

Tan - Barbell



Here a student of the Jundokan *dojo* in Okinawa is using a modern barbell like a *tan* to help strengthen his Legs. *Tan* and barbells have always been interchangeable, using whichever comes to hand. This photograph was taken in 1973.



Takayoshi Nagamine, headmaster of the *Matsubayashi* school of Shotokan *karate*, using the *tan* to offer resistance while working his legs doing squats, during training at his Kodokan *dojo* in Kiuna, Okinawa, in 2006.



Kosuke Yonamine training with the *tan* at the author's Shinseidoan *dojo* in Perth, Western Australia, in 1998.



Mario Higaonna using a modern barbell as a *tan* at his Yoyogi *dojo* in Tokyo in 1973.



Satoshi Taba of the Jundokan *dojo*, making it look easy.

The *tan* is perhaps one of the more immediately recognizable tools to the Western eye, its shape and form being so close to the modern barbell found in gymnasiums the world over. However, the range of exercises using the *tan* differs greatly from the kind of lifting generally associated with the Western barbell. This is not to suggest that one method of training is in any way superior or more insightful than the other when it comes to building the body's strength and ability to withstand impact; rather, the exercises involving the *tan* are pointed more directly toward the techniques and postures found in *karate* practice.

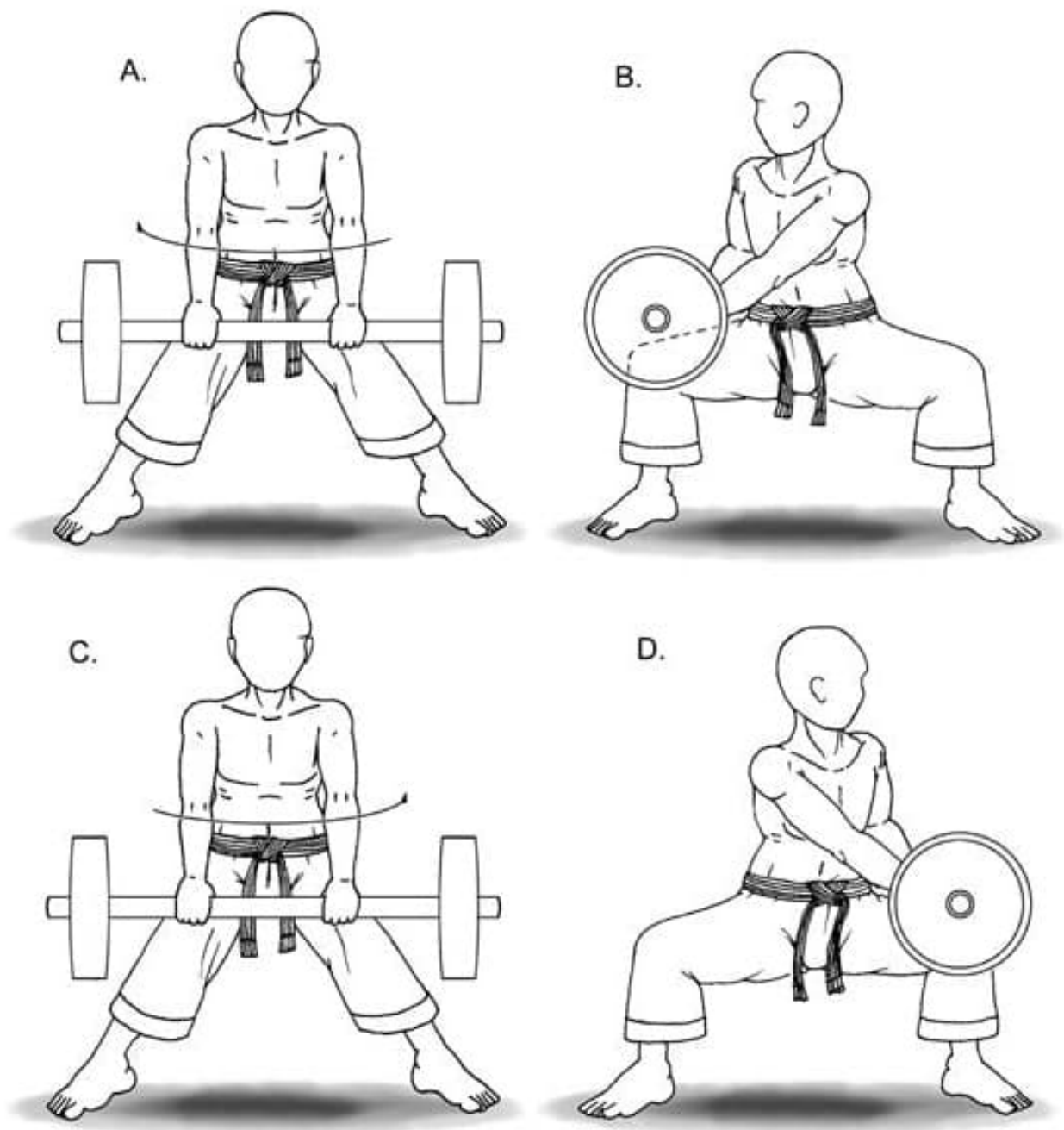
Two large stones, a length of rope, and a shaft of strong wood were all that was needed to construct the early versions of the *tan*. Later, with the arrival of railways and mechanized farming equipment in China and Okinawa, iron wheels of different sizes and weights became more common. Cement, too, poured into molds made horn buckets on either end of a stout post and allowed to set were also used. Regardless of the material employed, the basic concepts remain the same today as they have always been—use whatever materials are at hand, build with caution, and use with care. What follows are five of the many different exercises that can be done with this tool, each one targeting a different part of the body. It is important to remember however, that *karate* requires that your whole body be used in the execution of technique. *Hojo undo* is no different in this regard and the breath, the body, and the mind must all play their part in the working of each tool. To do otherwise is to invite accident or injury.



