

THE TRAINING STONES OF PANGAI NOON/UECHI-RYU KARATE

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STONE LIFTING

Stones have historically been lifted for single repetitions, multiple repetitions, timed repetitions, carried for distance/time, thrown forward and backward, rolled, and simply held for time. Oh yes, they have also been broken into little pieces with heavy sledges (not always voluntarily.) Their use has almost always promoted greatly increased strength in the lifter. Seldom though has man tampered with the stone's natural attributes. Man sees rock - man lifts, carries, throws, rolls, or bear-hugs rock. Nothing much was done to the rock with the exception of changing its resting place. The exception to this generalization has been the use of stone in martial art training. Needless to say, martial artists historically have also applied themselves to the "natural" routines performed with stones that were enumerated above. *Dragon, Tiger, and Crane: Uechi-Ryu Karate, At The Crossroads Of Kung-Fu And Karate* by Sensei Rod Mindlin contains photos of Okinawan "power" stones that were lifted in traditional ways to develop and demonstrate controlled explosive strength. [i] Sensei Morio Higaonna of Goju-Ryu, in *The History of Karate*, described his grand teacher, Sensei Chojun Miyagi, as challenging himself daily to lift heavy stones near the shore on his way to school. Miyagi's top student, Jin'an Shinzato, worked as a police officer in the city of Naha, Okinawa. It is said that "while he was patrolling, if things were quiet and he chanced upon any large stones, he would remove his cap and uniform top and exercise, thrusting the stone above his head or out in front of him." [ii]

Several innovations, arising in coastal southern China and later transported to Okinawa, reflect the martial artists' modification of the stone itself - the "tan" (primitive barbell) the "chishi" ('stone lever'), and the training stones of Pangai Noon/Uechi-Ryu karate. There are other methodologies devised for martial arts training that employ stone, for example, its use as a medium in iron palm training, but these are largely devoted to conditioning the body and extremities to withstand and deliver powerful blows with impunity. This article will focus upon the use of stone to consolidate the Sanchin posture and build great strength.

The ancient implement most similar to the Pangai Noon/Uechi-Ryu training stones is the "*Nageri Game*" or "*Kan*" ('gripping jars.'). These are not made of stone but traditionally were earthenware jars with a pronounced lip at the neck of the jar. The lip would be grasped with thumb tucked so that the medial aspect of the thumb was touching the lip of the jar. The remaining four fingers would then grip the jar in a claw like fashion.

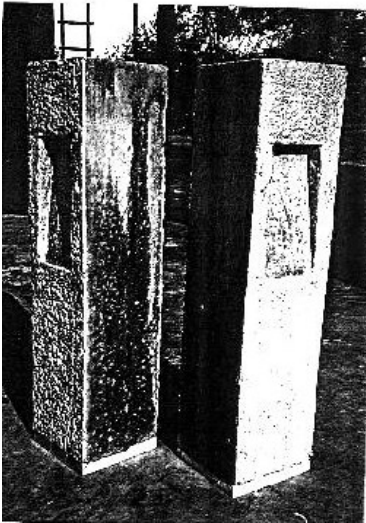
The jars would be used in daily training in Sanchin training and a small amount of water or sand would be added periodically for progressive resistance. The use of "*Kan*" remains unchallenged in its supremacy for training the "*Bushiken*" ('coiled thumb') which is employed frequently in Pangai Noon/Uechi-Ryu combative application; however, there is no rival to the stones for building staggering finger strength.

This remainder of this article will focus upon the history, construction, and use of the training stones of Pangai Noon/Uechi-Ryu karate - a matched pair of rectangular stones weighing between 50 and 250 lb., in which recesses have been chiseled to allow access to the extended

fingers. The stones are then lifted and carried with extended arms through the pattern of kata Sanchin, the root of Pangai Noon/Uechi-Ryu karate.

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What is unique about Uechi training stones is that they encourage the practitioner to improve the integrity of their Sanchin posture; they supremely tax the musculature of the shoulders, forearms, hands, and fingers; and carrying them demands iron will and concentration to correctly navigate the kata. Each of these dimensions provides direct carryover to combative activity. Carrying the Uechi stones is part of "shugyo" ('austere training'.)



