

Title: Karate Specific Calisthenics Exercises

Purpose: Traditional Karate Yondan (4th Dan) Examination Research Paper

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Abstract: In this paper I am presenting nine karate specific exercises that I developed during my practicing and teaching career. I found these exercises to be very useful, and I do practice them on a continual basis.

Author Info: I started karate in 1981 in Romania, at the age of 19. At the time karate was banned by the communist regime and we had to train in secrecy for many years. I trained continuously to this date, first nine years in Romania under sensei Dan Stuparu, then I moved to the US. I trained in sensei Nishiyama's AAKF organization from 1993 to 2008. I also attended numerous ITKF/AAKF training camps in La Jolla organized by sensei Nishiyama. I got my first degree (1995) and second degree (2006) from sensei Nishiyama, and later in 2012 my third degree from sensei Graves (the adviser and reviewer of this paper).

Prior to karate, I was an avid skier. I started skiing from age 3 and did competitive racing for about 10 years in my high-school and college years. I was also member of the Romanian army national winter triathlon team during my military service. Skiing has affected me tremendously during my formative years, there was the good part (stamina, strong thighs, balance, posture, hip control, smooth moves) and the bad part (inflexible ankles due to the rigid ski boots, relatively weak calves and weak upper body). When I started karate, I felt challenged. I was accustomed to squeezing my knees together while skiing, and it came unnatural to open my hips to kick yoko geri. My ankles were rigid, I had big, bony feet with high arch, and it felt awkward standing in zenkutsu dachi. I also have a congenital condition that fused a couple of vertebrae in my lower back. So when I was doing the exercises, warmups and stretches in my early years of karate, I felt out of my league. I realized then and there, that I have to work extra hard if I want to have any chance of mastering karate. My progress was slow. It took me fourteen years of hard work to earn my first degree black belt. I built many makiwara, stretching devices, I used weights, ropes, boards, cement blocks, all kinds of things to try to make my body work better for karate. I'm way better now than I was, but the journey continues.

In 1995, soon after I got my black belt from sensei Nishiyama (during the summer camp in Ashland Oregon), I started Intel Karate Club in Hillsboro. I have been teaching there ever since. Typically I teach four to six hours a week in four sessions. I had many students train with me, I estimate well over a thousand of them. Some trained for a week or two, some trained for fifteen years. My students are exclusively Intel employees (with the exception of occasional visitors). There's something specific about

my student body that affected my style of teaching. I am talking about the broad average description of a new student first walking into my dojo. They're educated, they spent many years sitting and studying. They're smart, they understand the concepts relatively easy. They are not very athletic. They tend to have a bad posture from all the sitting and typing with hunched, rigid shoulders. Many of them are introverts, not at all aggressive, and as such, Kiai does not come natural to them. They are not very good at controlling their body. They're uncomfortable being hit or feeling pain. They don't like to be injured and are very careful not to injure others. They typically have a strong desire for mastery and excellence. Some of these traits I recognize in my younger self at the beginning of my karate career. Of course, this is a gross generalization of my student body, there are exceptions, like experienced ballerinas who defy all stereotypes of engineers or power lifters with bulging muscles. I had students of every race, ranging from Finland to Japan, from South Africa to Nigeria, from India to San Diego CA, ages nineteen to sixty five. I even had a student in a wheelchair for a couple of years.

Calisthenics

I have two main goals with karate. The first one is to be the best karate instructor possible for my students. I find great satisfaction in seeing my students excel, progress from non-athletic cubicle-dwellers to disciplined, confident karateka. I feel responsible for their journey and also for being able to pass on the art of traditional karate and all the knowledge and mentoring I got from my senseis. My second goal relates to my personal growth: I am striving to improve my karate both mentally and physically also to improve my health and fitness level.

I am an engineer by trade, and I like to experiment with new things and do objective measurements. Over the decades of training and teaching, I experimented with probably over a hundred different exercises. Some involved training aids (like stretching seats, makiwara, bags, weights, etc.), some just the body of the practitioner. I was on the constant outlook for which exercises offer the most bang for the buck, as it comes to preparation for karate. I tried many exercises, and I dropped most of them. Eventually a handful of them emerged as clear winner exercises. In the rest of the paper I will describe each of them, and also explain why I believe they're worth doing.

