

WORLD JKA KARATE ASSOCIATION

Instructor Trainee's Report #05

Stances Used in Karate

WJKA (Canada)

Instructor Trainee # 002

Jeff Hutchings

To exemplify the importance of stances in karate, I often tell beginners I am working with that, *your karate is only as good as your stance*.

Stances are the root of karate, the foundation beneath the structure, the undercarriage underneath the automobile.

According to Google, a stance is “the way in which someone stands, especially when deliberately adopted (as in baseball, golf, and other sports); a person's posture.”

Interestingly, in Nishiyama Sensei's book, *Karate, The Art of Empty-Hand Fighting*, he not only said that attacking and striking depend on a balanced and stable stance, but he immediately followed his discussion on stance with a discussion on posture.¹

For our purpose here, the point about a stance being deliberately adopted is important. Every stance in karate is deliberate and should be very defined. Such a stance as a back stance should consist of weight proportioned to the back leg, back knee bent, toes in and knee out, posture upright, for example. In addition, a defined stance invariable has to be accompanied by suitable posture. A decent stance and poor upper body posture is essentially breaking the connection between the two. Being able to deliver an attack, and being able to parry or receive an attack, are all dependent on your lower body physical position, as well as the upper body's attunement with the same.

The understanding of stances in karate is a bit of a dichotomy: good stances are immovable, and those same stances need to be agile. As Sensei Toru Shimoji² says, karate is an amalgamation of “foundation and freedom.”

Taken further, karate stances are also a window into the mind of the practitioner. A karateka, when in serious training or combat, adopts a very particular mental *stance*. Mental intention fortifies the physical bodily deportment. A competitor entering a ring, or a karateka performing kata for testing, both tell a story with the stances they assume. The initial stances are like the opening lines of a book: they set up what is to come. Stances are the window into the martial artist's ability.

¹ *Karate, The Art of Empty-Hand Fighting*, Tuttle Publishing, p. 60

² Sensei Toru Shimoji, taken from <https://www.karateatl.com/>

To help us understand the variety of karate stances (Figure One) we can look to Nishiyama Sensei:

*Stances may be broken into natural stances, in which muscles are relaxed, stances where legs are put under tension by forcing the knees outward and those where the legs are put under tension by forcing the knees inward. As these are adapted to specific purposes, they become specific kinds of stances.*³

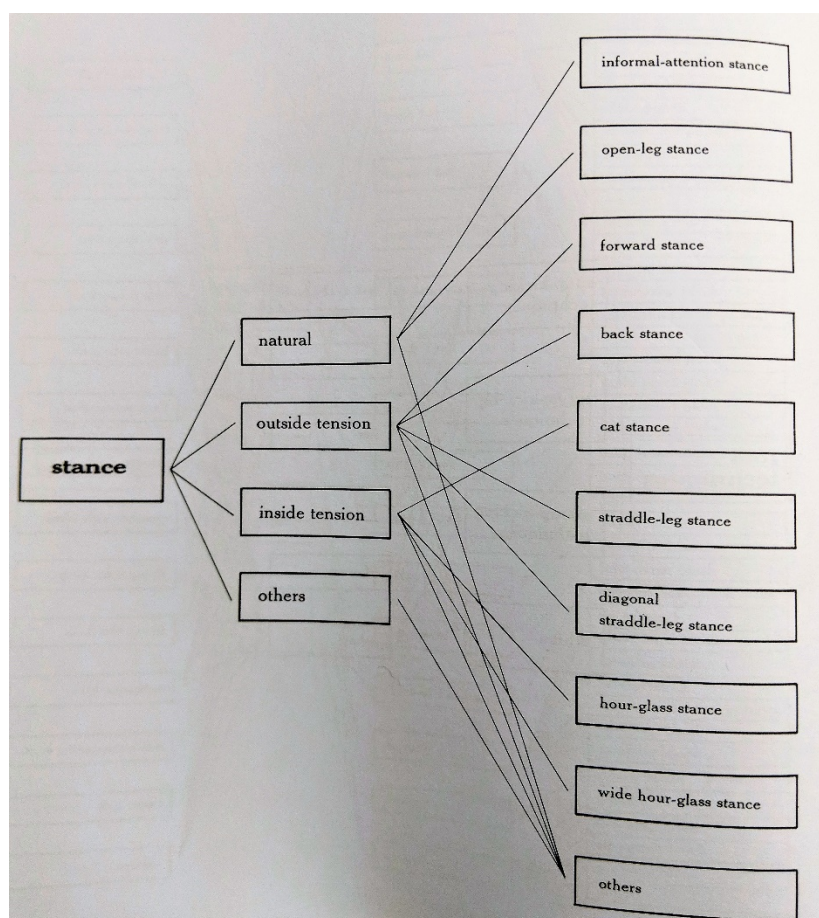


Figure 1: Stance, Karete, The Art of Empty Hand Fighting

Nishiyama Sensei goes on to write that natural stances (e.g. Natural-attention stance) are preparatory to moving into techniques, while the tension stances (e.g. Back stance) are for maintaining balance and to add strength while blocking and counterattacking techniques.