The ton in use, as illustrated in an old Chinese manual on martial arts.

I acknowledge that these days science is often adopted to bolster the modern approach to all things physical. Despite this, my approach is not to educate *karateka* in ways of achieving peak physical performance in the Olympic athlete sense, but to show something of the training methods developed and used in a time before scientific analysis had entered into the *karateka*'s vocabulary.

This book is as much an homage to those who have gone before us and who Laid the foundations for the traditional training so many people around the world still find value in, to this day, as it is a manual of physical training. Like every other aspect of *karate*, *hojo undo* requires us to look beyond the physical, to look inward to our own sense of ingenuity and creativity, and to draw upon such attributes to make progress—to cultivate the virtues of hard work and patience. In the mind of those serious about their training, *hojo undo* will always bring to mind the maxim: "*Karate* does not cultivate a person's true character; it reveals it."



Exercise 1

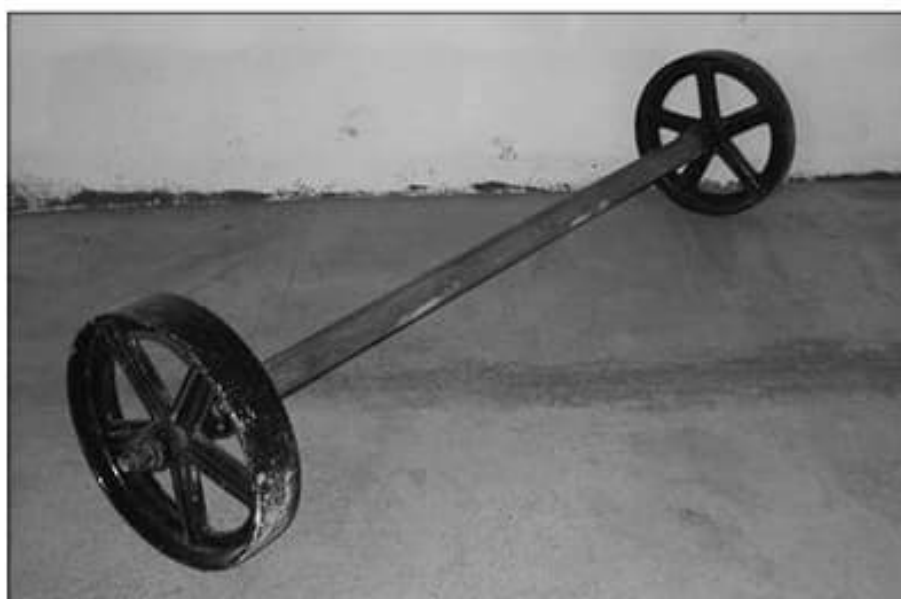
After lifting the *tan*, with a straight back and using the leg muscles to take the strain, stand with the legs wide enough apart to be able to drop into *shiko dachi*, holding the *tan* as shown in the starting position (Figure A). This exercise focuses on the torso, the leg muscles of the upper thigh, and the connection between these and the postures often found in *kata* from the *Naha-te* tradition, such as *sdyunchin* and *sanseiru*, and from *Shari-te*, *naihanchin*, or *tekki*, as that series of *kata* are known outside Okinawa.

