

Stance – “*Dachi*”



A good stance is critical in developing the strong foundation required of Shotokan karate-do. Stances provide stability while executing techniques, and allow you to position yourself to deliver those techniques. They are practiced in place, moving forward and backward and finally moving in various directions, combining different stances in different situations.

Mastering the fine points of stances associated with Shotokan Karate-do, opens the doors to learning proper punching technique, power transfer, blocking, weight distribution, centering and upper and lower body connection. Stances provide the framework required for balanced footwork and stepping speed, resulting in quick movement to the target. They also provide the foundation to bring your body to quick stop after the delivery of a technique while powerfully moving your centre towards the target.

Shotokan stances, especially for the beginner, are practiced deep in order to create a low centre of gravity, as well as to strengthen and make supple the legs and hips. Low stances may seem uncomfortable, but they produce maximum stability and develop strong legs and hips. When landing in a poor stance, one will create a level of instability which prevents you from making an effective defensive or offensive movement.

Basic Principles for Strong Foundation / Stance

Posture

Posture plays a key role in developing a strong stance. When advancing forward, backward or side to side, the torso must be kept erect and unmoving. The centre of gravity should be positioned where your vertical alignment passes through the hips, stomach, and chest.

Keep the back erect and vertical with your chin up and head in an upright position in all of your stances and movements. Hips should remain level, whether static or moving from stance to stance. This natural posture will result in better mobility, more effective breathing, less energy consumption and a stronger foundation (stance).

Inside and Outside Tension

There are two categories of stances, inside tension and outside tension. Inside tension stances are categorized by stances in which the knees are brought in toward each other, and outside tension stances have the knees pushed away from each other. Regardless of the type of stance, knees and toes should point in the same direction, with knees and ankles locked in place.

Creating tension in our stances helps to provide stability when executing and finishing a technique, especially when moving our centre of gravity rapidly, and executing a lunging type of technique such as oi-zuki. Without tension in our stances, balance and control will be compromised when powerfully throwing our centre of gravity in a particular direction.

The shape of the stance and the tension in the muscles should also provide stability to withstand impact when striking or being struck. Also, inside and outside tension in our stances help to provide the much needed connection between the upper and lower body. Dropping your centre of gravity will lower your hips and help to increase the tension in our stances.

Centre of Gravity

The centre of gravity for each stance must be kept low, and in a position that allows our hips to be level and our torso vertical. We want to move from our centre, and should strive to move our body around using our core, or seika tanden. How we make use of our centre of gravity in a given stance is very important in how you control your movement, as well as your opponent's.

Learning to manipulate and be in control of our centre of gravity, as well as connecting our technique to the ground, are important factors when transitioning between stances. To be firmly planted in an instant while transitioning between stances takes a full understanding of balance, coordination of the upper and lower body, as well as proper weight distribution.

Weight Distribution

Centre of gravity and weight distribution go hand in hand when developing a strong foundation, or stance. Also, transference of weight becomes important in creating smooth and efficient movements from stance to stance. The centre of gravity will be correctly positioned only if the weight distribution is correct. For instance, moving forward or backward into zenkutsu dachi (front stance); should the karate practitioner overstep and move their centre too far forward or back in their stance, the weight distribution will be incorrect, and will result in a poor stance, weak technique and poor foundation and balance.

With incorrect weight distribution, transition between stances will be extremely difficult and slow. Sudden changes in direction will be more efficient if weight distribution is correct, the centre of gravity is low and if we move through our centre.

Upper and Lower Body Connection

Upper and lower body connection is dependant on a number of items including strong posture, inside and outside tension, centre of gravity, weight distribution, as well as connection to the ground. A sound foundation (stance) created through solid connection to the ground will provide strong support for any technique; such as a punch, strike, block or even a kick. Although on one leg when kicking, keep the knee bent (low centre of gravity) and the supporting foot firmly and flat on the ground to provide strong support for the technique.

