

## The Block-Control-Strike Principle

If you are attacked outside the *dojo*, the assailant is not respectful enough to throw single attacks and wait between these for us to compose ourselves, they are not polite enough to give us fair warning that they are going to try to attack us and they certainly don't have the decency to bow and take their shoes and socks off first! Real world chaotic violence is messy, unpredictable, very changeable and comes with no warning. So how do we prepare ourselves for this and give ourselves the best chance to come out of any such encounter relatively unscathed? This article is intended to give an insight into a very common principle throughout *Karate*, block–control–strike, that can be used in such situations along with examples of where this is shown in different *Kata*.

The principle I want to discuss comes in three stages. In the first stage, when attacked, we need to be able to respond very quickly in order to block the initial attack. To maximise the probability of this we should look to utilise the human body's natural flinch reactions. The flinch reaction is defined as an involuntary physiological response to an unexpected attack that is highly consistent and functions as an effective protective mechanism. As such this non-cognitive process is substantially quicker than one where we have to recognise the attack, think about strategy and response, instruct the body to respond, and all before the attack connects. In the second stage, we need to understand that an assailant will not leave a blocked hand where it is and will seek to recover it and re-employ this in the conflict as soon as possible. So, the second stage is to employ an element of control to the attacking limb, or the attacker in general, in order to minimise their ability to inflict damage on you. The final stage is then to strike the assailant in such a way as to inflict enough damage to allow you to escape safely. Let us not be under any illusion that these types of conflict have rules or are fair in any way and as such we need to do whatever is necessary to ensure our own safety. However, we also need to be very aware of the law and be clear that in any altercation our sole concern is that of getting away safely. These three stages combine to form what I call the block-control-strike (BCS) principle.

Timing in the BCS principle is very important. When starting out in *Karate*, block – counter combinations are typically taught as two techniques strung together, each finishing with *kime*. As we develop, we are encouraged to shorten the time between completing the block and the counter attack. This is an important point as we know the attacker will not leave the attacking limb where it is, or cease the attack, and therefore, we need to counter as soon as possible in order to gain an element of control. In a previous article I explored the possibility that the actual block in most Shotokan *kihon* 'blocks' is the preparation and does not need *kime* thereby making the transition into an attack quicker. This can be seen as we move into more advanced *kumite* training. So, we know that we need to be able to counter the assailant as quickly as possible after blocking the attack and so why should we add in the control element, would this not slow things down? Well, if our combination was employed in sequential fashion then yes, adding this extra step would slow things down and would mean the counter attack was delayed. However, even in this situation, the benefits of controlling the attacker outweighs the slight delay to the counter attack. In reality, however, we would never implement the control step in a sequential fashion with the counter following, we would employ both sides of the body at the same time and do these two steps simultaneously. Thus, in the BCS principle, the blocking hand is the one that is primarily

used for the counter attack with the opposite hand (*hikite*) providing an element of control. *Hikite* literally means to draw or pull the hand and conceivably the original meaning of this could be to provide an element of control on the assailant whilst withdrawing.

Remember control can be enduring after the counter attack has concluded. The method of control can be to hinder any attack opportunities or to restrain. If we think about restraint or grabbing of the assailant or attacking limb, then this gives us more options after we have applied the BCS principle. How well we execute this principle may mean that the assailant is not able to continue and we can escape, or conversely, it may not have been effective and we may need further strategies. If we need to continue in the exchange, having hold of your assailant gives you a further advantage.

So, now we have thought about the upper body in the BCS principle, what role does the lower body play? In any unprovoked and unscripted attack, distance plays a key role in which techniques would be the most effective at any given time. However, distance in these types of confrontation usually changes very quickly and you have to be able to rapidly assess these and adjust your distance accordingly. Practicing a range of techniques allows us to apply this principle in many different situations and *kata* shows us many different ways to apply this ranging from where the assailant attacks at close range and stays close, to where the assailant throws a long-range attack and keeps their body far away. Note, there is not only a binary choice of far away or close but rather an infinite range of possibilities in between. Whilst in *kata* we usually practice these scenarios at the extremes, we need to have the ability to flex the principle along the whole of the spectrum whilst not reducing its efficiency. To do this we need to engage the lower body's transition of body weight, combined with effective use of body rotation and timing, all to ensure the optimum distance from the assailant. Now, as humans, we are able to understand where various bits of our body are in relation to the core – one would hope! After all, we have lived with our body all our lives and actually know it quite well. We innately know how “long” our arms and legs are and therefore know just how far we have to step to allow us to be in the optimal position. That's great if our assailant would be kind enough to stand still for a while, however, as we have already discussed, these confrontations are highly changeable and chaotic so our understanding of distance can only be a snapshot in time. By the time we execute the movement, that distance could have changed. So, what do we do when all of our well-planned understanding of distance gets ruined by our assailant's uncooperative chaotic movement? Well, we employ another in-built ability humans have - feedback. I was reminded in a recent seminar by Scott Langley that *kime* can be created at any point with the correct application of the body, however, this should always be in response to tactile feedback so when you make contact with your target (irrespective of where you are along the trajectory of the intended strike), the tactile feedback sets off a chain of events that culminate in a strong and effective strike. Having said this, we need to use both the distance and feedback together as each one on its own may not be sufficient to make an efficient strike. Also, note that the transfer of body weight towards the attacker can also be used to make the attack “heavy” by using good body dynamics.