Most fighting traditions are predicated upon the establishment of proper body structure early in the training sequence. Proper structure is not to be confused with rigid immovable postures in actual combat. Still postures are actually employed as a separate training sequence. These postures may be performed with soft (relaxed) or hard (dynamic tension) energy. The establishment of proper karate or gung-fu body structure is not, however, confined to posing still postures. It is essential in any unarmed close range combat system that certain structural criteria are met. These qualities are enumerated in the ancient literature of most Chinese martial arts and have been transmitted through the ages largely via proverbs, poems, or song - the classic oral tradition. The overriding justification for the establishment of correct body structure is that of adding skeletal alignment to the practitioner's attributes such as strength, speed, iron will, etc.

Using the stones in the prescribed manner contributes to the development of holistic strength in that the entire neurological and musculoskeletal structure of the body must be employed. If incorrect structure is used, or if resolve waivers, the routine simply doesn't happen: the lumbar spine will give way, pain in the shoulders will occasion the early abandonment of the movement, the stones will bang uncomfortably against the thighs, and last but not least, the fingers will collapse and stones will crash down on your feet. All of this is not to say that the skillful application of the training stones is a walk in the park. Like other "real" movements--movements that best occasion growth--any session with the stones is an opportunity to test oneself in body, mind, and spirit.

CHAU TZU HO

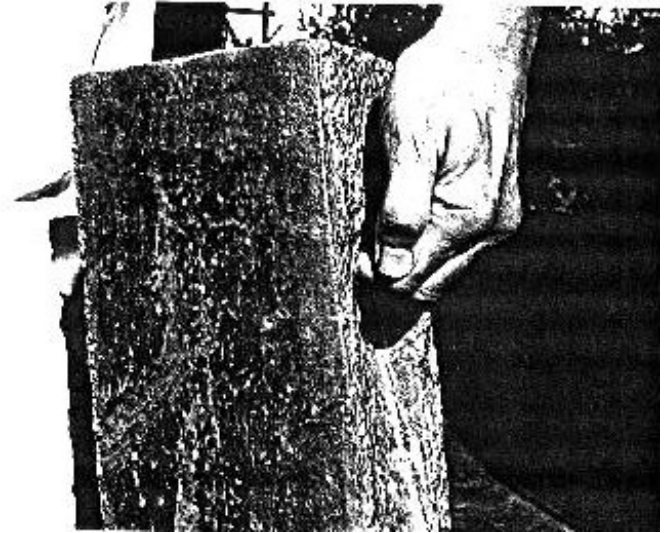
When reading this article, two important facts should be kept in mind. The first fact is that the use of these training devices has never been reported in the western martial arts literature. It is similarly doubtful if the training stones have been described in Chinese or Okinawan literature. The second fact is that as far as the authors are able to ascertain, the fabrication and regular use of the training stones in the western world has thus far been confined to their respective dojo.

The origin of our training stones lies in coastal Southern China in the ancestral villa of Sifu Chau Tzu Ho. Chau Sifu was a charismatic figure that taught a variety of Chinese boxing styles and was the teacher of our grand teacher, Uechi Kanbun. Uechi Sensei studied with Chau Tzu Ho for ten years before opening his own training hall and ultimately becoming the patriarch of our karate family. [\[iii\]](#)

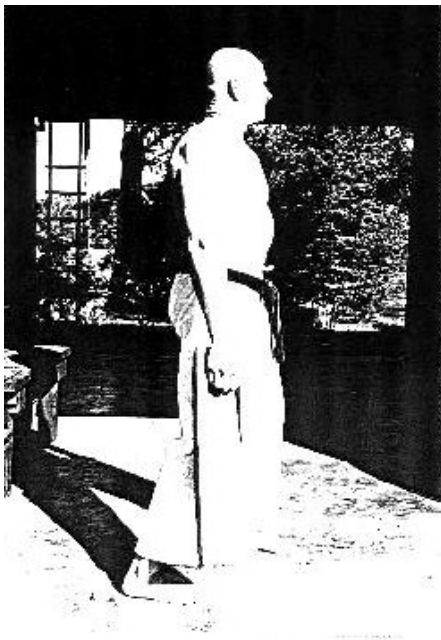
We know historically that Chau Sifu died in 1926. Since the time of Chau's death, the stones have not been used for their original purpose. Rather, they were rediscovered, in the relatively poor and remote area of what once was Chau Tzu Ho's ancestral compound, in an upside down position serving as the pillar supports for a stone laundry table!

