

MASTER UECHI KANEI
DIRECTING RYMARUK'S
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FUTENMA DOJO, 1982.

Abstract

This article introduces “Defending to the Four Directions,” techniques that add challenge to Uechi-ryu while incorporating and building upon the traditional katas which have formed the basis of the style. Making changes within a style’s training methods just to be different without any other purpose is of little value and actually destructive to the system. This article describes a meaningful and realistic addition to the practice of *hojoundo*, the formal exercises incorporating basic movements. “Defending to the Four Directions” is intended for advanced students who have mastered Uechi-ryu’s fundamentals. In addition, the practice is well-suited for adaptation and adoption into other martial art styles.

DEFENDING TO THE FOUR DIRECTIONS

EVOLVING UECHI-RYU'S HOJOUNDO EXERCISES FOR ADVANCED STUDENTS

IHOR RYMARUK



Brief Background of Uechi-ryu

Uechi-ryu is one of four major karate styles on the island of Okinawa. It is uniquely different in that it has not lost its resemblance to its southern Chinese roots. At its core are the three katas that Uechi Kanbun (1877-1948), the founder of Uechi-ryu, brought back from China after spending 13 years on the mainland as a student and then taught at his own school—sanchin, sesan, and sanseru. In 1940, Kanbun's students renamed Uechi's school from Pangainoon-ryu Karatejutsu Kenkyu-jo (Half-hard, Half-soft Style Empty Hand Technique Study Hall) to Uechi-ryu Karatejutsu (Uechi's Art of Empty Hand).

Uechi Kanei (1911-1991), Kanbun's eldest son, authorized a group of senior practitioners to piece together the fighting techniques that Kanbun taught. Between 1950 and 1960, Uechi-ryu took on, for the most part, its present-day format. Five beginner and intermediate katas were developed based on the original three katas. A series of warm-up exercises were added and the hallmarks of uniquely extrapolated techniques from Kanbun's fighting style were used to make up the formal exercises (*hojoundo*). Uechi-ryu's core of kata and techniques has been consistent for over fifty years. During those years, various two-person drills were developed, but there were no universal changes in how students practiced these core exercises. The practice of Uechi-ryu in the main schools on Okinawa is consistent, yet none are carbon copies of each other.

Training on Okinawa is a dream for most karate enthusiasts; however, the difficulties of travel, language, and time prevents most from attaining that dream. A few dedicated individuals were privileged to be a part of Uechi Kanei's dojo. My first certified Uechi-ryu instructor, Frank Gorman, and now my present teacher, James Thompson, both instructed and practiced Uechi-ryu as taught by Uechi Kanei. Thompson trained exclusively at the main dojo in Futenma Airbase under the direct tutelage of Uechi Kanei for almost ten years, a unique accomplishment for a non-Okinawan at that time. Being a part of Uechi Kanei's dojo was a special experience for me as well with the realization of being part of an organization greater than any one school. Today, there are many transplants from other countries that have fallen in love with the island culture and its people, and practice the martial arts on a regular basis. Some have become head teachers in their own Uechi-ryu dojo.

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of Ihor Rymaruk.*

Enhancing the Standard Formal Exercises

Hojoundo practice basically consists of thirteen hand and leg exercise combinations that always begin with a block, and is normally practiced as a group without regard of rank. Traditionally, hojoundo exercises are practiced while standing in place, and the exercises remain the same for the beginner, intermediate, and advanced students. That is, in the Uechi style, there is no progression of difficulty to challenge more advanced students. After executing thousands of repetitions, the training drill is embedded in muscle memory and becomes a natural reflex or habit. Practicing hojoundo is a great workout at any level, and it is a good feeling to be able to execute techniques on autopilot without errors. We believe that martial arts training consists of mind, body, and spirit. Currently, our destination in our training journey is to react with an empty mind. In essence, an empty mind is not necessarily lacking in knowledge, but it is conditioned to respond to any challenge without thought.