Preparation and word of caution

Never do any strenuous exercise without proper warmup. Anytime I made the mistake of not warming up properly, I immediately felt the negative impact on my body. It's way easier to get injured if you're not warmed up. Here are my recommendations:

Phase 1: Increase the heart rate. Start with light jogging, or easy hopping. Do not bend the joints too much, just keep everything light and in the comfort zone. The only goal is to increase the heart and lung activity. This should be the first 4-8 minutes of your workout.

Phase 2: Increase range of motion and improve lubrication of your joints. Babies have huge range of motion in their joints. As we age, we lose that range of motion and become rigid. After you completed phase 1, do exercises that gradually increase the range of motion of your joints. Jumping jacks, laying on back and doing kicks in the air, etc. The idea is lots of motion, not much muscle, relax, increase range,

try to feel like wet spaghetti, no tension. One good way to monitor whether your knees are properly lubricated, is to listen to them. If they still make crackling noise, it means they're not properly lubricated – it's probably best to lay on your back and do thirty light kicks towards the ceiling.

Phase 3: At this point your body should be warmed up and your joints properly lubricated and stretched. Now you can push your body to the limit, you can do deep squats with jumps, frog jumps, pushups with clapping in the air and such. However, if you do these without going through phase 1 and 2, it's more likely that you'll get injured. Maybe if you're a teenager it's not a problem. But at my age of 56, if I don't follow these steps properly, I will most likely injure my joints and wake up with pain the next morning.

The Nine Calisthenics Exercises

Exercise 1. Ankle bending on the incline

I built a triangular incline with 90, 50 and 40 degree angles. The hypotenuse side is covered with anti-slip grip surface. I hold on to the makiwara (or some bracket on the wall) and do one-legged heel lifts. At the bottom, my heel (kakato) rests on the surface, then I raise my body, using only the one leg (without help from my arms), trying to extend my ankle as much as possible, keeping the pressure on the ball of the foot (koshi) and not on the toes. The foot needs to be directed forward and not to the side. At the bottom, the heel needs to press into the surface, and at that time I pull my body forward with my hands and force my knee to bend a little, putting as much stretch on the ankle as possible.



For a more extreme stretch, I turn the incline around and thus its surface gets a 50 degree slope. I find it harder to plant my heel this way, and also more challenging to keep my knee slightly bent.



For the advanced mode, I hold a kettle bell while I'm doing the exercise.

The benefits: increases ankle flexibility, stretches the Achilles heel, strengthens the calf muscles. It is very useful in lowering stances like zenkutsu dachi or kiba dachi. It helps heel turns (like in opening move of Heian Shodan), helps keep knee and toe alignment, helps with building fast twitch muscles in the calf that are useful in initiating moves, also helps learn to stretch out the ankle in mae geri and conditions the koshi (ball of foot) as the proper kicking weapon.

Do 10-30 repetitions per foot. Only use weight if you're super well warmed up.

Exercise 2. Ankle bends on a yoga block

This exercise is similar to the above one in that it works the ankle. It is also done on one foot, this time the ball of the foot is planted in the center of the yoga block (brick sized and shaped block made of firm foam). I lower my heel until it touches the floor, then straighten the ankle and lift myself up as high as possible. The ball of the foot must be protruding at the high point, toes curled back, let all the weight of the body rest on the ball of the foot. This exercise does not bend the ankle as much as the previous one, the foot only makes about a 30 degree angle to the floor when the heel is down. However, since this exercise is done without holding on to anything and also standing on a not-so-firm or stable foam brick, it is challenging to do several repetitions without putting down the other foot,



something I try to avoid. To make it even more challenging, I lift my other knee as high as I can, as I'm doing these up and down moves. There are two thicknesses for these bricks. The blue ones (shown in here) are the thinner ones, and the easier ones. There are grey blocks that are thicker and make the exercise even more challenging.

The benefits: it teaches how to extend the ankle and protrude the koshi (ball of foot) properly and how to penetrate it into the target. It strengthens the connector ligaments and tendons around the ankle as the person is trying to stay balanced and making all the micro-adjustments. It makes the ankle stronger, more robust and more versatile. It also strengthens the calf muscle, though not as much as exercise 1. It teaches how to use the tandem (center of body) properly, to adjust for balance. It teaches good posture, for tailbone out, raised shoulders, head leaning forward, all these will negatively affect the ability to stay balanced. One way to check whether you do this exercise correctly, is to make sure that the upper body stays calm, shoulders are down, hands are down and all balancing corrections come from the tandem instead of the shoulders. Also, doing proper abdominal breathing in synch with the moves helps stay balanced.