The original stones had shallow finger grip holds chiseled into the granite about two thirds of the way up. They are designed to place a weight load on the fingers from the tips to no further than the first joint inward. Carried from the side while stepping, and with the elbows slightly bent, they work every tendon in the hand, forearm and upper arm up to the shoulder. From historical photos, it is likely that the original stones were at least one-foot square and at least 1.5 feet tall.

That is 1.5 cubic feet of granite per block. Given the density of granite, that corresponds to about 250 pounds per block!



SANCHIN



The training stones are but one component of the Uechi-Ryu curriculum. They are used in the manner of Hojo Undo (supplementary exercises) of our sister Okinawan style, Goju-Ryu. Goju-Ryu Hojo Undo requires the practitioner to use primitive equipment to strengthen the body for the performance of kata. Both systems have their origins in the Fukien Province of southern China and both systems consider their kata to be the heart and soul of their practice. Of the various kata of the two systems, none approaches the significance of the first and most important kata, Sanchin (Three Battles.) Even though the Sanchin of the two styles are radically different, their significance is paramount. The training stones provide the practitioner an opportunity to consolidate Sanchin training much as heavy walkouts and quarter squats allow the power lifter an opportunity to consolidate their squat training. The relationship between the training stones and Sanchin is inexorable and will be made much clearer in the next section.

Use of the stones may begin when the trainee is sufficiently familiar with the Sanchin form to walk through the steps without coaching. This is usually accomplished after several sessions of training. At this time, the trainee is able to begin a lifelong study of the multidimensional facets of Sanchin. Care should be taken in supervising younger trainees so that appropriate levels of resistance are employed. Instructions will be given in the fabrication section for making special stones for younger or unconditioned trainees.

As mentioned previously, doing Sanchin with stones is deceptively simple in appearance.

We approach the stones and "*Rei*" ('bow') showing humility and in effect thanking the founders of the art and the stones for the lessons they are about to teach us.

From the initial approach simply pick up the stones and stabilize them. When stability is achieved and you feel rooted to the ground, you are ready to walk. To walk in Sanchin posture: maintain the correct upper body structure; straighten the front foot by pivoting on the ball of the foot so that it is pointing straight ahead, lift the rear foot and step through with a small ellipse in toward the imaginary line that bisects the body; bring that foot through to the lead foot position and place it to rest at a 30 degree angle with the heel on a plane with the toes of the rear foot. This is the stepping pattern.

Stepping slowly with the stone weights also fosters the development of correct karate posture--a strong erect spine that is balanced over the coccyx and smooth flat steps in which the feet glide along the floor. Arm and hand tendon strength coupled with correct posture and movement renders one much more effective in the martial arts. The number of forward steps is optional. Classic Sanchin features three steps forward, turn, three steps back, turn, and three more steps forward. Following that we turn to both sides and then the front to close. Before that, however, we must learn the Sanchin turn.

Sanchin turn is performed by pivoting inward on the ball of the rear foot (which had been pointing straight ahead) so that it actually reverses direction and becomes the new front foot. The heel of the pivoting foot now points toward the toes of the forward foot. The front foot slides directly across and becomes the new rear foot.

To practice this maneuver, simply stand in Sanchin and pivot first to the rear and then to the front. You will traverse the length of the room in this manner at which time you may turn and continue turning until you reach the point of origin. Regardless of your motivations, you may never forget Sanchin turning.

Upon arriving at the final step of the three directions you have now walked, step in the direction of your front foot. Which foot is leading will depend on which foot stepped out first as you began Sanchin. Let's say the left foot is leading. What follows is a rather complicated description of a relatively simple maneuver. Imagine explaining a sneeze to a Martian!

Control the movement of self--control the movement of the stones

Control the enemy--control yourself.

Thus, the stones enrich our karate training. Not by making it easier, but rather by making it much more difficult.

Why carry stones while doing kata? After all, you will not have stones in your hands when facing a testing board for your next promotional, nor will you usually (however unfortunate) be carrying stones in combat application. We carry the stones because they help us push the envelope of our perceived limitations. They help us to become very strong physically and mentally as they transform our usual curriculum by making it much more difficult. And carrying the stones in Sanchin accomplishes these laudable goals within the context of performing Sanchin, a similar skill activity that we must constantly polish.

FABRICATING THE STONES

Granite can be expensive and are difficult to machine; particularly if you want two pieces of identical weight. Therefore, we have chosen to reproduce the basic design of the granite stones using concrete or cement. The satisfaction of making them adds to the pleasure of using these novel and attractive training stones. Much effort has gone into faithfully reproducing the essential features of the original granite stones.

