

# "Kotekitae"

## Chinese/Okinawan Conditioning

by George E. Mattson

In the fifty's, the various karate styles on Okinawa maintained a friendly relationship while retaining strong "signature" techniques that were unique to their individual systems. The first major break with this style identity was the creation of Isshin-ryu by a respected Shorin-ryu master, Shimabuku(ro) Tatsuo. The consensus of opinion of the major styles that formed what was then the "All-Okinawa Karate Federation" was that this "maverick" was pandering to the American servicemen, essentially giving them what they wanted: basic fighting skills that came from what the master considered the "best" of all fighting systems known to him at the time.

At first, the "traditionalists" shunned this new style and its founder. Over time, however, Isshin-ryu evolved into another accepted Okinawan karate system, differences of opinion forgotten in the search for unity and growth. Since much of this growth was taking place outside of Okinawa, it is easy to understand the change of attitude.

Since my original training on Okinawa in the mid-fifties, I've noticed that the major systems on Okinawa have taken a small paragraph from the Isshin-ryu book regarding "cross-training" and "mix and matching" of system ingredients and often "borrow" major non-kata training segments from each other. Uechi-ryu is famous for its simple, yet powerful fighting techniques, and owes much of its reputation to skillful body conditioning drills (kotekitae) combined with devastatingly effective blocks and counterattacks. One of these drills was part of the original style that Uechi Kanbun learned in China and is still a major part of today's Uechi-ryu. Over the past thirty-five years, I've noticed that all Okinawan systems now incorporate some type of body conditioning, using the Uechi-ryu type kotekitae drill as a model.

Because of its important contributions to Okinawan martial arts, I'd like to trace kotekitae's history in Uechi-ryu, beginning as practiced in Wakayama, Japan, by Uechi



### Group session working on the composite sparring/conditioning exercise.

Kanbun's first student and ending on Okinawa, where Uechi Kanei taught it in its current form. I will also present an extended application of this exercise as I speculate it was originally used in China.

This simple conditioning exercise continues to be performed almost the same way in which it was taught to me back in 1956. The general purpose being the reinforcement of blocking techniques while strengthening the arms of both attacker and defender. My students are still being tested for dan ranks in what I call the "compulsory" version, but in class, we practice an infinite number of variations and permutations of the exercise.

I began searching for a historical perspective relating to this exercise following a 1965 visit to a Uechi-ryu dojo in Wakayama, just outside of Tokyo, Japan. This dojo was where Uechi Kanbun first taught his Chinese fighting system. During this visit, I was privileged to meet Tomoyose Ryuyu, Kanbun's first student in Japan, and watch a demonstration of Uechi-ryu as practiced by members of the original dojo. During the demonstration, Tomoyose Ryuko (Ryuyu's eldest son and my teacher who

was living on Okinawa) had a few lively conversations with his father and brother concerning the kata and conditioning drills — both sides demonstrating their own version and explanation of the movements. In the end, everyone remained steadfast as to which interpretation was correct. Both showed bunkai (applications) to justify his way while demonstrating subtle reasons why the other version might not be correct. Back on Okinawa, I asked Tomoyose Ryuko about what we witnessed in Wakayama, especially the discrepancies in the kata and conditioning drills. Tomoyose was unable to explain why his father taught the system so differently than Uechi Kanei.

Overall, the Wakayama "style" looked more like Wing Chun (Yongchun in Mandarin) than Okinawan Uechi-ryu, from the stances to the hand positions. Blocks were closer to what Tomoyose Ryuko originally taught me — catlike and abbreviated — unlike the more precise and stylized Futenma (Uechi Kanei) version. Even on Okinawa, each teacher had his own personalized way of doing the style. The Wakayama kotekitae accomplished the same thing as what I was taught, but with different emphasis: more abbreviated, to the point, and closer to the Chinese crane exercises I'd seen during the Taiwan demonstrations witnessed earlier, than to the Futenma style.

