



# Board Breaking



## Introduction

For the rank of brown belt you will be required to successfully break boards as a demonstration of your power, concentration, and skill. Board breaking is a part of *tameshiwari*, the Japanese term for breaking materials including tile, brick, and stone (although these are not utilized in Cuong Nhu training). It is an objective test of the effectiveness of your techniques based on power, speed, and precision.

To prepare for breaking, you must carefully condition the striking surfaces you intend to use. Consistently practice your technique to the heavy bag or makiwara to develop accuracy and power. Begin striking with half power, and gradually increase the amount of speed, force and number of repetitions over many workouts. Have your instructor fine tune your form, and use weight training to help develop powerful technique. If you experience an injury, stop and ask your instructor to reevaluate your technique. In time, with a lot of practice, you will be able to hit the heavy bag as hard as you wish without any injury. You are now ready to try breaking boards.

Strength, speed, timing, proper form, breathing, kiai, and concentration are all important factors to consider when breaking. Focus all your energy on the task at hand; hear nothing, see nothing, and feel nothing but the explosion within yourself and the shattered boards falling to the floor. You must overcome all fear, doubts, and inhibitions. You must free your ego to allow your mind to focus all of the power of your body into the target in a single, fluid motion with precision and proper technique. To be successful you must focus your mind through the boards to infinity. You need to be calm and confident.

To develop confidence, practice your breaks many times in class, and try breaking more boards than are actually required for the test. Always break with your strongest technique first, and always have a back-up technique for every break. Have a classmate video tape your breaks, then review the tape carefully with your instructor to perfect your form.

## Types of Breaks

There are three basic types of breaks:

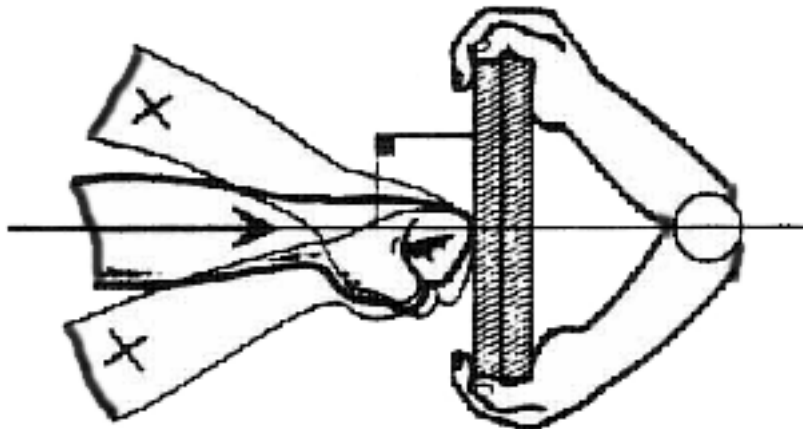
**Single Breaks:** The most elementary scenario involves only one set of boards supported rigidly. You have only one task to concentrate on; one direction, one technique, and one back-up technique to prepare.

### Multiple Breaks

When breaking in multiple directions, you must prepare two or more different techniques (and back-up techniques) to break more than one set of boards in a logical sequence. Although there is more to think about and prepare, when the time comes you must treat each set as a single break.

### Speed Breaks

This is the most advanced type of breaking because the boards are not rigidly supported. In a speed break the boards are hung from a string or held with the fingers of only one hand. Since the boards are flexible, you must strike faster than the rate at which the boards are able to flex.



**It's most efficient to strike the object perpendicularly**

## Board Breaking Requirements

It is encouraged to demonstrate a different technique for each of the following breaks. This will give the student four different techniques to perform for their black belt test.

Failure to break any set of board will result in probation. The tester will determine the next time the student may break boards to be eligible for promotion.

