Kettlebell Bunkai: The missing tool of ‘hojo undo’ (Part 2)

By Chris Denwood

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In the first part of this article, I gave a general introduction to kettlebells and their use as a functional training device for traditional hojo undo (supplementary training) in karate. In this second and final part, I'd like to go over some overarching core principles found in kata and suggest kettlebell exercises that can be performed to help enhance these. However, before we get into this, please allow me to spend a few moments explaining again why hojo undo (supplementary training) is so important for the pragmatic application of our art.

According to what information we have to date, the original karate of Okinawa seems to have been fundamentally based on methods to increase skills in respect to a civilian self-protection encounter and training was centred on three vital areas, which were undertaken in a mutual sense. Firstly, the karate-ka (practitioner) would study the technical aspects of the art via the traditional forms and progressively learn the roots from which to grow. The next area was that of applying the technical aspects of karate for use in a pragmatic environment and included comprehensive kata analysis and testing against a variety of challenges. Lastly, but no less important was the requirement for direct functional training. These three aspects were learned in parallel, with the supplementary training being a regular part of everyday practice.

To this day, hojo undo has only survived fully in styles such as goju ryu and uechi ryu and as far as most of the modern expressions of shuri-te are concerned, much of this type of training has died out completely. There are photos in existence though of modern masters such as Gichin Funakoshi, Choshin Chibana and more who are pictured with traditional training aids. Therefore, it is only very recently that these have been omitted from the shuri-te lineage in the west. Those styles in Okinawa are still known to practice heavily with hojo undo equipment. This is not only an eastern strategy either. You only need to go to your nearest boxing gym to experience functional training from your very first session.

If we look at the art of karate very broadly and from a purely combat perspective, we can see quite clearly that it represents a physical means of being able to transfer energy between two people, be it from strikes, kicks, locks, throws or chokes etc, in order to maintain our safety. The ways in which we, as human beings, mange to achieve this objective can be split up into three major components. Firstly, we need a means of obtaining energy or potential for use. Secondly, we need a means of transferring that energy as force and thirdly, we need a means of being able to cope with the resultant force that we will inevitably face, due to physics and in line with Newton's laws of motion. The more that we can satisfy these three components, the more effective our movement will be and the more chance we will have of meeting our objectives. In reality these components also apply directly to any other skill, sport or pastime that relies on the utilisation of physical energy.

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In respect to karate, obtaining energy provides the potential to work from and covers exploiting gravity by either pushing from or sinking into the ground. Transferring energy concerns the effective use of natural weapons and the ability to dynamically accelerate potential, making it much more useful in combat. Coping with resultant energy is something that many people seem to forget, but nonetheless, is still a critical component to maintain. This covers such things as structural stability of the skeletal bones and effective muscular recruitment during techniques to help facilitate this alignment. For the purposes of this article, I will discuss all three components very briefly and then suggest a single kettlebell exercise as an example to enhance performance.

The energy that we can obtain for use in karate is very closely related to the universal force of gravity, which affects every one of us. It also depends on our use of the ground, where our physical connection to the earth is acquired. There are generally two ways in which we can obtain energy for use in combat and these are promoted throughout each of the traditional kata. The first method is to dynamically press from the ground in order to utilise the resultant force generated into the body. Almost all dynamic sports tend to use this method of generating potential and this strategy relies heavily on explosive muscle actions and efficient muscle firing sequences of the posterior chain (the hamstrings, glutes and erectors). The downside of this strategy is that we must always first overcome the effects of gravity before any movement can be applied dynamically and because of this, energy has to be expended to start this process off.

One of the most effective exercises to develop explosive power and the transference of energy from the lower body is the kettlebell swing. This is the staple of all kettlebell exercises and is radically different from any other exercise performed using standard resistance training equipment. It also bears a striking resemblance to a number of exercises performed with the chi-ishi and very quickly brings about a strong connection with the posterior chain (the large power generating muscles of the lower body), hips and the upper limbs. It's no understatement to suggest that every single kettlebell workout should start with the swing.

After dead lifting the kettlebell, the hips are thrust forward to create a 'prep-swing', which should take you directly into the full exercise. When swinging the weight, emphasis should be placed almost entirely on the lower body, flexing from the hip joint as opposed to overly bending the knees, with the arms acting almost like 'hooks' to simply hold the kettlebell and allow a sound transference of energy from the hips to the weight. If this exercise is done correctly, the posterior chain is worked heavily and the core is also activated a great deal - both of these recruitments being fundamental for developing explosive power in karate.

Triple extension is a term used to describe the joint actions of the ankle, knee and hip during the 'working phase' of the swing. The aim should be to extend fully and in unison so that postural alignment is sound as the kettlebell is swinging upwards and outwards towards shoulder height. The shoulders must remain relaxed during this motion and a heavy enough weight should be used in order to stimulate and sufficiently load the correct muscle groups and not cause dominance from those muscles that should not be activated to aid the gross motion.

(Teaching ‘triple extension’ during the kettlebell swing)

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