

On Breathing

By Master Kawanabe

I think breathing practice may be helpful in recognizing your stomach work and increase the power of your breath. Breath power is different in its quality compared to the power derived from muscle. I hope you will practice by imagining that only your waist filled with Ki stands and all the rest of your body is unconscious and automatically follows like a shadow to the waist movement.

When you put your breath on the tip of your finger in harmony with your waist movement, there occurs power much more than usual. Feel your body like a vacuum and the strong energy flows through your body structure to penetrate the target. Drop your diaphragm and lift your anus and you will feel your stomach and waist move clearly.

Here is one thing which is very important when we think of analyzing physical power away from the hachiriki. It is “kokyu-riki”, meaning breath power which is different from the power produced by the muscle. They say that an Indian Yogi can make a rope stand high in the sky. Of course, I can't do that. I think there this is something in common with the breath power that I am now mentioning. Instead of gripping the opponent's wrist hard, just grip it softly and control the person. Then it becomes much easier in using any technique for punching or blocking. I think this is the third stage we have to get into after passing the second stage of splitting the waist (koshi-o-waru).

In this stage of exploration, we can study clearly, in a more distinguished way, how the energy passes through against the opponent by adjusting our physical structure. I believe energy and mental power goes through just like gas goes through a pipeline. This is a very important practice we should cultivate and develop in the future which I think is ultimately necessary and essential in all true Budo. In our practice of Kenjutsu, managing the ken also teaches us how to learn to acquire this power which can only be produced by the trained breath and Ki coordinated with a relaxed natural physical structure.

I think every technique can hopefully be produced using breath work of the lower part of the stomach. And in the process of doing this we should train our waist to be movable just like a hula dancer. The only difference from the hula dancer is that we walk with the waist. This is a very simple point but very a difficult one to do. We have to take this sense of walking with the waist and experience it by all means.

Imagine a breath ball in your lower stomach with which eight ken directions or every directional movement can be done. To do this, you must assure the entire body is relaxed at the moment of finishing the oizuki as well as at the starting pose. This whole posture may be compared to your hand grip when you grasp a ken; neither rigid nor loose.

Your waist should be like the root of a tree and absorb Ki (energy) both from the upper and lower side and from the flat of your feet with the help of relaxed ankles and knees.

Here let me write some of my methods of breathing.

1. Make a stable and comfortable position. I usually sit down on folded knees with a mat between my hip and legs.
2. Think about the purpose of breathing since our body movement is so closely dependent and related to the breath, we can feel easier in our movement by training our breath. Through this practice it should become easier in controlling your breath; thus you will be able to make your movements just as well as your breath. Really it is the breath that makes your movement. The practice of breathing also contributes to maintaining and vitalizing our body and mind, while it also becomes the foundation leading to meditation.
3. I usually take 40 to 45 seconds in one breath cycle and take over 30 seconds in the expiration alone. The long expiration is desirable for exchanging carbon dioxide accumulated in the lung for fresh oxygen. They say the slow tempo of waves in the spring is the universal one which is similar to prana filled in the universe and so this comfortable slow tempo coordinated with the universe is the most ideal way to practice.

In a nut shell, I think the key point is how to keep and carry on this breathing practice in an easy, relaxed and enjoyable way. The difficult point is how to switch from exhale to inhale. Like in yoga, release your breath at the climax point of the exhale and take an inhale with your anus closed properly just as if you cap at the bottom and top, or back and front.

I usually practice breathing while listening to the tick tock sound of a clock. But sometimes this may be bothersome to your concentration. They say changing the rhythm from a gentle breeze to strong wind sometimes may be good. I hope you will keep practicing this breathing patiently, slowly and steadily.

I make it a rule to practice breathing every morning for nearly an hour or so. I believe this contributes greatly to the practice of Budo. This is so helpful that I must recommend it to you.