Exercise 3. Hikite pushups with yoga blocks





As I mentioned in the introduction, many of my students have slumped back and rigid shoulders. Also, many of them – when they start karate – do not have strong enough triceps. This results in improper hikite (pull-back hand) with elbow poking out to the side, fist not rested properly above the hips. Also, when they initiate a zuki punch, the elbow tends to fly outside and do more of a semi-circular sucker-punch rather than a proper linear zuki with the elbow rubbing on the torso as it's executed.

In this exercise, I place two yoga blocks at shoulder distance apart, and rest my fists in the middle of each block, with palm forward, as if I would do an ura-zuki. I try to keep my body as straight as possible from head to heel, then lower myself all the way until my chin touches the floor, then do pushup all the way up, pushing myself as far away from the floor as possible, while keeping the body solid and straight. I find that straddling one ankle over the other makes it a bit more challenging, so I do that too.

I have been challenged in my early career with questions like: “how many pushups can you do?”. I realized, that if people try to do many pushups on a dare or a bet, they tend to do incorrect ones. They don't go deep enough, they don't push all the way up, they try to preserve energy any way they can. So they end up doing many low quality pushups. I recommend that you do fewer repetitions, but of high quality: straight body, alternate from deepest (chin touching floor) to highest (arms fully extended), keeping the body straight, keeping the elbows close to the torso, keeping your palms facing forward, and the fists in such a position to have the Seiken (the knuckles of the index and middle finger) bear the weight and have your wrists straight.

Some of my students will have their elbows poke away from their body even with all this setup. In that case, I stand above them and squeeze their elbows together while they're doing the pushups. Initially, that will decrease the number of pushups they can do, but eventually – with lots of practice and

conditioning – they will be able to increase the repetition count. The collar of the Gi is supposed to stay in contact with the back of the neck throughout the exercise. If a gap shows up, that means that either the shoulders are too high or the neck is not aligned with the spine.

Some karateka have their hikite too low, fists on their belt (obi) or even lower. That tends to make the zuki slower (longer distance from hikite to target) and also makes the trajectory of the fist non-linear, arching upwards toward the target. One cannot do these pushups with the fists starting at the hips. If the fist is too high up, close to the armpit, the shoulder will pop up, and they won't be able to do pushup either. Over time, this exercise will help one find the optimal hikite position for one's body which is a few inches above the hip.



Of course these pushups can be done without yoga blocks. However, using yoga blocks will properly move the fist more back, to touch the rib cage, increasing the range of motion of the hikite. Doing them without the blocks, the fist will stop a few inches in front of the torso. Also, some students don't have conditioned Seiken, and when doing the pushups on the hardwood floor without the blocks, they tend to roll their fists towards the ring and small finger, or just switch to palm pushups.

The benefits: Teaches proper course of action for the arm from hikite all the way to full extension. Increases flexibility of the shoulder. Strengthens triceps and deltoid muscles that are crucial for delivering proper zuki punch. Aligns and strengthens the wrist, conditions the fist and Seiken, makes one familiar with the feeling of proper penetration of the fist into the target. Also teaches proper breathing, for if inhaling on the way down and exhaling on the way up – in synch with the motion – will increase the repetition count one can do. Additionally, it strengthens the core as it keeps the body aligned throughout the motion. Also, as stated above, it helps find the most effective and natural location for hikite. Since the fists stay palm up for the whole exercise, it teaches arm extension without premature wrist rotation (the problem with premature rotation is that it makes elbows poke away from torso, resulting in a circular motion, instead of a forward, linear motion). Once one masters this exercise, one can do effective ura-zuki, then add a wrist rotation just prior to impact, and have a very good gyaku-zuki or oi-zuki. It increases the range of motion for the punch.

