

Atemi Waza

In this section we will begin to explore the various striking methods contained within *Goju Ryu* and some of the theories, tactics and training methods associated with them. For good self-defense, it is paramount that you develop trust and confidence in your art. Such confidence is developed through conditioning the body to be able to withstand a powerful strike, and by forging the striking tools used in *kata* so that you learn to trust that the tools won't let you down should you be forced to use them in an emergency. Unconditioned *Karateka* can be likened to guns that only fire blank rounds; they look and sound the same, but the end result is completely different. For example, when striking the opponent with certain hand forms it is important to consider whether the attack might do more damage to yourself rather than the opponent? This is why many *karateka* have no faith in techniques such as *nukite* or *ippon ken*, despite them being two of the most effective tools at our disposal in our opinion. Perhaps this lack of faith is due to the amount of effort which must be devoted to forging such tools to make them 'live'. Most people do not have the patience to devote years of effort in developing a technique they can rely on; we live in an era of instant gratification. Another reason for this lack of faith is often due to a poor understanding of the human body, its natural reactions, and the vulnerable areas. Although striking a torso with *nukite* would require a relatively high level of conditioning, the same technique could easily be used to the eye with much less effort, and for the majority of people it would have a far greater effect than their strongest punch. But, practitioners who do not regularly perform conditioning would probably hesitate to use a technique such as *nukite*.



Please remember throughout this section that the stronger you become in your *karate*, the greater effort should be made to actively avoid conflict. In Okinawa there is a famous saying;

"When the rice grain is plentiful, the stalk bows. When empty, it stands tall."

This should be considered carefully.

Seiken

The most common striking tool in *Goju Ryu* is the *seiken* which uses the two largest knuckles of the clenched fist. To make a good fist, each finger is bent over and held

tightly into the palm with the thumb pressed against the first two fingers to hold them in place. At the point of impact the little finger and thumb should be squeezed firmly.

As stated earlier, it is vitally important in *Goju Ryu* to condition the striking tool so that should you need to use the technique for real, it would have a positive effect. This means using the *machiwara*. The aim of the *machiwara* is to develop good, strong technique, and through its use you will also forge a positive spirit. Training on the *machiwara* should not be about developing large callouses. It was written in a popular UK magazine over 20 years ago by a 'famous' writer that Miyagi Chojun *sensei* couldn't



have made much use of the *machiwara* because in photographs he is never seen with calloused knuckles. Miyazato *sensei* was shown this article and told what it said, and he replied that he thought the author was an idiot, saying that he had personally witnessed his *sensei* striking the various *machiwara* at his home garden *dojo* every day¹³.

From what we know of Miyagi *sensei* today it is clear that he was a man of high moral principles. It has been said many times that Miyagi *sensei* was against lowering his art to the level of a street performer, being personally against demonstrations of *tameshiwari* (breaking) or the breaking of objects over the body during *sanchin*. He was also very careful to remind his students not to broadcast the fact that they were studying *karate* as he felt this might prompt unwanted attention and lead to problems. It would not be a large stretch of the imagination to think that he may also have been against openly

sporting the large grotesque deformities so proudly boasted by some practitioners both then, and now; viewing them as crude or even offensive? Kyan Chotoku, a contemporary of Miyagi *sensei* and member of the Okinawan aristocracy apparently held similar views. According to Mr Sunabe Shozen, Kyan said "*blackened knuckles were undesirable, particularly for members of the Okinawan samurai class*"¹⁴. It is possible to train daily and seriously on the *machiwara* without ever developing large

¹³ private conversation with R Barrett, Naha, 1986

¹⁴ Karate for Milk, Classical Fighting Arts, Vol 2 No.23, Goodin

callouses, but it is often the case that such deformities are seen as status symbols, badges of honor used to stoke the ego, or advertisements for popular associations. It seems like a case of 'form over function'.

There are now many different types of *machiwara* available, from the traditional post set into the ground, to wall mounted and modern *machiwara*. In our opinion, the classical *machiwara* is by far the most effective, and in most cases, the least expensive option. Wall mounted *machiwara* have very little give and can lead easily to injuries, particularly for less experienced practitioners. The padding used to cover the striking area can consist either of the traditional rope bound straw or the modern leather pad



produced by Shureido. Straw *machiwara* are much less forgiving on the knuckles as they are very abrasive and will punish any strikes which are mistimed or slightly off target. Despite this, the straw pad will toughen up the skin of the knuckles very quickly, leading eventually to less chance of cutting and having to take time away from practice in order to heal the wounds. This type of target builds up callous more easily than the leather variety and so should be approached carefully if you wish to avoid their appearance; an important consideration for females or people in certain careers where such things might be viewed negatively. The modern leather pads from Shureido are hard wearing and will last for many years of regular practice. The thickness of the pad and the feel of the leather is said to replicate the thin layer of skin covering the bones of the face, so becoming comfortable with striking hard on this type of target will quickly lead to increased confidence in your ability to deliver an effective blow to an opponent without fear of injuring yourself. In summer months, the surface area of this kind of pad becomes quite sticky and can lead

to the skin peeling from the knuckles. Various types of oil can be used on the hands to ensure they retain their moisture in order to avoid this. We have also found that regular practice on this type of target does not develop such obvious callouses and is more appropriate for social and professional life. The height of the target should be particular to your own body, with the middle of the pad being in line with the *ganka* point (depression in between the ribs just below the nipple) where the punches are aimed during *Sanchin*. The *machiwara* would traditionally be set so as to lean slightly toward the person striking, meaning that the impact would only be upon the two striking knuckles rather than the middle knuckles which is a common problem in

beginners. Modern *machiwara* are set straight so it is important to pay extra attention to the correct alignment of the wrist.

The primary objective in using the *machiwara* should be to develop a good connective feeling through the body and an understanding of the necessary alignments required to provide maximum effectiveness and efficiency of technique. Regular use of this tool will strengthen not only the striking areas of the hand, but also the wrists, shoulders, chest, back, torso, abdomen, hips, legs, and feet. The great thing about the *machiwara* is that it will highlight the areas that are weak. For example, if your shoulder is raised, you will feel it bounce away from the *machiwara* upon impact. Likewise, if the lower back lacks strength, when you punch harder you will find the impact causes you to jerk backward due to the rebound. As the power of the punch improves and you develop the ability to 'chain link' the impact tool down to the ground, you will start to feel the echo of the impact in your feet. This is a good indication that the power is being channeled correctly through your body and into the ground, and that you are delivering your techniques with no loose connections.



When hitting the *machiwara* it is important to keep the shoulders down and level, the elbows in, and the wrist straight. In the early stages of training you should focus upon striking more with the index knuckle which is smaller in size than the middle knuckle. After several months or years depending upon how your body adapts, you will then change your emphasis to strike equally with both knuckles upon the point of impact. As the power of your strikes increases in accordance with your level of

conditioning, you will begin to see the importance of being able to link the striking arm to the *tanden* and down into the feet. The harder you learn to strike the *machiwara*, the more force will be redirected into your posture, serving to strengthen the connective links throughout the body to develop *chinkuchi*. It is essential that you do not lean toward the *machiwara* as you strike, the reason being that if you were to miss the target or the opponent successfully avoided your strike, the momentum could cause you to continue travelling forward, losing control and balance. As discussed previously, the *uke waza* of *Goju Ryu* aim to exploit this very thing.

As your ability and confidence increases, you can begin to advance in your practice. Various methods of footwork can be employed to develop avoidance and closing distance. You can also begin from a position side on to the *machiwara*, or with your