
MAKIWARA: ESSENTIAL OR OUTDATED?

By Chris Denwood

By far the most well-known training implement in traditional karate is the striking post called *makiwara* (literally: sheaf of straw) named after the original padding used for hitting. This is most likely due to the fact that exclusive use of this tool was promoted by the mainland Japanese instructors and as modern styles such as (most notably) *Shotokan* began to spread worldwide, so too did the idea of regular *makiwara* training. Among those who did not fully understand its use, the development of noticeably calloused knuckles became a kind of 'trophy' to distinguish true *karate-ka* and highly sought after, to the point that it would be common to hear stories that would border on self-torture rather than self-growth. In actual fact though, the change in appearance of the knuckles is a result of regular and consistent *makiwara* use and should not be thought of as a primary objective. Having calloused knuckles is not directly proportional to the knowledge and application of powerful striking. Instead it simply shows that a significant length of time has been spent facing the post – whether hitting correctly or not!



The *makiwara* is largely considered to be a tool of Okinawan origin but there are also arguments to suggest that the initial inspiration may have come from either China (where many other traditional tools originated), or Japanese *Jigen Ryu* swordsmanship. It is this particular weapon system, founded in the late 16th century by Togo Chui, that the legendary *Sokon 'Bushi' Matsumura* is said to have gained a teaching licence and passed on knowledge to *Anko Itosu* (no doubt as well as other *karate* pioneers of the time). Interestingly, *Jigen Ryu* training involves repeated strikes against a vertically fixed wooden post (*tategi-uchi*), it incorporates a real emphasis on finishing a confrontation with a single blow and its syllabus also incorporates the use of *Dan* stages. Thus, there exists a possibility that the early development of *karate* on Okinawa may have been influenced to a greater or lesser extent by this art. This however has been the fuel of many debates with *karate* historians.

Regardless of the exact origins of the *makiwara*, the need to practice striking against objects for impact development is a method that should be practiced by all pragmatic systems of combat, where the traditional tools used to achieve this may of course vary greatly. For instance, also in traditional *karate* is the use of a large stone simply called *ishi*. Historically, these were lifted, carried and struck repeatedly to develop functional strength, conditioning and fight stopping power. Masters were said to have their own 'favourite' stone that would have been used for many years. Then we have items such as the wooden dummy (*mook jong*) from Chinese *Wing Chun*, coconuts, banana trees for *Muay Thai*, plus of course the likes of speed balls, focus mitts and heavy bags from the boxing arts of the west. Although the tools may vary, the message is simple - it's impossible to gain real skill and ability in striking if you do not spend time developing impact against actual physical objects.



In reality, there are a few types of *makiwara* used in traditional *karate*. the most common and the focus of this article is the *tachi* (standing) *makiwara* that is traditionally a tapered post buried into the ground outside so that the top is positioned to around the height of the chest. More modern designs of this have come into existence including indoor and portable types that although very useful can also vary greatly in quality and effectiveness. The *age* (hanging) *makiwara* is essentially a solid piece of wood suspended from the ceiling and has very similar characteristics to a modern punch/kick bag. It is used to add elements of *tenshin* (evasive body

movement) and allows for an entirely different training experience. The *kote-kitae* (forearm forging) *makiwara* is cylindrical in design and often split along the length to create a little give and absorb the shock. Lastly, there also exists a large *makiwara* that can be held by two training partners while a third practices striking. After an allotted number of repetitions, the roles are switched until all parties have had their turn.

The *tachi makiwara* is made from a single piece of wood and tapered along its length so that it exhibits a springy quality when supported at the bottom. The amount of spring is largely dependent on the type of wood used and the degree of tapering, but it is usually advised that beginners should naturally choose a softer wood and a larger taper before moving on to gradually stiffer posts. The flexion in the *makiwara* is critical though and a key component, not only to help reduce shock to the joints etc, but also to help develop correct bio dynamics when striking. In fact, I believe that this springy quality is what makes *makiwara* training rather unique and because of this, still very much a valid type of training when put alongside more modern implements.



As well as the traditional straw padding, more contemporary designs now utilise leather, rubber and canvas etc. Personally, I like to use a combination of leather and straw because I find them both very different and whereas straw is certainly more 'extreme' on the hands, leather allows for many more repetitions. Therefore, I will usually begin my training session by striking the leather pad and only after I have worked sufficiently on developing technique I will then move onto the straw pad to emphasise more the conditioning aspects. I

know some people who prefer not to use any padding at all, but I feel that with so many repetitions, some form of cushioning is necessary if used 'in anger'. Of course, this could also be achieved through the use of hand wraps or gloves, however the act of striking targets with bare knuckles and without artificial wrist support is something I believe that all traditional practitioners should practice regularly. Correct alignment of the hands (wrists and fingers etc) is obviously important on a number of levels.

