

Key Points to Look for in Evaluating Charts

By Master William Scott Shamblin

It has been said that the most important items that an Isshinryu Karate-ka will ever learn are found in Charts I & II. I tend to agree. Most of the advanced techniques that we learn in the kata are really just variations, in one form or another, of basic things. Strategies, concepts and the like, have no meaning unless the foundations that they are built upon are strong.

One of the most valuable lessons I ever learned from my Sensei was this: anytime my technique was off in kumite, or my kata performance was bad, my instructor would tell me to practice my charts...Go back to my basics, in other words. When I would do that, things would improve. I have taught that lesson to my students, and I have applied that lesson to my life. It is good advice.

It is important for us as instructors to understand that if our student's basics are good; their kata will be good. If their basics are good, their kumite will be good. If their basics are good, their self-defense will be good. It is just that simple. However, as instructors we also know that this just doesn't happen by chance...it takes specific work. We want to keep things as simple as possible, and we do not want to over-teach, but there are certain things that we need to emphasize to our students. Here are six important areas to consider when teaching the charts. They are: stances, form, centering, mechanics, breathing and kiai.

- 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 juttred out. To do so causes the spine to lock, thereby creating tension in the spine. The goal is to remove excess tension from the body. 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.
- 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." (Body awareness is the idea of being able to "feel and control" all muscular activity, movements and breathing, at all times. Sanchin kata gives advanced training in this concept.)
- 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 foot remains in light 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, the knees bent and the weight transferred towards the feet (centered).
- The Isshinryu 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.” (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 uncomfortable to them for a long time. However, this is a necessary step and MUST be done. This position ensures that the proper punching 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. In the beginning, 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. Gradually a person’s breathing pattern may become less audible, as long as they are not holding their breath! This should happen naturally and never be force
- Start out teaching slow movements and correct form only. Not too much power or speed. Then, after the charts have been fully learned, start encouraging speed and more power. At this point, slight hip rotation may be introduced to aid in power. Remember, emphasize form and breathing first, then speed and power.
- Kiai doesn’t have to be practiced on every repetition of each chart technique (it is okay if it is), but it should be practiced on at least one repetition of each technique. The reason for this is that kiai should become natural and spontaneous. Timing on kiai is

also important, and should be stressed. A kiai at the wrong time is ineffective. Above all, kiai should be strong. A weak kiai is worthless! (Many people feel self-conscious about performing a kiai in public. They fear sounding “silly.” This takes some overcoming, be patient with students who are timid, but require them to do them anyway. It will get easier for them the more they do it. Your discipline will ultimately become their discipline. Remember: Isshinryu Karate is about facing your fears and gradually overcoming them.)

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
5. Good eye focus