

Karate Terminology

1. Introduction

As karate is a Japanese art, techniques, stances, etc are referred to by their Japanese names. This is similar to the way in which musical terms are often referred to in Italian and dance terms in French. There is however a marked advantage to this. Becoming familiar with the Japanese terminology enables you to travel to a karate club anywhere in the world and train with the minimum of linguistic barriers.

The following is a list of the more commonly used Japanese terms and their English equivalents.

2. Tachi-waza/Stances

fudo-dachi: rooted stance
gyaku-hanme: half front facing to the opposite side
hanme: half front facing
heisoku-dachi: feet together
kiba-dachi: horse/straddle stance
kokutsu-dachi: back stance
neko-ashi-dachi: cat stance
hangetsu-dachi: half moon stance
sanchin-dachi: hourglass stance
shiko-dachi: squat/sumo stance
shizen-tai: natural stance
shomen: front facing
sochin-dachi: rooted stance
zenkutsu-dachi: front stance



Nishiyama Sensei demonstrating sanchin-dachi.
Nishiyama Sensei demonstrating sanchin-dachi.

3. Keri-waza/Kicks

ashi-barai: foot sweep
fumikomi-geri: stamping kick
hiza-geri: knee strike
mae-geri: front kick
mawashi-geri: roundhouse kick
tobi-geri: jumping kick
ura-mawashi-geri: reverse roundhouse kick



Y. Hanzaki scores with a mawashi-geri during the 1999 JKA National Championship
Y. Hanzaki scores with a mawashi-geri during the 1999 JKA National Championship

ushiro-geri: back kick
yoko-geri-keage: side snap kick
yoko-geri-kekomi: side thrust kick

4. Uke-waza/Blocks

age-uke: rising block
gedan-barai: lower block/sweep
nagashi uke: sweeping block
osae-uke: pressing block
otoshi uke: dropping block
shuto-uke: knife hand block
soto-uke: outside block
uchi-(ude-)uke: inside (forearm) block



Kase Sensei uses gedan-barai to defend against Shirai Sensai's kicking attack.
Kase Sensei uses gedan-barai to defend against Shirai Sensai's kicking attack.

5. Tsuki-waza/Punches

choku-zuki: straight punch
gyaku-zuki: reverse punch
kage-zuki: hook
kizami-zuki: jab

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A young Nishiyama Sensei punching the makiyara with gyaku-zuki (From his book 'Karate: The Art of Empty Hand Fighting'.)

A young Nishiyama Sensei punching the makiyara with gyaku-zuki (From his book "Karate: The Art of Empty Hand Fighting".)

mawashi-zuki: roundhouse punch
oi-zuki: stepping punch
ura-zuki: upper cut

6. Uchi-waza/Strikes

empi-uchi: elbow-strike
haito-uchi: ridge-hand strike
shuto-uchi: knife-hand strike
tetsui-uchi: hammer-fist strike
uraken uchi: backfist strike



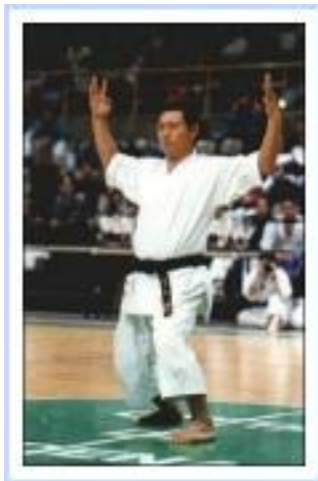
Yoshitaka Funakoshi striking the heavy bag with shuto-uchi.

Yoshitaka Funakoshi striking the heavy bag with shuto-uchi.

7. Counting

ichi: one
ni: two
san: three
shi: four
go: five
roku: six
shichi: seven
hachi: eight
ku: nine
ju: ten

8. Kata



Shirai Sensei demonstrates the kata Hangetsu.
Shirai Sensei demonstrates the kata Hangetsu.

Kihon kata: basic form
Heian shodan: peaceful mind number 1
Heian nidan: peaceful mind number 2
Heian sandan: peaceful mind number 3
Heian yondan: peaceful mind number 4
Heian godan: peaceful mind number 5
Tekki shodan: iron horse number 1
Tekki nidan: iron horse number 2
Tekki sandan: iron horse number 3
Bassai-dai: storming a castle - greater
Bassai-sho: storming a castle - lesser
Kanku dai: looking to the sky
Kanku sho: looking to the sky
Jion: named after a temple
Empi: swallow in flight
Hangetsu: half-moon
Jitte: 10 hands
Gankaku: crane on a rock
Nijushiho: 24 steps
Gojushiho-dai: 54 steps - greater
Gojushiho-sho: 54 steps - lesser
Sochin: rooted
Unsu: cloud hands
Chinte: strange hands
Wankan: king's crown
Meikyo: clear mirror
Ji'in: named after a Buddhist scholar

9. Other terms

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bunkai : application (of kata moves)
chudan: middle level
do-gi: training suit (for karate/judo/etc)
dojo: training hall
gedan: lower level
hajime: start
jodan: upper level
kamae: guard/posture
karate-gi: karate suit
karate-ka: karate practitioner
kata: prearranged forms
kiai: shout
kihon: basics
kumite: sparring
mawatte: turn
mokuso: meditation
naotte: relax/recover
otagai ni rei: bow to each other
seiza: formal kneeling position
sensei: instructor
sensei ni rei: bow to the instructor
shomen ni rei: bow to the front
yame: stop
yoi: ready