



PRESSURE POINTS IN SHOTOKAN KARATE

by Chris Thomas

There is a well known photo of Gichin Funakoshi in his 80's performing *kumite*. In the photo, Funakoshi has grabbed the right wrist of the attacker with his left hand, and is delivering a right upper level reverse punch (*jodan gyaku-zuki*) using a middle-knuckle fist (*nakadaka-ken*). Some Shotokan practitioners look at that photo and observe, "How spry and healthy he was. Shotokan karate is clearly an excellent health regimen." Other practitioners (notably those whose lineage trace more to the Shoto-kai) react with, "See, O-sensei was using a middle-knuckle fist. That proves that we should be doing the same." Practitioners with an intimate knowledge of the use of pressure points (*jintai no kyusho*), however, draw the following conclusion, "Gichin Funakoshi understood and used pressure point fighting methods (*kyusho-jitsu*)."

Of course O-sensei knew pressure points! After all, *Karate-do Kyohan* has an extensive chapter devoted solely to the subject. But, the existence of this chapter alone does not demonstrate a genuine understanding of pressure point fighting. If that were the case, then every Shotokan practitioner with a copy of *Karate-do Kyohan* would be a competent pressure point expert. What makes the difference between the true expert and someone who merely owns the book, is what is *not* said in the chapter on vital points.

In the book we are told that the points are places where the body is more vulnerable to attack, and that these points are generally the same as those used in orien-

tal medicine (moxabustion is specifically named). What is not stated is that these points are not used singly, but rather, are used in combinations. And these combinations of points are selected in accordance with the rules of traditional Chinese medicine.

In the old photo, Funakoshi has grabbed in such a way that his left thumb is pressing on a point on the inside of the attacker's wrist. The point is known as Heart # 5 (*Tongli*). The punch with the right middle-knuckle fist is aimed precisely to the hollow of the cheek, at a point called Small Intestine #18 (*Quanliao*). This is not accidental. The Heart and Small Intestine meridians are considered a yin/yang pair in acupuncture anatomy. To attack both simultaneously is regarded as a way to short circuit the positive and negative lines of the body. Furthermore, that particular wrist point is a "connecting point" between the Heart meridian and the Small Intestine meridian, and a point from which *ki* is understood to rise up to the eye. The cheek point is the location on the Small Intestine meridian which is closest to the eye. So, as the energy entered into the wrist point rises to the eye, it is met at the cheek point by the punch.

The presence of information on points in the most important written work on Shotokan karate, and the photo showing O-sensei utilizing pressure point methodology, should put to rest any lingering doubts some might have as to the importance of pressure point methods in the effective application of the style. But, it also begs a serious question: Why aren't Shotokan practitioners generally conversant in pressure point theory? The answer is that, in order to truly grasp the place of pressure point methods in the style, it is necessary to look at techniques from a perspective quite different from that taken in the average *dojo*. To illustrate this, let us consider a single technique, *shuto-uke*.

Shuto-uke is one of the most basic and fundamental movements of karate. In training, careful attention is paid to the proper placement of the hands, the correct angle of the lead elbow, and the structure of the attending stance (*kokutsu-dachi*). In partner practice, the technique is used against a middle level step-punch (*chudan oi-zuki*). The attacker charges forward, and the defender retreats into back stance, blocking the punch at the attacker's wrist. There are, however, several significant problems with this approach.

In Shotokan karate, every element of a technique is important. And, for this reason, practitioners drill the techniques in an endless quest for perfect execution. But, in the case of responding to a lunge punch with *shuto-uke*, absolutely all of the training is irrelevant. Consider stance, for example. If the defender steps back and



1-3. In the conventional interpretation of *shuto-uke*, assailant Clint Chapman attacks with a middle level step punch (*chudan oi-zuki*). The defender, author Chris Thomas, responds with *shuto-uke*, using the technique to block the punch at the wrist. However, this interpretation makes all of the particular aspects of *shuto-uke* entirely irrelevant. It doesn't matter what stance is used, as the interpretation works as well with *sochin-dachi* or *kosa-dachi* (4,5) as with the requisite *kokutsu-dachi*. In fact, since the defender has stepped out of range of the incoming punch, the arms are, themselves, unnecessary. Clearly, the conventional interpretation does not do justice to the Shotokan emphasis on technical precision.

blocks the attacker's punch, the technique will work just as well if the attacker is in *sochin-dachi*, or *kosa-dachi*, rather than the requisite *kokutsu-dachi*.