As I evolved in my understanding of Uechi-ryu, I began incorporating various stepping sequences into my practice of the formal exercise. The culmination of which is the evolution of old ways done with a new twist, which I call “Defending to the Four Directions.” Teaching new students and developing their foundations is still done in the time-tested traditional manner. However, as students progress in rank and understanding, it seemed logical to challenge the student’s comfort zone as they moved through the ranks of beginner, intermediate, and advanced levels. After all, I too, still a beginner, also needed to push, explore, and take my own understanding to different levels. Taking students out of their comfort zone by putting hojoundo into motion, builds on what students can already do extremely well in a static position, and helps students to discover, through struggle, that there is a continued need for greater mental as well as physical training challenges. Incremental additions to training drills have the benefit of maintaining a student’s thirst for new information, and demonstrate that the level of one’s training is only confined by one’s own limitations. Evolution is a friend, stimulated and influenced through diligent repetitive training and time.

It is important for all new students to develop and understand the original format of the formal exercises as developed and practiced by Uechi Kanei. Without this original format, there is no style of Uechi-ryu. Once a student can perform the formal basics smoothly and without any hesitation, he or she is ready to add life to the static formal exercise training regime. Once the formal exercises are learned, students are typically taught two-person control fighting drills. These drills (*kyu kumite*) are the real beginnings of developing timing and distancing and simple blocking and striking. However, these drills do not incorporate the formal exercises in a realistic defensive or offensive manner, and actually relegate them as warm-up for kata, without much exploration or practice of real benefits for practical self-defense. Furthermore, the hojoundo exercises assume that all attacks come from the front only. Hojoundo’s application may be understood by the masters, but it should not take years for students to make the leap to the practical application stage.

I began searching for ways to help students understand and bridge the gap to the application of hojoundo. Hojoundo are preformed in an hourglass (*sanchin*) stance with a designated foot forward. The first modification I incorporated for intermediate beginners was to alternate arm movements. That is, to practice an exercise that is intended to be executed with a left arm block, for example, by alternating left then right with each repetition. This changes the flow of the original combination, but not the combination itself. If the standard way is to do a certain technique off the lead leg only or off the rear

leg only, I practice the upper body combination without regard to which leg is forward. I would keep my stance stationary, but alternate the hand combinations. After all, students should be able to apply combinations that they have learned regardless of which foot is forward. Plus, the added benefit of alternating sides is that your uniform will no longer bind at the shoulders or arms from doing the same repeating motion.

As I became comfortable practicing in this ambidextrous stationary manner, I found that the realism of fighting movements was still missing, and that the traditional format of blocking off a specific foot was not being applied. Realistic fighting is rarely if ever a stationary activity without footwork, and it is important to maintain the style's foundations. So, for my intermediate and advanced students, I took the next step, and put hojoundo into motion with a simple step. This was accomplished by stepping forward and executing a given combination until there was no room to go forward, at which point we would step backward executing the same combinations before moving on to the next. This allowed for the alternation of arms during the practice of the combination without compromising the standard format of hojoundo. While stepping forward or back is not a unique way of practicing basics, as many other styles do so during their basic drills; it is just not how traditional Uechi-ryu hojoundo was practiced. When there were a lot of students in class, and space was very limited, I would have students take one step forward, execute the combination, step back, and execute the combination for six to ten repetitions (A1-3). This method worked out well, and the step forward gave the feeling of being on the offensive, while the step back gave the feeling of defense. Thus, hojoundo took on the motions of an ocean wave, moving forward, closing ground/offense, and moving back, giving up ground/defense.

Maintaining good form will likely be a challenge for intermediate students; however, the more accomplished a student becomes, the easier it will be for him/her to maintain his/her sanchin root. Through the stepping motion, students can better visualize the application of each hojoundo exercise, even though they will still assume that the attack they are fending off is coming from the front.

Sequence of Hojundo Exercises Used with Defending to the Four Directions

- 1) circle block, front kick
- 2) circle block; hook punch
- 3) high block punch, middle block punch
- 4) circle block punch, palm block punch
- 5) circle block chop, back fist, punch
- 6) circle block, elbow strikes
- 7) finger strikes
- 8) four-way wrist blocks
- 9) fish tail blocks



Stepping to the front and to the back is the fundamental footwork.

