

Complementary Opposites in Isshinryu

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It has been said that the art of Isshin-ryu karate is a dichotomy of contrasts. The goal, or challenge if you will, for each student lies in learning to balance these contrasts. Isshin-ryu karate is a living art that requires each participant to learn to balance both mind and body. It is very unlikely that any other activity that one may do develops this type of mental and physical harmony in quite the same way. The term, “shingi ittai” is a Japanese phrase that literally means, “mind and body are one”. This concept is important in all things, but especially in a self-defense situation where the wrong move could have disastrous consequences.

The Hard and the Soft

“A manner of drinking and spitting is either hard or soft.” Anyone ever heard that one before? Hard movements are those that require a sharp, hard contraction of the muscles. This is what we mean when we say a person is “muscling” a technique. Great effort is required to accomplish the goal. In contrast, soft movements require little or no muscle tension and generally rely on technique, or “finesse” to be successful. In the practice of kata, some movements should be done fast and powerfully while others should be done slower and softer.

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Sometimes the very same movements should be performed both ways. For instance a block can be done slowly, working on form and feeling each muscle that is involved. This gives the student a greater awareness of their own body, therefore greater control of it. Then, after several repetitions, the same block is performed in a sharp, strong manner, concentrating on great power. In self-defense, hard movements exact soft movements. This corresponds to the concept of “going with the attack”. This has the tendency to off-balance an opponent as well as provide for a greater release of energy (ki) through the technique itself. The founder of judo, Dr. Jigoro Kano had this idea down pat. It was said that to wrestle with Dr. Kano was like wrestling with an empty jacket.

The Slow and the Fast

“The time to strike is when the opportunity presents itself.” Just as hard and soft movements apply to karate so does the concept of slow and fast. In training, an instructor will have their students perform techniques slowly, with a little muscle tension, to work on learning good form. Then after many repetitions, as sure as the sun comes up, the instructor will say “All right, a little faster this time! O.K., now... faster!” This slow/fast method in training gives each student a good sense of body control which, when coupled with other training methods of training, leads to an understanding of timing. In a life-threatening situation, knowing when to move fast and when to go slow is all-important. For example, if the “bad guy” has a knife, you might want to move very slowly in an attempt to not startle him into using it. But if he does decide to use it, your response must be immediate and your techniques must be done with great speed.

Weakness and Strength.

In weakness there lies great strength. This sounds almost biblical, doesn't it? That's because it is. God has provided this truth for us. The fact is, in karate both strength and weakness are highly valued commodities. Sometimes we must become weak, or “take the power out of a technique”, to actually become stronger. A technique without power or strength is a relaxed technique, and this principle is the single-most consideration in developing both ki and speed. The faster we go, the harder we hit. This combined with focus of technique (kime), results in devastating energy transfer. Energy does not flow freely through a tense body. The muscles need to stay loose until the moment of impact (or sometimes, just slightly before); with a brief contracting of the muscles, and then back to the relaxed state. It is like splashing - as opposed to throwing - water on someone from a cup. If you want to increase speed and power, concentrate on the recoil of a technique rather than the delivery. The “come-back” is more important than the “go-out”!

Calmness and Intensity.

The game of chess is a game of strategy that requires concentration and planning. If one does not remain calm and plan several moves ahead, the game will quickly be lost. Karate is the same. We refer to a state of alert calmness as zanshin, or “remaining mind.” Isshin literally means “one mind” or as we sometimes say, “one heart.” Heart and mind in this context refer to the same thing. Zanshin is calmness -

isshin is intensity. Zanshin may be likened to the ocean; broad, slowly rolling and calm, but with a sense of great underlying power. Isshin, on the other hand, is like a tidal wave or a great tsunami, crashing in and destroying everything in its path. Zanshin allows us to perceive an attack and avoid or block it. Isshin allows us to mount a strong, overwhelming counter attack if necessary. Then once the engagement is over, we return again to a state of zanshin. (A great analogy of this idea is of a cat before and after a fight. Have you ever noticed how a cat slowly and cautiously walks around another cat before a fight? Then when they finally clash, it is a furious encounter! Afterwards, once they disengage, they move slowly and cautiously again, until distance is gained and they are sure the threat is over. What I am talking about here is basically the same thing.) Alert calmness, then intensity, and finally back to alert calmness. These two ideas encompass the principles of all the others that we have discussed, and without a doubt is the most important. It is this precise blending of opposites that makes Isshin-ryu karate the balanced art that it is.