One statement by Tomoyose Ryuko made in 1957 stuck in my memory: "Kanbun talked about practicing a special form of free-fighting in China, which he did not teach to his students. This free-fighting was more of a drill than what we do today." We speculated as to what this free-fighting might have looked like and Tomoyose offered that perhaps it had something to do with kotekitae.

In 1984, after hosting a Chinese delegation from Fuzhou from the same family of martial arts as taught by Shushiwa, I had an opportunity to watch an entirely different variation of kotekitae, as performed by this Chinese group. The moves looked



As the punch gets closer, student on right begins to move.



Student on right traps the punch by striking the attacking arm, first with his left forearm, then almost at the same time, with his blocking right arm.



As the blocking action is finishing, the left arm is being moved upward and in the same motion



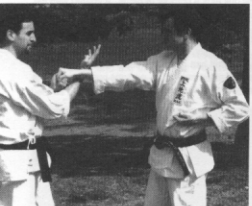
Pounds downward onto his partner's extended arm.



As the pouncing action takes place, student's right arm is already preparing to strike out.



Student on right steps forward with his right leg while punching out with right arm. Partner steps back with his right leg while striking the attacking arm with a left inside block.



Immediately followed by a right circular block.



As the block is completed, the left arm is completing its hit.



The hit has been completed and the right arm is already on the way as the drill continues.

This is a fun drill that will develop fast reflexes, accurate timing, and blocking sensitivity, all while conditioning the arms as a natural by-product. Vary the tempo and speed. Practice pausing before punching. This forces the defender to relax and react to the attack rather than by rote. In order to work, your moves must be soft and smooth. Keep an open mind and enjoy your practice.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The author is the President of the Uechi-ryu Karate Association: North American Chapter. (NAC) For information regarding Uechi-ryu Karate, call George Mattson at 508-586-3969 or check out the Uechi-ryu Karate Association's On-Line Magazine at <http://www.uechi-ryu.com>

#### DEMONSTRATORS

Barry Bomzer, Fedele Cacia, Steve DiOrto and Greg Postal

## THE "COMPULSORY" UECCHI-RYU KOTEKITAE. A: ARM WARM-UP EXERCISE:

A simple arm rubbing exercise, performed prior to the conditioning set. This warm-up was done in pretty much the same way at the Wakayama dojo during our 1965 visit. These movements can be performed in a number of ways, which turns a simple arm toughening set into a multifunctional and highly useful exercise. For purposes of this article, I'm only showing the version taught in most Uechi dojo, the ones used in official Uechi-ryu Karate-do Association dan tests.



1 Students face off, right arms linked.



2 Turn palms downward.

Vary the strength and number of repetitions performed. This variation of the exercise will strengthen the inside and outside of your forearms. Turning your fist as you extend your arm will include the top of your forearm in the toughening process. New students should spend more time on this exercise than the "pounding" that follows.



3 Extend arms outward and slightly upward, toward partner's shoulder. The movement should be against the friction created by opposing force of the extended arms. Keep your elbows closer to your body than your forearms.



4 At the top of the extension, turn your fist upward and pull your forearm back to the original position.

## B: ARM "POUNDING" EXERCISE:

The Okinawan version, used in official Uechi-ryu Karate-do Association dan tests, is more complex than the set practiced at Uechi Kanbun's original dojo in Wakayama, Japan. The footwork is the same, but the Okinawan version has an initial inside block not found in the Wakayama version.



1 After facing-off and bowing, student on the right steps forward into a right sanchin stance while punching with his right arm. Student on the left steps back with his right foot, into a left sanchin stance while inside blocking with his left arm. This is a conditioning move, building strength in both students. A built-in safety factor is present by limiting your block to a sanchin arm position. This limits the distance the block travels and the amount of impact delivered to your partner's arm.



2 The exercise continues with the second conditioning move. Student on the left swings his right arm in a circular pattern, under and around his partner's extended arm. The second block continues, finishing in a right sanchin arm position. This second blocking action is also a conditioning move, depending on how the extended arm is struck during the block.



3 As the right arm completes the block, your left arm slides out from under your partner's arm and is raised, ready to strike a downward blow.