Consider the placement of the withdrawing hand (*hiki-te*) across the torso. Since it is not doing anything, it really doesn't matter where it ends up. Even the lead hand, the one performing the block is irrelevant. Since the defender has stepped back to avoid the punch – which is to say, has stepped out of range of the punch – there is absolutely no reason to even bother performing any block. The years spent perfecting *shuto-uke* can hardly be meaningful if all that effort produces nothing more than an unnecessary, and not particularly remarkable, chop at an attacker's extended punch.

In addition to the irrelevance of the *shuto-uke* response there is another important issue: the attack is equally irrelevant. While the correct use of *oi-zuki* is extremely effective (a topic for another article, perhaps), the application of this technique in the manner typical of *ippon kumite* is completely pointless. It is pointless because no one actually attacks like that. Observe any

human combat, from battlefield to barroom, from NHB arena to *dojo* sparring, and you will be hard pressed to find anyone initiating an attack with anything which even remotely resembles *oi-zuki*. So, what could be more utterly pointless than to train to defend against an attack which has no referent in the real world?

However, when we take a different approach to the problem, we will find that *shuto-uke*, in all its particularity, is entirely relevant and useful. But, to do this we must begin by changing the manner in which the attack is imagined. In the real-world of violent encounters, one of the frequent methods of aggression is that an attacker will grab a potential victim (usually using his left hand, and standing with his left leg forward) by the throat or clothing in order to stabilize his target for a punch to the head (usually with the right hand).

When attacked in this manner, the natural and immediate response is to raise one's hands to ward off the attack. The first part of the *shuto-uke* (the part often described as the preparatory position) is precisely this warding movement. The left hand shoots forward along

the inside of the attacker's right arm, and stops his right shoulder. The right hand crosses over the attacker's grabbing left hand to intercept the attacker's fist.

Immediately, the defender must step forward (Isn't it always a forward step in kata?) and complete a right hand *shuto-uke*. The defender's leading right leg penetrates to the outside of the attacker's left leg. It is important that the defender's leg presses up against the

him into his weighted left leg. Finally, the defender's left hand grasps and activates the pressure point Large Intestine # 10 (*Shousanli*), on the attacker's outer forearm.

As the defender's right arm moves forward, it first strikes with the elbow against the attacker's left arm, crashing onto Lung # 6 (*Kongzui*). This collapses the attacker's arm, further unbalancing him onto his lead leg, while entangling his grabbing hand beneath the defend-



(1) In the pressure point interpretation, the attacker uses a common real-world mode of assault: he grabs the defender with his left hand to stabilize his target for a right punch to the head. (2) As the attacker throws his punch, the defender responds with a very natural warding action. With his left hand, he pushes against the attacker's right shoulder to stop the technique, while his right hand crosses over the attacker's grabbing hand to intercept the attacker's fist. This exactly corresponds to the first, or "preparatory," portion of the the execution of *shuto-uke*. (3) Having received the attacker's punch, the defender immediately captures the attacker's right arm with his left hand and draws it to his torso. At the same time, he uses his right elbow to collapse and smother the attacker's grabbing left hand. (4) The attacker then drops forward into *kokutsu-dachi*, controlling the attacker's left leg with his foot placement. As the defender settles into a correct back stance, the cumulative effect is that the attacker is turned and unbalanced onto his lead leg. (5,6) With the completion of the technique, the defender uses his right forearm to strike into the attacker's neck. Without the use of pressure points, a solid blow can cause the attacker to trip over the defender's lead leg. With pressure points (as shown here), a very light blow produces a knock-out. (*Caution: Seek out expert instruction before attempting a pressure point knock-out.*)

outside of the attacker's ankle. This immobilizes his footwork, while activating pressure point Gall Bladder # 39 (*Xuanzhong*).

