In combat, we seek to maintain contact at all times so as to read the opponent with our senses; when contact is lost it is generally a cue to attack since the opponent is repositioning to attempt some alternative technique.

Body-shifting

Body-shifting (*tai sabaki*) is a technique in which the goal is to move in relation to the attacker both to avoid a blow and gain a position of advantage [Okazaki]. The simplest form of this concept is termed *opening the door*: if the defender is standing in a ready stance, and the attacker attempts to strike with the left hand, the defender moves the right foot backward, rotating the body by 90-degrees to avoid the blow. This technique places the defender on the inside in a position to counter. A similar technique with the right foot can be used to avoid a left forward punch. Although this technique is simple, it is preferable to position the body to the outside of the attacker where there is less likelihood that the attacker will be able to use a second technique.

Principle #7: Use body-shifting to allow a blow to pass and reposition the body to advantage.

Body-shifting movements can be achieved on any angle, not simply backward. For example, Figure 10 shows how to combine the technique with the rising block. The attacker attempts a right-punch, the defender intercepts and adheres to the blow, moving to the left on a 45-degree line with the left foot, while maintaining contact and following the opponent (a). The right foot is then positioned so that the defender is in an advantageous position, on the outside of the attacker, with the groin protected from kicks (b). During this movement, the rising block is used to expose the ribs by grabbing with the muscular part of the forearm. Body-shifting ensures the correct distancing to effect the counter (c). Irrespective of the stance in use, when moving to the left, the left foot moves first followed by the right; when moving to the right, the right foot moves first followed by the left.

Figure 10



a



b



c

Principle #8: When moving to the left, the left foot moves first followed by the right; when moving to the right, the right foot moves first followed by the left.

It is important to overcome the student's natural tendency to step back during the delivery of a blocking technique. Stepping backward is useful as a teaching tool when students are learning the basic gross patterns of blocking as it prevents their being inadvertently hurt. At more advanced levels it produces a defensive mind-set and represents an error in conditioning that places the student at a distinct disadvantage by causing loss of contact. This in turn prevents the ability to sense and control the opponent's movements. Movement to the side, as shown above, is a common alternative and is a distinct improvement as it allows push-hands to be used.

The Advanced Level Block

Combining the transfer of internal energy, with push-hands and body-shifting, students can at last progress to more advanced level blocking techniques. The advanced level block is shown exaggerated in Figure 11 to highlight the main ideas. Although this figure presents a sequence of movements, it is important to recognize that the entire sequence is performed as *one fluid motion*.

Instead of blocking from the chamber at 45 degrees in a deflecting motion, the block is organized first to intercept the incoming blow as shown in Figure 11(a). This occurs at the earliest point the chambered hand can reach the incoming blow and takes the shortest path to interception. The position of the interception is almost vertical and occurs with the muscular part of the forearm. It provides the first point of contact and the defender immediately adheres to the opponent. The motion of the arm continues upward in a circular motion redirecting the opponent's energy (b). The defender's arm then rotates into its final position pulling the opponent's arm out of danger by adhering and redirecting at the point of contact (c). No force is required to achieve this block irrespective of the power and speed of the incoming blow. It occurs as a light, effortless, and fluid motion maintaining contact at all times.

As the block begins to redirect the blow, notice that the defender's hips are back, *loaded*, as shown in Figure 11(c). As the defender redirects the opponent's energy with the block, he *steps straight in and strikes* with a counter punch using fajing (d). This strike occurs with the full force of the loaded energy. The defender remains in contact at all times even though striking a blow. The counter strike occurs before the opponent has time to form a subsequent attack. Following the counter strike the defender is *reloaded* in the opposite direction with both hands in contact. A wide variety of follow through attacks can now be achieved while remaining in contact with either hand.