<b>Brown Belt</b>		
<b>One Black Stripe</b>		Trials: <b>2</b>
Up to 154 lbs	2 boards	1 direction
155 lbs and above	3 boards	1 direction

<b>Two Black Stripe</b>			Trials: <b>4</b>
Up to 154 lbs	2 sets of 2 boards	(4)	2 directions
155 lbs to 174	2 boards & 3 boards	(5)	2 directions
175 lbs and up	2 sets of 3 boards	(6)	2 directions

<b>Black Belt</b>			Trials: <b>8</b>
Up to 140 lbs	4 sets of 2		4 directions
141 lbs to 154 lbs	3 sets of 2 & set of 3		4 directions
	5 sets of 2		5 directions
155 lbs to 174 lbs	2 sets of 2 & 2 sets of 3		4 directions
175 lbs and up	1 sets of 2 & 3 sets of 3		4 directions

<b>Shodan</b>
Not required

<b>Nidan and Up</b>	Trials: <b>Unlimited</b>
Perform a board breaking demo with combinations of 1, 2, and 3 boards using different techniques. This will reflect on precision, timing and <b>CREATIVITY</b> more so than power.	

<b>Substitution for medical reasons</b>
The board breaking substitution must be the same level of difficulty of the test and must be pre-approved by a Cuong Nhu Master.

<b>Age exemption</b>
14 and under
40 and above

## Board Breaking Regulations

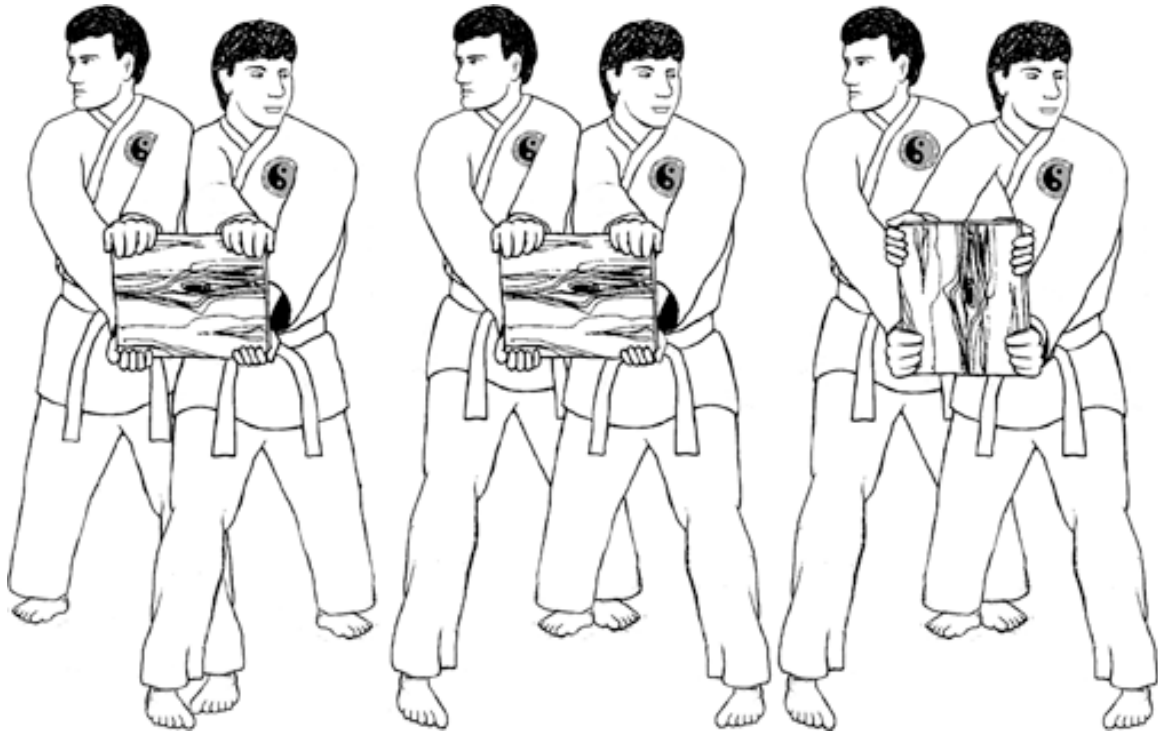
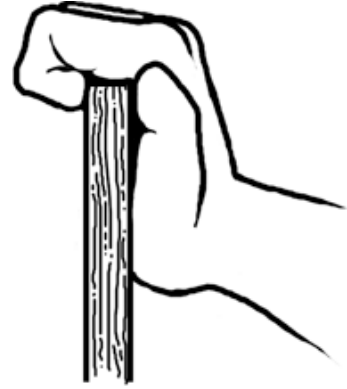
All boards should be of 1 x 12 (one inch thick by twelve inches wide) white pine, spruce, or fir lumber cut square ( $11\frac{1}{4}$ " x  $11\frac{1}{4}$ "). Each board must be without cracks, splits, or other structural defects. Students must supply their own boards, and boards should be available for individual inspection prior to testing. Boards can be arranged into sets prior to the test so that all boards fit together as snugly as possible with little or no intervening air space. However, the sets cannot be joined by any means (nails, screws, etc.) other than removable tape. They may not be artificially separated with spacers (pencils, washers, etc.). Improper boards can result in automatic probation for board breaking.