Technical Section

Defending to the Four Directions

The next logical progression for the practice of hojoundo is to appreciate that attacks come from all directions. “Defending to the Four Directions” was conceived about two years ago as I monitored and critiqued students’ leadership and teaching skills while continuing my personal development and study in the back row next to my new white belts. This technique was developed as I experimented with ways to give my Uechi-ryu formal exercises a more practical and realistic twist.

This exercise along with the use of strong visualization increases the practicality of Uechi-ryu in a self-defense situation and challenged even the most advanced student. You will have trained to defend in any direction of multiple incoming threats while staying true to the founders and foundations of Uechi-ryu. “Defending to the Four Directions” is not a very complicated drill; it’s just not for beginners. This multidimensional addition to hojoundo makes Uechi-ryu a more realistic close-in fighting system.

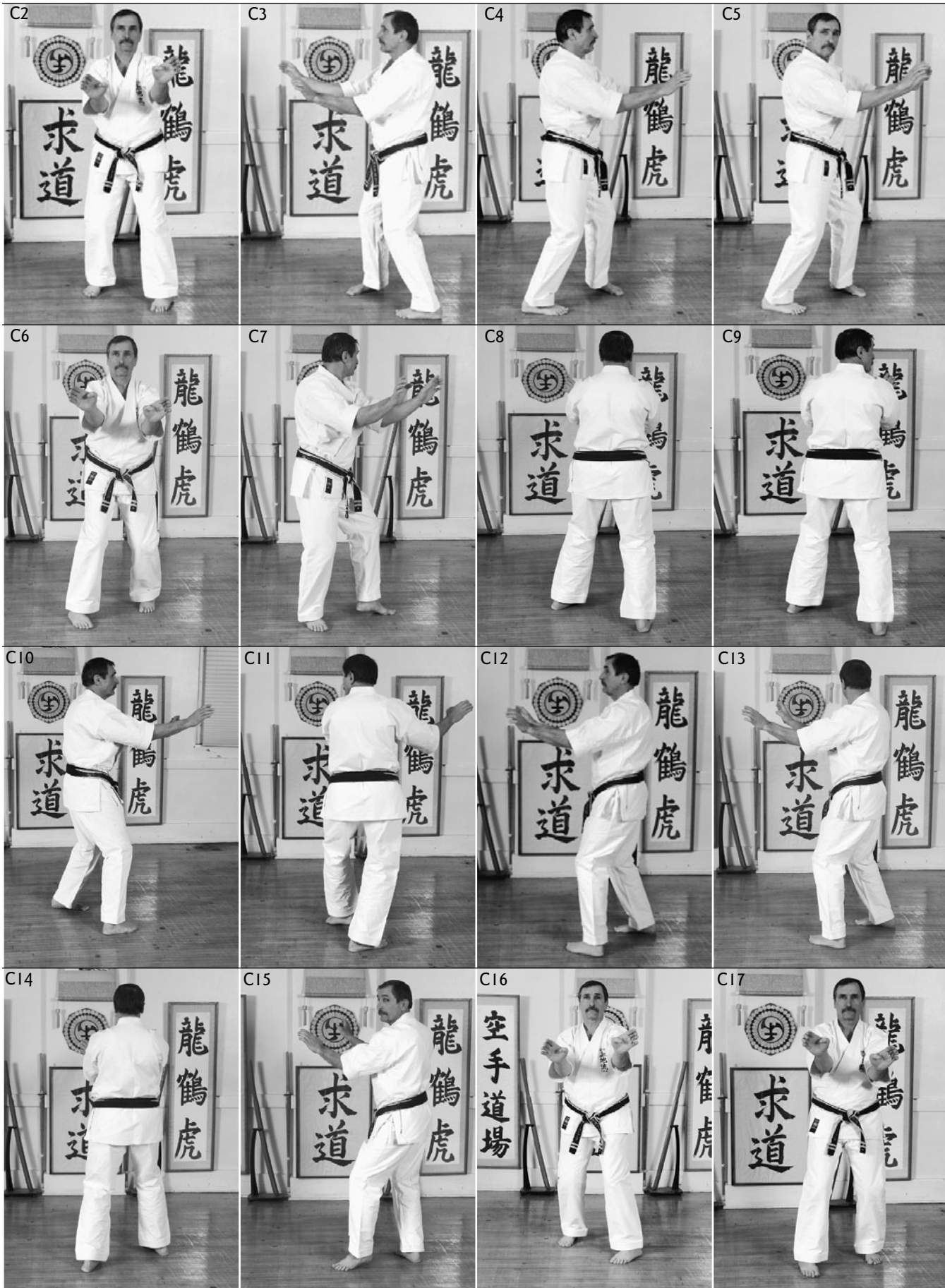
To execute the “Four Directions” foot work, you will need to understand two basic turns, a 90° pivot turn, and a 180° turn known as a sanchin turn for its execution from the sanchin stance. To make the 90° pivot turn, start in a sanchin stance with your left foot forward. Your big toe of your back foot should be in line with the heel of your front foot, and your feet should be approximately shoulder width apart. Pivot on the balls of your feet to face your right. Your right foot will now be your front foot and your left foot will be your back foot (B1-2). You may also choose to begin with the right foot forward, in which case you will pivot in the same manner to the left. Always pivot to the direction of the rear foot.