From the starting position, inhale first before twisting to the right and dropping into *shiko dachi* (Figure B). Exhaling with the drop, the outward breath, the body dropping, and the twist all end at the same time. Take care not to allow the rear leg to buckle. While you turn to the right and sit in *shiko dachi*, the left leg tends to buckle. You must push it back and try to maintain a correct *shiko dachi* posture. Reverse the movement by straightening the legs (Figure C), inhaling through the nose, and twisting the body to the opposite side (Figure D). Again, remember to keep both legs locked into a good stance.

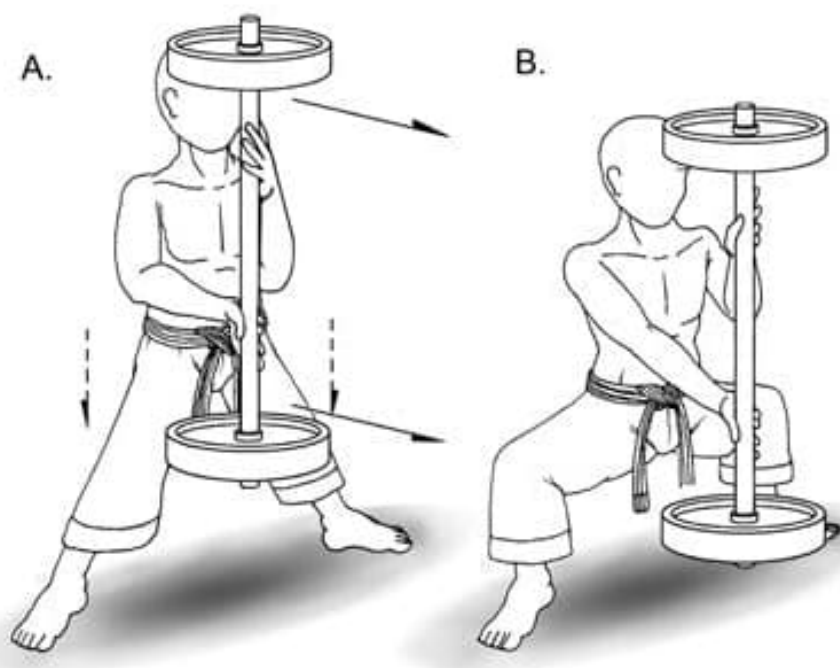


The inhalation lasts until the body is upright (halfway through the maneuver) before becoming an exhalation through the mouth. Once again, the movement and the breath should end in synchronized harmony. The continuous rising and falling works the legs in the same way as squatting, while the twisting of the torso improves also strength in that part of the body. Take care not to over twist or let the rear leg buckle inward.

Keep the straight and remember to Jet the legs do the lifting.



A traditional *tan* made from wood and two iron wheels. This *tan* was made by Richard Barrett and is used in his private dojo in Almeria, Spain.