If you want heavier or lighter stones you can adjust your form design as needed. However, please remember that when lifted, the stone will rotate so that the center of mass moves directly under the finger grip hold. In other words, a too short stone will rotate right off your fingers and onto your foot when you try to lift it. The height of the grip hold also needs to be considered. So, be mindful of proportions if you change the design to suit your weight needs.

Also, while cement and concrete are extremely strong under compression they are weak under tension and bending loads. Therefore, do not make your stones too long and skinny lest they break easily. While on the subject of breakage, be sure to use the rebar pieces as described in the drawings. In the event of a structural failure, it may save your foot.

Do NOT use fast setting concrete to make these stones. Construction grade concrete may be used for these stones, but the result will not be as visually appealing. Shop around for good clean decorative concrete with small and smooth aggregate filler. Pure Portland cement gives a beautiful surface finish, but cement is brittle and weak compared to good concrete. However, cement allows the smoothest grip area with no exposed pebbles to loosen during use.

If you wish, you may make your own mix from cement and the aggregate filler of your choice in a one to one ratio. The aggregate adds strength and works best when it varies in size from sand grain to pebble size. You can add concrete coloring additives to the mix. Black gives the most stone-like appearance. By using creative aggregate and color selections, some very interesting and beautiful results can be achieved.

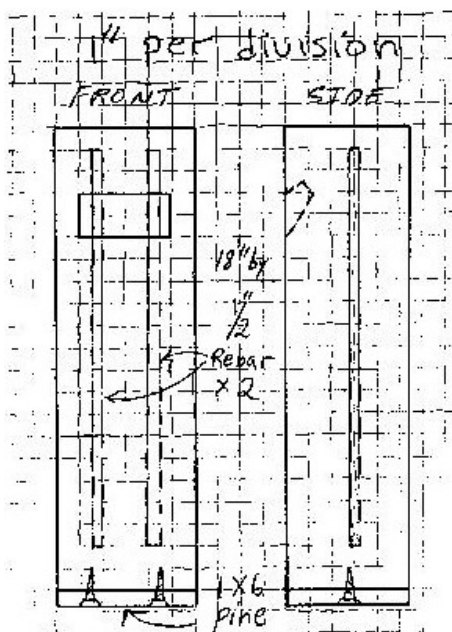
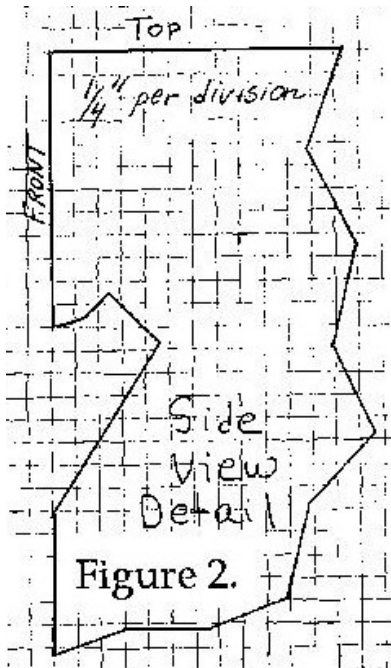


Figure 1.

Figure 1 shows the overall dimensions of the finished block (6" x 5.5" x 21"). The hand grip is high enough (3" from the top) so that a six foot person can pick it up without bending at the back at all. Note the position and length of the 1/2" rebar pieces. In the finished product they are not visible. The 1x6 pine base protects floors and saves the bottom of the block from chipping. The screws in the bottom of the wood are counter sunk and placed through the wood BEFORE the concrete is poured.

