

Yakusoku Kumite

Purpose

Prearranged sparring (literal translation: “promise” + “coming together/entangled hands”) provides a simple yet effective set of self-defense moves against one attacker in a simulated life-and-death encounter. It tests one’s skills and conditioned reflexes as applied with full commitment in a controlled, safe setting.

Yakusoku kumite develops:

- Proficiency in blocking and striking, as well as conditioning of the forearms.
- Assessment and adjustment of *maai* (distance) as relates to different sized opponents (training partners).
- Body-shifting backwards or diagonally when blocking to avoid the attacker’s reach and/or line of sight while simultaneously creating an opening to counter (note that in kata we usually block while moving *forward*).
- Intuition for sensing an opponent’s intentions, strengths, and weaknesses (“fighting sense”).
- Management and effective use of adrenaline (physiological response) and fear (emotional response).
- Overcoming inhibitions and “polite” behavior to confidently “move in” and take over an opponent’s space.
- Learning to evaluate a situation from two perspectives (defender/attacker, yin/yang).
- Becoming an effective and challenging training partner: working collaboratively toward mutual self-improvement.

Safety

- Unless otherwise instructed, the lower rank attacks first (confirm with your partner if unsure).
- Everyone starts off lightly when working with a new partner. Beginners should always hold back a little.
- Lower rank and/or the smaller person may set a slower pace. Read your opponent!
- Use only a speed and power in which a technique can be stopped before reaching the target in order to avoid injury. (Caution: adrenaline unconsciously speeds you up and increases your range!)
- Physical contact is forearm-to-forearm *only*. Avoid injuring the joints! When punching, stop short of the target by 2 inches for white belts, 1 inch for green belts, ½ inch for brown belts, and less than ¼ inch for black belts.
- Listen carefully to all instructions! Communicate any injuries and, if needed, wear a brace to alert others to them.
- Avoid getting injured by *not* completely relaxing your arm until *after* your partner has blocked or countered.
- Yakusoku kumite should be practiced toward the end of the class after everyone is well warmed up, often following a stomach workout and/or arm training to prepare the body.

Why not jyu kumite (free-style sparring)?

Although free-style sparring may appear more “realistic”, it undermines traditional karate techniques by encouraging one to think of fighting as a contest or sport instead of a true life-and-death situation. Strikes are used for scoring points instead of neutralizing the opponent. Realism is further compromised by protective equipment, pulling punches, matching opponents of equal ability/size and avoiding high risk targets. Despite the “holding back” required by jyu kumite, the rate of injury associated with free-style sparring is notoriously high.

Etiquette

“Karate begins and ends with courtesy.” Partner exercises are collaborative, *not* competitive. The higher rank’s job is to challenge the lower rank with on-target attacks that are neither too easy *nor* too difficult, and blocks of appropriate strength and speed. The higher rank also models proper form for the lower rank to emulate.

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Setting up:

- Line up facing partner in a quick and orderly fashion, in formal attention stance, with adequate space between you for both to bow comfortably. Do not be “choosy” about partnering. Higher ranks take the lead in establishing the lines, while lower ranks fill in any gaps. The instructor will iron out loose ends regarding uneven numbers, etc.

Yakusoku kumite exercise:

- “Kiotseke, ni rei!” is called and all participants bow using verbal courtesies (“Onegai shimasu, Sensei [Sempai]”).

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- “Yoi!” is called and all participants step together in yame dachi. The specific yakusoku is announced (1 through 4), along with left or right hand, count or no count, and the speed and power. *Attackers* set their distance for optimal range, which will vary depending on which yakusoku is being performed.
- After the third and final technique, if by the count, hold the position until “And up!” or “Yame!” is called; then return to yame dachi. If no count, return to yame dachi automatically and await further instruction.
- If changing partners or ending the exercise, “Kiotskete!” is called, and all return to formal attention stance and bow as described above using “Domo arigato gozaimasu, Sensei [Sempai]”.

Changing partners:

- As prompted by the instructor, participants will either: 1) “Step down and change” as a group (all deshi move one spot counter clockwise); or 2) Only one of the lines will be instructed to shift (in which case the person on one end moves to the opposite end and everyone else shifts over one spot). Always show full courtesies at the beginning and end of working with a new partner.

Overall Considerations

- Never take your eyes off your opponent, except when bowing. Keep the gaze fixed on the center of your opponent’s throat, with soft vision taking in the whole body and surrounding area. Cultivate the mindset that at any time your opponent may preemptively attack *you*, especially after the third and final move. No “dead kumite”!
- In yakusoku kumite your techniques should be similar to those in kihon or kata. At times your opponent may send you off balance. Even if the attacker moves in rapidly or is out of position, make your techniques as clean and effective as possible. Stepping first and foundation should *not* be compromised, although you will need to adjust to your opponent’s size regarding height of blocks and placement of strikes (to targets).
- Commit yourself 100% to the exercise, whether it involves getting out of the way or landing a punch directly in front of a vital target. Adopt the attitude that every technique can have lethal consequences, with *equal* commitment to not harming your training partner.
- Kata and kumite are meant to complement each other. However, kata remains the essence and foundation of karate-do and should be emphasized in training.

Attackers:

- Appreciate the efficiency and strategy of the attacking sequences as developed by the masters.
- Strike to the target (resist the urge to “help” your partner by punching to the side). We help each other improve by offering realistic attacks (with control!).
- Attack to where your opponent *currently* is, *not* where they end up. “Cut them in half” as you move in.
- If the defender steps or shifts out of range, do *not* overextend your technique to “reach” them. Instead, rely on the next move (and your footwork) to get in closer and deliver a follow-up attack.

Defenders:

- Respond to the *actual* attack from your training partner and *not* to the count. Timing and eye/hand coordination are critical to avoid blocking too soon or too late. Try to wait until the last minute and respond as if you **do not** know in advance where the strike is going.
- If the opponent is too far away, do *not* sacrifice balance by “reaching” for the attack with your blocking arm; let their attack fall short. Also keep in mind that blocking with excessive force may send your opponent out of range for an effective counter. Avoid this by sticking to the proper footwork and maai built into each move.
- If you are too close to fully extend your counter, punch *past* the target rather than pulling the punch.

Karate ni sente nashi. (There is no first attack in karate.)

A main benefit of yakusoku kumite, besides considerable practical self-defense, is that the practice of “holding life and death in your hands” should give you a greater respect for the *value* of life (both your own *and* your opponent’s). You will come to see that your *inner* enemies – fear, ego, rage – pose the greatest threats. You and your training partners can help each other confront these obstacles through cooperative total commitment. Such reciprocity, over time, will help us work toward an “indomitable calmness” (Bushi Matsumura) and the ability to “win without fighting”.