

THE JOINT-FRIENDLY PUNCH (TSUKI): A SUGGESTION. By Dr Wolf Herbert.

The straight punch in all its variations might well be the technique we train the most often in our Karate-life. We are therefore well advised to execute it in a way that does not damage our joints, particularly the one of the elbow.

You can observe that children and most of the sports Karateka shoot out their punches until the arm is extended to its maximum, which means the elbow joint is locked out. It has become the standard way to punch in the Karate of the main island (Hondo) of Japan. In the following I shall make a rough distinction between Hondo-Karate, which was developed in the 1920s in Japan and Okinawa-Karate.

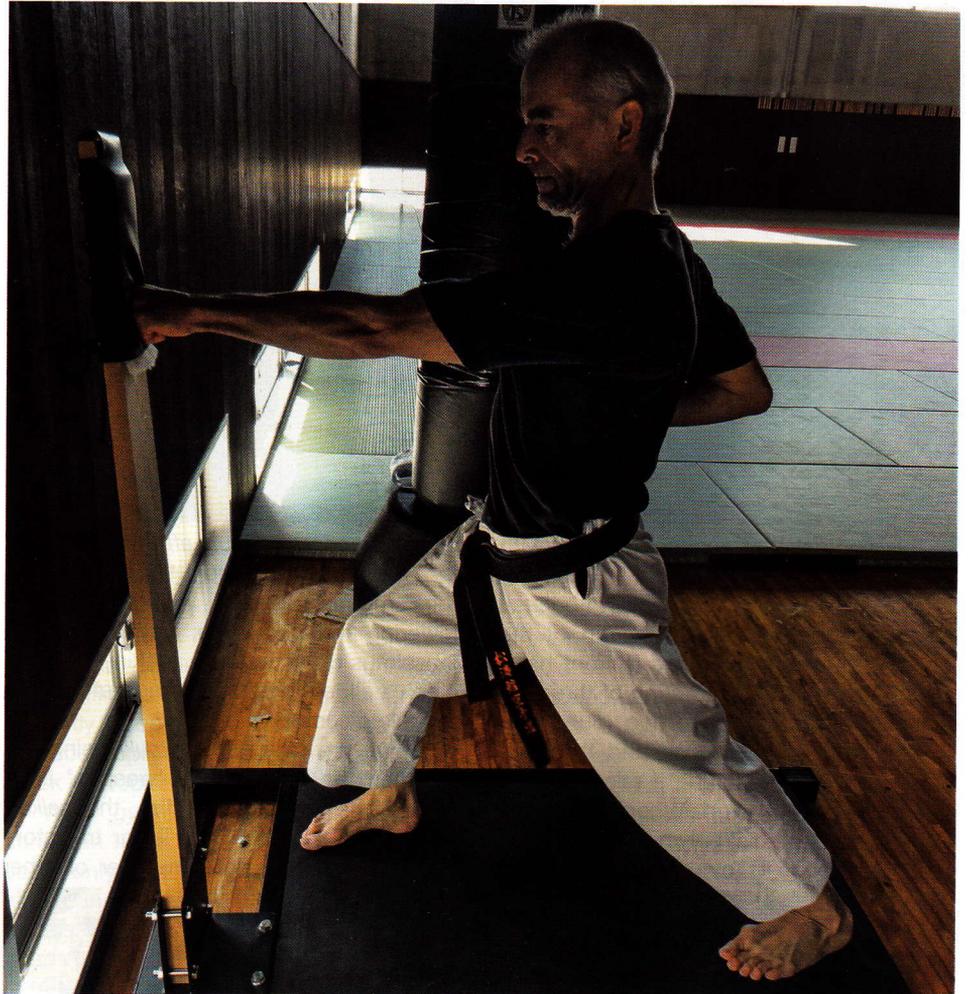
To thrust out the fist until the arm is extended may be the easiest way to "arrest" the technique, but I contend this will put quite a strain on the elbow in the long run and lead to wear and tear. The alternative way to stop and control the punch would be to arrest it before the elbow is totally stretched out. I try to describe how to do and train it and the many advantages it entails. As a caveat: I do not suggest that this is the "correct" way to execute a Karate punch in the air.

There exist different ways to throw punches. It is not about right or wrong, rather about a wholesome method to punch and avoiding harm to the body. Moreover, the power of a punch does not hinge on the elbow. It is generated by the proper transmission of energy from the heel through the thighs, hips, torso, arm and fist in unison.