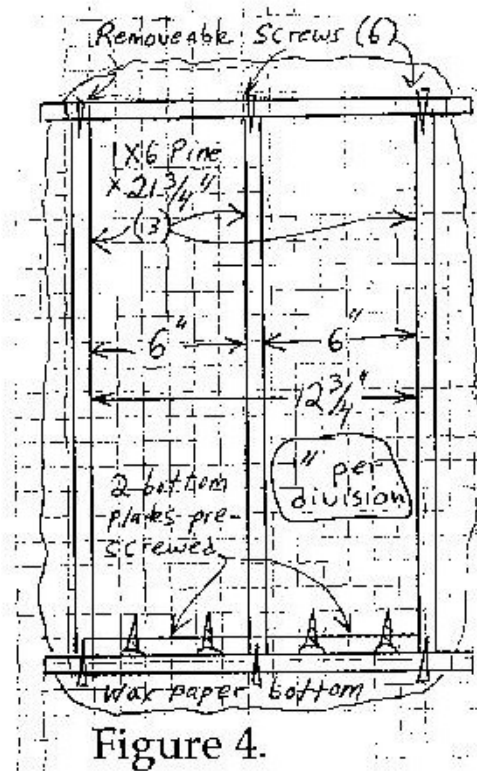
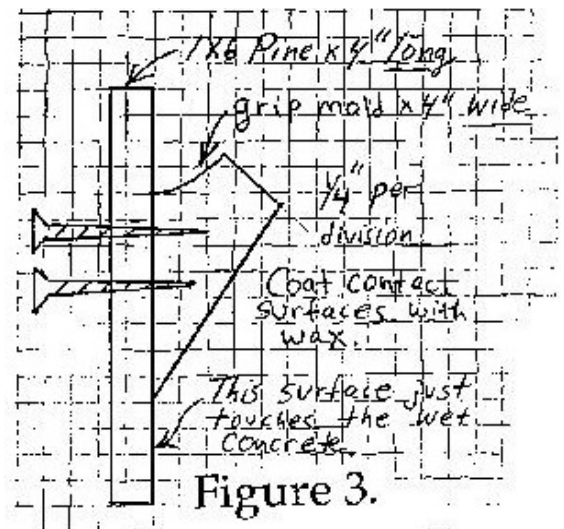


The grip area is critical. See the side profile detail depicted in Figure 2. The weight of the stone should rest without a sharp edge on the tips of the four fingers of the hand (no deeper than the first joint inward).

Remember, this stone will rotate (bottom outward) about 10-15 degrees when lifted. The finger grip shape depicted in Figure 2 accounts for this so that the stone will not slide off your fingers.

To make the desired finger grip impression in the wet concrete will require the positive mold depicted in Figure 3.

The grid scale is 1/4" per division and you can use the drawing as a scale template. The 1x6 pine backing provides a reference surface so you know how deep to push the mold into the wet mix. The exposed screws are absolutely necessary to take the mold out AFTER the mix hardens. We suggest that the entire mold be sanded very smooth and then painted with molten wax or heavy silicone oil to ease its later removal. It can then be re-used.



NOTE: The grip mold is only 4" wide and the 1x6 pine will be 5.5 inches wide. Please be sure to place the grip mold in the CENTER of the 1x6 board before you screw them together.

At this point, prepare the appropriate amount of concrete mix. Be careful not to make too soupy a mix; follow mixing directions. Pour about 2 inches of wet mix into both molds and place the rebar pieces as described. Finish filling the molds right to the top and smooth them off by scraping off the excess with an 18" long board which has a nice clean edge.

Put the grip molds carefully in place and touch up the surrounding surface as necessary. The wood molds will want to FLOAT OUT of the wet mix so you will have to carefully weight them down while the concrete sets. Don't weight them down so much that the grip mold gets shoved in the mix too deep or you will never get them out. You can figure out a combination of boards and weights to get things where you want them. Have some extra pieces of 1x6 pine 18" long and a few bricks handy. Once the hand-grip molds are in place, you

can texture the exposed front surface of the block with a whisk broom and light strokes. This adds a more natural appearance of stone.

Although most concrete and cement instructions say it will be ready to use in 24 hours, you may break the stones if you take out the finger grip molds too early. Concrete continues to strengthen substantially for days, even weeks. Wait two or three days; then tap out the finger grip molds carefully. Then remove the frame screws and carefully disassemble the molds to remove the almost finished stone.

Stand them up and using coarse to medium sandpaper, round off all edges and other defects. This improves appearance, prevents cuts and actually inhibits cracks from developing. If you are using these on a fine floor such as a karate dojo, an optional clear coat of WATER-BASED urethane will keep grit from falling loose.

MAKING CHISAI (SMALLER) STONES

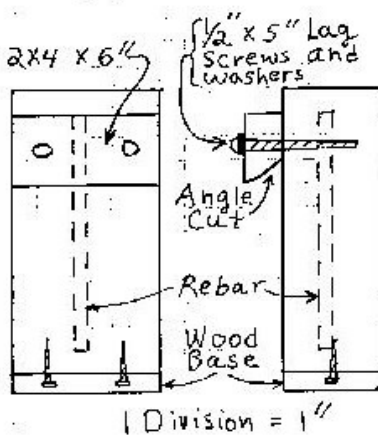


Figure 5.