To execute a sanchin turn, begin in a sanchin guard position with one foot in front of the other, toe heel on the same line, feet shoulder width apart. Pivot on the ball of your hind foot, turning the heel toward your supporting front leg. As you start turning, to your left if your right leg was forward, or to your right if your left leg was forward, turn your hips and shoulders in the direction of the turn before moving your front leg. Plant the heel of your pivoting leg on the floor and bring your other leg around smartly so that the toe of that foot is in line with the heel of the pivoting leg. Ultimately, your front leg will become your hind leg as you turn your body 180° to face the opposite direction that you started from (B3-4). Once you have mastered these turns, you are ready for the “Four Direction” cycle.

Begin the “Four Directions” cycle by standing in the sanchin guard position with your right foot forward (C1). Step forward with the left foot (C2). Next, pivot 90° to your right (C3). Now execute a sanchin turn, turning 180° toward your left (C4).

Repeat the 90° pivot turn to the right, followed by the 180° sanchin turn to the left, until you have faced all four cardinal directions, and are facing the direction you began in (C5-17).





Four Direction Practice

Once you have mastered this pattern of turns, you will be ready to add hojoundo exercises. To do this, simply execute a hojoundo exercise after each turn. You may do the same drill throughout the cycle, or you may do a different drill between each of the turns. A complete cycle of the “Four Directions” technique applying the circle block hook punch exercise of hojoundo is provided in D1-36. This set begins with a step forward followed by a step back before the cycle begins (D1-7).

D1-4 From the left guard position, step forward with your right leg. Execute a left circle block off the rear leg and a right hook punch off the front leg. Always come to the guard position after completing each combination.

D5-7 Step back with right leg and execute a right circle block followed by a left hook punch.

D7-10 After delivering the left hook, return to the guard position. Pivot 90° on the balls of your feet to the right, and execute a left circle block and right hook punch.

D10-14 From the guard, turn 180° and execute a circle block off the rear leg and a hook punch off the front leg. Return to the guard position.

D14-17 Shift your weight slightly onto the balls of your feet and pivot 90° to the right. Perform a circle block and hook punch combination.

D17-21 From the guard position, execute the second 180° turn. Perform a circle block and hook punch combination.





D21-25 From the guard, pivot 90° to the right and execute circle block and hook punch combination.

D25-30 Bring your hands to the guard position, execute a 180° turn, and perform a circle block and hook punch combination.

D30-33 After completing the combination, bring your hands to the guard position and pivot 90° to the right. Execute a circle block and hook punch combination.

D33-36 After completing the combination, bring your hands to the guard position, and turn 180°. Perform a circle block and hook punch combination. This is the end of the four direction cycle. At this point, you can continue the same sequence for several more repetitions, or you may move on to the next combination.