Exercise 4. Seiken Choku Zuki Plank





In this exercise, I place a yoga block in the center, open my feet wide and place both my fists in the middle of the block, palm down position. While holding a straight plank and a strong core, I pull back one arm to proper hikite position and hold that position for ten seconds. Then I place my fist back next to the other one on the block, then I pull my other arm back to hikite. I alternate in ten second intervals, while keeping the body in the same position. I try to keep my shoulders parallel to the floor and avoid rotating the pulling-hand-side shoulder away from the floor. Also, I push and extend my punching arm as far away as possible, while maintaining proper armpit squeeze and connected shoulder. Also I try to keep my scapula flat.

The benefits: Teaches proper arm extension and alignment for a strong punch. Teaches proper shoulder and armpit connection. Strengthens the core to avoid sagging hip, and also strengthens the triangle between the shoulders and the center punching position for proper zuki delivery. Helps with focusing punching in the center, rather than to the side. For more advanced training do this without the yoga block, that will additionally condition the Seiken on the hardwood floor, especially with one fist propping up the body at one time.

Exercise 5. Isometric Deep Stances with Weights

In order to make my stances deeper and more connected to the floor, I do stances for one to two minutes while holding heavy kettle bells in my hands. I do this in front of the mirror and analyze the spine alignment and overall body posture. I start with placing my feet in proper position, making sure that in kiba dachi the sokuto (outside edges) are parallel, and in kokutsu-dachi they're perpendicular. In kiba dachi, I push my knees forwards, keep the tailbone under, keep my spine elongated, collar of the Gi touching the back of my neck. As the time is passing, I try to deepen my stance, without compromising the posture. I usually do this exercise after doing exercises 1 or 2, so that my ankles are already

conditioned and stretched. I also squeeze my butt cheeks and try to direct the energy from the tailbone up and front through the tandem.



In kokutsu dachi, the rear foot feels the same as in kiba dachi. The front foot's koshi is on the floor, bearing less weight than the rear foot, the front kakato (heel) is lightly touching the floor – sometimes I move it up and down half an inch tapping it on the floor. The back foot is firm and stable, the back sokuto firmly planted, the back ankle bent to maximum. Knees are pushed away from each other, butt cheeks squeezed, innards pulled upwards towards the stomach. Front knee aligned with the front toes, both pointing straight forward. Hips are kept parallel to the floor.



I also practice zenkutsu dachi and neko-ashi-dachi stances, but for some reason, I feel that the biggest benefits come from kiba-dachi and kokutsu-dachi stances for this exercise.

I do these for 60 to 120 seconds and I use kettle bells weighing between 40 to 100 lbs. It's natural for the muscles to start shaking towards the end of the sequence.

The benefits: Improves the stances, makes them deeper. Teaches proper foot positioning, ankle bending, knee-toe alignment. Drives the stance deep into the floor. Improves the performance of kata. Strengthens the quads and makes them more explosive. Teaches proper abdominal breathing, because the heavy weights pull down the shoulders and prevent from upper, shoulder breathing.

Teaches proper spinal posture, tailbone under. Also teaches the proper feeling of shooting the energy from the tailbone up through the tandem.

Exercise 6. The binoculars

I lay on my back and put my palms under my butt. I push out my heels, pull the toes towards the shin, thus protruding the heels as much as possible. It's similar to the feeling I have when I kick ushiro-geri. I keep my knees locked in straight position, I try to eliminate even the slightest bend in the knees, and



keep them this way throughout the exercise.

I make large circles with my heels in the air, with legs vertical on top, and almost touching the floor at the bottom. I do them from outside in – meaning I raise my legs towards the outside (similar to a mikazuki geri feel) and come down in the middle, I do 50 repetitions. Then I switch the direction and raise the legs in the middle and come down on the outside. I try to do the circles as smooth as possible, keep them circular and with the largest radius I can. I inhale on the way down and start the exhale at the bottom. I try to relax my abdomen on top of the circle and quickly tense it at the bottom to give a fast acceleration. I try to think of my leg as a circular pendulum that I have to “push” hard at the bottom of the circle, but it does the rest of the circular motion of its own. The extended leg is the radius, and the center is the hip ball joint. For advanced mode, I tie weights on my ankles. This makes the exercise really hard.

The benefits: Lubricates, conditions and increases the range of motion of the hip ball joints. Strengthens the cruciate ligaments in and around the knee. Strengthens the abdomen and the quads. Strengthens the muscles around the hip that help with mawashi, mikazuki and yoko geri kicks. Builds muscle memory for the heel out – locked knee – for the correct impact of ushiro geri. Helps proper breathing from the lower abdomen and in synch with the motion. I also noticed that this exercise will alleviate knee pain and speed up healing. If you do this with knees bent – even the slightest – you will get less benefits. I recommend to do fewer but correct repetitions, rather than many with the knees bent.