The defender's left arm encircles the attacker's right arm, and pulls it tightly to the body. This traps the arm so the attacker cannot initiate a series of pummeling blows with his right fist. It also rotates his body, twisting

er's armpit. The right hand then completes its forward movement by striking into the attacker's neck, hitting the points Stomach # 9 (*Renying*) and Stomach # 10 (*Shuitu*). Interestingly, the strike to these points will generally be delivered with the ulna bone of the forearm, rather than the hand.

When we consider this interpretation of the tech-



(1) In these photos some of the details of the pressure point interpretation are evident. The exact initial, or preparatory, movement of *shuto-uke* is used in a natural way to stop the attacker's right punch at shoulder and wrist. Note how the defender's right arm has come over the attacker's grabbing left hand. As a result, the attacker's hand is trapped against the defender's body. (2) As the defender begins the outward movement of his right arm, he leads with his elbow, crashing down onto the attacker's left arm, folding and smothering it, causing the attacker's neck to draw into range. (3) As the defender completes the *shuto-uke*, it is the attention to technical detail which insures that his forearm strikes the attacker's neck at the correct angle to effect the pressure points. (4) Note how *kokutsu-dachi* assures the exact placement of the defender's lead leg to control, trip, and activate one particular pressure point on the attacker's leg. All of the technical requirements of *shuto-uke*, which are irrelevant in the conventional interpretation, are essential in the pressure point interpretation.

nique *shuto-uke*, we see that every element is present for a very precise reason. Only the stance *kokutsu-dachi* will engage the attacker's lead leg at the proper angle to cut across GB-39/*Xuanzhong*, while also providing a structure for the attacker to trip over. Only by strongly pulling the left hand to the torso can the attacker's right arm be controlled and maintained, while enabling the defender to specifically grasp LI-10/*Shousanli*. Only by careful attention to the elbow placement of the right arm can the attacker's left hand be controlled, and the pressure point L-6/*Kongzui* engaged. And, only the proper bend of the elbow will insure that the right forearm strikes S-9/*Renying* and S-10/*Shuitu* at an effective angle. Further, because the hand is held in the open position, the total length of the the moving part of the arm (elbow to fingertips) is maximized. Since the weight of the hand is extended as far forward as possible past the point of impact, the forearm will actually penetrate more efficient-

ly into the neck.

When the particular combination of pressure points utilized is considered, it is apparent that precision of technique is even more significant. In a worst-case scenario, when the defender performs very poorly, the likely outcome is that only the points S-9/*Renying* and S-10/*Shuitu* will be struck. But, just this alone can have a significant effect. These two points lie over the two ends of the tiny Herring's nerve, which branches off of the vagus nerve. When struck, a signal is sent to the vagus nerve which can cause the body to collapse like a rag doll.

If the defender has some level of skill, then he or she will be able to trap the attacker's right arm and stimulate the forearm point LI-10/*Shousanli*. One of the significant principles of acupuncture is the Diurnal Cycle of *ki*. This principle describes how internal energy flows from one meridian to another throughout the day. *Ki* flows

from the Large Intestine meridian into the Stomach meridian. By activating the forearm point, the flow of *ki* is said to be disrupted, causing weakness in the Stomach meridian.

