

BACK TO BASICS: Examining the Lunge Punch

By Robert M. Carver

It is common today, that many of the most basic of traditional Martial Art techniques are not really understood by practitioners of the Martial Arts. The lunge punch (Oi tsuke) is just one of those techniques. Although this article will be from a traditional Japanese/Okinawan Karate perspective, it still applies to all practitioners whose art includes the lunge punch.

In today's Martial Arts community, we have unfortunately a host of practitioners who are not fully informed or properly trained in the execution of the basics. We have become a community that has embraced Bruce Lee's abhorrence for the "Classical Mess" of traditional Martial Arts techniques, such things as Kata. We have now taken up the practice of such illogical and possibly dangerous things such as "ground fighting" and the like. I am not saying that a practitioner should not learn to fight from the ground (better state that before I get too many nasty emails), but the emphasis in ground fighting should be to escape from the ground and get back on their feet rather than fighting on the ground. Fighting on the ground just invites an attacker's buddy to put a knife in you, but this is a topic for an entirely different article.

The Lunge Punch, like many of the basic techniques of Karate-Do is more than what it appears on the surface. Rather, it is the sum of many parts, that when properly combined and executed makes for a devastating technique. Proper technique and use of body mechanics is the key to the Lunge Punch.

A correct Lunge Punch requires the use of (1) the upper body, to include the arm and shoulder, (2) the hips and (3) the legs. Additionally, correct alignment of the wrist and hand, as well as using the proper striking surface is required. The forward momentum of the stepping motion lends additional power to the strike. We will examine each of these in detail.

THE UPPER BODY

The upper body is what most people associate as being the most important part of performing a lunge punch. The arm that executes the punch is thrust out in a straight line from the body (whether you begin at the hip or a little higher is irrelevant) with the palm of the striking fist turn up. Just before impact the fist rotates 180 degrees turning the palm down. The striking surface, which is the first two knuckles, should be in direct alignment with forearm and straight. It should be possible to lay a ruler on top of the wrist and have it make contact with the entire fist up to the knuckles, backwards to the forearm. The non-punching arm should be pulled sharply back to the hip. This "push-pull" motion causes the shoulders to turn. The speed of the punch is vital. We know from basic physics that force = mass x acceleration. So the speed of the punch and the mass behind it are what provides the power. The punching and non-punching arm should remain relaxed and supple throughout the technique and finally, just before impact (just as the hand turns over) the arm tenses. Tension should only be on the arm at the moment just before impact through the actual contact. As soon as the punch is landed, the arm should immediately relax.

Why is relaxation and tension important? Simply, energy travels better through solids than non-solids. For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. When you land the strike, energy from the impact is transmitted along the arm, into the shoulder and throughout the rest of the body. If you are tense, then that reaction may force you off-balance

Also, do not lean forward or allow the shoulder to precede the body. Keep the upper body perpendicular to the ground and the hips and shoulders directed forward. The punch should be delivered primarily with the next component, the hips.

THE HIPS

The hips are the true source of power for the lunge punch as well as many other basic Karate techniques. The hips remain in a neutral position prior to the final execution of the technique. Meaning, as you step forward with the rear leg, the hips remain in the same position and parallel to the floor. As the punch is being delivered with the arm, the hips turn simultaneously as the driving force behind the punch. It is important to keep in mind that the hips should remain parallel to the floor while rotating the hips in the same direction as the punch. The hips should be kept at the same level throughout the entire movement to prevent the body from bobbing up and down. The bobbing takes force away from the punch by directing the energy of the movement up and down rather than forward. Utilizing the hips for maximum power would not be possible without the last component of this technique: the legs.

THE LEGS

The legs are important in that they are the component that provide the forward momentum to the technique and are the delivery vehicle for the punch. The use of the legs also is a vital part in the proper utilization of the hips in the lunge punch.

Normally, the lunge punch is executed from Zenkutsu Dachi (Forward Stance), in which one leg is forward and supporting approximately 70 to 80 percent of the body's weight and the other leg is in back supporting the remaining. The hips begin facing forward toward the front leg.

As the technique is executed, the forward leg "pulls" the body forward, while at the same time the rear leg drives forward or "works as the driver". As the back leg moves forward, it is brought in toward the supporting forward leg. During this entire movement, the forward supporting leg continues to pull the body forward. As you move forward, the tendency is to raise the hips and therefore creating the bobbing movement discussed above. To prevent this from occurring, keep the supporting forward leg bent. Not only will this prevent bobbing up and down; it also provides that leg room to straighten as the forward supporting foot transitions to become the driving leg of the technique.

As the supporting forward leg and rear leg meet at the halfway point, the supporting leg becomes the power leg of the technique, driving toward the ground and propelling the leg which is stepping forward in the direction of the punch. As that leg moves to the forward position, the power leg drives the hips forward into the punch.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Adding together each of the individual parts, here is how the entire sequence of events should take place.

The forward leg pulls at the same time as the back leg drives forward. The knees remain bent and the hips do not turn and remain at the same level. The rear leg comes forward parallel to the forward leg. As the rear leg continues to move forward becoming the forward leg, the supporting leg drives toward the ground driving the forward leg and hips toward the target. The punching arm begins its forward movement at this point. As the forward leg begins to settle into its position, the rear leg drives backward straightening the knee, thrusting the hips forward in a rotating and tensing the muscles of the leg, arm and body the moment of impact. The forward momentum hips, arm and legs all terminate their movement simultaneously.

As you can see from this article, the lunge punch is more than just stepping forward and throwing your arm at the target. With proper technique, much practice and diligence, the Karateka will have a truly powerful and versatile technique in their arsenal.

Robert M. Carver is a Jujutsu instructor at the Heiwashin Dojo in Baton Rouge, LA. A former Marine with over 32 years in the Martial Arts, Carver Sensei is ranked in several styles of Jujutsu, Karatedo, Judo and Yudo. Additionally, he has also trained in Aikido and Arnis while living in the Philippines. He is the former Vice President of the United States Ju-Jitsu Federation (USJJF), and currently serves on the Board of Directors and on the Central Technical Committee of the USJJF. He is a founding member of the United States Martial Arts Federation and Martial Arts International Federation.