“Defending to the Four Directions” can be applied to most hojoundo exercises, except for the side snap kick, and the three stepping drills. Keep in mind you can practice the “Four Directions” beginning with either foot forward, as called for by the hojoundo exercise you wish to practice. If you are training solo, you may change the direction of the flow of the exercise at any time by pivoting to the direction of your choice. For example, you may wish to begin with your right foot forward, in which case you would simply pivot to your left instead of the right, then execute sanchin turn as usual. You may also wish to add stepping forward or backward in between turning. For group training, be sure to establish the direction of movement first so as to reduce confusion and collisions.

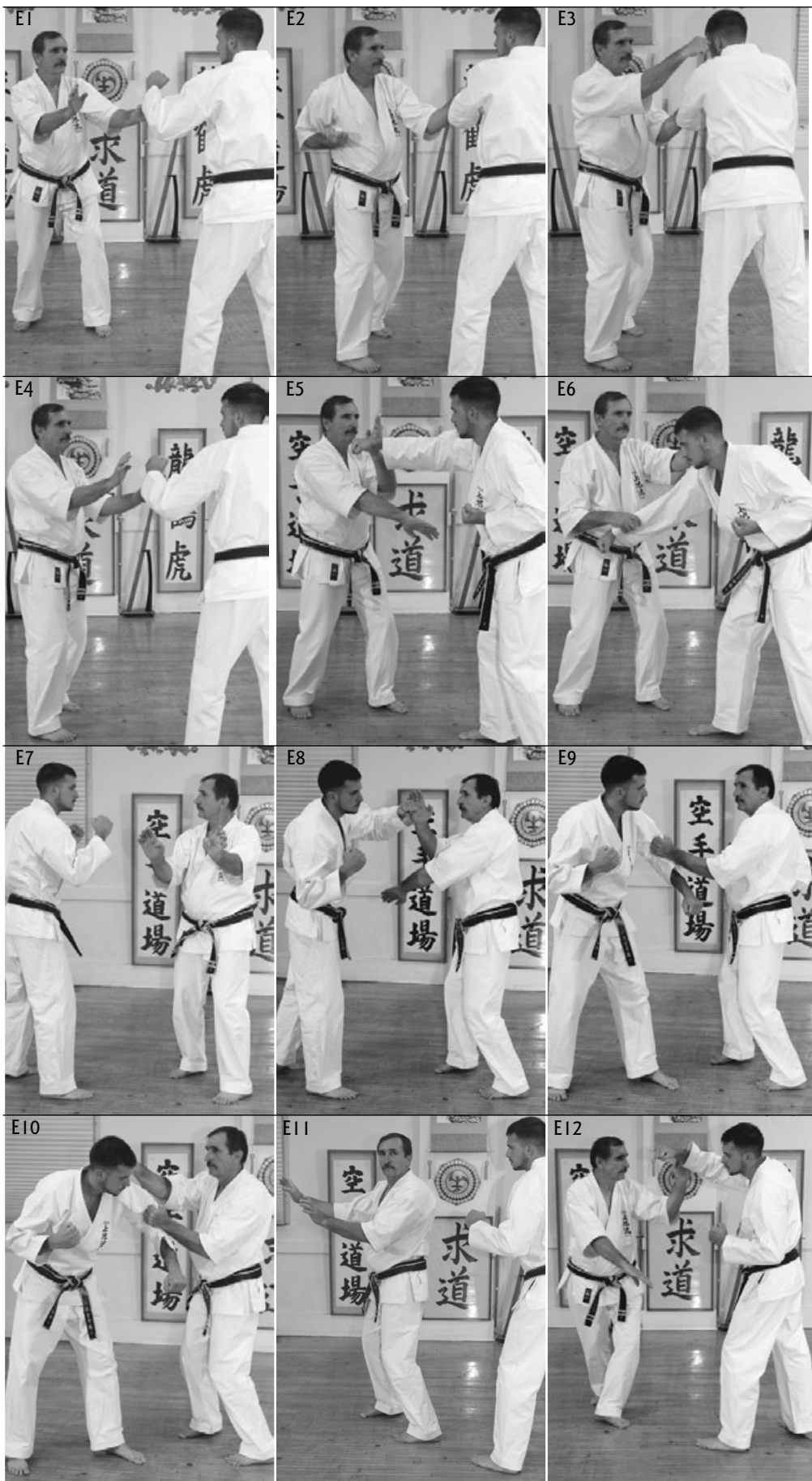
Four Direction Application

You may find this technique challenging at first, or find that your once solid form may become sloppy. As you continue to practice in the four directions, your mind will become sharper, and your body will create new muscle memory that will make the drill easier to execute. You will be able to further hone your skills, and may even find that you utilize hojoundo techniques more often in self-defense applications. An example of how the “Defending to the Four Directions” technique may be applied is provided using circle block hook punch in E1-25.

E1-3 The defender on the left steps in and performs a circle block to check the attacker's left guard followed by a hook punch.

E4-6 From the guard position, the defender steps back against the attacker's punch. He then executes a circle block and finishes with a hook punch.

E7-10 The defender (on the right) is threatened with an attack. He pivots 90° to the right and neutralizes the left punch with a circle block. He then counter-attacks with a hook punch.



