Aspects of Breathing in the Martial Arts
Part One: The Fundamentals

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7th December 2002

Introduction

The role of breathing in the martial arts is complex, and extends far beyond the physical act of oxygenating the blood. In this essay I will explore some of the aspects of breathing as they apply to the martial arts, both as a combative discipline and as a promoter of health and longevity.

The wealth of breathing techniques championed by martial arts instructors is almost as diverse as the styles that these instructors practise. As a karate student well conditioned to exhaling strongly whilst punching, I was duly reprimanded for doing so in a Shaolin kung-fu class. "Why are you breathing loudly?", I was asked. "If you breath loudly, your opponent will know that you are about to attack!". Whilst I cannot fault the logic in this, the justification for audible breathing is equally as convincing. I use this to highlight the fact that there is rarely a single right way to do anything in martial arts. For much of this essay I favour the discussion of principle over technique, since the principles of martial arts are, in general, more uniform than the way they are implemented within particular styles. Where I do descend into discussion on technique, it should be borne in mind that *a* method is being talked about, and not *the* method.

Breathing techniques

At a very basic level, karate students are taught that breathing plays an important role in the correct execution of technique. Inhalation should take place through the nose and exhalation through the mouth. Inhalation is usually performed in the transition between stances or positions and exhalation proceeds whilst the technique is performed. If a sequence of techniques occur in quick succession, the exhalation is usually spread over the number of techniques involved. One master, Kenko Nakaima, professed that breathing (during kata training) should be natural, exhaling with a sharp *hiss* when

striking. He went on to add that, in combat, the breathing should be undetectable. Yoshio Itokazu of Goju-ryu also believed in this principle. The apparent contradiction between the techniques that are trained, and those that are applied in combat mirrors the difference between karate-breathing and kung-fu-breathing mentioned above. Eiichi Miyazoto, also of Goju-ryu, discussed breathing technique at greater length:

> Inhale slowly through the nose using the lower abdominal muscles, and in the same way gently ease the air out through the mouth with a guttural hiss. This sound is coincidental to the breathing and should not be made on purpose.

Shoshin Nagamine taught that a defensive technique should be executed with inhalation, whereas an offensive technique should be executed with exhalation. These views are all joined by a common thread: they teach the *what*, but not the *why*. The rudiments of correct breathing are oft stated but rarely explained. In all of the examples above, the teachers advocate that exhalation should accompany an offensive technique. Why is this? One fundamental reason is that if you are hit in the chest while your lungs contain air, you are likely to become winded. Emptying your lungs avoids this danger. It is also said that the purpose of *kihon* (basic training) is to unify the mind and body with the breath. This is most clearly seen in *kiai*, of which I will have more to say later. In some way then, karate is underpinned with the belief that exhalation whilst performing a technique binds the intent of mind and body: a strong, powerful exhalation promotes the execution of a strong and powerful technique

Many of the Okinawan styles advocate breathing from the abdomen rather than from the chest, not just while training but all of the time. The Japanese phrase, *bu no chikara*, is used to describe the hidden strength that is thought to result from this. It is believed that such abdominal breathing engages the *tanden* - the centre of the body's intrinsic energy, or *ki*. The *tanden* is located just below the navel and is important in internal martial arts such as tai-chi, and in styles of karate that teach *kyusho-waza* (techniques performed to the body's vital points). The Koju-ryu employs muscle breathing exercises that help to harden the body internally and allow the body to take a blow on any surface without damage.

In Taido, there are four methods of breathing that relate to the four scenarios experienced by a person being attacked. Each breathing technique is made up of two components: inhalation and exhalation. Both the inhalation and exhalation can be performed at two speeds, quickly or slowly. The four methods are therefore as follows:

Method	Inhalation	Exhalation
1.	Fast	Fast
2.	Fast	Slow
3.	Slow	Fast
4.	Slow	Slow

A fast inhalation is carried out when a possible threat becomes apparent - the taidoka inhales quickly in preparation to move. A slow inhalation is conducted when there is no apparent threat, but the taidoka still needs to maintain a state of awareness and readiness (*zanshin*). A fast exhalation indicates that a perceived threat is real and marks the transition into a defendable position such as *kamae*. Conversely, a slow exhalation marks a continued state of readiness, even though there is no immediate threat.