Figure 11



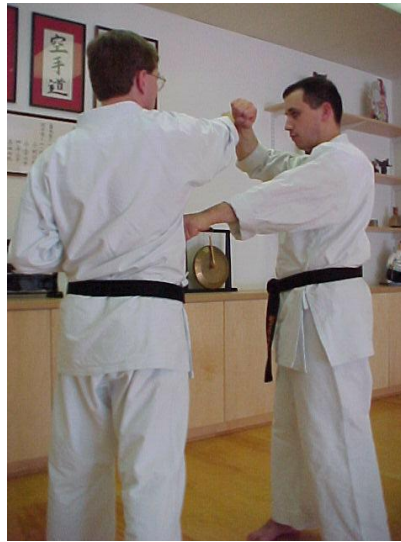
a



b



c



d

Principle #9: Intercept, stick, redirect, lock, counter, and reload in *single fluid motion*.

Applications

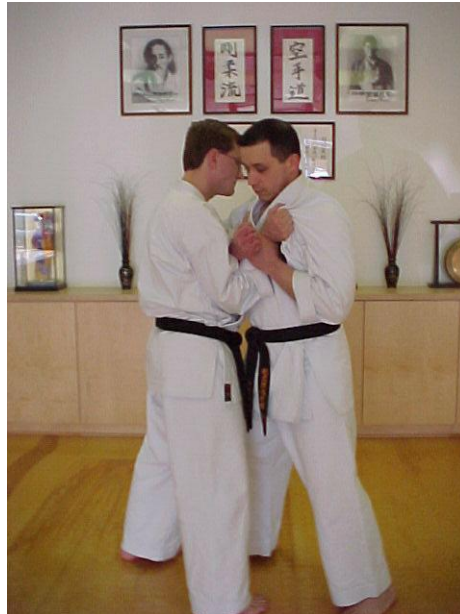
We have so far considered the rising block as a deflecting technique, as a powerful strike, and as a method for redirecting an opponent's energy. However, the technique can be used in wide variety of applications. A few of these are demonstrated here to give a flavor for the more general utility of the technique.

Grappling Techniques. At close quarters the block is useful in obtaining space. For example, in Figure 12 the attacker is grappling close in and in order to use any techniques the defender must create some space (a). The defender first grabs the attacker (b) and strikes to the forearm to loosen the opponent's hold. Then the opponent is pushed away using the block (c). Multiple attacks can then be made while remaining in contact to read the opponent's movements.

Figure 12



a



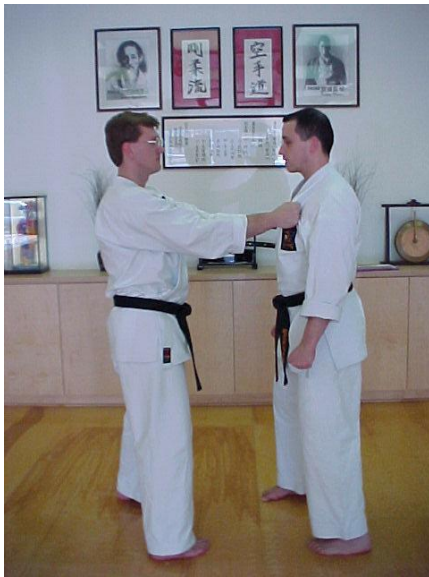
b



c

Typical grabs, such as that shown in Figure 13, can also be confronted using the block. In these applications, the chambered hand is always used to trap and control the opponent. For example, in Figure 13 the attacker grabs the defender (a) who immediately clasps the grabbing hand (b). Holding the grab in place, a block is used downward to soften the opponent's arm and pull him forward (c). At the same time, the wrist is turned downward causing the opponent to be sucked into a subsequent strike to neck (d). Notice that after initial contact is made (b), the defender never loses contact until the attacker is defeated.