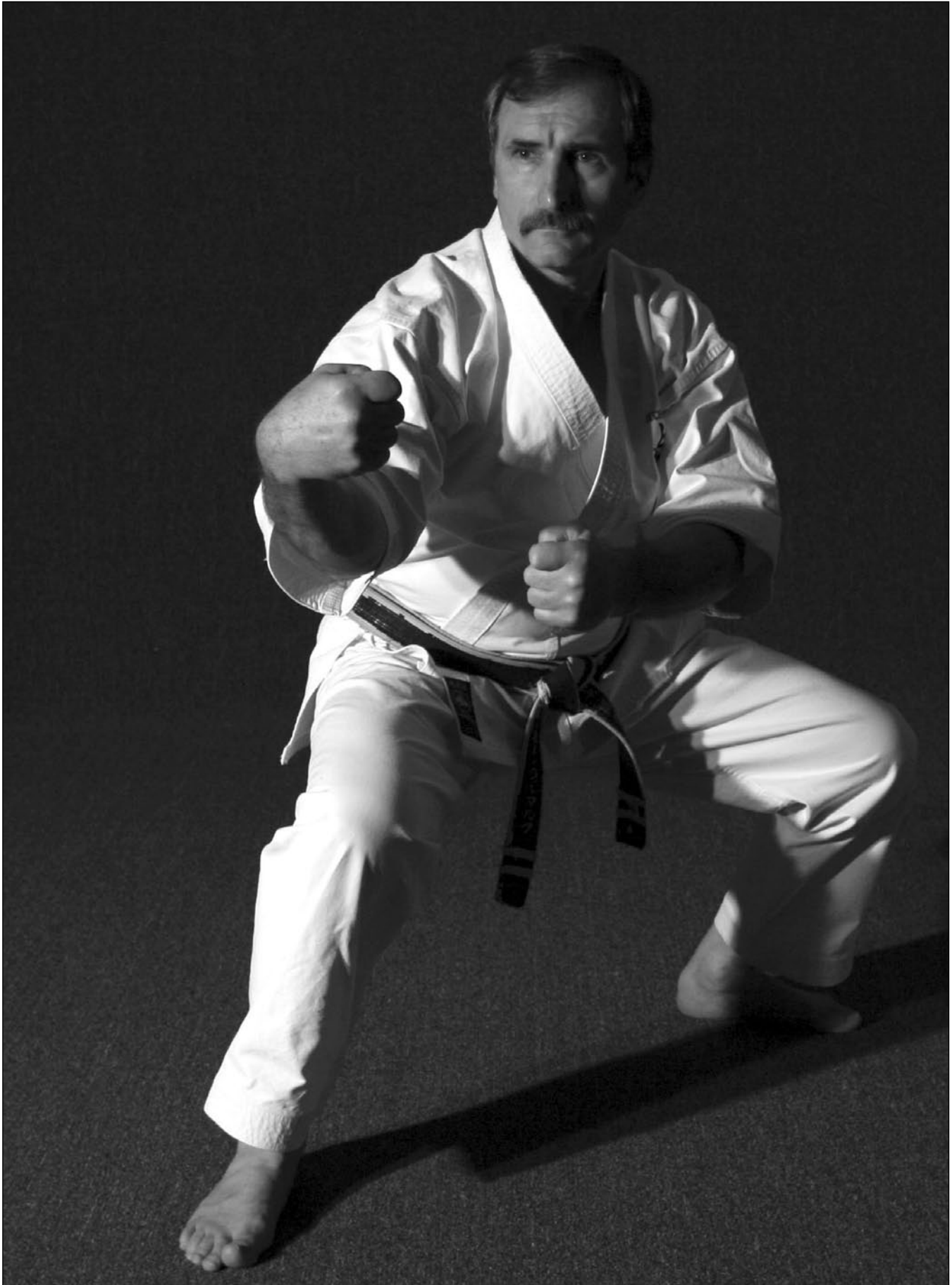


E11-14 The defender sees an attack coming from the rear and performs a 180° turn (sanchin turn). He then performs a circle block against the attacker's right punch, and counter-attacks with a hook punch to the head.

E15-18 The attacker strikes from the right. The defender pivots 90° to the right while stopping the attacker's punch with a circle block and counter-attacks with a hook punch.

E19-22 The defender sees an attacker coming from behind to punch. The defender pivots 180° (sanchin turn) and performs a circle block against the attacker's punch. The defender then counter-attacks with a hook punch.

E23-25 The attacker comes in from the right to deliver a combination punch. The defender pivots 90° to the right and stops the attacker's right punch with a right pressing block. The defender next uses a left circle block against the attacker's left punch and finishes with a hook punch to the temple (Note: Finishing punch is not shown).



Conclusion

It is not often that one can add a simple but unique twist to a system or style that has already proven itself and met the test of time. I am pleased to have introduced and shared with you my special way of practicing hojoundo, for the advanced students. Often, over the years, advanced students have complained that they were bored with the same routine, or just needed something more to challenge them. These were the few students that just did not appreciate the effectiveness of simplicity. The belief was that the magic for effective self-defense applications was hidden in complex motor skills. And yet, these were the same students that could not move in any direction without losing some control of the basics. Students learn what is expected of them, and today we must expect more from our students. Not only are they the future of Uechi-ryu, they are responsible for its survival in a very competitive world. Uechi-ryu