In many Okinawan schools the *tsuki* is performed not to the full length of the



Fujinaga Sensei in his Vienna dojo 1980s. Wolf Herbert (right) makiwara in the background.



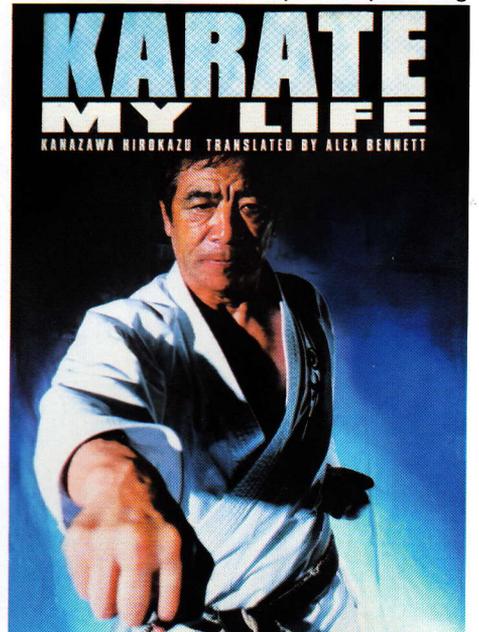
Wolf Herbert at the makiwara, Budojo University, Tokushima, Japan. "My makiwara arm is pretty stretched, but the biceps is involved and the elbow is rolled in and centering goes downwards".

arm, but is rather stopped shortly before. Some do not even do a full rotation of the fist. The fist can stay vertical or rotate to a 45 degree position. The elbow is not straightened out to its limit, but rotated slightly down and inwards. The punch is arrested by the muscles of the arm and shoulder and not via the joint. The rolling in of the elbow brings the shoulder down, involves the pectoral muscles and in particular the latissimus dorsi. Therefore a strong and solid connection to the *tanden* (lower abdomen) is achieved!

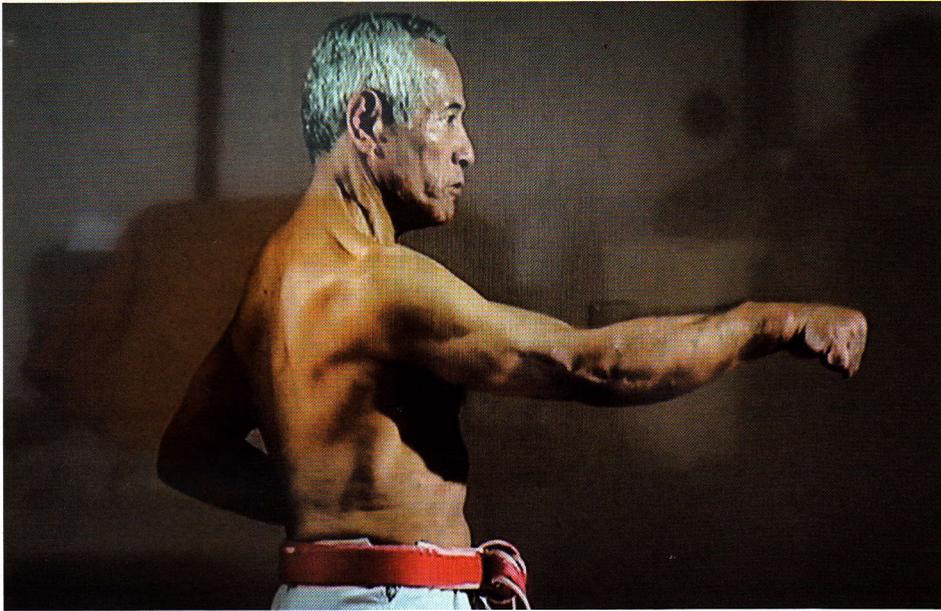
The accentuation of muscular tension in reaction enables a total release and relaxation, which sends a whip like wave or vibration through the body. In appearance the difference between the Hondo and Okinawa Karate punch styles may be minute, but the biomechanics generate quite a different "inner feeling" for the performer.

