

Gedan Barai – A Different Perspective

Let's go back to when we started Karate and our instructor showed us how to do one of the most common blocks in Shotokan – *gedan barai*. In my opinion, this block is the one which is given the least consideration and is the one that is most misunderstood. However, I propose that this is potentially a highly efficient, practical technique to deal with chaotic real-life violence and one of the best tools in our Karate arsenal. Wow, that's a big claim, so let me walk you through my thought process and you can make up your own mind.

For *gedan barai* the blocking hand is taken to the side of the head to prepare for a downward action moving an attacking limb out of the way (either a kick or a *chudan* punch we are told) with a body rotation at the end to add power. This is great for the beginner to start to understand how to use the body correctly to create power and how good preparation allows the body to be in the correct position to capitalise on good body mechanics. This explanation of the basic block brings to mind a few questions though. Why would you move the blocking arm away from the attack first, would this not create longer for the attack to contact? For the block to be effective, wouldn't the block have to be away from the body meaning that the blocker would have to be ready for the attack? Why would we train to work against our natural flinch reaction to an attack rather than working to utilise it?

So, how do I propose that a different perspective will turn this humble block into a technique that can be easily employed by all practitioners, irrespective of skillset, to deal with real life violence. In this scenario I am working on the principle that the most common attack is a punch to the head. The first thing is to understand that there is a very strong natural flinch reaction that is designed to protect us. This can be employed by everyone and with training can be enhanced. The flinch reaction can be formalised into a parry block away from the head and will stay close to the head giving the blocker time to intercept the attack from either further away or closer to the head. Thus, this type of flinch block is usually quicker than a structured block and will have a better chance of success against an attack that is unanticipated. The second point is that now the blocking hand is primed ready to attack using the full body rotation to create power. The hand, once it has blocked and protected the head then continues through the normal trajectory, however, rather than being a block it is a strike to the assailant all done in one fluid movement.

Let's dig a little deeper into this. The *gedan barai* is taught as a block culminating in *kime* and power at the end of the technique. Do we need this power in order to be able to block effectively? I would say that it is not a pre-requisite and that timing and good technique can be more effective. We should strive not to meet force with force, as this is not good for long term health, but to be more cerebral with our application of Karate. To block a punch to the head an effective strategy is to redirect that attack just enough to take it off its impact course and therefore miss the head (the flinch block I referred to earlier). In reality, moving the attack off course by only a few inches as it travels towards you will effectively stop it hitting you. The earlier you catch the attack and start the redirection the easier it is, however, essentially it is still only moving the attack a short distance irrespective of when you intercept it and therefore needs little strength or *kime*. This can also be made more effective by a subtle body shift or *tai sabaki*. This flinch reaction is a survival instinct and as

such does not require us to see the stimulus, process it, work out a strategy and finally instruct the body to react (this can be quite slow), its already pre-programmed into our DNA and is very quick. We should capitalise on these reactions in our Karate. So, I am saying that we do not need power and *kime* to make an effective block and this idea works with the principle of using the preparation part of *gedan barai* as the block without compromising the integrity of the technique. This means that the block will protect and then seamlessly move into the attack with the only point of *kime* being as the strike contacts the assailant. To help with power generation for the strike, the block creates compression in the upper half of the body and can store power in the muscles ready to be released in the strike.



Picture 1 & 2 ; Preparation for *gedan barai* as a *negashi uke* block and the block as a *gedan* strike with the *hikite* hand providing an element of control over the attacking arm

I have discussed how a single arm can be effectively used to block and attack in one fluid movement capitalising on our body's natural defence mechanisms. However, in a chaotic violent confrontation, we should be using all the tools at our disposal to ensure we get, and maintain, the advantage. So, we have the other hand, classically referred to as the *hikite* hand. There have been years of energetic debate on the use of *hikite* and I do not intend to add to that arena, however, what I want to talk about are two potential uses for the *hikite* hand in the *gedan barai* scenario. The first would be to use the *hikite* hand as a strike to the assailant at the same time as you block the attach. This is not a natural thing to do and would require training, however, it would have a positive effect of distracting the assailant whilst the more powerful strike was delivered from the blocking hand. This makes use of the "double tap" principle for effective striking. The second option would be that whilst blocking, the *hikite* hand grabbed the assailant and pulled them onto the strike creating a push / pull action. Again, this option would need training, however, it would not only increase the effectiveness of the strike but it would also disrupt the posture of the assailant.

We can see *gedan barai* in many aspects of more advanced Karate if we look for it. Moving on to when we are taught *jiyu kumite*, one of the blocks that is used a lot is that of parrying the punch to the head. Whilst this is used in several different ways with different body movements, at its core it is effectively the preparation for *gedan barai*. So, from the very

first lesson through to advanced kumite, the principles instilled by *gedan barai* run through the whole of our art. A more advanced kumite drill is where you attack the opponent with *gyaku tzuki* whilst simultaneously parrying an attack to the head. Whilst this drill has the primary purpose of attack whilst simultaneously protecting the head, again we can see the preparation position for the *gedan barai* at play here.