A very early, beautiful depiction of a Shotokan karate stance is found in Gichin Funakoshi's book, *Karate-Do: My Way of Life*:

During one particular typhoon that I remember, all the people of Shuri huddled together within their homes, praying for the typhoon to pass without wreaking any great damage.

No, I was wrong when I said all

the people of Shuri huddled at home: there was one young man, up on the roof of his house in Yamakawa-cho, who was determinedly battling the typhoon.

Now the young man on the roof assumed a low posture, holding the straw mat aloft against the raging wind. The stance he took was most impressive, for he stood as if astride a horse. Indeed,

³ Karate The Art of "Empty-Hand", Hidetaka Nishiyama and Richard C Brown

anyone who knew karate could readily have seen that the youth was taking the horse-riding stance, the most stable of all karate stances, and that he was making use of the howling typhoon to refine his technique and to further strengthen both body and mind. The wind struck the mat and the youth with full force, but he stood his ground and did not flinch.⁴

Funakoshi Sensei is suggesting here that the horse-riding stance is the strongest of all stances, and it becomes obvious that this stance was best suited for him in the conditions that he is describing atop the dwelling where he was attempting to strengthen his karate.

The multitude of stances in karate are used depending on the scenario the practitioner is currently in and, given that these scenarios can vary, each stance can have a variety of uses and applications. The horse-stance for example can be used to stabilize the body while delivering an elbow strike to the opponents rib cage, or the horse-stance can be used to position the body to enable you to engage and throw the opponent, as sometimes seen in Heian Sandan. In addition, shifting from front stance facing the opponent, into a horse-stance away from an opponent is commonly used to parry an attack.

Another example of stances having multiple applications, as well as indicating the importance of transitions between stances, include moves 23-24 in Heian Godan⁵:

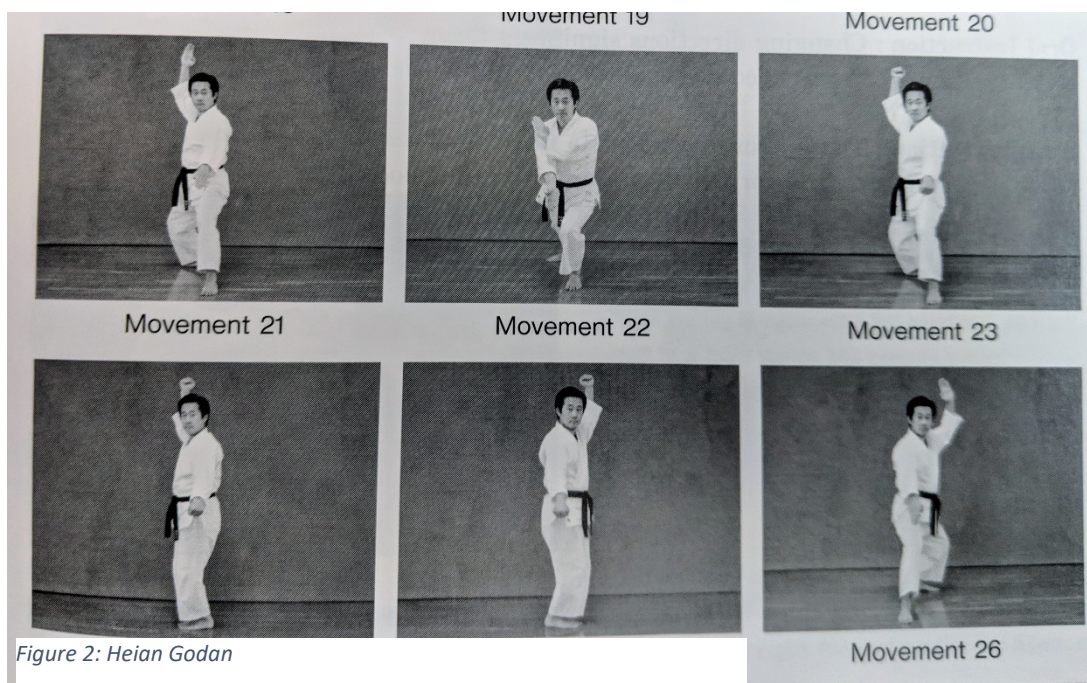


Figure 2: Heian Godan

⁴ *Karate-Do: My Way of Life*, Gichin Funakishi, 1975

⁵ *Hidden Karate*, Gennosuke Higaki, pp 144-145

The transition between the left back stance in 23 and the upright natural stance in 24 is a good example of how what happens between stances is as important as the stances themselves. Here, if we accept the standard Bunkai for these moves we see that a left downward block or blow was delivered and then the left foot was drawn back to accommodate the next move.