The upper body must work together with the lower body to maximize the efficiency of the technique. For instance, connecting a block to the ground while standing in a static position or moving back requires proper timing, planting the heel to the ground at the time the blocking arm makes contact with the target. Utilizing the rear leg and heel will add support to the technique.

By having the heel planted firmly on the ground, a solid connection is created between the floor and the target. Try to “grip” the floor, keeping the soles of the feet in full contact with the ground. Feeling solid contact with a target and the reaction of the rear leg/heel into the ground, along with the power of the rear leg thrust, brings everything together for a strong technique.

Referring to the well known law of physics, “for every action, there is a positive and equal reaction.” – For maximum power and effectiveness of a technique, ensure that the upper and lower body are connected through strong posture, inside or outside tension, centre of gravity and weight distribution as well as connection to the ground.

Stance Specific Mechanics

The following stances are encountered when practicing the Taikyoku and Heian Katas. These stances are the building blocks leading to more complicated and challenging stances at the intermediate to advanced levels. All of these stances should demonstrate good posture and strong connection to the ground. Drop the hips and keep the centre of gravity low to the ground.

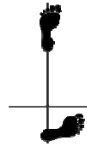
I have addressed these kata in the order that they are encountered as you learn the Taikyoku and Heian kata.

Zenkutsu dachi (forward stance)



Zenkutsu Dachi is the first stance encountered in our kata practice – Taikyoku Shodan, Taikyoku Nidan and Heian Shodan. It is the simplest stance for the beginner to learn, execute and master, mainly because it is a stance which is most natural for the human body, whose legs prefer to move forward and backward, rather than sideways. This stance is primarily used for advancing, retreating, and is a strong position for executing techniques to the front.

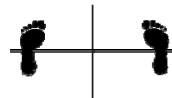
- ✓ **outside tension** stance with the hips open at about a 45 degree angle.
- ✓ **centre of gravity** should be approximately one third back of the lead foot and two thirds forward of the rear foot. The feet should be hip wide and pointed toward the front, with the centre of gravity centred between the feet.
- ✓ **weight distribution** approximately 60% on the lead leg and 40% on the rear leg. The front knee is bent such that the knee is positioned over the ball of the foot, and the rear leg should be straight. Stance length is approximately two shoulder widths.

Kokutsu dachi (back stance)

Kokutsu Dachi is first encountered in our kata practice when learning Heian Shodan. In my experience, keeping the weight back while advancing is one of the more difficult concepts for a beginner to master. The karate-ka must understand the concept of transitioning weight through their centre, rather than thinking of stepping forward. When first teaching a student this stance, we move backward rather than forward, to better demonstrate the proper weight distribution.

In this stance the karate-ka can efficiently move either forward or back, as well as turn direction. This stance is very strong from the front, and is very useful in retreat and blocking frontal attacks. Also, if the stance is executed properly, the karate-ka should be able to execute a kick with the lead leg without having to shift their weight.

- ✓ **outside tension** stance with the hips open at almost a 90 degree angle. Focus however, should be forward.
- ✓ **centre of gravity** should be approximately two thirds back of the lead foot and one third forward of the rear foot. Heels should be in line to the front, with the lead foot pointing to the front, and the rear leg pointing out at 90 degrees.
- ✓ **weight distribution** approximately 30% on the lead leg and 70% on the rear leg. The front knee is slightly bent for stabilization and freedom of movement to the front. The rear leg supports the weight with the knee positioned over the ball of the foot. Stance length is approximately two shoulder widths....same length as zenkutsu dachi.

Kiba dachi (horse riding stance)

Kiba Dachi is first encountered in our kata practice when learning Heian Sandan. This is where the concept of outside tension really hits home when executing the last two techniques in the kata. When powerfully shifting weight and centre of gravity left and right for the swinging punch and elbow strike “hidari ken tsuki-age, migi empi ushiro ate”, one must ensure that outside tension is maintained, and the hips are kept low so as not to break form or stance.

