

# TO CATCH A GHOST – ENGAGEMENT IN BATTLE. By Jeff Hutchings.

Some years ago in chatting with a young Karate enthusiast who seemed eager to try out his karate for real, I made the usual comment about winning fights: the best way to never lose a fight is to not have one – don't be there. My point was to illustrate that the way of traditional Shotokan Karate, as I'd been taught, was not to be looking to engage in confrontation, but rather find a place through your training that allows you to walk away with confidence. He and I then had a talk about what I consider righteous conflict.

The 'not be there' part came back to me this past week when we were in intensive Dan-level training. However, this time it was related to an analogy that Sensei Power uses a lot: "Be the ghost on the end of your opponent's technique."

On the surface this seems pretty simple – don't be there, don't get hit, but of course, as with many things in karate, it gets much deeper than that.

Being a Karate guy that loves to get below the surface, I thought I'd look more closely at Sensei Power's teaching, reaching out to those who could help me better understand the concept of being the ghost.

'Not being there' in a fight can take on a number of connotations, including physically removing yourself from a potentially violent situation, or, like the ghost, staying just outside your opponent's range of effectiveness, but maintaining your ability to strike. It's a great analogy as we imagine stereotypical ghosts as having no barriers to movement – they shift effortlessly, floating even, and yet they have some energy, some foundation to allow them to move. Herein lies the challenge: float-like movements but with a foundation.

Interestingly enough, I heard Sensei Don Owens of WKJA Canada refer to this same analogy in a different way. "The art of not being there." A concept passed on to him early in his Karate life, he uses this notion to teach students about "missing their timing" and are unable to capitalize on an attack or offensive. Anyone who has ever driven a vehicle with its engine's timing off can understand that yes, the engine runs, but not very efficiently or smoothly.

It is disheartening to your opponent if he/she is having difficulty staying with your cadence and moving effectively against you. Timing, pressure and distance (the cornerstones of Sensei Power's teaching), are the three equally important points of



Author, Jeff Hutchings, nidan (right) and sensei Brian Power demonstrating the concept of 'receiving' while maintaining 'forward intention' Go No Sen, at sensei Power's home dojo.

the Kumite triangle.

When Sensei Power teaches "be the Ghost" he often uses Go no Sen as a basic method to understand the concept of staying on the end of, or just outside of, your opponent's movements and subsequent attack. In essence, an aggressor can't hit

what they can't reach. They move, you move – seemingly in unison, maintaining the correct rendezvous distance in between. Sensei Power stresses that being the ghost on the end of a technique does not mean removing yourself from a fight; it simply means parrying your opponents offensives but staying on the edge of effectiveness.

This correct distance (Maai) is key in shifting back from an opponent; you do so systematically, always staying in range to deliver your own offensive. The ghost doesn't leave the room, he simply floats back, or off-line left or right – always in Zanshin, ready to perceive an opening and explode back into the opponent's space. Incorrect distance means you've eliminated any chance you've had to get your timing right. Conversely, if your timing is off, correct distance is a moot point. Pressure, of course, is maintained throughout with both physical and mental intention.

The weightless ghost here understands Maai, or engagement distance; which isn't as simple for us as we attempt to move or 'float' a large body mass (in my case a rather large body mass!) in harmonization with our opponent's intentions, or, if you're conducting the fight at the moment, having them attempt to move with yours.

I believe the only way to understand engagement distance is to engage through Kumite as well as Ippon. Currently I am starting to get Maai as a feeling; when I am engaging an opponent, I can feel when



Jeff, with Sensei Toru Shimoji who's 2017 seminar focussed on the many facets of breath energy movement in kata and kumite.

I am within range to strike, or when I am in the zone where my opponent can. In relation to this, I've often heard it said that Nishiyama Sensei used to say that you have to 'conduct the fight.' Initially, I simply believed that this was to take charge, but in studying Maai I now know that it is more than that. At the level Sensei Nishiyama was teaching, Maai not only means maintaining the right distance while monitoring your timing, it also means not allowing your opponent to do the same.