Exercise 7. Knee and leg lifts with ankle weights

I tie 5 lbs or 10 lbs weights on my ankles and do knee and leg lifts. Lifting my knee to the front, like a preparation for mae geri, I keep my support foot pointing forward, heel down, toes forward. I try to lift the knee as high as possible, while keeping body at same height, or even dipping a bit. I try to keep my



heel close to the groin and bend the ankle and toes up. In the left picture, my heel is too far away from my body, it's not correct. In the picture on the right, the heel is close to groin, knee is up, supporting ankle bent, it is properly executed. When the heel leaves the floor, I try to squeeze it close to my buttock, almost trying to kick my own butt. I try to finish with the knee high up at the most acute angle. I do the first few repetitions slow, then gradually increase the execution speed to maximum possible. There's no danger to the joints doing this exercise fast, so I try to push myself to the limit. As a side note, I also do full mae geri kicks with weights, but I need to be careful, because the ankle weight swinging away from my body has a tendency to overstretch my knee, so I only do mae geri at medium speed.

I also do side leg lifts with ankle weights. I keep my knee straight, my heel out, my toes pulled up, similar feeling as in the exercise 6, with the sokuto (outside edge of foot) in horizontal position. Since the knee is locked, there's no danger for knee injury. I swing my leg gradually higher. The last few repetitions I try to do very slow and hold the highest position for a second. I find it very hard to do so, especially with the 10 lbs weight. I keep my supporting ankle bent, the supporting knee slightly bent, proper hikite and

proper front elbow connection to torso. I also try keep my body in a vertical plane, but since I'm naturally not that flexible, I have a tendency to lean a bit in – something that I'm trying to fix. After each repetition, I stand up vertically to a neutral position, shoulders horizontal, spine straight and vertical.



The benefits: For the front knee lifts, it strengthens the three hamstring muscles (biceps femoris, semitendinosus and semimembranosus muscles) especially at the moment of lifting the heel towards the buttock in an accelerated move. It strengthens the hips flexor muscles in the process of lifting the knee. It helps with the lower abdomen assisting with the move, for a proper squeeze will improve the knee lift. It helps with increasing the knee height. If I do this exercise consistently, I notice a marked improvement in my mae geri, in terms of speed, height and the ability to penetrate the target perpendicularly, rather than brushing my foot upwards on the target.

The side leg lifts strengthen the side hip flexor. It improves the side kicks (yoko kekomi and yoko keage). Teaches proper leg connection (knee, ankle and sokuto) for a proper delivery of yoko kekomi. I find

that when I try to do high kicks to the side I am limited both by range of motion and by the lack of muscle strength. It's very hard to make big advances in side flexibility – at least at my age. However, if I strengthen the muscles, I notice that I can actually deliver effective kicks at the upper boundary of my flexibility range.

Exercise 8. Hikite conditioning at the mirror

I stand next to the mirror, right heel and sokuto firmly touching the wall. I stand in a narrower yoi dachi. My right shoulder is touching the mirror. I perform Seiken choku zuki (straight punch to the center) with the hips kept straight. Then I switch to right hand jodan age uke (high block) with rotated hip, followed by left Seiken choku zuki and hip back to forward position. As the mirror side arm is coming back from a zuki or jodan age uke into the hikite position, I need to rotate my wrist early, that will bring my elbow close to my ribcage. Otherwise, I will hit the mirror with my elbow and it will leave a bruise on it, a reminder that I still have more to practice. On the way back to hikite, my elbow will rub on my Gi and not on the mirror. I also try to move the hikite all the way back to the middle of my body thickness, about a fist higher than my hips. I also try to focus on squeezing the small and ring fingers in my fist, that will make a good connection in the arm tendons and keep the elbow in proper position. Sometimes I squeeze a light tissue paper with my small and ring fingers into my palm. You can do this next to a wall as well, but I found that the mirror, being a smooth surface, does not cause friction bruises on my skin.