Kiba dachi is essential for the development of good posture and for training the legs and hips. It is most effective for defending or attacking targets from the left or right.

- ✓ **outside tension** stance with the hips low and the back straight. The torso faces forward.
- ✓ **centre of gravity** should be centred in the stance. Heels should be in line perpendicular to the front, with the knees approximately over the balls of the feet.
- ✓ **weight distribution:** 50/50. Stance length should be approximately 2 shoulder lengths; again, approximately the same length as zenkutsu dachi and kokutsu dachi.

Kosa dachi (cross legged stance)

Kosa Dachi is first encountered in our kata practice when learning Heian Yondan. When executing mai-geri (front kick) / tate uraken uchi jodan (back fist strike) in the kata, it is important to bring the left shin behind the right calf to make strong kosa dachi and maintain strong balance. Use dropping power and keep the hips low.

Kosa dachi is typically used when landing after a jump or when shifting (yoriashi) powerfully into the target. Ensure that all the weight is placed on the supporting foot when landing, to maintain balance. Kosa dachi uses forward momentum, so is often used for attack or defence to the front.

We often use Kosa dachi for practice when moving laterally into our side kicks....yoko ke-komi and yoko ke-age. Moving from kiba dachi (outside tension), and transitioning through kosa dachi (inside tension), is a good method of demonstrating and teaching the student proper contraction and expansion to move from stance to stance.

- ✓ **inside tension** stance with the hips low and the back straight. The hips and torso face slightly off centre with focus forward.
- ✓ **centre of gravity** should be centred over the supporting lead leg, with the rear shin connected to the lead calf to help provide balance.
- ✓ **weight distribution** is approximately 90% on the lead supporting leg, and 10% on the rear stabilizing leg.

Sagi-ashi dachi or Tsuru ashi dachi (heron or crane leg stance)

Sagi-ashi dachi is first encountered in our kata practice when learning Heian Nidan. This is the stance on one leg, where the other leg is raised and bent so that its foot touches the back or side of the knee of the supporting leg, in preparation for a rising side kick (yoko ke-age).

The supporting leg must be bent to offer the lowest centre of gravity as possible, and posture must be vertical to ensure proper balance. The hips must be level and body contraction (or tension), must be inward to create sound connection between the upper and lower body.

- ✓ **inside tension** stance with the supporting knee bent, hips low and the back straight. The hips and torso face approximately 45 degrees from the line of target. Focus is forward.
- ✓ **centre of gravity** should be centred over the supporting leg, with strong connection in the legs and hips. Keep the supporting leg bent and the hips low.
- ✓ **weight distribution** is 100% on the supporting leg.

Renoji dachi (L stance)

Renoji dachi is first encountered in our kata practice when learning Heian Godan. It is one of many stances that are executed in "shizen-tai" (natural position). The body and knees must be relaxed, but in a state of readiness (zanshin) to be able to move quickly in defence or attack.

- ✓ **outside tension** stance (relaxed / zanshin). The front foot points directly forward, and the rear foot is turned out about 60 degrees out, heels in line.
- ✓ **centre of gravity** is higher (shizen-tai) and is just in front of the rear foot, by about 1/3 of the stance length.
- ✓ **weight distribution** is about 70% on the rear leg, and 30% on the front leg. Stance is about one shoulder width long.

**Stances Represent the Foundation for our Techniques**

Like the foundation of a house, our stances must be strong, rigid and plumb to support all of our karate techniques - punching, blocking, striking and kicking. Our centre of gravity and hips should remain low. Hips should remain level, and torso vertical when transitioning from stance to stance, in order to maintain balance and body control.

The stances described herein, are all those encountered in the Heian Kata. They include outside and inside tension stances, as well as natural stances.....or postures (shizen-tai). The Heian kata, should be practiced diligently, while working particularly hard on the stances. When mastered, a strong foundation will be developed for more challenging stances ahead.

As required when constructing a house, when developing strong technique, one must work from the bottom up, starting with their foundation.....or stance.

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