Another mentor and teacher of mine, Sensei Toru Shimoji, offered me the following when I went in search of the definition of Maai:

The word Maai can best be translated as functional distance. It is made up of two kanji, ma which can mean space, distance or interval, and ai, the putting or fitting together or meeting of. Two kanji combined creates a word that elucidates as space of meeting, an interval of coming together, or distance of harmony.

In Kumite, for example, the idea is to engage with your enemy by dynamically altering the distance to better favor you. The point is to use your distancing effectively to set up or confuse your foe, allowing you to avoid, attack or counter against the opponent.

Thus, the ghost now not only moves according to how it wants to engage the opponent, but it also does so with the notion that it has to break the opponent's own distance and rhythm: pull them in, send them back and strike when there is a momentary lapse in their physical or mental department.

Sensei Shimoji (a superb teacher of energy movement in combat) also stresses that though you may be recoiling, shifting back, your essential energy in the form of your intention has to continue to be projected forward. There's an old saying that there is no backing up in Karate, and this I believe is true in the sense that keeping a safe distance from your opponent until the timing is right to attack is all part of your overall intention of encroaching on and destroying your opponent as timing allows.

'Backing up' then can be seen as merely recoiling the slingshot; your overall energy is still drawn to the target.

To add another layer to this, in Karate combat or in a real situation, I am learning there can't be a feeling of 'waiting to attack.' This is breaking your own Ki flow. The very idea of waiting contains in it a thought process: trying to see an opening in your opponent's defenses, or worse yet, a subdued energy as you look for that opening. As Nishiyama Sensei used to say: "Think and you're too late!"

I lost a Provincial tournament years ago when fighting a fellow who was known primarily for his rocket-like reverse punch.

Of course, in focusing on that, and waiting for him to throw his signature technique, he scored with a roundhouse kick to my temple. A busy mind in a fight, as in life, blows an ill wind.

Perhaps a concept for another time, but something else I am working on is thought versus perception; thinking about an opponent's attack, or when you should go on the offensive, means you're focused on something, possibly creating a gap for your opponent. Perception, however, means you are of a clear-mind, more in tune with your opponent's intentions, allowing you to act on openings/opportunities that simply appear.

Thinking is parallel to look at, and commenting on the brightest flower in a painting; perception is quietly absorbing the entire artist's landscape: seeing without looking.

Sensei Power often engages his students in Kumite demonstrations and just as we think he is shifting back he fires forward, not as if he is changing direction, but as he perceives an opening in our intention and he capitalizes. This lap in our mental intention probably comes from 'watching' his movements and thinking 'he's shifting back,' and being a seasoned fighter, he uses this to his advantage and before we strike, he does: the intuitive ghost.

In this sense, shifting back while being the ghost is simply part of the continuing engagement. It isn't a move in itself, but part of the fluid interaction with your opponent.

In the split seconds during which a fight is pushing you back or you choose to recess slightly, you have to stay totally engaged. 'Looking' for an opening won't work, but if you (the ghost) maintain your intention and retain your energy

connection to your opponent, and move in unison with his/her movements (or have them move in coordination with yours), openings appear and you fire – just as when an archer's drawn arrow crosses the kill zone on the target.

Another aspect of this that I am currently working on with Sensei Power is the foundation. When in transition, moving in or out, left or right, there has to be a maintained connection to the floor. A block or attack, no matter how good the form, is weak unless the physical action starts with your feet and stance, sending the energy upward through your spine and out your arm and hand. Starting a gyaku zuki without launching it from the floor is like pitching a baseball while standing in slick grass.

In maintaining root stability during transitions, I always think of the Kung Fu TV series and Kwai Chang Caine moving his feet with no more than a sheet of rice paper between them and the floor.

