

## **Instructor Information: Key Points to Look Out for In Evaluating Kata**

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The purpose of this article is to give instructors and students alike, some simple, concise, easy to understand, and straight forward references in evaluating Isshin-ryu kata. It must be noted that good kata can translate directly to good kumite. If done properly, kata and kumite combined can translate to extraordinary self-defense skills, but it does not happen by accident. Kata training must be specific in that certain skills must be focused on and properly trained in order to gain the full benefits. If you don't have targets to shoot for, you can never hit them. All Isshin-ryu sensei seek the best for their students. To be able to pin-point specific items in evaluating a student's kata, and then with educated guidance, see those items steadily improve over time, is the mark of an excellent instructor.

The focus of the key points in this article pertains primarily to Centering, Mechanics and Breathing. They are "bullet pointed" for easy reference. There are many more that can be emphasized, but if you will do these, it will help you.

- Look for the stances being correct; i.e., proper width, foot positions, knees correctly bent, etc.
- Look for the hips being low and the back straight. If the knees are bent properly, the hips should be low. This is "centering" and it aids with balance and power.
- Look for the knees being bent enough so that the toes cannot be seen for the knees, but no further. This also corresponds to "centering."
- Weight should be dropped from the hips, into the feet. Also corresponds to "centering." Do not lean forward.
- Look for the back (spine) being straight, with the head, neck, and tail bone in good alignment. ("Fight with your back straight." – Chotoku Kyan)
- Look for the chin being slightly tucked down while the tailbone is slightly tucked (not too much), to keep the spine straight. The head should not be tilted back, nor the tail bone jutted out. To do so causes the spine to lock, thereby creating tension in the spine. The goal is to remove all tension from the body.
- Look for the student's eyes being up and looking straight ahead at eye level, never down at the floor or at the feet. The student should not "watch" their feet to check

stances; they should be “feeling” their stances. This is one step towards developing “body awareness.” In the very beginning (perhaps the first 2 or three training sessions), it is acceptable for the student to look down occasionally in order to check their stances and make sure that their foot positions are correct. However, as soon as possible this practice should be discouraged, before it becomes a habit.

- The face should point towards the opponent’s solar plexus and the eyes should point towards the opponent’s eyes. This will align the neck properly with the spine, and protect the throat area at the same time.
- When moving in the crescent step, the hips move first, followed by the knees and then the foot. The ball of the foot remains in contact with the floor and “glides” into place. The entire step, forwards or back, should be done in one smooth, continual movement (no hesitation).
- In moving from one position to the next, the head level should remain the same. It should not bob up and down. The idea is to move as if moving under a board that is about 1 to 2 inches lower than head level. If you bob upwards, your head hits the board; you want to “glide” smoothly underneath. The key to this is in keeping the hips low and the knees bent (centered).
- The Isshin-ryu fist position MUST be correct. The thumb is on top of the fist. When punching, the wrist must be bent slightly downward, so that the first two knuckles are prominent.
- In the chambered position with the hands, the fists should be mounted on the hips (on the belt), with the elbows pulled back fully against the body. Do not allow the elbows to stick out, i.e., “chicken wings.” The shoulders should not ride up. Pull the shoulders down and “relax.” (Note: Most people will do anything but “relax” at this point. This will feel very awkward and uncomfortable to them for a long time. However, this is a necessary step and MUST be done. This position ensures that the proper mechanics are in place.)
- In kicking techniques, all kicks should return to the chamber position, and held for a second, before returning the foot to the ground. The kick should never be allowed to simply drop to the floor. Learn to set the foot down when you want to, not when you have to.

- When throwing front snap kicks, make sure that the students do not strike with the flat part of the bottom of the foot. Instead, make sure the students point the foot down, pull the toes back and strike with the ball of the foot. The flat part of the foot causes the impact of the kick to dissipate. The ball of the foot causes the impact of the foot to penetrate. Penetration as opposed to dissipation is the key.
- The MOST important element is correct breathing. This must be established early and reinforced forever. Inhale through the nose on preparatory movements and exhale through the mouth on execution of techniques. The breathing needs to be audible, so that the instructor can hear, and know for certain, that the student is breathing correctly. The instructor needs to make sure that the student is never holding their breath. Breathing must be steady and above all, constant. This is crucial; it must be enforced for a long period of time, and must never be overlooked.

LISTEN for:

1. Correct breathing
2. The snap of the gi on all techniques
3. Good kiai

LOOK for:

1. Correct stances
2. Good posture and balance
3. Correct placement (hitting the correct targets)
4. Correct form, including proper fist position
5. Good eye focus.