4 Strike your partner's forearm, alternating from just below the elbow to just above the wrist.

Be very careful practicing this drill. Start off with more arm-rubbing than pounding. Begin with very easy blows. Increase force of the blows very gradually, over a period of years. Communicate with your partner and don't be afraid to tell your partner to "ease-up".



At the end of step #4 (above right) The person on the left punches with the right arm and the drill is repeated by the other person.

more like a sparring drill than a simple conditioning exercise. The emphasis was more on timing and actual blocking, with the conditioning process being more of an afterthought. I decided to "explore" what the Uechi system had been doing for the past one hundred years and try to interject some of the Wakayama and Fuzuhou influences back into it's heart.

What resulted is a full-speed sparring drill that looks more like the Fuzuhou/Wakayama kotekitae, but uses the Okinawan techniques. The modified kotekitae forces the student to move freely and to get out of his "white belt" mentality concerning the moves. Blocks and punches are more circular, with no emphasis on the "karate" defined "chambering." Students learn to

block and punch from wherever their arms happen to be, rather than to rigidly define postures and technique before performing a movement.

Unfortunately, the drill is difficult to demonstrate with static photographs. However, with the accompanying descriptions, you should get a feeling for the techniques' fluidity and sparring nature.

## THE WAKAYAMA KOTEKITAE.

After the warm-up arm rubbing, a more "Chinese" type of arm conditioning is performed. The stepping is the same as done on Okinawa, with one foot remaining in place during the exercise. This drill has the participants maintaining contact throughout both the punches and blocks. A punch is thrown and is deflected, then the punching arm recoils as the punch turns into a block.



Partners begin by student on right punching with right arm while stepping into a right sanchin stance. Student on left, steps back with his right foot, into a left sanchin stance. While blocking the punch with his right arm, student simultaneously hits the punching arm with his left arm.



Upon completing the pounding block, student on the left smoothly converts his right block into a strong punch, coordinated with a forward step with his right leg.



Without losing contact, student on the right steps back with his right leg, converting his right punching arm into a block, by pulling his elbow inward toward his body and guiding his partner's punch slightly to the right with his forearm.



Student on the right simultaneously blocks and pounds his partner's extended arm.



Without losing contact, student on right converts his block into a right punch.



Student on left steps back while blocking/pounding in a single action.

Unlike the Okinawan version of this drill, the Wakayama exercise stresses more timing and coordination on the part of the students. The fluid and seamless transformation of the block into a punch and maintaining contact at all times is much different than the separate and distinct moves as interpreted by the Okinawans.

## THE COMPOSITE "SPARRING/CONDITIONING" EXERCISE.

(I take full responsibility for the creation of this drill. It is not an "official" Uechi-ryu exercise, rather my speculation as to how the drill might have been done in China.)

This set combines the Okinawan moves with the original Wakayama-Chinese fluid moves, creating a very interesting sparring drill ... perhaps the one Uechi Kanbun spoke of to Tomoyose Ryuko.

The focal point of this drill is to remain centered, relaxed, and fluid. Almost the opposite of the way most modern Uechi practitioners perform their techniques. Instead of performing two individual blocks, this drill asks you to move both arms together, trapping while controlling the attacking technique ... making no distinction between attacks, blocks, or conditioning.

Instead of breaking the drill into "ich," "ni," "san" sections, this drill requires that you perform all defensive and countermoves as one. The two blocks/conditioning moves are combined with the counter strike/conditioning move; then, almost as one movement, the last block is converted into an attack and the cycle continues.

The development of this drill took a number of paths. It started with the Wakayama form, emphasizing various elements of this extremely simple set. Something seemed to be missing, however, so I added the second block from Okinawa, but kept the element of speed and fluidity found in the Wakayama version. Eventually, the final drill fell into place quite naturally. In my opinion, the drill has come full circle with this sparring exercise, and in the process of experimentation, perhaps has brought us a little closer to one of the original Chinese forms of kotekitae.



Student on left begins this exercise by punching with right arm while stepping forward with right leg.



Student on right moves with his partner, stepping back with his right leg while preparing to "trap" the attacking punch.