Sensei Shimoji uses an analogy of Christmas lights wrapped around your spine, and in order to move or transition effectively and efficiently you have to energize this area of your body. This image works as you visualize energy garnered from pushing the feet into the floor, pulling with the front leg or pushing with the back leg, sending this energy to your center, engaging the muscles around your spine and subsequently sending it out to the striking limb.

I think a key to this image is that the energy is going to your very center, and not merely to your trunk. Like a good golf swing, movement has to revolve around the center of your body: the spine, and like striking a golf ball, leading with your shoulders, hips or arms rather than your centre, means the whole thing is out of



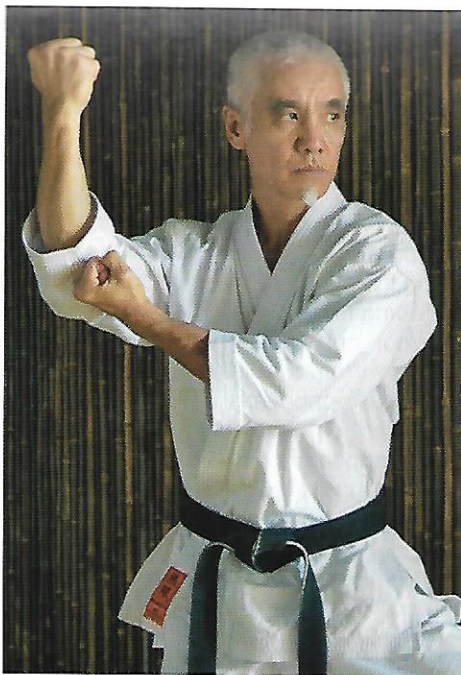
Sensei Brian Power (left) and student Tim Angel going over the concept of timing in kumite. Understanding of timing through experience as opposed to 'looking' for an opening.

rhythm with a poor result.

Engagement of, and rotation around, your very center is the crucial part of movement, I am learning. We visualize the ghost as drifting about vertically, effortlessly.

The image of the lights around your spine also helps with posture, I believe. After all, shifting, moving, parrying, etc. are pointless if you're sacrificing posture as you do so. However, energizing the lights (your spine) from the bottom up gives you a visual of an upright physical attitude as you move. As a point of interest, Miyamoto Musashi thought posture to be so important that he named more than twenty specific points when discussing fighting posture alone. All of this is Ghost Tai Sabaki at its finest, I believe: a ceaselessly engaged, well-timed game of evasion or approach. Like many things in karate, the ghost analogy makes sense, but reality takes a lot of sweat, and equally important, an open mind.

These are the deeper, finer points of Karate that many of us are now looking to understand, and personally, I am grateful for Sensei who have both the persistence and knowledge to present these things to us. Effective Sensei, like those I am blessed to be mentored by, aren't only showing us, they are offering us methods with which to



*Sensei Toru Shimoji, guest sensei to the Power Karate Academy in Newfoundland, Canada.*

dissect and understand Karate through our own experience.

On countless occasions I reach out to my own Sensei, as well as those I don't train directly under, and the result is always the same: they help and offer assistance wherever they can. I'd never

begin to understand any of this by learning in a vacuum, and I believe the growth and wider acceptance of Karate hinges upon collaboration and open dialog. Written material and online media are great resources, but neither of these is complete in and of itself. However, having the opportunity to train with and collaborate with Sensei who have walked this road and studied this art before is invaluable. Various perspectives, methods of teaching, and approaches to the three 'Ks' of karate are necessary and each have their place on the Karate path.

Sensei are individual architects of mind, body and spirit in their own right, each adding a particular appeal to this single work of Art. I am truly grateful for that.

I firmly believe that there are multifaceted elements of Karate that are beneficial to society, and in order to illuminate this, we have to keep the discussion going; right from how to perform a punch to the deeper, philosophical questions around that state of Karate today, and the balance of tradition and evolution in Karate going forward. Remember, in Karate – as in life – when the opponent attacks, be the ghost. I wish you all mindful, meaningful training.

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