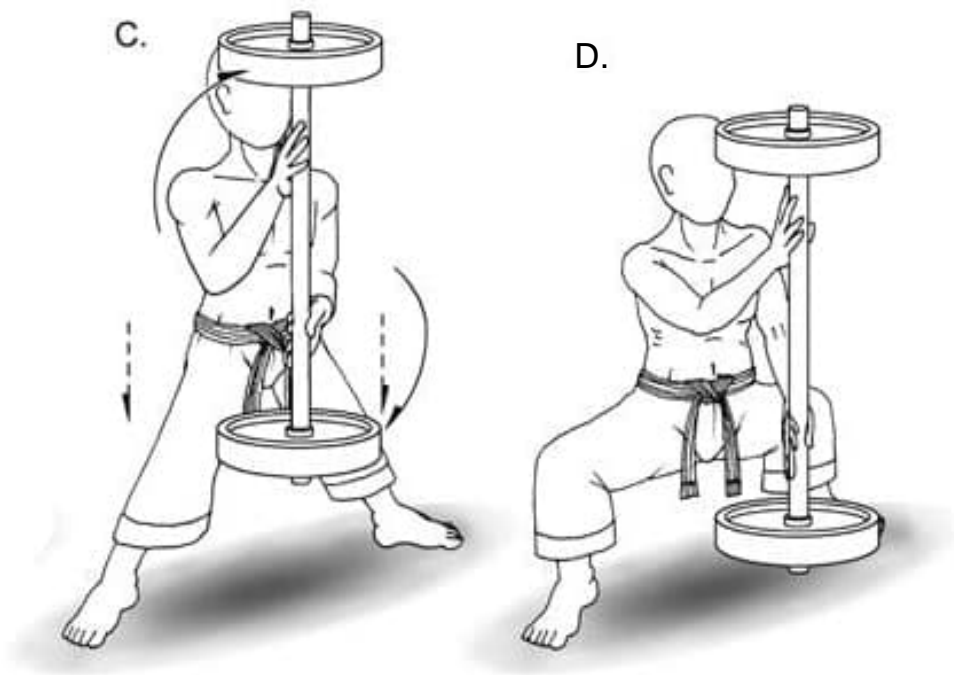


Exercise 2

Holding the *tan* with the hands pointing in opposite directions along the shaft, assume the starting posture with the tool held in a vertical position, close to the body, and the armpits closed (Figure A). Inhale before dropping into *shiko dachi*, straightening the arms while you do so (Figure B). This mimics the *torn uchi* (tiger strike) technique found in many *kata*.

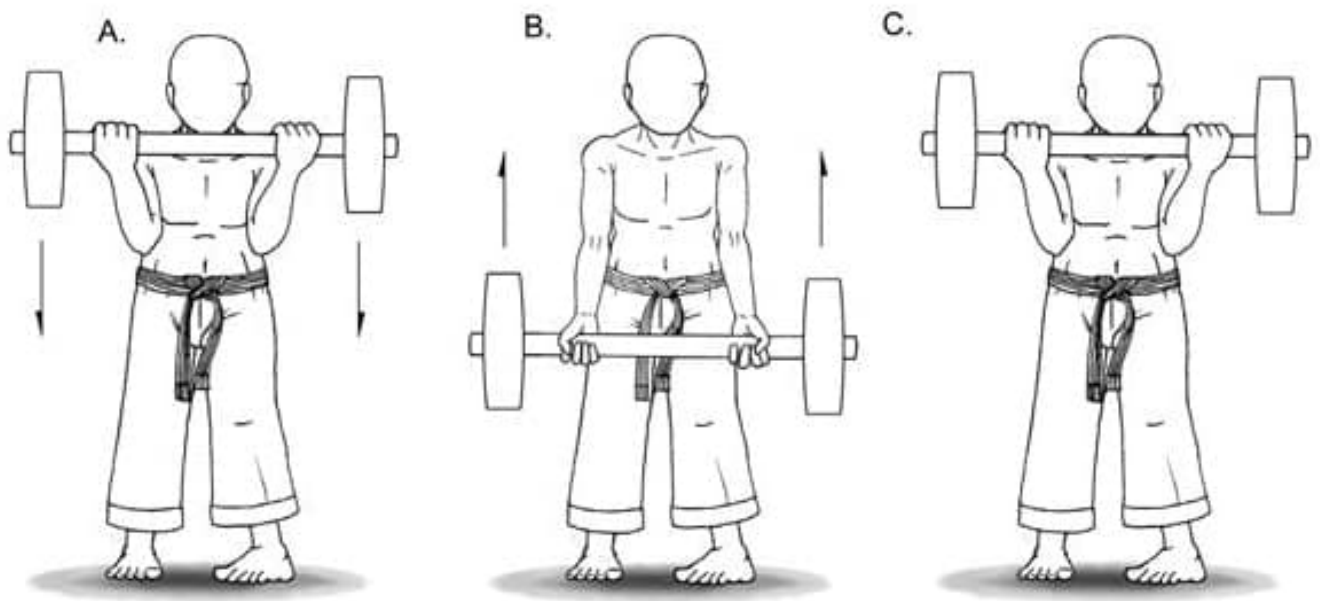


The author aged 40, conditioning his forearms with the *ion* at his Shinsaidokan dojo in Perth, Western Australia in 1995,