A closer look may reveal that the left foot being drawn back to the right may in fact be a sort of sweep or foot technique where the opponent's foot is hooked (after he has been struck) with the attacker's left heel is drawn forward in order to break his balance.

Also worthy of note is that the technique seen in image 23 can also be the setup for a grab and throw, from the left back stance position. See figure 3⁶.

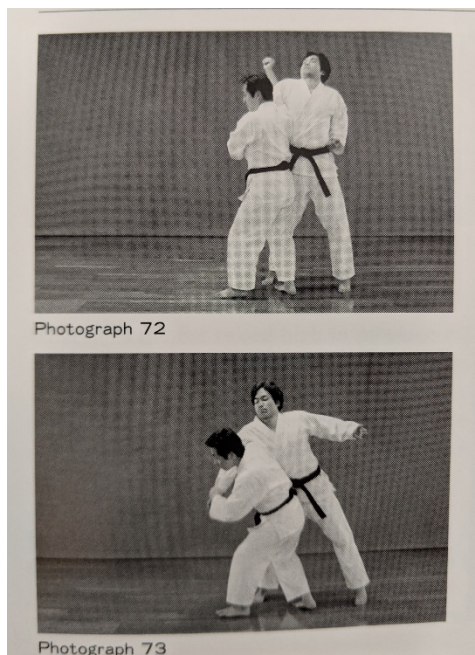


Figure 3 Opposite Hand Back Throw from back stance

A key point is that though the stances are changing (for whatever reason) there is still a mindful attention paid to correct posture and stability in the stances. In figure 3 we also see the back stance changing to what looks more like a front stance in order to carry the momentum of the throw.

It becomes obvious that transitions between stances happen quickly and are done with the purpose of the technique in mind.

The strength in stances then isn't absolute as in one being stronger than another. It seems that the stance chosen is relative to the technique at hand. Lower legwork and core bodywork seem essential to the development of stable stances as well as the agility to move effortlessly between

them.

⁶ Gennosuke Higaki, pp 146-148

A further area of interest to many martial artists is the notion of higher versus lower stances. There are karate styles that utilize higher stances, and those that prefer the lower ones. Interestingly, the Shotokan style seems to have gone through an evolution in stances, and even today, depending on where you train, you will see that disciplines of the Shotokan style have their own reasons for teaching either the higher or the lower stances.

Commonly heard in the Shotokan Dojo is the saying that we train in lower stances to gain strength and stability, but we tend to fight and *apply* Kata in higher, more practical stances.

If we look at the change in stances seen between historical images and footage of the early days of karate, and current day karate, we see that stances used in pre-1930's were more upright with less knee bend:

