



Are Traditional Karate Kicks Better Than Tae Kwon Do's Flashy Kicks?

There is a maxim in traditional karate that goes something like this: If you learn several basic self-defense techniques well, they will serve you better in a life-threatening situation than an entire arsenal of fancy techniques. Gichin Funakoshi, the founder of *sho-tokan* karate, also believed in this concept. When he created shotokan, he incorporated only four kicking techniques, with the understanding that these four kicks alone could accomplish the same tasks as dozens of other "flashy" kicking maneuvers. However, as the popularity of kick-heavy styles such as *tae kwon do* and *tang so do* has increased, the credibility of shotokan kicks has been questioned. Some martial artists wonder how a style with only four simple kicks can compete against a system that features countless complex kicking techniques. Kenneth Funakoshi, a distant relative of the late Gichin Funakoshi and a shotokan instructor in San Jose, California, assures his students that shotokan kicks are potent enough to handle any self-defense situation. According to Funakoshi, mastery of these kicks—front kick, roundhouse kick, side kick and back kick—will aid a martial artist far more than having a general knowledge of the countless spinning, hopping, jumping and hooking kicks found in other styles. The front kick is the most frequently used kicking technique in shotokan. The kick travels in a straight, perpendicular line from floor to foe, and in combat or tournament, conditions should never be delivered higher than the opponent's solar plexus. This makes it a fast, versatile weapon. Funakoshi calls the front kick the "reverse punch of kicks" because of its universal applicability and ease of use. To perform a front kick, the shotokan stylist pivots his front foot and raises the back knee up to chest level. He then snaps the foot out, striking with the ball of the foot, then quickly snaps the leg back and returns to a fighting stance. The kick should travel in a straight line from start to finish. Funakoshi emphasizes body alignment, balance and hip

torque in shotokan kicking techniques. When performing a front kick, he recommends keeping the supporting leg's knee bent just slightly. Students should rotate their hips into the kick at the moment of full extension for added penetration and power. The body should be held upright or should lean slightly into the kick, rather than away from it, for maximum power and balance. The roundhouse kick is "just like a front kick, but it comes from a roundabout way," Funakoshi says. Instead of bringing the rear leg forward vertically, as in the front kick, the shotokan practitioner swings his rear leg around horizontally, again snapping the kick out and striking with the ball of the foot. The kick arcs around the attacker's body, striking the opponent's legs or torso. Shotokan roundhouse kicks differ from those in tae kwon do in a few subtle ways. For one thing, the shotokan roundhouse is almost never delivered higher than sternum level. It is designed to batter the opponent's thighs or his ribs and midsection, as opposed to tae kwon do's roundhouse kick, which is frequently targeted to the opponent's head.

Another difference between the shotokan and tae kwon do roundhouse kicks is the striking surface. The tae kwon do roundhouse utilizes the instep as the striking surface, while shotokan employs the ball of the foot. Funakoshi explains that, although striking with the instep can add length and distance to the roundhouse kick, kicking with the ball of the foot adds power. "Instead of spreading the force of the kick over the entire foot, all of the power is focused in the smaller surface of the ball," Funakoshi explains. The powerful thrusting sidekick is also included in shotokan's kicking arsenal. A popular kick at traditional Japanese-style tournaments because it is difficult to counter, the sidekick can break through an opponent's block with its tremendous force. The shotokan sidekick's form and application are nearly identical to the tae kwon do sidekick, the exception being that shotokan stylists target almost exclusively the chest and midsection, whereas TKD practitioners often opt for attacking the head. Funakoshi claims the shotokan sidekick looks like a cross between the front and roundhouse kicks. The practitioner begins by bringing his knee up as if performing a front kick. At that instant, he pivots on his planted foot, shifting the position of his hip from vertical to horizontal. The kicking leg is thrust out, striking the target with the edge of the foot. "It is important that the kick snaps straight out for full extension and to make it harder to block," Funakoshi asserts. The back kick is the hardest of shotokan's four kicking techniques to master, and Funakoshi admits that he has only known a few people who could execute it perfectly. Shotokan's back kick is not used often in competition because it is potentially dangerous to blindly turn away from your opponent. However, the back kick is one of the strongest techniques in the martial arts because it gets its power from the gluteus maximus and the quadriceps—two of the largest muscle groups in the body. "A good back kick can break bones and do internal damage," Funakoshi claims. To execute a back kick, the shotokan stylist pivots away from the opponent and brings his

rear knee up as if performing a side or front kick. Looking over his shoulder to maintain eye contact with his adversary, the shotokan practitioner thrusts the kicking leg out heel first and leans into the kick to add force and help maintain his balance. According to Funakoshi, the preceding kicks are generally the only kicking techniques taught in traditional shotokan classes because they are the only kicks that appear in the *kata* (choreographed fighting sequences) passed down by the art's founder. Although other effective kicking techniques, such as the crescent and stomp kicks, are often part of the shotokan arsenal, Funakoshi claims very few "flashy" kicks are ever seen in a traditional *dojo* (training hall). Flashy kicks "look very good for show, but they are not very useful," Funakoshi says. "What does the opponent do when you are jumping or spinning or turning? He hits you." Efficiency is the hallmark of shotokan kicking techniques. That is why shotokan kicks usually are not delivered above chest level. "We like to see kicks done in kata very high, because you can see how much balance and skill the student has," Funakoshi states. "But in competition, or in the street, you want to kick low, because a lower kick, to the body, groin or legs, has more power, is faster, takes less balance, and is harder to defend against." In tae kwon do's defense, Funakoshi says that the Korean art has several good kicking techniques—such as the hook kick—that usually are not taught in shotokan. Most shotokan instructors do not teach such techniques, Funakoshi claims, because they are not necessary. "You can defend yourself from almost any attack with the front kick," he notes. "Or you can use the side kick. These kicks work all the time and are not as specialized as tae kwon do kicks." Funakoshi admits, however, that there is a place for fancy kicks — in tournament competition. Intact, Funakoshi's son Kyle has been known to spice up his forms routine with a flying kick or two. However, in the end, the ability to kick a mugger into next week is a far more important goal in shotokan karate. "We teach the kicks that work," Funakoshi says. "Why teach the ones that won't?"