Anatomically speaking the elbow is an intricate hinge joint and involves three bones – the humerus (upper arm), the radius (thumb side) and ulna (little finger side) of the forearm –, ligaments, tendons and cartilage. Mind you, I am a doctor of

philosophy not medicine, but permanent or frequent hyper-extension of the elbow cannot be salubrious. Repetitive punching



Kanazawa-Soke: No full extension, the elbow is slightly bent down!



Miyagi Takeshi-Shihan, from the DVD 'The essence of Shorin-ryu Karate-do.'
(jap BAB Japan). Okinawan Karate style punch.

in end-point lock-style or accidental hyper-extension can lead to elbow ailments.

In many Okinawa Karate-styles one can see a downward position of the point of the elbow at the completion of a punch, i.e. the tip of the ulna is pointing downwards to the floor. The elbow tip does not rotate out like one would typically observe in modern sports karate practitioners. The full length lock of a punch evolved to enhance form, make an impressive appearance and increase reach. This is observable in Sports Karate, they do everything to maximize their reach, thrust out their limbs to the limit, slap the other's face with the protective gear via opening their hand, no fist, because the stretched fingers reach out longer!! (See Photo below... Olympics Tokyo)

When actually applying a punch the full lock-out position is neither required nor practically occurring. One can test this with impact training, notably on the makiwara. Again, there are different ways to treat the makiwara, I shall introduce a particular

routine to train with it which was taught to me by Sensei Fujinaga Yasuyuki (JKA Austria, 1944-1995). It was not the only way we hit the makiwara, but the practice pertinent to the elbow question.

He advised us to place the fist on the makiwara for the twist at the end of the punch and slowly push, but not rotate out the elbow. Thus one can feel the muscle chain implied when one focusses the technique from the forearm, triceps, over the biceps, the pectoral and lateral muscles on the side of the body down to the abdomen. He claimed it would be a good isometric muscle strengthening of exactly the parts needed for a good punch.

Then we executed the punch in its full range with speed, but brought it to a halt at the end, again with downward and not fully extended elbows and held the position for a few seconds to feel the reverberation of the resisting padded wooden board. The essential point of the makiwara is that it does not travel away when hit like a

sandbag, but kind of pushes back. This momentum is used for getting the right feel for impact and build up the muscles involved in the respective techniques.

Fujinaga-sensei advised us to "taste" and relish the resistance of the flexible striking post and let the feeling spread through the body. These exercises naturally lead to focussing our thrusts with our musculature when punching air.

Another bonus of not stopping a punch in stick-fashion is the improvement of control. If one is used to arrest the punch with one's muscles, one can resort to the same feeling and stop midway or at any point called for at will, e.g. if an opponent moves towards the attacker.

When punching into air you can first execute the *tsuki* in slow motion and turn the elbow downwards before the arm is stretched out completely and shortly tense the body. You can then rotate the elbow outwards and inwards and sense the difference. The rolling in and pointing down of the ulna definitely gives a stronger contraction oriented towards the *tanden* (abdominal centre). The muscles involved alter as well. It is worth a try-out, particularly for Shotokan practitioners, who generally are used to punch to the full reach of the arm.

A teacher of Okinawan Koryu Goju-ryu showed me that when performing *Sanchin* he does not lock-out the elbow, but keeps it bent inwards at the end of the move and holds it there while tightening the body. One can combine it with a strong exhalation (*ibuki*) as it is exercised in Goju-ryu or execute the punches very consciously like in the opening sequence of *Hangetsu* (historically the "sister-Kata" of *Sanchin/Seisan*).

It provides you with a good feeling for the hardening of the body for a split second in the instant of *kime* when punching with speed. *Kime* involves the whole body from feet to head. Even in *shizentai* the tension should go bottom up through the thighs into the buttocks by tucking in the coccyx, tensing the abdomen (*hara/tanden*) und tautening the muscles involved in the punch (biceps, triceps, particularly the *latissimus dorsi*) downwards into the direction of the *tanden*. It gives you a strong feeling of centredness.

In my experience this is achieved much easier when you punch in Okinawan style. The quality of one's Karate does not depend on the form or shape, but on the inner feeling. Just experiment with it and find out what suits you best. I for myself prefer the way of punching in the old school martial way and always leave a little leeway to the elbow and don't stretch the arm to the limit. It is definitely more gentle to the elbow joint and advisable for older practitioners. Let's go and throw some healthy punches!



"Tokyo Olympics...the guy actually scored a waza ari for that!!" (?)