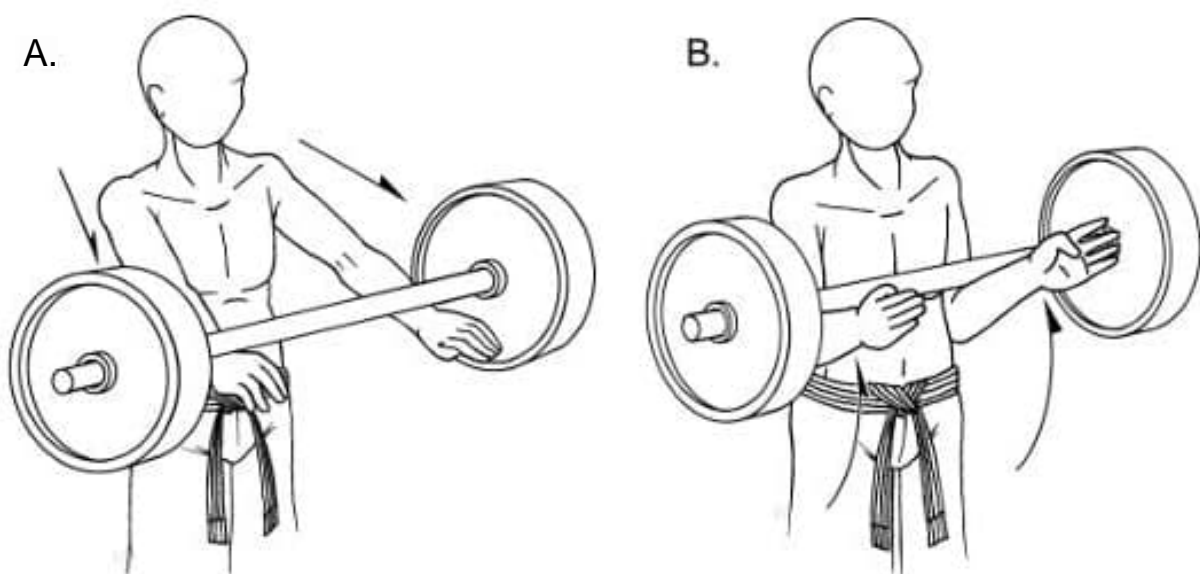
Reverse the movement by standing up while inhaling, drawing the arms back toward the body, mimicking the *mawashi uke* (two-handed swinging block) and twisting the *tan* 180 degrees (Figure C). Then drop back into *shiko dachi* and straighten the arms once more, while exhaling (Figure D). Keep the elbows tucked in and the armpits closed as much as possible throughout the exercise.

A rhythmical and continuous movement should be maintained until the anticipated number of repetitions has been successfully completed, remembering all the time that the challenge is as much a mental one as it is physical. Start with a small number of repetitions and then, as time passes and strength levels improve, increase that number to a maximum of ten in any one set. The link between this exercise and the *mawashi uke/tora uchi* combination found in many *kata* is a clear one, and a strong sense of visualizing this technique can often help when the weight of the *tan* is beginning to make its presence felt through the buildup of lactic acid in tired muscles.