Picture 3: Advanced kumite driving in with *gyaku tzuki* while simultaneously parrying a *jodan* attack

What we have explored so far focuses on the upper body and its application to a chaotic violent situation. What I mean by this is that we are looking at real world scenarios where we do not know that the attack is coming or which direction it is coming from. This is why it is so important to build on our natural defence reactions rather than a set of moves that would take a skilled practitioner years to master. This way we make karate accessible and highly practical to more people and not just the elite.

What about stances and lower body movement? Most of our *kihon* or *kata* involving *gedan barai* practice it stepping forward or to the side in *zenkutsu dachi*. Is this practical and the right thing to do? If this were applied to the traditional teachings of using *gedan barai* as a block then I would say this does not make much sense. Yes, you could be using your weight to drive into an opponent's attack and smother it meeting force with force, but again I would suggest this would only work well for highly trained practitioners. So, for me, the idea of moving towards an attack to block is counter intuitive. However, working on the perspective I have described, the flinch reaction block can be performed on the spot, either for a frontal attack or by rotating to block an attack from the side. We then have the opportunity to assess how close the assailant is and use a step forward to deliver the strike. How much we step forwards is completely dependent on the situation. This has the benefits that as the strike lands it will be timed with the body movement and therefore increase the effective mass of the strike (more power) and it will allow you to drop your body lower giving better access to your assailant's vulnerable strike areas. If you look at *Kata*, *gedan barai* is mainly performed either to the side or straight forward and trying to understand effective *bunkai* or *oyo* for these it is difficult to see in terms of the technique being a downward block. However, change perspective to see *gedan barai* as a quick

redirecting block quickly followed by a strike (with potential double tap strike or posture disrupting grab added), then the application of techniques or the understanding of principles in *Kata* start to make a lot more sense.

As a single technique there is a lot to understand about what *gedan barai* could be used for and how we can efficiently make use of the movement. Not all these things have to be done at the same time but they should always be there in your muscle memory so that the body can use whatever would prove most effective in a confrontation. As we all know, muscle memory isn't something we can pick up from the computer shop, it requires dedication, repetition and hard training.

Gedan barai is just one of our Shotokan blocks. Can this similar principle be applied to other blocks? I believe it can, for example in Soto Uke, the preparation is very similar to *jodan nagashi uke* followed by a strike to the jaw. I will not go through my thoughts on all other blocks as this article is only intended to get you thinking about different perspectives to the basic techniques we have been taught and to question how they would best be applied.

Does it stop there, do we use this block - strike technique in isolation or is there more we can do with it? I believe there are other things that can be scaffolded onto this principle to make it more effective and likely to succeed if the given situation asks for it. The additional principle I want to explore here is collection and control of the attacking limb after it has been blocked initially. I talked about the fact that an effective block does not need to be strong or applied with *kime* in order to make it effective, however, this just redirects the assailant's attack leaving it open to being reused to attack again. In order to control this, we have the option of using the opposite hand (what I have referred to as the *hikite* hand earlier) to collect the attacking limb immediately after the block. What I mean by collection is the act of connecting with the attacking limb so that you will be able to follow it using the principles of proprioception and then manoeuvre or grab to apply control. This collection must be done quickly to ensure the assailant does not have time to re-use the attacking limb. Once the other hand has collected the attack it effectively moves the assailant's attacking limb to a position that renders it useless for further attack or grabs and secures it thus controlling this limb. This can be seen in many *kata*. *Kosa uke*, first seen in *Heian Sandan*, shows us an example of this. Whilst one hand goes to the head to block the *jodan* punch the other prepares by the hip. When the punch is blocked, the hand by the hip comes up to collect the attacking hand whilst the blocking hand simultaneously attacks the assailant. So here you have the classic block – control - strike cycle; I will leave this for another day. Another example of this block – control - strike cycle is Manji Uke using larger body rotation to make it applicable to different situations. Again, it is a principle that can be applied to many situations with *Kata* demonstrating several examples of the same principle.

Looking at the principles I have discussed allows a myriad of possibilities to be exploited depending on the situational needs during a confrontation. Whilst the ones that enhance basic human survival instincts are quick to learn and intuitive to use, the more complex (and potentially more effective) techniques require repetition and hard training to ensure they get ingrained in our muscle memory. However, once we have all these options trained into our very DNA, should the situation ever arise where we need these, the body will take over

and use the most appropriate technique that we have drilled hour after hour for year after year.

This is my perspective on *gedan barai* and I want to stress that I do not believe this is the only way it can be used and that all other ways have no value. I am simply giving my viewpoint on a different perspective that I believe is more natural, easier to train to any practitioner, not just the elite *Karateka*, and has real world value if you should ever need to use your martial arts knowledge. I believe Karate is not a definitive set of instructions of how to do things but a set of principles that each individual will learn to apply in a way that works for them, thus creating their own Karate. For me, this article is about a set of training principles to enhance the body's natural reactions and augment them to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the techniques in real world scenarios.

To summarise, the one block in *Shotokan* that I believe is the most overlooked I believe has the most real-world value for every level of practitioner. Considering we probably do *gedan barai* in *Shotokan* more than any other block, to understand this perspective on it and the principles it brings to life, should make us elevate the humble *gedan barai* to a position of reverence. Understanding that it underpins many of the more complex moves in Karate as well means that understanding and mastering *gedan barai* should be the constant goal of *Karateka* as a foundation for life long efficient, strong and effective Karate.