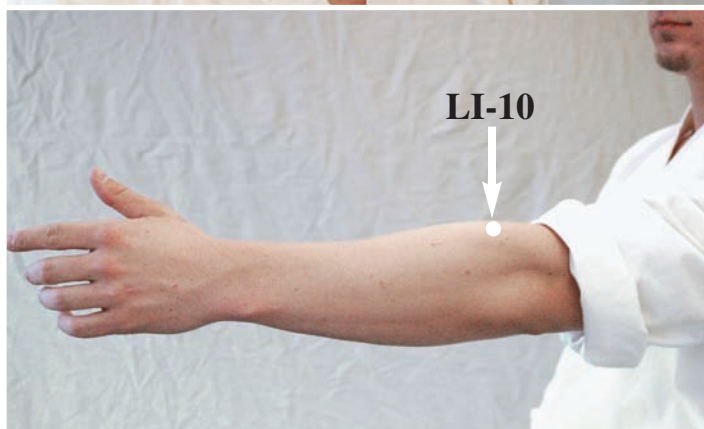
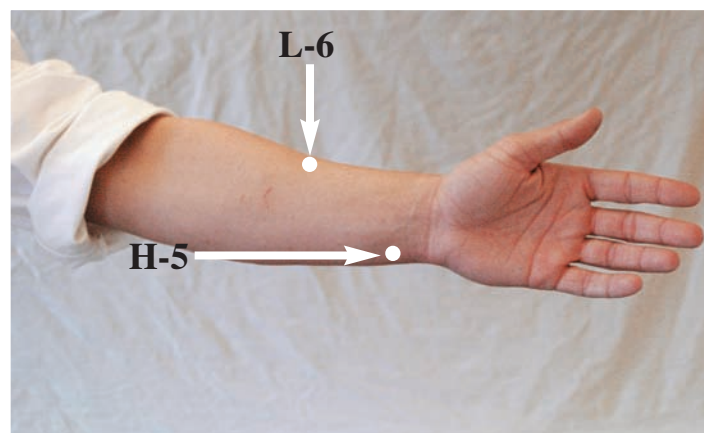
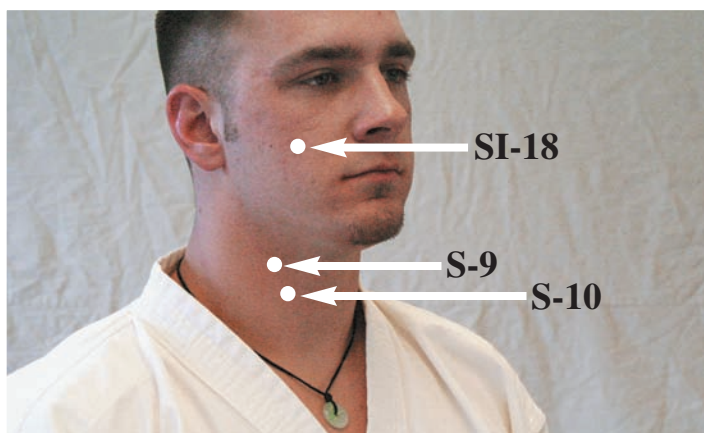
When the defender's right elbow strikes the point L-6/*Kongzui*, the point on the leg becomes vulnerable. Every meridian interacts with other meridians. One of these interactions is called "sedation." The Lung meridian can be used to "sedate" the Gall Bladder meridian. And interestingly, the Gall Bladder meridian is said to "sedate" the Stomach meridian.

Consider, then, the entire sequence of pressure points: one arm point weakens the leg point which in turn weakens the points on the neck, while the other arm point directly weakens the neck. It is apparent that each of these points is selected in order to make the attack on S-9/*Renying* and S-10/*Shuitu* as absolutely effective as possible. But, the selection of points is made, not by the whim of the practitioner, but by the precise execution of *shuto-uke*.

It is important to compare the two interpretations of *shuto-uke* presented here. In the first interpretation – the conventional interpretation – the technique was used to pointlessly "block" an unrealistic attack. Not one of

the salient features of the technique was in anyway relevant in its use. In contrast, in the second interpretation – the pressure point interpretation – every aspect of *shuto-uke* was used with exactness, against a realistic attack, and in such a way that a very specific set of pressure points was accessed. Clearly, only one of these two interpretations fits Shotokan's spirit of technical precision. And only one of these two interpretations is in the tradition of a man who knew that pressure on H-5/*Tongli* was to be precisely followed by a strike to SI-18/*Quanliao*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Chris Thomas has studied karate since 1970, and holds dan ranking in Shotokan (JKA), Isshin-ryu, and Ryukyu kempo. His articles and essays on karate have appeared in Black Belt Magazine, Fighting Arts International, Traditional Karate, Combat, Blitz, Irish Fighter and many other martial arts publications around the world. He has also co-authored a series of books on pressure point methods with renowned pressure point expert George Dillman.



Pressure Points Referenced in this Article