



Freezing an augmented middle block

The Freeze

The observant and philosophical student of karate soon learns that perfection of one's kata performance is an unending quest. Even Sensei has his own higher masters, and seeks to improve his own already amazing skill. That is part of the charm and attraction of karate for those who embrace the *process* instead of concentrating overmuch on some particular stage of advancement as a fixed goal.

That said, it is exciting to observe the kata performances of black belt competitors at major tournaments because doing so can yield insights into the levels which hopefully our own performance will someday achieve. With the valuable image of their masterful performances in our minds, we can dimly begin to visualize performing that way ourselves; and this is essential because it is almost impossible to do something that you have been unable to visualize yourself doing beforehand. One of the aspects which really stands out in the technique of advanced kata practitioners is their mastery of what might be called "The Freeze."

As background to an understanding of The Freeze it is useful to understand the stages involved in learning a physical performance skill (such as fighting with a sword, hitting a baseball with a bat, or kicking a soccer ball). It has been said that precision comes first, then speed, and then finally power. We first learn to walk our way through a kata, and after significant practice we can get through it with some speed. Finally we develop the ability to perform it with real power while maintaining speed, precision, and ever-increasing accuracy.*

In kata one of the ultimate demonstrations of power in combination with speed and precision is the ability to “freeze” a move. This should occur in the split second following the execution of a technique, especially where a slight pause is called for to signify that you have eliminated a particular attacker in the sequence. The strike comes quickly down (or out or whatever) and *stops dead* without any apparent deceleration. *All* parts of the body freeze simultaneously. There is no wavering, or bouncing, and no minute corrections or adjustments to the position of hands, feet and body. Only power and practice can stop a strong movement *instantly*, as if someone had pushed the “pause” button on a video. The fact that tiny adjustments are not made following the stop serves to demonstrate that you have come down in the precisely accurate position already, not a millimeter off-line. The suddenness of the freeze denotes power and control, lending a superhuman appearance to the performance, a beautiful thing to see when done well.

A good freeze can be developed, but only with *conscious* effort, because it is not one of those things that occurs naturally in human movement. It requires the building of appropriate muscles and neurological control, combined with a very tight mental focus. Practicing in front of a mirror is an excellent approach. A person cannot always see directly how a technique looks, but must learn to tell *by feel* if it’s coming down in the right spot, freezing perfectly and not wiggling or wavering in the slightest. The mirror gives a valuable outside view as an extra feedback mechanism. Having perfected a movement in the mirror, you can then associate the correct kinesthetic sensation with it, and later operate on that feeling alone, in the confidence that it will look right to the judges.

Observing the way top competitors execute their freezes is inspiring, and shows us where we are going in the development of our own kata skill. The National Championships are a prime opportunity to do so. Try not to run off as soon as your own division is finished, but stay around and study the performances of the higher ranks, especially the black belts on Sunday. Recording performances on video will allow later study. The experience will be worth it.

* “Precision” and “accuracy” are not synonymous. We can place a technique precisely where we want it, but if that’s the wrong spot we lack accuracy nevertheless.

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