

PERSPECTIVES ON LIFELONG KARATE

BACK TO BASICS

REVISITED

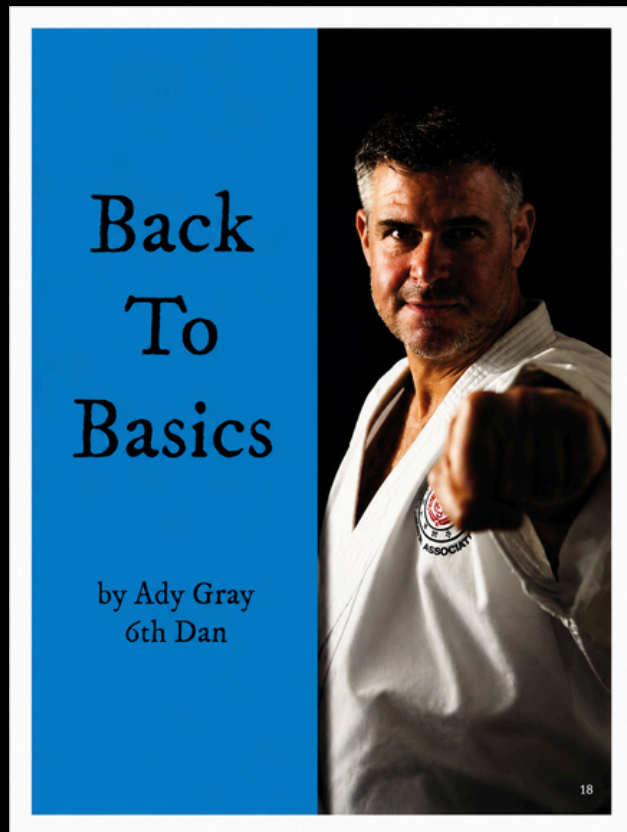
Nearly ten years ago I
wrote about the
importance of going
back to basics.

Nearly ten years later,
I believe it matters
more than ever.

Ady Gray



NEARLY TEN YEARS LATER



In 2017, I wrote an article for Ippon Magazine called Back To Basics. At the time, one of my concerns was the rush I was seeing within karate to continually move on.

- The next technique.
- The next kata.
- The next grade.

I wrote about students expecting “a new move or a new kata” and becoming “blinded by all the box ticking.”

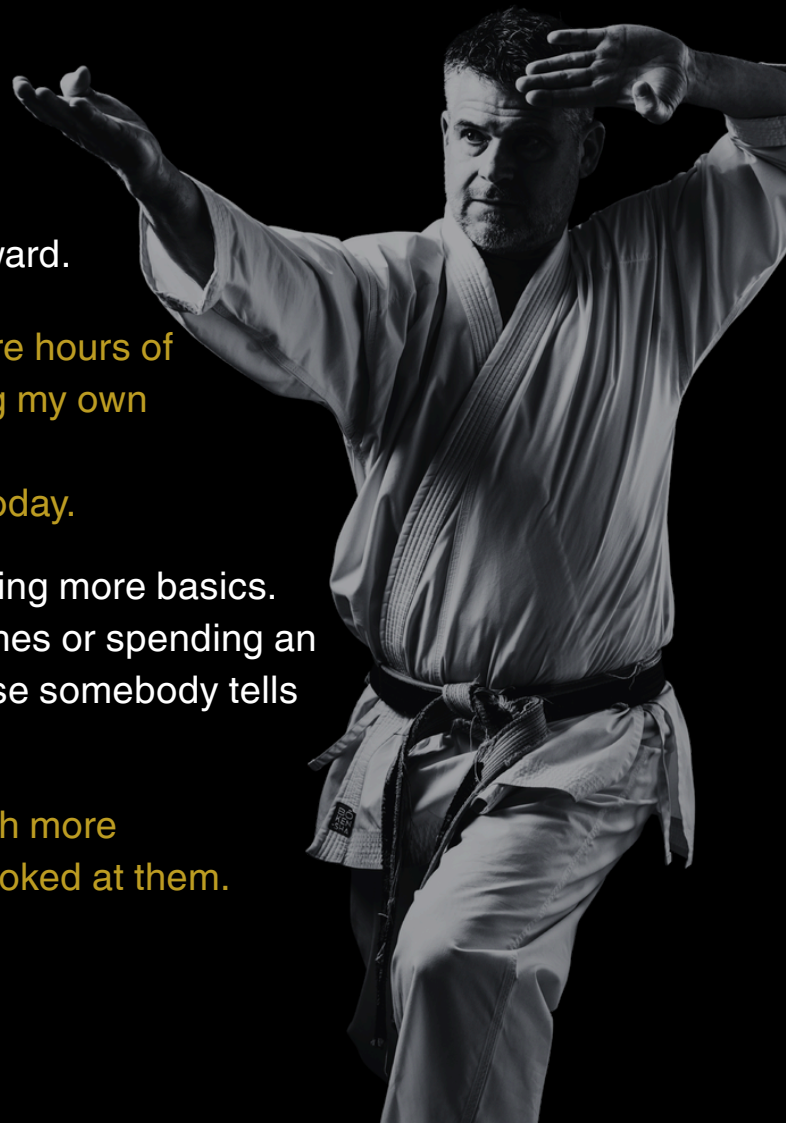
My point wasn't that progression was wrong. Of course we should progress. We should learn new things, challenge ourselves and continue developing.

My concern was that moving on was sometimes being mistaken for moving forward.

Nearly ten years later, after thousands more hours of coaching, watching karate and questioning my own understanding, I still believe that. But I would probably explain it differently today.