Figure 5 shows one design for a lighter set of stones with a modified hand-hold area made from a 6" long piece of 2 x 4 wood, two lag screws (1/2" x 5" long) and two flat washers. The stone portion of these stones are 12" tall by 6" wide and 4" deep and when finished will weigh just about 22 pounds each.

Notice that the bottom edge of the 2 x 4 wood piece is angle cut along its length. This angle cut is necessary to keep the stones from sliding off the fingers during use. This cut is best done using a table saw, but it can be done using a hand saw just as well. Sand the wood pieces smooth and ease any sharp edges and corners. We recommend leaving the wood bare and unfinished.

Pre-drill the 2 holes for the lag screws to avoid splitting the wood. Use a drill size which allows the threads to bite properly into the wood around the holes. Put the washers on the lag screws, apply some carpenter's or white glue, and secure the screws into the finished wood pieces. Wipe off excess glue and allow them to dry overnight. NOTE: It is important that the lag screws be threaded along their entire length so that they grip the wood and concrete/cement equally well to prevent loosening later on.

When you pour the wet mix into the molds, simply lay the wooden hand-grip assemblies into position as shown in Figure 5. The concrete/cement will harden around the exposed ends of the lag screws. For these smaller stones only one piece of rebar is used per block, but it is still used! The wood base is also recommended as shown in the figure.

You may be tempted to use empty cardboard boxes (shoe, cereal, etc.) as the frames for smaller stones. This can work but the sides tend to bulge from the weight and wetness of the concrete/cement. Reinforce the long sides at least with wooden pieces on the outside of the box. The wooden base will keep the bottom surface flat.

The authors have no experience using these wooden hand-grips on stones heavier than 35 pounds. Exercise forethought and caution if you choose to use this grip design on heavier stones.

SOME FINAL SUGGESTIONS

The training stones of Uechi-Ryu Karate are a unique and highly effective modality for supplementing the curriculum of any traditional karate or gung-fu style. They build useable total body strength and contribute to the iron will fostered by practice of kata Sanchin. Their regular use builds body structure and physical attributes needed in effective close range unarmed combat. Their use will provide many benefits not the least of which is the development of extraordinary finger strength. They are relatively easy to fabricate and an economical addition to the home gym.

Because these stones are carried on the side of the body, and the weight is pulling almost straight downward, there is minimal strain on the supraspinatus tendon of the rotator cuff. If you experience excess strain on your neck or back while carrying the stones, your posture is incorrect. If any part of your body besides your fingers, hands and arms feels strained, back off on the weight and check your posture using a mirror.

The spine must be straight, the chin pulled slightly in, eyes straight ahead, hips tucked under, and stepping must be done with a cat-like gliding movement.

Try to keep the weight from swinging fore and aft as you step. Keeping the elbows slightly bent and keeping the weight from getting behind your legs will help this. Another benefit of keeping some muscular tension in the elbow and shoulder is that it helps to minimize excessive pulling on the head of the humerus which would tend to de-stabilize the shoulder joint. In other words, do not let the arms go slack; tension on them works the tendons and protects the shoulders from excess downward force. Also try to keep the weight from bumping into your legs as you step. This is as much a design feature of a well-proportioned block as it is proper technique.

One more caveat: start with lighter weight stones and move upwards in weight carefully. You should be able to step through ten to twelve slow steps with the stones before fatigue/failure sets into your fingers. If the weight is too heavy to step properly, work on your posture and/or back off on the weight for a while. Consistent and careful training will lead to a hard and strong body through old age!

The authors would suggest two injunctions in using the stones. Handling the stones is addictive - don't overdo it! The stones occasion the use of seldom-used tissues in even otherwise strong trainees and tendonitis is always a danger. Secondly, never, never drop the stones - in ascending order of worst-case scenario, the floor, your foot or the stones **will** break!

[i] Mindlin, Rod *Dragon, Tiger, and Crane: The Story of Uechi-Ryu Karate at the Crossroads of Kung-Fu and Karate* p 47 Rod Mindlin Productions, 1995

[ii] Higaonna, Morio *The History of Karate* p. 123 Dragon Books, 1995

[iii] Mattson, George *Uechi-Ryu Karate Do* pp. 7-14 Peabody Publishing, 1965