Exercise 3

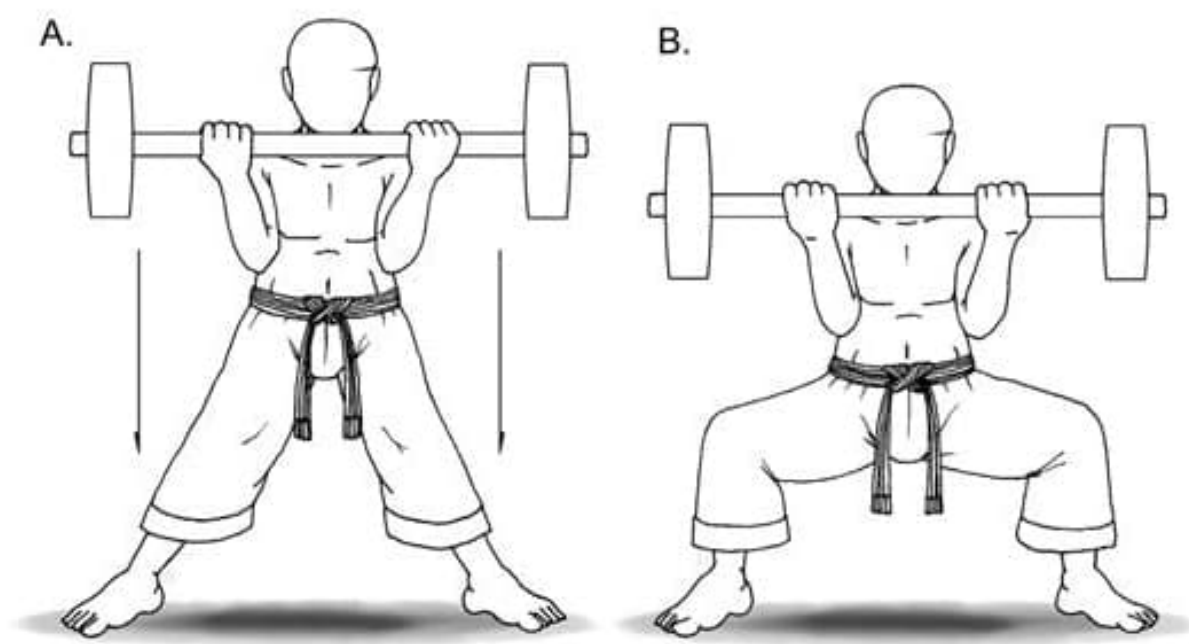
Adopting a *sanchin dachi*, hold the *tan* in both hands as shown (Figure A). With the elbows tucked in and supported by the front of the body, inhale through the nose, and then lower the forearms while the breath is released and timed to end when the arms reach their full drop (Figure B). Inhale sharply and at the same time return the arms to the starting posture (Figure C). Harmony of breath and body movement is essential, as is the adoption of a correct stance. Having completed the maneuver, step forward into *sanchin dachi* in a slow and deliberate manner before repeating the exercise. *Sanchin kata* footwork (*embusen*) can be followed (but without the turn) or you can simply decide on a number of steps backward and forward, and complete them. Either way, the arms, particularly the bicep and tricep muscles of the upper arm, receive a powerful workout and become all the stronger as a result.



Exercise 4

Standing in *sanchin dachi*, this exercise begins with the *tan* resting on the back of the forearm with the arms held out in front of the body. From this position, the arms are lowered slowly, allowing the *tan* to roll toward the wrists (Figure A). Turning the palms toward each other and the hands slightly upward to check the *tan*, tilt the forearms back, and allow the elbows to drop a little, thus letting the *tan* roll back toward the body (Figure B). Step forward into *sanchin dachi*, and repeat the exercise.

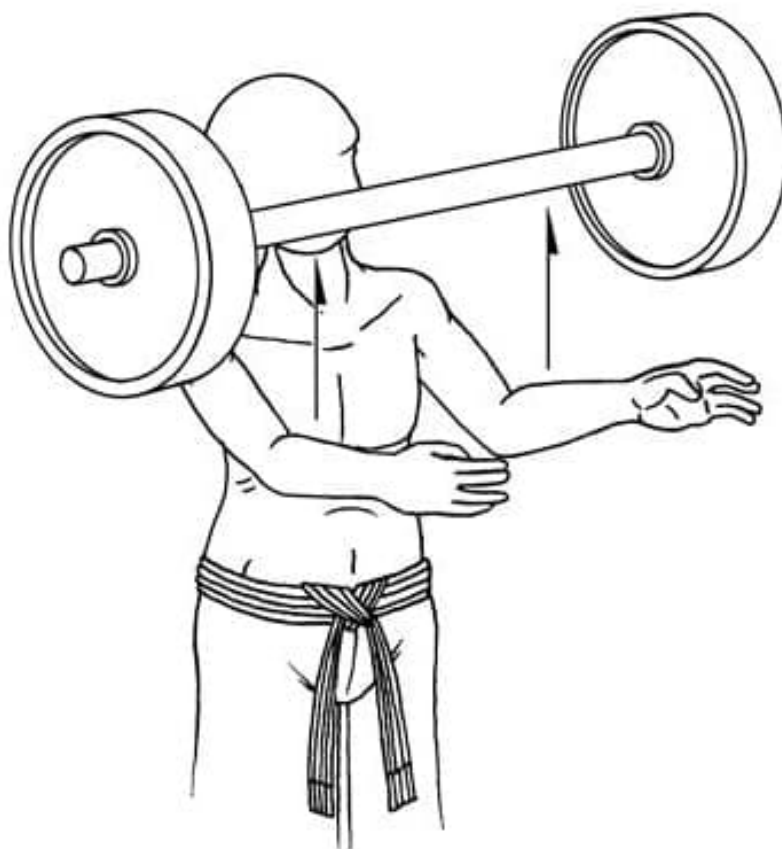
A variation in this exercise can be done by turning the arms on their side, with the palms of the hands facing each other, and following the same maneuver. However, under no circumstances should the *tan* be allowed to roll on the inner forearms. The proximity of the body's blood supply and lack of protective musculature makes this zone a no-go for such punishing training. It is, however, a target we all need to keep in mind when defending against others. A well-placed pinch or grab here from fingers that have been strengthened by training in *hojo undo* is a very powerful weapon indeed.