So far, we have talked about the BCS principle being a reaction to an attack. Often, even for the people who are trained Martial Artists, such an unprovoked attack cannot be “seen” in time and so the defence could be only partial making it more difficult to gain the control

over ourselves that we need to prevail. So, how do we increase our chances of leaving an altercation with minimal trauma? As Peter Consterdine has talked about in many articles and books, being aware of your situation and being able to pre-emptively control the situation (within the bounds of the law) can be a very powerful ally. The 'block' of BCS principle could be used to pre-emptively control the opponent's limbs or clear them out of the way in order to allow us to then control them and strike before the assailant can make the attack. If we believe we are in imminent danger, then we can employ reasonable force, including pre-emption, to ensure we are safe. For example, when being grabbed from the front, the block part of the BCS principle could be used to break or disrupt the grip with the control part completing this disengagement or disruption to such a point that the person grabbing you is taken off balance allowing you to strike in such a way as to allow you to safely escape.

OK, so having talked about the principles of block – control – strike, what does kata tell us about the BCS principle? Recently, after listening to Iain Abernethy, I was reminded that *kata* is a formalisation of a fighting system (pre-dating Karate styles) in order to allow us to remember and teach its principles and that different kata come from different fighting systems around the world. Therefore, if there are common themes of this principle in multiple *kata* it only serves to reinforce the efficiency of the principle. When you start to look for examples of the BCS principle in kata you will be amazed where you see it employed. For me, applying the BCS principle to some of the more complex moves in kata has helped me understand potentially effective *bunkai* and *oyo*. *Kata* shows us examples of both pre-emption as well as reaction.

Let's start looking at two ends of the spectrum, one where the attack is close and the assailant remains at close range and the other where the assailant attacks at a distance. Whilst this doesn't change the BCS principle it does change the distancing at which the components are used. The block aspect of this principle should always be done at close quarters as it is inefficient to try block an attack that would not connect. The attack could be launched whilst the assailant is very close and uses a short-range punching technique, or it could be at full extension. However, either way, the block will be executed close to the body. The control and strike aspects now vary depending on distance. Firstly, looking at the close attack, after the block, it is more difficult for the assailant to get the attacking limb away as they are fully committed at this short range. The control aspect can now be employed with techniques starting close to the body, for example the hip preparation for the *uchi uke* part of *kosa uke*. While the control of the assailant's arm is put in place, the blocking hand can then strike, again at close range, and still be effective. Secondly, let's explore an attack at full extension. Again, the block would be employed only if the attack would connect, however, the control and strike aspects are different due to the different distancing. As the attacking limb can be easily taken away after the attack, the controlling hand should start further away in order to have the ability to intercept and control the attacking limb either at a distance or closer. For example, the forward hand during the *manji uke* preparation starts far away from the body and covers a lot of distance to pull back (and control the attacking limb) into *jodan uchi uke*. At the same time, the strike extends away from the body to catch the assailant at a distance, using a step if needed to make the attack effective. Now, there is a whole spectrum of distancing between a very close quarter attack and one at full range, and the BCS principle can be used across this full spectrum. For

example, moving from *kosa uke* to *manji uke* as the distance of the attack changes, shows that these two blocks can be essentially thought of as the same, just employed at different ends of the distance spectrum.

Having talked about *kosa uke* and *manji uke* as examples of the BCS principle, it is interesting to note how many different kata show these techniques, especially remembering that these have likely come from graphically diverse fighting systems. There are other great examples of the BCS principle, for example the start of *Sochin* or the move at the end of *Nijushiho* and towards the end of *Unsu*.

For years the technique of *ekubi makiotoshi uke* and *teisho awase zuki* (curled wrist falling block & palm heel combined punch), in *Unsu* and *Nijushiho*, confused me regarding its application and therefore its execution. Applying the BCS principle to this move made a lot of sense to me and allowed me to see how this would work in reality. The block would be as I have described before, the parry for a head punch, while the control is applied using the opposite hand circling round in an arc and catching the attacking limb with a hooked wrist and pushing this downwards. At the same time the blocking hand prepares to strike and pushes forward to strike with *taisho*, the controlled attacking limb is thrust into the assailant's groin.

Probably the most common application of the BCS principle can be seen in *shuto uke* which appears in many *kata*. Here, the blocking hand is the parry of the head punch as we prepare for *shuto uke*, the opposite hand goes towards the assailant to allow you the ability to find the attacking limb and as this hand withdraws it will remain in contact and grab the assailant. As we apply this control to the assailant, the blocking hand then uses a large portion of the forearm to guarantee a strike on the assailant's neck and collar bone. Stepping is then used to move to the correct distance to make your strike effective.

In summary, we have discussed a principle of blocking an attack (reactive) or clearing the pathway (proactive), controlling the limb to ensure the assailant is off balance or hindered and then capitalising on this to strike in order to allow you the time to safely escape. We have talked about examples of the principle that can be applied across a whole spectrum of different distances and is shown in the two extremes in *kata* (*kosa uke* and *manji uke*). Also, we have discussed very common techniques in Shotokan (*shuto uke*) that are classically taught as a block that could actually be employed as a block, control and strike. Finally, we have been able to apply the BCS principle to some of the more difficult to understand parts of *kata*. Irrespective of how this principle is applied, its logic is flawless and with training continues to build on one of humanities best survival instincts, the flinch reaction! The BCS principle allows us to better understand some of the lessons buried in *kata* and to have an efficient and practical set of tools for self-defence.