

My Karate Journey, Part 23 -- The Magic of Asai!

My short time training under Asai Sensei was an incredible eye-opener, and has had an overwhelming effect on my teaching at HSK. I was SUPER fortunate to have been at KAH when I was ... in college, with no job or family commitments or responsibilities, and loads of free time to train!! Hence, I spent much of my spare time in the dojo watching him like an eagle and training whenever he taught.

Unfortunately, Sensei was NOT a very good communicator. He spoke very little English, much of it NOT understood by his students. A LOT of what he said was lost by those who tried to translate for him. Thus, much of what he wanted to convey was never completely shared.

Did I mention that he was a wizard? His speed, snap, flexibility, and movement were extraordinary!!! He seemed to float across the floor as he moved, and was able to get from point A to point B in a flash! I TRULY BELIEVE THAT HIS TECHNIQUES WERE MUCH TOO ADVANCED FOR MOST OF HIS STUDENTS!!! Much of what he taught was WAY over our heads!

Fortunately, I was with him long enough to realize that there were FOUR important levels of movement to strive for, each one more difficult than the previous. Before Asai, I had focused on just two. Most karateka that train long and hard enough will get to the point where moving forward and backward becomes natural. They feel confident and comfortable advancing forward to deliver an attack and retreating backward to avoid one. Obviously, retreating quickly and efficiently is important in self-defense. However, doing so still keeps you in sight and in the line of attack of your opponent. So, he can attack again and again! Also, because he can still see you, he has a greater chance of blocking YOUR attack, should you decide to counter. This level also requires

the most power and rigidity of stance to be able to block the attack and withstand all the force directed toward you. This is the **FIRST** and most basic, but also the **MOST** important level of movement — **FORWARD AND BACKWARD!**

More difficult to execute, but **MUCH** more effective, is movement to the side. If you are able to move to the side when the attack strikes, you place yourself **OUT** of the line of fire and in the perfect position for a counter-attack that your opponent does not expect nor is able to see. In short, your opponent experiences the phenomenon of “now you see him, now you **DON’T!!!**” The split-second time it takes for your opponent to realize what happened is more than enough time to counter the attack with a strike of your own. If you fail to counter, it also forces your opponent to re-direct and reset himself for another attack, which takes time!

Knowing this was a very useful and effective means of defense, I spent much time developing shifting movements and techniques that I presently teach my advanced students. In fact, I developed a series of movements that I call “Shifting Techniques” that are now on our website for all to see. Most of the techniques are strictly for defense, you reacting to some kind of attack. Some are more complicated, attempting to elicit a response from your opponent **BEFORE** the shift or scoring attack.

The key to shifting effectively is definitely the timing — the **WHEN!** Many students who get to this stage have a difficult time getting comfortable with the movements ... **AND THE TIMING!!!** Whereas timing **IS** important in the forward and backward movements, it is **CRITICAL** in side-to-side movement! Movements forward and back have to be powerful and require a strong and stable stance to deliver an effective block since you remain in the line-of-fire and force. Movements to the side do **NOT** require the same amount of power or strength because you remove yourself from this “line.” They require

patience, timing, and finesse! Very little power or strength is involved, which increases YOUR speed and movement.

Patience is difficult to teach or understand, especially in karate! Your opponent attacks with his full force and speed. Seemingly, the best defense would be to move as fast as YOU can to assure a successful block. This is true for forward and backward movement. The danger of this in side-to-side shifting is moving too soon. If you shift to the side too soon, your opponent can redirect his attack to the direction of your movement. Moving BEFORE your opponent commits and releases his attack puts you in harm's way! Here's where patience comes in. If you are able to delay YOUR movement until just after the attack is released, the MAGIC HAPPENS!!!

I tell my students that the MOST effective movement is one where your opponent charges, releases his technique, and confidently tells himself, "I GOT HIM!!!" Then, quicker than the blink of an eye, YOU ARE GONE!!! Surprise and confusion take over, as you suddenly appear to DISappear!! This, then, is the SECOND level of movement — SIDE-TO-SIDE!!

The THIRD and even MORE difficult and complicated level is movement AROUND your opponent. This type of movement places you at the BACK of your opponent after the attack! Again, timing is critical at this level, and almost NO POWER is used in the application. Curiously, as the amount of power you must exert to execute the movement decreases, so too does the distance between you and your opponent. In fact, at the halfway point, you should barely touch your opponent as you slide by him and his attack! Rotating a full 180 degrees by pulling your back leg forward and pivoting your body puts you BEHIND your opponent! I call this technique the "180 pivot."

A downside to this movement is the distance you end up from your opponent. Because the attack direction is opposite the defense direction, the two forces are moving away from each other, leaving the distance from your opponent

NOT conducive to a counter-attack, which nullifies the value of the technique. Because of this, I modified the movement so that I would end up just inches away from my opponent, exposing a slew of possible counter-attacks, including strikes with the fingers, hands, elbows, knees, and legs, not to mention choke holds from the back. Now disabled, my opponent is a sitting duck for ANY finishing strike. This is the THIRD level of movement — AROUND!!!

The FOURTH and final level of movement is OVER AND UNDER. You recall my first story about Asai Sensei winning the All-Japan Karate Championships by ending up on the back of his opponent? This movement I will only MENTION since I have NO CLUE how he did this ... and I am STILL trying to figure it out!!! I CAN cover the “under” part since I have seen Asai perform this movement, and also was able to execute it in my youth — MANY YEARS AGO!!

This movement requires agility and flexibility, and is generally in response to a kick attack. When your opponent kicks, his knee rises before the foot is released. At the same instant, you drop down, leaning your head and body forward and down, ducking UNDER the kick. Thrust your body forward, aiming for the spot that the kicking foot started from. Because the knee is now lifted, slip through this vacant space and pull your body through, pivoting 180 degrees. You will end up BEHIND your opponent. This is probably the MOST difficult level of movement, and requires MUCH practice to perfect! I call this technique, and those like it, “SLIDING TECHNIQUES”! This, then, is the FOURTH level of movement — UNDER!!!

Of course, the effectiveness of these movements would increase a hundred-fold if there was a short video included with the description. But since that’s NOT possible in this book, you’ll just have to take my word for it!