

Karate Weapons: Fumio Demura Outlines the History of (and the Karate Techniques Possible With) the Tonfa

by the *Black Belt* Editors

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Think of a martial arts weapon – what do you see? A pair of *nunchaku*, a flashing blade, a Chinese spear? Chances are, you didn't think of karate weapons like the *tonfa*. The *tonfa* hasn't been glamorized in films, and it's one of the less dramatic of the better-known karate weapons. Yet these ancient karate weapons are well-established in the art of *kobudo* (weapons use).

In application and training, the *tonfa* provides a vital link between *kobudo* and karate.

“Kobudo and karate are like the two wheels of a bicycle. They are separate, but they work according to the same principles. To be useful, they have to work together,” says karate weapons and karate techniques expert Fumio Demura, an instructor of both arts who teaches the use of the *tonfa*.



Some of the *tonfa*'s basic techniques are the same as empty hand moves. Here, the same low outside block can be employed empty-handed against a kick or with *tonfa* against a *bo*.

Fumio Demura holds advanced-*dan* rankings in *kobudo* and karate; he has trained in *kendo* and *iaido*; he was the All-Japan karate champion in 1961 and a *Black Belt* Hall of Fame inductee in 1969 and 1975. He sums up his perspective on the *tonfa* as follows: “It doesn't have the popularity of the *nunchaku*, the *sai* or the *bo*. But I'm sure this is only temporary because the *tonfa* is an important weapon in *kobudo*. It's a very effective weapon for fighting and extremely valuable in training, as well.”

How the Tonfa Became One of the Most Versatile Karate Weapons

The tonfa originally did not exist amid the world of karate weapons but rather was an agricultural implement common throughout Eastern Asia. It was the “handle” by which a millstone was turned, so its basic, functional shape was repeated independently in many areas. The long, heavy end of the tonfa (or *tui-fa*, as it was also called) was fitted into a hole in the side of the millstone, and the smaller, handle end of the tool was used to turn the stone to grind rice.

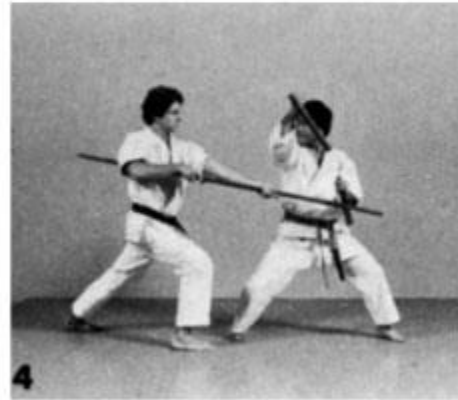
It was in Okinawa that the tonfa first developed into full-fledged karate weapons. The Ryukyu Island chain (of which Okinawa is the largest island) has always suffered a dearth of workable metal, leading the inhabitants to experiment with various kinds of wooden implements.

During the 17th century, the islands were conquered by the Japanese. The invaders forbade native Okinawans to carry weapons – which made spear guns, swords and other “ordinary” weapons that much more difficult to obtain. Even empty-hand combat training was outlawed for a time in the interest of subduing the populace.

In response, the people of Okinawa developed new weapons – weapons that could be disguised as innocent tools. The tonfa was one of these early karate weapons. Any fairly large farm was likely to have a number of millstone handles available, so they could easily be explained away as tools of the trade (in case some Japanese soldier got curious).

On the other hand, the tonfa could – with training in the karate techniques of early Okinawa – easily be put to deadly use.

In those days, the tonfa was simply a convenient, hard and rather sophisticated club, used for striking or throwing. The farmer, trying to defend his fields or his family from occupation forces, might have carried three or four tonfa so he could throw some of these karate weapons at his enemy from a distance while remaining prepared for close battle.



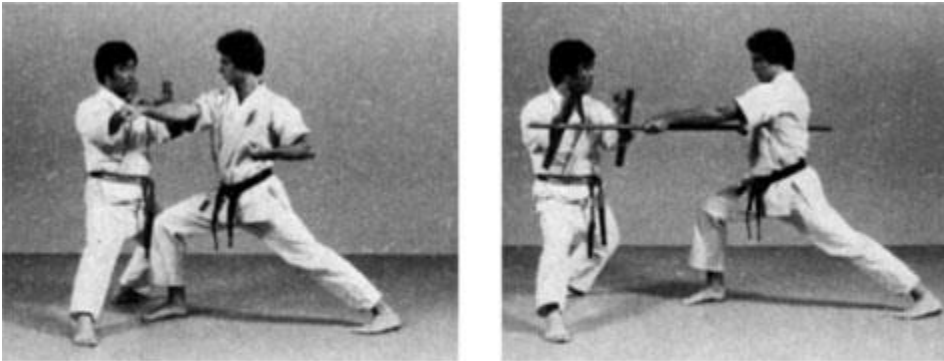
The tonfa is far more versatile than its simple design might indicate. Against a bo, the defender can parry a straight mid-level thrust (1-3), holding the bo outside with one tonfa while he whips the other around in a semi-circle to strike the attacker in the forehead (4-5). In a natural returning motion, he can swing the long end of the tonfa back under his forearm and finish with a powerful strike to the solar plexus (6-8).



