

# Stances and Stepping First

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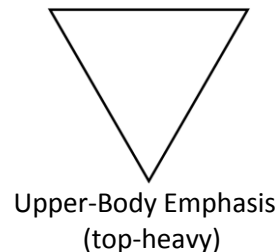
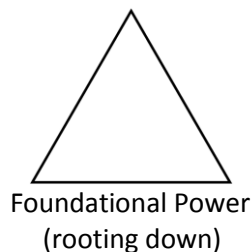
## Stances

### Overview

- One must learn to stand properly before learning to walk. It's well worth the time and effort to put extra emphasis on gaining a strong foundation, as the stability and strength of all techniques will be built upon it.
- Carefully study the "Soku" chapter in *Building Warrior Spirit with Gan/Soku/Tanden/Riki*, including specific exercises to condition the toes, feet, ankles and legs for both strength and flexibility.
- Shorin-Ryu has only a handful of stances, yet they are the keys to foundation and balance from which speed and power will emerge.

### Soku (Foundation)

- Ueshiro Shorin-Ryu is rooted in natural stances characterized by clean straight lines. While the head *always* faces the target directly, the shoulders and hips may be square, angled 45 degrees or 90 degrees relative to the target.
- Rooting down in a stance can be improved by gripping with the toes, optimizing posture (balance and alignment), and placing one's center of gravity lower than the attacker's: so *get low*.
- Consider the concept of two triangles to visualize your stances, one with a wide and stable base vs. the other, top-heavy and unstable.



- All stances should ultimately feel stable and structurally sound, even if your muscles are still developing the strength and flexibility needed to hold them for long periods of time. Every stance should render the practitioner fully prepared to deliver any block or strike *without* moving the feet.
- Research and practice the precise positioning of the feet in all stances for your level, as well as proper weight distribution and body alignment. Our goal is to have stances that yield: (1) long endurance, (2) stability and balance, and (3) flexibility and mobility.

### Stance Measurements

*Yame dachi*: feet shoulder width, toes pointing 45 degrees outward, straight legs but knees not locked.

*Shizentai dachi*: feet 1 to 1.5 fists' width apart; 2 fists' width between the heel of the front foot and toe of the back; front foot straight, back foot angled 45 degrees; 50:50 weight distribution with slight projection forward.

*Zenkutsu dachi*: same as above except front knee bent 45 to 90 degrees relative to the floor, knee directly over the heel (not toe), 60% to 70% weight on the forward foot, back heel (including outer edge) pressed firmly to the floor.

*Jigotai dachi*: both feet angled 45 degrees, knees bent 45 to 90 degrees, knees directly over the heels, chest up and ears in line with the shoulders, 50:50 weight distribution.

*Neko ashi dachi*: same as shizentai dachi (or slightly narrower to protect the groin), back leg bent 45 degrees or more, heel of front foot raised, hips and shoulders angled 45 degrees from the front, chest up and chin pulled back, 90% weight on the back foot.

*Kosa dachi*: same as neko ashi dachi, except the forward foot is instead placed 1 to 2 fists' distance *behind* the heel of the other foot; shin of the rear leg pressing into the calf of the front leg, knees pressed together (to protect the groin); 50:50 weight distribution.

# Stances and Stepping First

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## Stepping First!

### Overview

- The sequence of any Shorin-Ryu technique is *gan (awareness) first, feet next, hands last*, with the goal to *eventually* make them appear simultaneous, “as sunshine streams across a room when a door is opened” [Master Nagamine].
- While every stance should enable the practitioner to deliver a powerful block or strike without moving the feet, “stepping first” (i.e., moving correctly from one stance to the next) allows the karate-ka to (a) set the optimal distance and angle relative to the opponent (ma-ai), (b) wind up the lower body for maximum power generation, and (c) reinforce the rooting down concept so that power gets directed *through* the target instead of dissipated elsewhere.

### Rooting Down

- In addition to the tips listed on page 1 under “Soku (Foundation),” rooting down is improved by:
  1. Lowering the body by going from a high stance to a low stance, or by bending the knees *slightly* in any low stance as the technique makes contact.
  2. Straightening the legs quickly from any low stance (“for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction”).
  3. Rotating the hip downward with the technique.
  4. Transferring more of one's weight onto a supporting foot, either forward towards the opponent, or away as in *neko ashi dachi*.
- In keeping with the concept of economy, the amount of rooting down is ultimately proportional to the amount of force to be delivered or absorbed. As Master Nagamine observes, karate “is a training in efficiency.... For it **enables a person to meet any situation with exactly the right expenditure of effort**, neither too much nor too little.”

### Footwork

- In general, improve foundation by minimizing any unintentional movement of the feet, especially sliding (except in prescribed exercises where covering extra ground is crucial). Train the feet to “skim” across the deck, then lock down all four “corners” (2 on the ball, 2 on the heel). Common mistake is to lift the knife-edge or heel off the deck.
- When changing direction, get the feet as close to their final position as possible before releasing the technique, rotating on the ball of the foot. Such rotation can be performed lightly or with a “drilling down” motion, as if burying the feet in sand.
- When changing height and stepping first, the general rules are:
  1. From any low stance into any high stance: stay low *while* moving in and chambering, once the feet are in place, *then* explode upwards with the technique.
  2. From any high stance into *zenkutsu* or *jigotai dachi*: drop first and chamber, *then*, once the feet are in place, move horizontally towards the target as you deliver the technique.
  3. From any high stance into *neko ashi* or *kosa dachi*: stay high *while* stepping and chambering, once the feet are in place, drop *precipitously* with the technique.
- When stepping first, always keep the upper body balanced over the feet. Common mistake is briefly leaning the head or torso away from the lower body, compromising foundation and risking injury.

### Versatility

- Certain steps require a slow, deliberate motion (intermediate moves, returning to *yoi*, and transitioning between *yoi* and formal attention stance). At the other extreme, the foot may move with maximum speed, as if stepping on hot coals. Similarly, rooting down can be very light, as with the front foot in *neko ashi dachi*, or as powerful as the foot-slam in *Naihanchi kata*. In general, step softly and swiftly into position, then explode with maximum velocity.
- Bear in mind that the feet not only serve to anchor the body, but also to scout out the terrain, take over the opponent's space, and deliver kicking, stomping and sweeping techniques.