

## **Jiyu-Kumite - is it necessary?**

**By Matt Price**

Is Jiyu-Kumite (non prearranged free fighting) really a necessary part of modern karate training?

Let me start by telling you of an incident that happened to a friend of mine, who I would consider an excellent all round karateka, whilst training on an open karate course a few weeks ago. Towards the end of the lesson, which had covered kihon, kata and kumite, the instructor told the students to pair up and practise some Jiyu-Kumite. My friend was partnered with an adult 2<sup>nd</sup> Dan black belt. Upon the command of hajime the 2<sup>nd</sup> Dan asked my friend what the instructor had meant. My friend replied, “free fighting” to which the 2<sup>nd</sup> Dan responded, “I’ve never done that!” my friend, who will train free fighting weekly as part of his all round training, was shocked, but replied, “In that case we should just go at it lightly”. What followed was my friend hitting the 2<sup>nd</sup> Dan at will, whilst the 2<sup>nd</sup> Dan flailed away unable to even come close to making a connection and cowering every time my friend launched a light attack at him. It was embarrassing to watch, and believe me my friend was going lightly. I would hate to imagine what he could have done to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Dan if he had been fighting with his usual venom.

Now watching the 2<sup>nd</sup> Dan training, up to this point he had looked good. He moved sharply during the kihon and kata training showing good form and technique, during the bunkai training he looked aggressive and composed and during the arranged kumite drills he looked competent. So why did he look so bad during the free fighting?

I later spoke to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Dan’s instructor, a 4<sup>th</sup> Dan who had also been training on the course. He explained that they (his Shotokan association) didn’t believe in free fighting training. He explained that Jiyu-Kumite isn’t real fighting - for real fight training they use ippon-kumite and bunkai.

At this point let me say that I do consider ippon-kumite and bunkai training essential components of a karateka’s training, but if you believe that training these prearranged drills alone will ready you for a real life combat situation you are kidding yourself.

Many instructors will tell you that the techniques used during Jiyu-Kumite are no good for a real fight situation, as the most destructive techniques such as eye-gouging, groin attacks etc. have to be removed. This they will tell you is not a true reflection on fighting as you are left with only controllable techniques such as straight closed hand punches and kicks to the body and head. They are of course correct, these techniques may not be the most destructive, but if I can hit you with them and you can’t hit me, I have a distinct advantage. Plus it’s not a hard transition to change a head punch into a throat punch or nukite, or to change a body kick to a groin kick.

The problem with the ippon and bunkai training is that you are practicing your techniques on an unresisting, co-operative partner. Spend an evening on a nightclub door, or for a safer option watch some of those cheap TV shows showing CCTV footage of street fights. There you’ll see crazed men and women wildly throwing their arms and legs everywhere. Now picture yourself being confronted by that assailant. They’re not going to stand still for a moment. The chances of you being able to take them in a wrist lock or find a nerve point to strike is extremely unlikely as they will not stop punching and moving.

This is much the same situation Jigoro Kano envisaged when he developed Judo. Kano was interested in developing a truly effective combat efficient martial art. He had spent four years studying ju-jitsu,

where all the training was based on ippon and kata. The majority of techniques being taught were considered too dangerous to be practiced in free fighting, so free fighting was not practiced. Kano realized that training in this manner would not ready students for actual combat where opponents have a nasty habit of being extremely unpredictable. He developed a system where the more damaging techniques were removed so allowing the practitioner to take part in free fighting. The ju-jitsu community of the time were not pleased with the success and notoriety judo was acquiring. This resulted in a series of challenges issued to Kano's dojo (the Kodokan). The judoka defeated all the challengers with relative ease. Then in 1887 the Tokyo police ran a well-published tournament to see which of the varied martial arts should be adopted by the police force. Again judo easily came out on top.

This example shows the importance of free fighting in martial arts training. Of course Jiyu-Kumite is not real fighting, but it is as close as you can realistically practise real fighting in the dojo. If we go back to the example of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Dan who had no Jiyu-Kumite training. His instructor may say his students are getting their self defense/street fighting training from their ippon and bunkai training, but do you really think that 2<sup>nd</sup> Dan would fair any better in a street defense situation where his attacker would have been even more unpredictable?

Good Jiyu-Kumite training and practice carried out in a controlled environment with good instructors will teach you many skills it is almost impossible to gain with other training methods.

## **Fear Control**

Jiyu-Kumite is scary, and so it should be! Everybody has opponents they don't like facing. Karate should not be about staying in your comfort zone. The more you do it the more you will get used to facing and controlling your fear.

## **Getting Hit**

Jiyu-Kumite will get you used to being hit. This is a skill most people do not naturally possess. More often than not, the first time you are struck in the head during training you are shocked. It is frequently not the pain that has shocked you, as this is often no worse then knocking your head getting out of the car. It is the fact another person has just hit you in the face with their fist or foot. This is something most people will not have experienced regularly in their everyday life. If the first time you experience this shock is in a street defense situation, you may find yourself in big trouble. Obviously I am not saying you can get used to the big knockout blows, but there is no doubt you get used to taking knocks.

## **Timing**

Jiyu-Kumite teaches reflex timing. If you can break an opponents distance and hit them as they are coming at you, you can deliver a decisive blow. I know from my time working the doors in nightclubs this skill saved my bacon on many occasions. This type of training can be practised in drill fashion, against pads and attackers coming at you with arranged attacks, but unless this skill can be used in a live fight situation it is useless. You can train and train your gyaku-zuki making hundreds of punches a day, including striking pads and makiwara, which believe me I do, but this same gyaku-zuki can suddenly feel very different when facing someone who is intent on hitting you back.

These are just three skills you will gain from Jiyu-Kumite. There are many more, but I believe the most important skill you will gain from Jiyu-Kumite is getting used to being confronted with non-prearranged attacks. Most people's natural instinct when being attacked is to cower away. This is fine

when you are about to hit a tree in your car, but not so good in a fight. It takes time and patience to learn to deal with non-prearranged attacks; you are re-training your body's natural instincts.

I am not saying that all karateka should go out and become competitors. In my dojos 70 % of my students would have no interest in competing, but they still take part in Jiyu-Kumite on a regular basis in the general classes. If they do decide they want to try their hand at competition we have specific classes they can take. These competition classes are optional, but the Jiyu-Kumite training as part of the general training classes is considered essential.

It amazes me how many karateka I speak to who tell me that they never take part in Jiyu-Kumite. I know many instructors do not do it, as they are fearful of losing students who are scared off by this type of training. I know there is always a risk of injury with Jiyu-Kumite, but compare that injury risk with other activities such as rugby, horse riding, hockey it is minimal. If you worry too much about avoiding injury you may soon find yourself doing non-contact karate such as Go-Kan-Ryu. And surely karate without contact is like football without the ball.

About the author

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