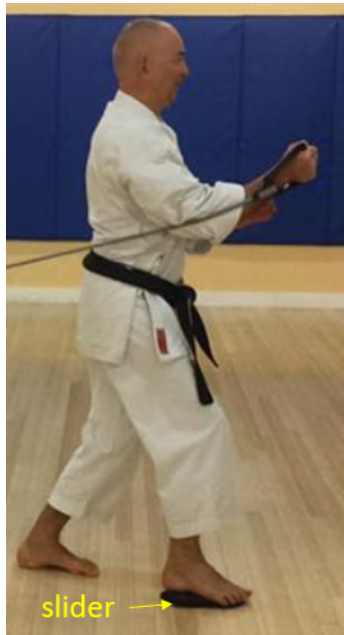
The benefits: improves course of action for zuki punch, age uke and return to proper hikite. The mirror acts as an objective feedback, if your elbow is bruised, you need to fix your movement.

Exercise 9. Zenkutsu dachi step with bunjee cord.



I tie a bunjee cord to a wall mount, hold it in my right arm and step forward from a left zenkutsu dachi into a right zenkutsu dachi, while keeping my right hand in hikite position. I focus on keeping the body straight at all times, center connected, tailbone under. I make sure the support foot (left foot) grips the floor from the start and that the toes are neither lifted, nor prematurely rotated left. I keep my left heel planted and anchored at all times. I keep my shoulders down, neck straight, collar of my Gi resting on my neck. I initiate the move by tensing the left hamstring and moving the left knee forward. The right heels comes a bit off the floor, but I try to keep close to the floor, right ball of foot hovering over the floor.

For added difficulty, I put a slider plate under my right (moving) foot. This will prevent me from initiating the motion by pushing with the rear foot and rather focus the proper squeezing from the front



foot and the inner thighs. Once the move is properly executed, I add full extension of the right hand to perform an oi zuki. I lock down and hold the final extended position for a few seconds to condition the body and build muscle memory. The bunjee cords come in different strengths, I noticed that the stronger the cord, the more and better feedback and conditioning it provides. I start with a few slow repetitions, then I go to full speed.

The benefits: Teaches proper course of action for stepping in zenkutsu dachi. Teaches proper transition, body connection and oi zuki. Strengthens the core, improves breathing and its synchronization with the motion. Improves front (initiating) foot connection to floor, alignment, hamstring tonus and connection. Keeps inner thighs engaged and reduces air gap between them at the transition point. Teaches proper linear course of action of the fist. Keeps the punching side elbow inside. Improves execution speed. Improves rear quads extension at the finish of the move, thus extending the range of motion and reach of the stepping zenkutsu dachi and oi zuki.

A few more thoughts on the nine exercises

I recommend working these exercises into your routines. Make sure you're properly warmed up. Gradually increase the repetition count, weights, cord strength and execution speed. Do same number of repetitions on both sides – that goes without saying.

Body, Mind and Spirit

The Body is characterized by the combined state of one's muscles, joints, range of motion, posture, balance, stamina, reflexes and such. In computer terms the Body is the Hardware.

The Mind is characterized by the combined state of one's inward focused capabilities like the overall mental health, inner balance, being in-tune and mastering one's own body, focus, optimism, etc. In computer terms the Mind is the low-level Software drivers that operate the body.

While the Body and the Mind are (mostly) centered on self, the Spirit is our outwardly manifestation. This is how we're perceived by the world around us. Through the Spirit is how we make an impact and leave a lasting legacy. It ranges from little things like how we're talking to others, how we project outwards, to what decisions we make in difficult times, how we mentor and teach others, how we read others' intentions and how we deescalate high tension situations. In computer terms, the Spirit is the high level application that serves the user community.

Of course, there's no sharp dividing line between these three characteristics of a person. A small change in the mindset can alter the body, for example the same face can look quite differently when frowning or smiling. Being optimistic and in-tune with one's body can make a big difference in one's spirit and impact on the people around.

Learning and mastering karate is a lifelong pursuit. At some point during this journey, one evolves from being a karate *practitioner* and becomes a *karateka*. This roughly happens around the time one reaches black belt. At that point the karateka will naturally start working on sharpening the body, the mind and the spirit.

Below I describe some of the habits and exercises I developed over time that help me become a better karateka and also a better person.