Demura does not attempt to block the sword stroke directly, since a skilled swordsman could cut through the hardest wood. Instead, he strikes at the oncoming blade from the side in a circular motion (1-4), blocking the return cut while he swings the other tonfa into play (5). He disarms the swordsman with a strike to the wrist (6) and follows with a full-power blow to the throat (7-8).

Karate Weapons Today: How the Tonfa Figures Into Karate Techniques

Today, while there is no hard-and-fast rule, the art of kobudo generally uses two tonfa – one in each hand. The powerful blocks and the straight, penetrating blows of karate all are strengthened by the tonfa, which can be used in simple adaptation of empty-hand techniques. These karate weapons are held in the hand, their long ends parallel to and under the forearms.



The double outside block is one of the most secure ways to neutralize a blow with tonfa. Though the attacker's range is considerably greater, the attacker is no less vulnerable to a defender's hand techniques.

When holding these karate weapons, each hand becomes, in effect, as hard as the solid white oak or cherry wood of which tonfa are generally made. One can strike at an assailant with karate techniques such as the punch, using the tonfa almost like a large wooden brass knuckle.

The heavy part of the tonfa also can be whipped or swung with great velocity, simply by keeping a loose grip on the handle, using the handle as a swivel and letting the tonfa build momentum by swinging it in a circular path to strike the target.

“You can't swing the tonfa as fast as the nunchaku,” karate techniques expert Fumio Demura says, “but remember, it's a much heavier weapon, too. Nunchaku seem almost like toys – they're small, but their momentum gives them power. Tonfa are quite a bit heavier, so with less motion you get the same or more impact.”

Using two tonfa, swinging them both in figure-8 patterns, the defender can set up a confusing and dangerous defense with these karate weapons.

Or he can change his grip, grasping the tonfa by its long end, and use the handle to trip, strangle or apply various joint-locking techniques to an opponent. Locking techniques are not a major part of the traditional kobudo applications of the tonfa.



Even the handle of the tonfa can be deadly. From a ready position (1), Demura flips his grip on the weapon (2) and strikes just below his opponent's chin (3-4).

But with the emergence of a new, extremely effective police baton, the PR-24 (which is based on the tonfa), these techniques have become more common. (**Editor's Note:** Please remember this article about Fumio Demura and the tonfa was originally published in the February 1982 issue of *Black Belt*.) The PR-24 – essentially a normal police baton with a handle (sometimes a swivel handle) at one end – can be used in a number of ways in police work. If the suspect seems dangerous, the traditional striking techniques of the tonfa can be employed with devastating effect. If the suspect is less dangerous but needs to be physically arrested, the shape of the tonfa is useful for grappling and controlling moves.

"It looks simple, but really it's a hard weapon to use properly," Fumio Demura warns prospective students. Fumio Demura stresses that karate weapons in general are not for the beginner. Karate weapons depend on a solid knowledge of empty-hand karate techniques.

Karate techniques and the integration of karate weapons such as the tonfa rely on good form, good body condition and perfect control, according to Fumio Demura. Otherwise, it can be hard to tell, from the injuries and so on, whether you're learning to defend yourself or trying to commit a ritual murder-suicide. Fumio Demura recommends at least a few years of training in karate techniques before undertaking karate weapons.

But despite the warnings from masters such as Fumio Demura, the tonfa is a superb training device. The weight and length of the weapon alone could help most people develop stronger, more focused karate techniques. And the special uses of the tonfa are ideal for strengthening the hand and the wrist, essential for power in certain types of strikes.

The Physicality of Karate Weapons: The Tonfa and the Human Body

Swinging the tonfa requires a snap of the wrist not unlike that used in the last instant of a punch.

Developing control – for which you must be able to stop the circular movement of the weapon by gripping harder on the handle – is very much a matter of hand strength. The muscles of the hand and wrist become greatly developed through training with the tonfa.

“Many people think the key to powerful hand technique is having strong, invulnerable knuckles,” says karate techniques master Fumio Demura. “So they try all kinds of conditioning methods for the knuckles. People even break their own knuckles, hoping the fist will become stronger. But the key to a strong fist is the strength of the hand and the wrist, not the knuckles at all. A backfist or a vertical fist punch should end with a strong snap of the wrist, which can be enough to send an opponent flying.”

How Competition Training Affects Karate Techniques and the Use of Karate Weapons

Fumio Demura believes that American-style competition may discourage using the wrist in hand techniques. In full-contact karate competition, padded gloves and the general denigration of technique detract from proper wrist use. And in point karate, the idea is to score, not to garner every last bit of power. So with a combination like this, Fumio Demura believes, it’s not surprising that use of the wrist is a little neglected in American karate. But Fumio Demura – an All-Japan karate champ and *Black Belt* Hall of Fame member – certainly doesn’t underrate the value of competition.

“Competition is good,” Fumio Demura says, “but it should only be about 10 percent of karate training. People who train mostly for competition are going to lose the mystery of the art, and they could miss out on technical knowledge, too.”

But training with the tonfa is a valuable accompaniment to competition training or sparring for improvement of karate techniques. Many tonfa techniques are the same as empty-hand karate techniques except that the weapon projects a few inches in front of the hand and along the length of the forearm, increasing the strength of strikes and blocks.

Training in karate techniques with this kobudo weapon not only develops the muscular strength of the hand and wrist but also aids in developing good form in karate techniques. In that sense, it is a crucial link between kobudo and karate – it accustoms the student to karate weapons while it also contributes to his or her empty-hand karate techniques.