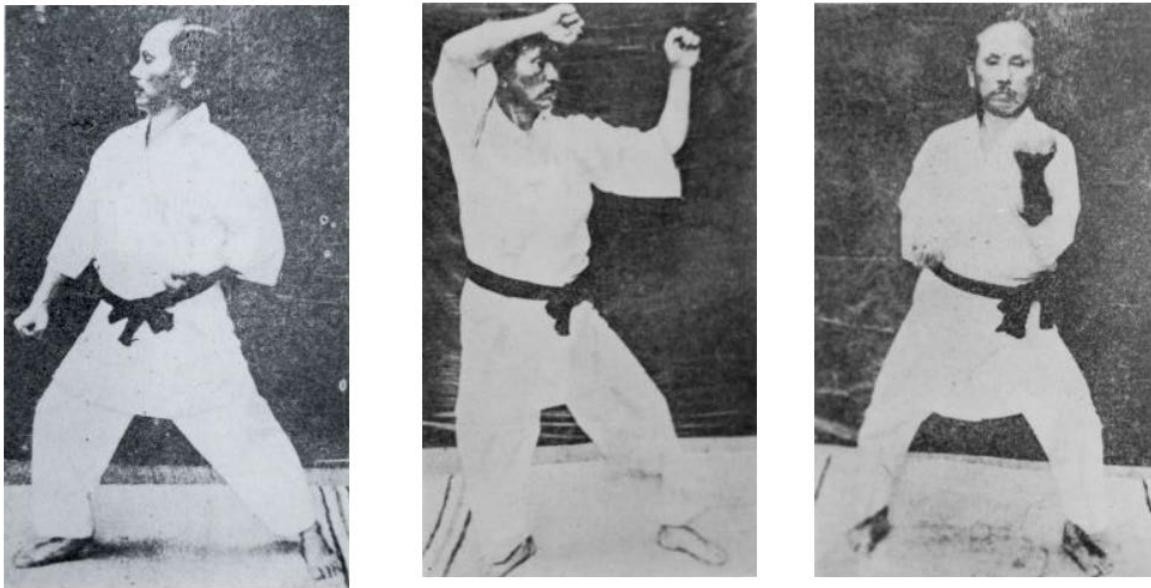


Figure 4 Master Funakoshi ⁷

Jason Armstrong Sensei comments in his book, "A key point to note is that deep stances evolved with sports karate after the 1930's, prior to this date stances in such arts as karate were predominately short and high."⁸

⁷ Images form *Tote Jitsu*, Gichin Funakoshi, 1922

⁸ *Street Fighting Statistics & Medical Outcomes linked to Karate & Bunkai Selection 2nd edition* 2012 Jason Armstrong pg. 109

The suggestion here is that the lower stances came about as the result of competition karate.

The history of karate also tells us that Yoshitaka Funakoshi, the third son of master Gichin Funakoshi, had a great impact on many of the modern karate techniques that we practice today, not the least of which was the karate stance:

Yoshitaka insisted on using low stances and long attacks, chained techniques, something that immediately separated it from Okinawan karate.

The leg techniques were performed with a much higher knee-lift than in previous styles, and the use of the hips emphasized. Other technical developments were the turning of the torso to a half-facing position (hanmi) when blocking and thrusting the rear leg and hips when performing the techniques, the idea being to deliver the attack with the whole of the body.⁹

Given that Yoshitaka lived from 1906 to 1946 which encompassed the time when karate came to mainland Japan and then flourished in competition, it makes sense that he did have a tremendous impact on the modern karate stance.

Next in the evolution of karate stances is the understanding that over-extension, particularly in the hip joints has led to long-term injury. New understandings in the area of kinesiology has proven that over-extension creates undue tension and damage to muscles, ligaments, tendons and joints. In addition, the extended width of back stances and front facing stances can also lead to injury after long term repetition.



¹⁰An example is the use of very low front stances with the hips in shomen position.

Biomechanically, the natural hip extension range of motion is less

⁹ Waka Sensei, taken from <https://shotokai.com/gigo-yoshitaka-funakoshi/>

¹⁰ Zenkutsu Dachi, Google Images

than 30 degrees.¹¹ Over-extension adversely affects the hip joint as well as hip flexor muscles. Historically many karateka trained in a low stance, hips to the front (especially for punching), and the pelvis forward or “tucked up”. Such an arrangement of body parts could have adverse long-term training effects.

In his book Jason Armstrong Sensei went on to say that karate masters in Okinawa (who used higher, less physically demanding stances) most often did not face the same hip, muscle and joint issues that modern-day karateka do.

Therefore, with the ongoing study of karate and the correct and efficient utilization of body parts in movement, a balance has been found between stable, strong stances, and proper hip alignment in extension or abduction.

It stands to reason then, that karate stances are evolving to merge the necessity for power and stability, with the need to take care of one’s physical wellbeing, allowing for the long-term physical commitment that is required to become adept in the martial arts.

¹¹ Brad Appleton, *Stretching and Flexibility*, taken from https://people.bath.ac.uk/masrjb/Stretch/stretching_8.html#SEC90

Bibliography

Nishiyama, Hidetaka & Brown, Richard C, *Karate, The Art of Empty-Hand Fighting*, Tuttle Publishing, reprint 1990

Sensei Toru Shimoji, taken from <https://www.karateatl.com/>

Gichin Funakishi, *Karate-Do: My Way of Life*, Kodansha International; Reprint edition (Feb. 1 2013)

Gennosuke Higaki *Hidden Karate*, Champ; 1st edition (September 15, 2006)

Gichin Funakioshi, Images form *Tote Jitsu*, Masters Pubn, 1922

Jason Armstrong, *Street Fighting Statistics & Medical Outcomes linked to Karate & Bunkai*, DownloadKarate.com & Lulu 2nd edition 2012

Waka Sensei, taken form <https://shotokai.com/gigo-yoshitaka-funakoshi/>

Zenkutsu Dachi, Google Images

Brad Appleton, *Stretching and Flexibility*, taken from

https://people.bath.ac.uk/masrjb/Stretch/stretching_8.html#SEC90