Exercise 7

Begin by holding the *tan* with the legs open wide enough to allow the body to drop into *shiko dachi* (Figure A). Inhale through the nose; while the body drops, strengthen the legs and maintain a straight back (Figure B). Do not allow the spine to curve or the shoulders and hips to become misaligned. The posture adopted should be the same as the one used in *kata*, and no deeper. While focusing the mind on the leg muscles in the thigh, hold the position for a few seconds before exhaling through the open mouth and, at the same time, pushing the legs straight. This movement brings a return to the starting position (Figure A) from where the desired number of repetitions can be made.

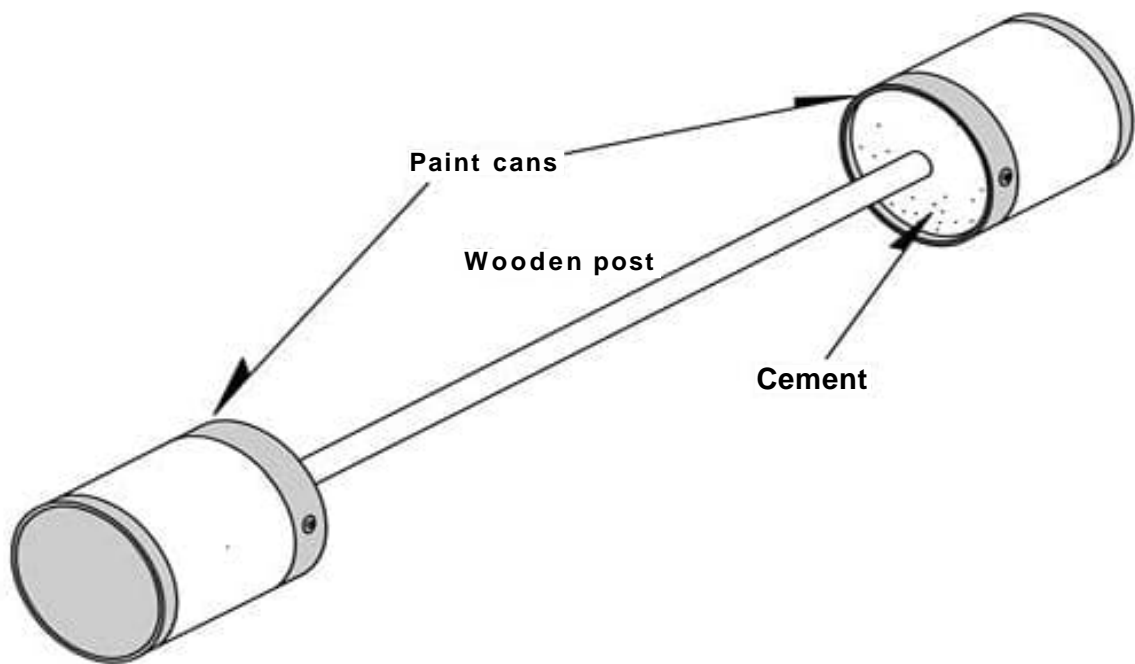
Keep in mind that the breath and the accompanying body movement must be made to start and stop at exactly the same time. In other words, the body and the breath should be working together. To do this successfully, you must concentrate at first; however, as the strength and skill levels increase this becomes less an act of concentration and more a sense of understanding. Thus, the trinity of mind, body, and spirit that traditional martial artists strive for is repeatedly manifest in your actions.