Body

In addition to the nine exercises described above, I try to weave into my daily routine a host of micro-exercises to maximize my karate conditioning. Here are a few:

- When I am in the elevator by myself, I do some karate move (kiba dachi, kokutsu dachi, gyaku zuki, empi uchi, etc.) Even if the ride takes 20" I try to use the time to my advantage
- Brushing teeth while standing on one foot. If you're a karateka, there's no reason for brushing teeth while standing on both feet.
- Opening heavy doors with tate-shuto (vertical shuto), with good core connection and straight posture
- Opening heavy doors with a horizontal push-bar by using gedan barai or sukui uke, with nice rotation on impact.
- Skiing on one leg, other leg holding steady on the side in yoko kekomi
- Bicycling without holding the handle bar, hands stretched out in the "parting of the clouds" movement from the beginning of Unsu kata.
- Standing in line in kosa dachi or on one foot, other foot tucked behind the knee of first foot.
- Pivoting on heel when walking barefoot at home
- Closing the microwave oven with gentle zuki punch, nice rotation.
- Breaking walnuts with tetsui uchi.
- Hitting flies in mid-flight with uraken uchi or haishu uchi.
- Doing ankle stretches on the curb while waiting for somebody.
- Holding a steady stance while standing in waist high water in the ocean surf.

Mind

- I try to be aware of – and regulate – my breathing. Especially in the binoculars exercises (exercise #6) if I start an aggressive exhale just before my foot reaches the lowest point in the circular path, I feel that my whole body is performing better and I can do more repetitions.

- Meditation. We live in a crazy and fast world. I tend to do longer mokuso, especially after a long and exhausting karate workout. On a good day, I can calm my body from head to toes and reach a really calm and peaceful state of mind. When my fingers - and especially my toes - completely relax by themselves, it's indicative that I reached a good state. The more physically demanding the karate workout was, the more I feel the need for the meditation and the deeper the relaxation.
- Awareness of the body. I constantly study my body through the mirror and through videos. For example, it took me quite a while to realize that I did not turn my toes enough at the beginning rotation of Heian Shodan. I thought I did, but the video showed something else. I try to mentally scan my body from head to toe, focusing on posture, facial expression, breathing, knee-toe alignment, etc. This is not just in karate context, but everywhere. When I'm writing a program on my computer, I totally miss out on body awareness, I just focus on the characters on the screen, and I know that's not a good thing. But when I stand up and do something, move around or do sports, I try to constantly monitor my body, as if I would see it from an outside viewer's perspective. When my mental image is closely matching what a video camera sees, that's an indicator of success. Sometimes it does happen, but many times not. I think I'm getting better, but there is so much more to improve on this angle.
- Controlling emotions. In my youth I used to get angry way more often than nowadays. My heart rate would go up, my breathing would become shallow, my left ear would turn hot and red. Sometimes I had to pour cold water on my ear to cool it down. I believe breathing exercises really help with controlling emotions. Long, continuous, smooth breaths can do wonders. Another exercise I find helpful, when somebody says or does something negative towards me, I try to totally reverse that and respond with utmost kindness. This is hard at the beginning – kind of goes against our human nature – but once you get used to it, it's really cool. It puts you in control and results in a better overall outcome for both.
- Connection to nature. Our urban lifestyle disconnected us from nature. We need nature for a peaceful and balanced mind. Walking through a lush forest and breathing in the impeccable and oxygen-rich air does wonders. I try to spend at least one day a week outdoors skiing, kayaking, windsurfing, hiking, mountain biking, etc. I've been doing this since early childhood – thanks to my father who taught me all these activities. I would be a different – and lesser person – without a strong connection to nature.
- Humility. No matter how successful we are in our personal or professional lives, in the grand scheme of things we're small and feeble. When I am out in the ocean windsurfing, I am just a speck, a collection of molecules squeezed into a neoprene suit. The size and power of the ocean dwarves me. My karate rank is totally meaningless out there. I like pushing myself to the limit but stay respectful to the immense power of nature. I need to be humble to be able to return to shore in one piece.

Spirit

The Spirit builds upon the Body and the Mind. It has to do how we carry ourselves in the world, how we interact with others. There are a few exercises described below that I found very useful in honing and perfecting our karate (and overall) spirit.