It's worth noting that there have been some negative views associated with *makiwara* training with regards to long term joint damage and arthritis later in life. To balance this argument, there are currently many seventy and eighty year old masters on Okinawa who have struck the *makiwara* daily since childhood and seemed to have suffered no accumulative damage whatsoever. Although I'm not a qualified doctor and therefore not certified to advise in such as capacity, I do believe that the human body has a unique ability to adapt, respond and develop according to the specific demands placed on it. This of course is entirely dependent on being exposed to these demands gradually, progressively and sensibly over time. Therefore, I would suggest it's more likely that many of the adverse effects associated with impact training have come from inappropriate or excessive practice and is in no way limited to *makiwara* training alone. I have hit *makiwara* myself for many years and so far (even though I have many years to go before experiencing old age) I have only ever experienced benefits.

The only real and significant downside of *makiwara* training for me is the fact that because the post is fixed permanently to the ground, movement is very restricted and does not adequately represent the environmental dynamics of an actual confrontation, i.e. your opponent will not stay in one place in order to be hit. It is possible to add more footwork into the training, but essentially the traditionally designed *makiwara* is to be considered very much a static device. Therefore, my own training incorporates the use of a number of different impact tools so that I can enjoy the specific benefits of each.

Functional power in striking comes from not only the way in which energy is issued from the ground (the delivery system), but also from the way in which reactive energy is absorbed and redirected back through the body (reaction system). Newton's laws mean that we must consider both systems if we are to fully utilise the body and make it as efficient as possible. The uniqueness of the *makiwara* is its ability to challenge not only the delivery system, but also the reaction system through its inherent springy quality. Whatever you give the *makiwara* it will return with interest and regular practice of coping with this feedback helps greatly to produce a powerful strike when applied on a 'real' target and this is why I think this tool is so special to *karate* when compared with other implements used for developing impact.



Regularly facing the *makiwara* will help make your hands become relaxed, charged and heavy. It will also test your resolve because you will be challenged with a degree of discomfort in order to develop and grow. No matter how many times you strike, the *makiwara* will always prevail and remain upright as you walk away day after day. Therefore every technique should be thrown with concentration, intent and respect for this very valuable teacher as it will waste no time in revealing your errors. In addition to the physical values associated with *makiwara* training, there is also a mental component that comes from the constant and rhythmical repetition of technique, striving for that unattainable state of perfection. Personally, I find *makiwara* training very valuable aspect for my study of *karate* as a whole.

USING THE MAKIWARA



The *makiwara* is generally used to apply the lessons associated with structural alignment and dynamics for effective functional power.

Begin by facing the *makiwara* with the left leg forward with the front foot turned inwards slightly towards the base of the post and the rear foot also in vertical alignment. The weight should be evenly distributed and legs evenly flexed at the knees.

Start with only a few repetitions of each movement both sides and after a couple of weeks start to increase the numbers gradually until you can complete a few hundred repetitions. By varying the exercises, it is not uncommon for experienced practitioners to perform around one thousand strikes per session. However, quality must always come before quantity and it is most important that you strive for improvement in technique over increase in repetitions. So performing fifty correct strikes is far better than performing five hundred bad strikes - remember that it's not 'practice', but 'correct practice' that makes perfect!

It is expected that your knuckles will become red and a little sore, but if you break the skin at all then you should not face the *makiwara* again until the wound has completely healed. Re-opening cuts on a daily basis is very counter-productive, it goes against the natural recovery process and in doing so will put you on the road to eventual failure. Breaking the skin can be quite irritating, not only from a physical point of view, but also if you are eager to progress. After some practice however, it is possible to gauge your training so that your knuckles are challenged to a point just before the skin is liable to break. Achieving this consistently is a fine art though and not always successful. As the hands gradually become more conditioned to repetitive impact, the potential for broken skin will begin to diminish. Therefore in the initial stages of training, it pays to be patient and strike the *makiwara* only when the hands are healthy enough to do so.

I would also personally recommend that you make use of a good quality conditioning liniment. The ingredients will help to promote natural healing, increase blood flow, reduce any swelling and disperse bruising, as well as toughening and protecting the skin, bones, ligaments and tendons. Iron Palm liniment or *dit da jow* (literally

'iron fall wine') is ideal for this and now, with all the shops of the world at your fingertips via the internet, this (along with other liniments) can be obtained from a number of suppliers. Rub a little into your hands before training and then again afterwards, making sure to massage well into the areas used to strike the *makiwara* and that the liniment is fully absorbed (i.e. hands are completely dry) before performing your first strike. I also like to vigorously shake my hands for a minute or so after training in order to help promote blood flow to the area.



The ways in which to strike the *makiwara* are limited only by your imagination. However, below I've listed a few very basic drills to get you started. These concentrate on using the fist as a weapon, but it must be noted that a whole range of weapons can be developed. However, for open handed strikes such as *shotei uchi* (palm heel strike) and *shuto uchi* (sword hand strike), I personally like to make use of the *ishi* (stone) instead.