You must incorporate an appropriate level of skill and difficulty into your breaks, using a wide variety of hand and foot techniques. The following regulations will help you develop challenging and impressive breaks. A set of boards may be divided into subsets containing fewer boards if the subsets are to be broken simultaneously (the divided set counts as only one break). A set of boards broken with a speed break can be reduced by one board without a penalty. This means that a two board speed break would be equivalent to a regular three board break. You are only permitted one downward foot technique (i.e. axe kick, front thrust kick) in your breaking sequence, and even then it must be waist level or above. You are also prohibited from breaking more than two sets in any breaking sequence with downward hand techniques (i.e. hammerfist, downward elbow).

If you cannot break all your sets within the specified number of trials, you automatically receive probation for board breaking. You are then given two more opportunities at future tests to successfully complete the breaking requirement. If you have not broken after your third attempt, you must retake the entire test. Tameshiwari is also a demonstration of accuracy and control. Hitting the fingers or bodies of the board holders will result in automatic probation for board breaking. Candidates under 16 years of age are not required to break boards. Those who choose to break assume the same risks of probation or failure as those required to break boards. Candidates older than 40 years of age, or who have a handicap, may, with instructor's approval, substitute other techniques for board breaking, partially or totally, according to individual ability.

## Holding the Boards

It is important to know how to properly set up your boards, because both the success of your break and the safety of your holders depends on it. You will require a minimum of two holders for each set of boards. The back of the boards must rest flush against the heels of your holders' hands, which must run parallel with the grain of the wood. The fingertips rest on the front of the boards so that they can lightly compress the set. The holders should minimize the surface area of their hands and fingers in contact with the board. The holder's arms and safety glasses should provide protection for their face and eyes from flying board fragments. When the grain is held horizontally, the holders each grip the top of the boards with their inside arms, so that the left holder is supporting the left side of the boards and the right holder is supporting the right side. If the grain is held vertically, the holder's right hands are both on the right side of the boards, left hands on the left side, with the inside arms crossed on top. The holders should be in stances that allow for a free range of motion and complete follow-through so that they do not interfere with the technique.



Additional students can be used to support the wrists, shoulders, or elbows of the holders, and add rigidity to the boards. Choose your holders carefully, asking them beforehand if possible. Just prior to breaking, they must tense their muscles and flow their ki outward so as not to absorb too much of the impact or the boards will not break.

## Breaking Checklist

**To make sure that your breaking demonstration goes smoothly and efficiently, follow these 12 guidelines:**

1. Warm-up adequately; mentally, physically, and spiritually prepare yourself.
2. Ready each set of boards and inspect them to ensure that the grains are all going the same way.
3. Ask for holders prior to setting up the break.
4. Inform the holders of the breaking sequence and look over their positions carefully.
5. Check the height and the angle of the boards, as well as the distance between each set.
6. Consider safety! Determine where your boards are going to land and make sure no one is in the way.
7. Rehearse the entire breaking sequence two to four times and calm yourself in preparation to break.
8. Bow to the instructor(s) administering the test.
9. Mentally focus on each set of boards, concentrate and take a deep breath, then approach the first set and prepare to break.
10. Visualize the break, then do it! Aim through the center of the boards, past your holders. **Kiai loudly!**
11. Repeat step #10 until all the sets are broken. If a set fails to break, use your backup technique.
12. Bow out to the instructors, relax, and clean up and remove your broken boards.