Exercise 6

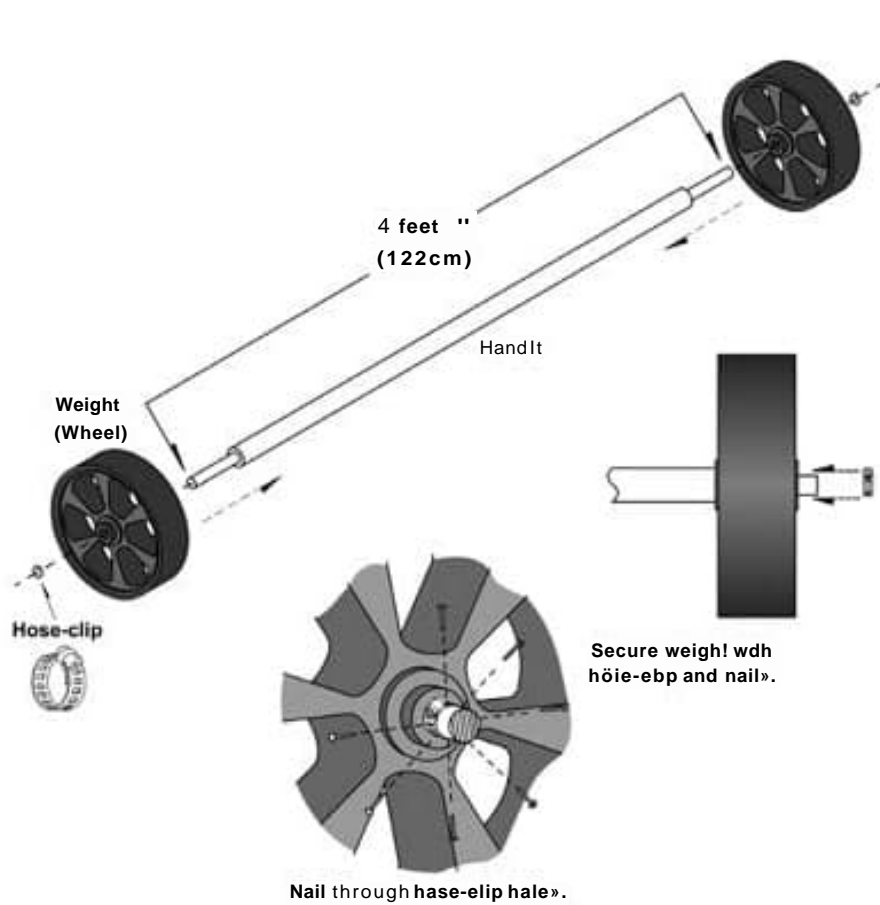
Stand in *sanchin dachi* (hourglass posture), palms facing each other with the *tan* resting across the "thumb" edge of the forearms close to the elbow joint. From here, lower the hands and allow the tool to roll slowly toward the wrists. When the tool reaches halfway, bring up the forearms sharply and throw the *tan* into the air before catching it again on the same inside edge of the forearms. This takes some practice; be careful to throw the tool only a few inches at first. Once the *tan* can be thrown and caught again without losing balance and without dropping the tool, the height of the throw can be increased. When this happens, make sure to use the legs like the suspension system on a car (shock absorbers) and do not hold them locked when the *tan* returns to the arms. Once a throw and catch has been completed, take three steps forward, or backward, in *sanchin dachi* and throw again. Great care must be taken not to allow the *tan* to land on the inside of the elbow joint.

Tan Construction Notes



A construction method similar to the double-handle *chiisfri* is used here.

The most common items used in the construction of the *tan* in olden times were a couple of rocks of equal weight, and later, iron wheels, the kind that could be found on the carts and wagons that moved freight around the warehouses and wharfs of Chinese and Okinawan harbors. These days it is often possible to find such wheels on farms and at country markets, or in junk shops. In fact, the latter is where I found a number of the tools used in my *dojo*. Again, if iron wheels cannot be found, use standard weights from a sports shop. Place the weight at each end of a round pole of solid strong wood, similar to oak, approximately four feet (122 cm) in length. Make sure that the weight is securely fixed to each end and the wooden shaft is strong enough to take the weight. If buying weights is not an option, then using two old paint cans as molds can make a perfectly good *tan*. Fill them with cement, attaching them to both ends of a stout post in a similar way to the *chiishi* construction method and remove once the cement is set. The *tan* in my *dojo* weighs 34 lbs. (15 kg).



Iron wheels from fsrms or industrial sources make a perfect ton.



During a visit to the Meibukan dojo in Kume, Okinawa, the author spatted this Eon made from heavy-duty engine gears.