training has to evolve to meet the demands and needs of a society that is becoming more cognizant of the importance of self preservation. Uechi-ryu karate will survive as long as there is a need for a formidable system of self-defense. A student who is truly gaining mastery of Uechi-ryu will certainly welcome and handle the challenge to raise his/her training to a new dimension. It is like a dart player who can always hit the bull's-eye looking for a challenge by way of putting the dart board in motion. The expert suddenly becomes a beginner.

I have taken my Uechi-ryu from stationary practice, to moving forward and back, to moving to the four cardinal directions. That first step I took years ago in making my Uechi practice more practical has led to the many steps and changes in directions that have given birth to a much more realistic work-out routine for the senior student. While students must first learn certain moves and develop timing, distancing, and proper reflexes appropriate to a given situation in a safe and constructive manner, there comes a time when the developed skills must be set in motion.

Hojoundo is often practiced as a separate entity, relegated to being a warm up for the next phase of skill building. It just makes sense to work the drills that have been practiced the most, get deeper into the style, and continue to build on them, and put them to more practical use. "Defending to the Four Directions" builds on traditional teachings and adds new dimensions and challenges for advanced practitioners of Uechi-ryu, yet its simplicity makes it highly adaptable for use in other martial arts. It is said "a high tide raises all ships in the harbor." Therefore, if my simple modifications have merit, are accepted and become widely used by my fellow teachers, then I have contributed in furthering our knowledge of the depths of Uechi-ryu.



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