Going back to basics isn't simply about doing more basics. It isn't about performing hundreds of punches or spending an hour walking up and down the dojo because somebody tells us that's traditional karate.

It's about returning to the fundamentals with more experience than we had the last time we looked at them. And asking better questions.



BASICS DON'T BELONG TO BEGINNERS

We often describe certain techniques as basic techniques. But sometimes I think the word basic is misunderstood.

“Basic” shouldn't mean easy. It shouldn't mean unimportant. And it certainly shouldn't mean something we eventually leave behind.

The physical movement may be introduced to a beginner, but our understanding of that movement should continue developing for decades.

A white belt and a senior Dan grade might both practise exactly the same punch. But they shouldn't be practising it with the same level of understanding.

The beginner may be concentrating on making a fist correctly, where the hand starts and finishes, the position of the elbow and the basic coordination of the movement.

Years later, that same punch should involve a much greater understanding of posture, relaxation, timing, distance, weight transfer, hip movement, acceleration, connection, impact and recovery.

Eventually, we should begin asking a more important question:

What is this technique actually trying to achieve?

The punch may look similar. The terminology hasn't changed. But the understanding behind it should be completely different.

The technique hasn't necessarily changed. Our understanding of it has. That's why I don't believe we ever really finish learning the basics.

As our karate develops, the basics should develop with us.



DON'T BE IN SUCH A RUSH TO MOVE ON

This page combines progression  purposeful repetition, because I think they belong together.

This is probably the part of my original article that I feel even more strongly about today.

We live in a world where progress is often measured by completing things and doing the bare minimum..

● **Tick the box** ● **Get the certificate** ● **Move to the next level**

None of those questions are wrong. Grades do matter. Syllabus progression matters. Learning new kata and techniques matters. The problem comes when the next thing becomes more important than understanding the thing we're currently doing.

Learning another kata doesn't automatically make our karate better. Neither does knowing another combination or achieving another grade.

They should represent development, not simply accumulation.

Sometimes rather than asking “**WHAT AM I LEARNING NEXT?**”
we should ask: “**WHAT AM I STILL MISSING FROM WHAT I ALREADY KNOW?**”

Repetition is fundamental to karate. There is **no shortcut** around it. But there is an important difference between repeating something and developing it. If perform a technique another hundred times, what am I trying to improve? **Timing?**
Relaxation? Speed? Connection? Balance? Distance? Impact? Or am I simply trying to reach one hundred?

Repetition is important. But quality of repetition matters more than the number.

THE HIGHER THE GRADE, THE MORE YOU SHOULD SEE

As students progress, we naturally give them more information. But I don't think advanced karate should simply mean more techniques. It should also mean seeing more within the techniques we already have.

Take a stance.

At first, we're concerned with where the feet go and how long or wide the stance should be. Later we should begin understanding what that stance is doing.

Where is the weight?

Where is the centre of gravity?

Can I move from it?

Can I generate force from it?

Am I stable?

Am I so fixed that I've made it difficult to move?

The same applies to a block, punch, kick or movement within kata.

As our experience increases, our questions should become better.

That's why I find it strange when basics are sometimes treated almost as warm-up material before we get to the interesting karate.

**BASICS ARE NOT A STAGE YOU
PASS THROUGH ON THE WAY TO
THE INTERESTING PART.**

**THEY ARE THE PLACE WHERE
EVERYTHING IS DECIDED.**



EXPERIENCE SHOULD CHANGE WHAT YOU NOTICE

This is perhaps where my thinking has developed most since I wrote the original article. When you've trained for a long time, you can return to something incredibly simple and suddenly notice something you never noticed before. Not because the technique has changed.

BECAUSE YOU HAVE.

You have more experience.

You've made more mistakes.

You've taught more people.

You've seen different body types.

You've trained when you're fit and when you're tired.

You've probably changed your mind about certain things more than once.

All of that should affect what you see when you return to a basic technique.

That's one of the things I enjoy most about karate.

Something you were shown during your first few weeks of training can still challenge your understanding decades later.

The longer you train, the simpler the things you become interested in.

How efficiently can I move?

How much unnecessary tension can I remove?

Can I generate the same effect with less effort?

Can I improve the timing rather than simply trying to move faster?

Those aren't beginner questions. They're questions that can take a lifetime to answer.



BACK TO BASICS

So, nearly ten years after writing that original article, would I still tell students to go back to basics?

Absolutely.

But I would add something that perhaps I didn't fully appreciate then.

DON'T GO BACK AS THE KARATEKA YOU WERE WHEN YOU FIRST LEARNED THEM. GO BACK WITH THE EXPERIENCE YOU HAVE NOW.

When you return to a basic technique, you don't return to it as the student who first learned it. You bring with you every year of training, every mistake, every correction and every lesson you've learned along the way.

“ The technique may be the same. **But you are not.** ”

Going back to basics isn't about going back to the beginning. It's about revisiting the beginning with everything you've learned since. So keep progressing. Learn new things. Study more kata. Challenge yourself. Earn your grades. But don't become so focused on what comes next that you stop looking at what is already in front of you.

Occasionally go back to that first punch.

That first block.

That first stance.

That first kata.

And look again.

You might be surprised by how much is still there.

The longer I practise and coach karate, the less interested I become in how much somebody knows. I'm far more interested in how deeply they understand what they know.

GOING BACK TO BASICS ISN'T GOING BACKWARDS. IT'S GOING DEEPER.

KARATE IS A LIFELONG JOURNEY

**KEEP TRAINING
KEEP QUESTIONING
KEEP DEVELOPING**

KARATE IQ
PERSPECTIVES ON LIFELONG KARATE

ADY GRAY



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