## **Burns On Boards: Gimme A Break**

By John Burns

Breaking boards on your black belt or dan test involves more than just breaking all the boards in the required number of strikes. The best way is to surround yourself with each set of boards as if they were opponents, drawing them in as close as possible. Minimize movement between breaks, moving from one set to the next without hesitation or pause. Choose techniques that show ability, not brute strength, and execute them as quickly as good form allows.

Much forethought is involved in a “good break.” After spending long hours on a heavy bag and makiwara, spend some time thinking about how to arrange and position each set of boards. The best way might not be readily apparent. Walk through the techniques, experiment, and then think some more. No rules indicate all the forethought must be your own, either. If you have trouble visualizing a good arrangement, enlist the aid of your classmates and instructor.

Opening with your strongest technique is a good confidence builder. Your first break will determine the position and pattern of the other sets of boards. The pattern should flow well and allow no more than two steps between each set. I cannot think of any technique that requires more than two steps. Running across the room for a flying side kick is like using your foot as a battering ram. Try running across the room at your opponent when sparring and see how easily you are avoided. Not so easily avoided is a quick, one-step jump and kick. A flying kick shows the skill involved in its application when executed with one or two steps.

Hand techniques require only that you reach the boards, so a shift or turn should be sufficient to position yourself for the next break when using hands. A shift or turn, in combination with a crossover, hop, shuffle, step, jump or spin will minimize movement when breaking with a foot technique.

After surrounding yourself with a suitable arrangement of boards, be determined to break as quickly as possible. When faced with a multiple-opponent attack, you will not have time to psyche yourself up – this would only assure your defeat. As one adversary after another must be eliminated in rapid succession, so must your boards fall. Standing before each set of boards and taking time to summon your courage before breaking is like performing a series of brown belt test breaks, not the best way to approach breaking on the black belt or dan test. The flow is interrupted, the multiple opponent aspect is ignored and an inability to concentrate your energies is shown. Gather your confidence and psyche yourself up before you bow in. Once the break has begun, don't stop. If you miss, continue with the flow to another set of boards and come back, or immediately strike again and then continue.

Pick techniques that require skill. Breaking with a very difficult technique is more impressive and lets your abilities shine, but it also increases the chance of error. Consider the risks carefully and prepare accordingly.

Going beyond the requirement is even more impressive. When you set up four boards instead of the required three, or five sets instead of the required four, you should pass or fail according to the challenge you've set for yourself. You cannot ask an assailant to be a little less tough or to attack a little higher or lower. You shouldn't remove one board if you've set up four and find you cannot break them. You should not change the level or direction of the boards. Using a different technique after a miss is proper as long as the boards are not moved (try to have an alternate technique for each set of boards). Changing the boards in any way defeats the purpose of the test and shows failure.

Think about your past breaks or breaks you've seen on previous tests. Were these principles applied? Was there a good flow? Was there excessive walking between the boards? How could the breaks have been better?

Spend time thinking, set up the boards close to you, move less between breaks, and maintain a flow once the breaking begins. The successful break is like a short kata – your own kata. Make it the best you can!

## **Selecting Boards For Breaking**

By Charles Bennett

For advancement at the upper levels in Cuong Nhu, candidates must break boards. The number of breaks and boards per break increases with each advanced level. Much has been written about the training and discipline (mental and physical) needed to complete this requirement. Yet there are a number of candidates who fail to break their boards. These failures, more often than not, are failures in understanding the mechanical properties and characteristics of wood, rather than failures in discipline or technique.

Each candidate is responsible for preparing and setting up the boards that will be used for his/her break attempt. But how do you select the best boards for breaking? How do you avoid boards that may be almost impossible to break?

The standard boards used for breaking are sold as 1×12 length, S4S (the S4S stands for surfaced four sides), white pine. These boards start as plain sawn 1 inch thick by 12 inches wide boards of varying lengths. The lumberyard or sawmill takes this rough lumber and finish planes the four surfaces (top, and bottom and both edges) over the length of the board; the finished board is usually 11 1/4 inches wide by 3/4 inches thick. This finished board is then graded based on the size and the number of knots, straightness and degree of warping of the board, the grain pattern, and sometimes, the moisture content. The best boards with straight grain and no knots are graded "select." The boards most commonly available (and the cheapest) are Standard No. 2, or Construction grade; these boards contain poor grain and varying numbers and sizes of knots.