EXERCISE 1: ISOLATING DYNAMICS

Place your rear hand against the *makiwara* with the palm against the pad and the fingers hooked over the top of the post. By focusing on the connection made by your feet against the ground, explosively push the palm into the pad. This action should come from the whole body using the posterior chain in addition to the effective use of gravity by 'dropping the knee', the principles of sequential delay, elastic (stretch) potential and use of the *koshi* (hips). The movement should not originate from the arm, which should ideally remain extended throughout.

This exercise is a great starting point for those new to *makiwara* training and for more experienced strikers, a suitable initial drill before moving into to more advanced level striking. It helps the mind/body connection and promotes a greater understanding of how body dynamics and timing are used to support the *tsuki* (thrust) – this being a key principle within traditional *karate*.



When many people first face the *makiwara* they tend to concentrate on striking as hard as possible and more often than not overemphasise the use of the arms for power generation. In close range affairs, this would be a luxury seldom enjoyed and from a pragmatic perspective, the upper limbs should merely be used to transmit force into the opponent, with the main functionality coming from the lower body and core. Since the hand is already at rest against the pad during the exercise, it forces the use of the body and inherently reduces the emphasis placed on the upper limbs.

Also, because of these distance related restrictions, the only way to achieve more output is to incorporate the dynamic principles already mentioned above to good effect.

From a structural point of view, the elbow should remain low and not pointing out to the side. In addition, the shoulder of the striking arm should be pulled down with the *waki* (arm pit) closed. Any structural inaccuracies will be felt and probably seen very quickly and should be corrected as soon as they become apparent. Ensure that the hips and sacrum are aligned correctly so that the connection between the lower and upper body is sound. The whole idea of this exercise is to feel as though you are striking from the ground (or more accurately, with the ground) and that any emphasis at the feet is transmitted through the body and into the

makiwara via the striking limb. Regular practice of this exercise will help ingrain the application of this concept and slowly but surely, increase the effectiveness of your *tsuki*.

EXERCISE 2: REVERSE THRUST

This is the application of *gyaku zuki* (reverse thrust), which is effectively a progression of the first exercise by adding movement of the upper limb. The fist should make contact with the first two knuckles and for me, preferably extended in the more traditional *naname ken* (three quarter fist) position. I find that this technique helps to ensure good structure, especially with the elbow joint, which is naturally brought to the side in the more common *sei ken* (regular fist) position.



Begin in the same stance as the previous exercise and with each repetition, focus on feeling for energy at the ground, travelling up the body and out through the limb. At the same time, ensure the structure is such that any reactive energy is absorbed and redirected back into the ground. Here, you can also apply concentration to the front foot and practice dropping the knee momentarily before impact, therefore utilising gravity to aid the strike. Lastly, bring your attention to the principle of sequential delay and work on a smooth transition of force through the joints of the body.

EXERCISE 3: ADDING FOOT MOVEMENT

The next progression of the *gyaku zuki* is to add foot movement via both a step and a hitch. Each of these transitions is different and helps to emphasise certain aspects of dynamics. For example, since the hitch relies on a strong drive from the rear leg, principles such as 'elastic potential' and 'triple extension' can be practiced more easily. In contrast, the step is a great way of learning about bodyweight manipulation, alignment and dropping the knee.

EXERCISE 4: CHANGING THE ANGLE

Following movement of the body, you can also progress to changing the angle of the thrust slightly so that the strike penetrates in different directions. Just before the moment of impact, apply either an inward or outward emphasis, or either an upward or downward emphasis. This allows you to feel the effects of 'fine tuning' the strike and employing different ratios of muscular recruitment. It also increases the level of control you have over your striking limbs and the way in which you issue force through them. In application, this can completely change the effects of a strike. Changing the angle of strikes has a good conditioning effect too, since the striking surface of the weapon will achieve much more uniform exposure to the target.

EXERCISE 5: CLOSING THE DISTANCE

In self-protection, distance is a luxury seldom enjoyed, so once you have become competent at hitting the *makiwara*, it is then useful to purposefully restrict the distance of each technique so that you are then forced to find power through efficient technique. One useful drill is to do this through gradual steps, by reducing the range a couple of inches following each strike. Then when you are at the stage that your knuckles are almost

touching the *makiwara*, begin to progressively increase the distance again in the same way. Aim for the whole drill to be completed in around twenty to twenty five strikes so that you can repeat it a few times in succession with both hands. During the drill be very mindful of where the power originates, try to find the most effective path and resist as much as possible the urge to pull back (telegraph) before striking.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR...

Chris Denwood is a UK based karate practitioner, author, teacher and fitness trainer. He has been studying martial arts since childhood, specialising in practical kata bunkai and the application of karate's core principles for civilian self-protection, personal development, life integration and self-discovery.

Chris is also a respected writer and contributes regularly to the UK's leading martial arts magazines. His books and DVD's have been sold in countries across the globe and he is a member of the Martial Arts Combat Hall of Fame.

For more information about Chris please visit his website: <http://www.chrisdenwood.com>.