It should come as no surprise that fast breath is used to match a fast action, and a slow breath is used to match a slow action. This can be experienced by trying to perform your favourite technique at full speed and power, whilst breathing slowly. Deliberate and controlled breathing also promotes a state of readiness and calmness - If you can control the breath, you can control the mind (think about the difficulty of acting rationally when the body is struggling for breath). Similarly, if you can control the mind you can control the body (think about the conflict between mind and body that arises when you are in the middle of a gruelling run) . Moreover these breath-mind and mind-body relationships are transitive: If you can control the breath, you can control the body. The ability to control the body is a core principle in martial arts.

Kiai

The breath can be used to mirror the body's intent. A strong, powerful exhalation promotes a strong and powerful technique. In addition, the use of abdominal breathing can reinforce the body's resolve and the ability to strike. The natural extrapolation of these principles results in the performance of *kiai*. The physical act of *kiai* involves tightening the muscles of the body (including the diaphragm) on impact, and exhaling forcibly to produce a shout. *Kiai* literally means 'spirit convergence' and is a state of being which is meant to express a harmony between the body and the mind. In his autobiography, Funakoshi recounts a tail of the karate master Matsumura, who once defeated an enemy using only his *kiai*. The physical shout of the *kiai* can be used to scare the opponent, something that Musashi states as being of great importance:

> The difference between a half-hearted scream intended to scare the enemy off and a resolute shout is the difference between bragging and making a commitment to attack.

It is also said that the act of *kiai* causes the throat to harden - in defence against a strike to the front of the neck.

Although the use of vocal *kiai* is championed by the majority of martial arts, it is by no means universal. Kaneshima, of Tozan-ryu, believed that the *kiai* shout is not necessary for karate training, and is in fact, a "waste of time". Indeed, some schools teach that the use of *kiai* marks a weak point in the martial artist's attack, since it causes the body to become tense. Many higher graded sensei refrain from performing an audible *kiai*, preferring to give an 'introspective' *kiai* on impact; strong but subdued. It is an unfortunate side-effect of competition karate that more value is ascribed to the physical shout than to the internal aspects of *kiai*.

Mushin

The principle of *mushin*, or no-mindedness is important to zen martial arts such as karate. When fighting in a state of *mushin*, the body reacts to stimuli without the intervention of the mind; thoughts do not cloud the body's intent and the body acts freely.

The principle of *mushin* may appear too esoteric for some, but it is, in fact, completely natural. While you are reading this, you are not thinking about reading it, you are merely reading it. As soon as you *think* about reading, it becomes much more difficult to read - the mechanics of intentional reading inhibit your ability to read. It is the same with martial arts - when confronted by an enemy (and all the attendant fears), the intervention of mind can only be a hindrance - *inserting 'thought' where your best guide is instinct.*

Mushin is sometimes experienced during the practice of meditative sitting, or *zazen*. People sitting for the first time often find the sitting uncomfortable and the mind remains extremely active. The process of breathing deliberately, and in particular the counting of the breaths, helps to focus the mind on a single activity. This is often called one-pointed attention. The same principle applies in martial arts - intentional breathing can be used to focus the mind. Once the mind is focused on a single thing it can make the transition from one-pointed attention to no-pointed attention - the state of *mushin*. If this explanation seems unclear, it is because no-mindness is not something that can be easily described, but can only be experienced.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have touched on a few aspects of breathing in the martial arts. A closed mind can never learn; only an open mind can be free. The pursuit of freedom; freedom from fear, prejudice, conflict and a multitude of other restrictions to which we are necessarily bound, is a lofty goal for any martial artist to aim for. As with life itself, a martial art has nothing to do with the goal, and everything to do with the journey. Breathing, a vital action that is for the most part performed entirely unconsciously, helps us along this path by allowing us to control the body and the mind. The application of techniques such as *kiai* can fuse the body's power, intention and resolve, into a single point. Breathing can also help to promote the calm, lucid and free state of mind that can lead to *mushin*. In this way, the act of intentional *breathing* helps to draw together many disparate threads in the practise of martial arts.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Sensei Lars Larm and Sensei Tim Steel for their comments on this essay.

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