Figure 13



a



b



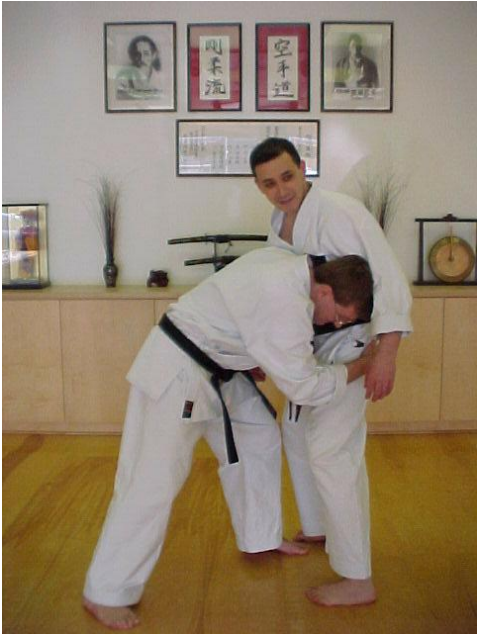
c



d

The technique can be used in other grappling positions such as that shown in Figure 14 (a). Here the defender steps backward and holds the attacker's head downward (b). This provides direct access for a downward strike to the nape of the neck (c). Again, after initial contact, the defender remains in contact until satisfied that the attacker is defeated.

Figure 14



a



b



c

Penetration Punch. Figure 15 shows the use of the block as a penetration punch. Initial contact occurs during the block where the attacker expects a standard block (a). Instead, the blocking arm rotates upward fully, striking the attacker in the temple (b,c). Notice that contact is maintained throughout the technique. The defender keeps the attacker's arm under control while delivering the punch; the attacker's own energy is used to drive the defender's strike in at the temple.

Figure 15



a



b



c

Chokes. Figure 16 shows how to use the block to enter a choke. The application begins with the attacker pushing (a). The defender then traps downward to obtain contact (b). A rising block is then performed directly to the neck (c) while maintaining contact. The opposite hand is then moved under the blocking arm to grab the opposite collar (d). The knuckles on the blocking hand are then forced upward into the opponent's neck by pulling the opposite hand downward at the same time as forcing the blocking hand upward (e). Tight contact is maintained through the blocking arm at all times leading to strangulation (f).

Figure 16



a



b



c



d



e



f

Take Down. The block can also be used as part of a take down. For example, in Figure 17(a), the attacker ducks to avoid a blow and grabs at the ankle while striking to the hip joint. The take down is affected by striking with the block (b) while pulling at the ankle until the opponent falls (c).

Figure 17



a



b



c

The applications presented here are by no means exhaustive; they simply represent a cross-section of representative uses for the rising block alone.

Principle #10: A block is multi-role technique that can be used in a wide variety of applications that include grappling, striking, choking, take-downs, as well as *blocking*.

Concluding Remarks

The Goju-Ryu principles presented at the beginner level provide simple basic forms that were never intended to guide the practitioner in applications; they are primarily learning tools to progress along the path to advanced technique. Most of these basic ideas can be used in a multitude of applications in combat. However, to be useful they must be based on the principles of *structure*, *movement*, and *breathing* developed through Sanchin kata. Subsequently, advanced principles must be added: *transferring internal energy* into every technique, *push-hands* to intercept, adhere, and redirect an opponent's energy, and *body-shifting* to position the body. Correct distancing, timing, and hand-eye coordination must be developed progressively through stationary and moving *partner training*. As overall technique improves, the quality and subtlety of kata training grows to incorporate more advanced movements. Thus each incremental improvement is fed back into every aspect of progressive training. Finally, applications evolve not as a staged set of movements, but rather as an artistic combination of the practitioner's ideas and training. Karate is then no longer concerned with mastering a technique; in the end it is concerned with mastering oneself.

[Labbate]

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Author's Biography

Marvin Labbate is a seventh dan in Seibukan Goju-Ryu, fifth dan in Matayoshi kobudo, and a certified Yang taijiquan instructor. He has studied karate for over 35 years and is the United States representative for the Okinawan Seibukai Association under its president Nakasone Kinei. Mr. Labbate is the director of CNY Karate, founded in 1963, the oldest karate school in upstate New York. His children's program incorporates comprehensive life skills training curricular. He also teaches special classes for children and adults that include the popular "stranger danger" program for children and self-defense classes for women. In his spare time, he conducts seminars on a broad variety of martial arts topics.