- Once we master our body and mind, we should have enough bandwidth and energy to pay attention to others. The first thing is turning towards the other person, facing them fully, looking at their face, reading their facial and body language, get in tune with them, practice empathic listening. You should be able to replay what the other person said if you paid proper attention. Try to smile with them, and cry with them. Try to reiterate what they said, to really show that you're with them, fully engaged. Use your imagination to put yourself in their shoes, what are they going through, what issues they have. This is a skill that does not come natural to a bunch of engineers. Through practice, you can get better and this and then people will open up to you, will be more candid, will trust you more, will want to work with you more often. And, you'll be able to read their faces, emotions and most importantly their intentions much better. The best way to win a fight, physical or otherwise, is to prevent it, talk it out even before escalation. Paying attention to - and being in tune with - your partners is a key skill to master. It may be even more important than karate itself. One simple dojo exercise is when my partner is trying to poke my stomach with a finger from close distance. I need to react quickly to block and sweep his wrist to the side. The best way is to read their face and look for tiny clues when they're about to make the move. A slight change in the eyelids, a tensing vein on the neck, a near-imperceptible move of a toe may signal the intent to strike. Another exercise I found helpful is while I speak or explain, I look at the students' faces and try to detect their wish to speak or ask question, even before they raise their hand or open their mouth. There's always some early sign that signals their intent. It's the zanshin that we are all supposed to practice in the dojo.
- We need to learn how to project ourselves outward. How we talk to others. Body needs to be turned towards the partner, good posture, looking in the eyes but simultaneously seeing and observing their whole body. Our voice needs to be directed at them and we need to constantly read their face to see how our words and persona affects them in that particular situation. Our projection can range from very kind and understanding when talking to somebody in trouble all the way to maximal Kiai when delivering a finishing blow on an adversary. It's the same skill, just applied with different intensity and different purpose. I ask my senior students to teach the class while I observe from the sideline. Some – mostly the introvert – folks tend to talk while looking at the floor. I stop them and direct their projection to the student that's being coached. Also, some tend to focus just on one student, while ignoring the other students in the dojo. I teach them to look around each of the students and pay attention to all of them. We practice Kiai – just like sensei Nishiyama taught us, to stop an incoming attack, just by our voice and projection, without physical contact.
- Making decisions in difficult situations. There are times, when one needs to make a decision between right or wrong, between tactical or strategic, between self-interest or generosity, between taking or giving. Sometimes the decision needs to be made in a second, sometimes there is plenty of time. One way I found to hone this skill is by imagining how my action would be judged way later by my family, by my colleagues? Or imagine how a person I really respect would handle that situation? Which decision will make me proud years from now? If one of my sons would write a story about me, how would they portray my action? To a large part this is rooted in the flight-or-fight reflex nested deep in our reptilian brain. One way to hone this skill in the dojo is respectful sparring exercises, where one needs to constantly make decisions about blocking, attacking, moving in, retreating, sidestepping, tricking partner in, play with timing, with

distance, and being fully alert and in tune with the constantly changing dynamics of the pairwise exercise. These exercises build character that a karateka will carry beyond the walls of the dojo.

Final thoughts

I am on a personal journey. I am better than I was, but I have way more to learn. The exercises I described in this paper, I was able to internalize them, but in no way have I mastered them all. At the beginning of my karate career I wanted to prove myself to others, make sure that I was relevant, I was noticed, I was important. I tried to outdo others in strength and speed and sheer energy and time I put into karate. After 38 years of training I have changed. Now, I strive for inner and outer balance, harmony, efficiency, kindness and the service of others. I don't want to prove that I'm better than others – I'm not. I was fortunate and blessed to have had the opportunity to train with the karate greats of our times: Stuparu, Jorga, Enoeda, Kanazawa, Nishiyama, Kawasoe, Okazaki, Osaka and Tatsuya. I also feel grateful for the Pacific Northwest Karate region (PNKA) providing a good ecosystem for karate mastery and growth. I want to thank the regional senseis for the decades long coaching, mentoring and countless seminars and training opportunities they provided. I feel energized to grow this knowledge and pass it on to others.

I cherish learning, I respect and feel grateful to those who are willing to teach me. I take notes after each seminar I attend. I study, I write down my thoughts, I videotape myself and my students. I make sketches of the karate stances and moves. I try to learn and study continuously, no matter what rank I hold. For me, it was a lifelong pursuit. I hope to continue it.