Most people buy the cheapest boards they can find from the local Home Depot or Builders Square. Unless you know to ask for “select” boards, you most probably will get No. 2 or Construction grade lumber. This is not always a problem if you know how to cut the “break boards” from the larger piece of lumber. However, if you can buy select lumber, the “break boards” will be more uniform, stack better and require a lot less force to break.

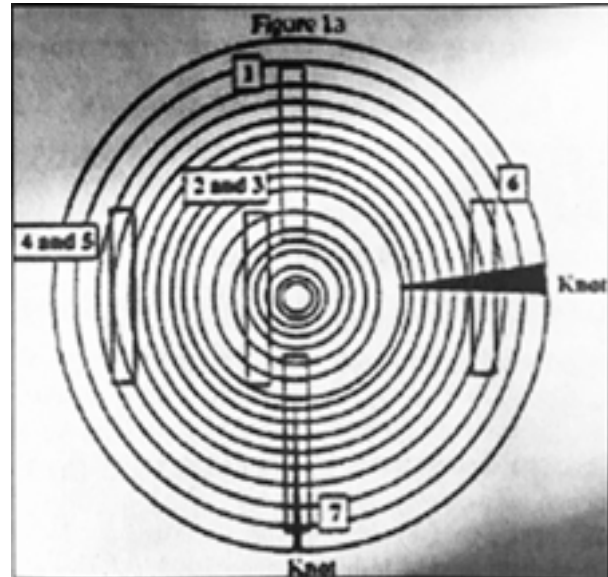
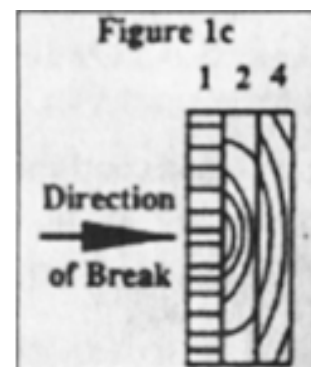
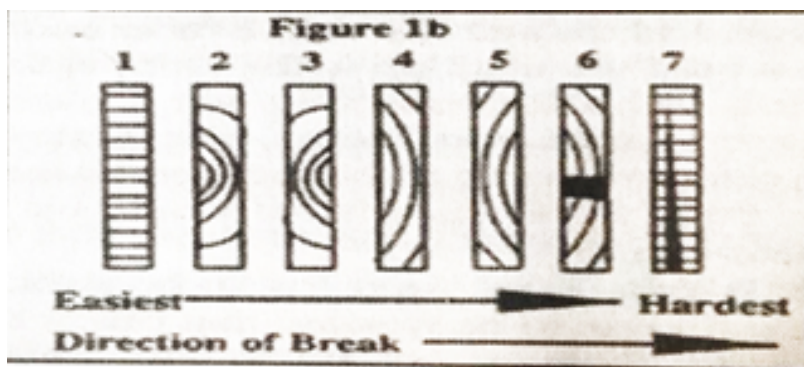


Figure 1a shows how to identify where a board comes from in a log by observing the profile of the tree’s annular rings in the end grain of the board. Figure 1b shows how the end grain pattern determines the force needed to break the board. And, figure 1c shows how to stack multiple boards.



Most “select” boards have a short end grain that is usually perpendicular to the width of the board (figures 1a and 1b, #1). These boards are the easiest to break, and they will break in a uniform and predictable manner (which is especially important when two or more boards are broken together).

The boards labeled 2, 3, 4, and 5, show how the end grain becomes increasingly more parallel to the width of the board. In this case, the direction in which you break the board is important; 2 is easier than 3, etc. All boards with knots should be avoided, especially if the knot runs across the direction of the break (as seen in 1b, #7). Small, round knots (especially those located where you don’t expect the board to break, and along the edges) are not usually a problem.

When more than one board is to be broken, they should be stacked as shown in figure 1c, with the easiest board first and the hardest last. The ideal situation would be to have all the boards look like #1 in figures 1a and 1b.