THE KIAI

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Newsletter of THE AIKIDO INSTITUTE

MORE THOUGHTS ON KIAI.

I've written several times about kiai, its purpose, stylistic and fashion issues, and, of course, some thoughts about delivery. I thought it'd be interesting to consider the mind/body connection in terms of the power of breath.

So. Breath. Well, we know that it's a reasonably important aspect of life. You can go without food for weeks, without water for days, and without TV for a lifetime. But try not breathing for more than about 40 seconds. Really; go ahead and try it right now. It'll help make my point. Because it is such a clear illustration of the importance breath has to our energy body. On the most superficial level, it keeps us alive. Since humankind began to consider the energy body, it became apparent that anything with such unconscious power must be even more powerful, consciously harnessed.

In my 15 or so years doing yoga, breath work, or pranayama (which translates to "energy practice") has always been one of the core practices. All ancient yoga traditions and most modern ones include some kind of breath work. The Sivananda school, which is one of the largest and most well respected in the world, maintains that 1/3 of ones daily practice should be focused on breath and breathing. The venerable tradition of hatha yoga is essentially binding body movement with breath (seeing a pattern?). Even ultra-hip Bikram includes it; in fact, if he's successful in his legal battles, everyone who breathes will owe him royalty.

The inhale draws energy, it's the yin, the receptive act, the face of the wave, the center of the spiral. In yoga, one would create convex shapes, like bending out or curving backward. Inhale. Open the body, fill it with energy. In Tai Chi, one inhales while opening, or in retreat. In Aikido, the inhale serves as a bracing, a moment of preparation and gathering of resources. Like in the third ken suburi or in "ki musubi no tachi," one draws and compresses breath, like tightening a coil or compressing a spring.

They say that the inhale is relaxing, calming. In advanced breath work, often times we measure our inhale in one count to holding the breath for four counts. (Yes, they call that relaxing.) It's an incredible exercise.

Breath control isn't a completely esoteric practice. It's an exercise in self-control. It's never been alien to me because I swam competitively as a kid and through school, so managing breath was critical. Second nature, really. But recently at a yoga class I saw a woman struggling with it, she actually looked panicked. In fact, she got up and left the class after just a few minutes. After a lifetime of breathing on auto pilot, I guess it was just too difficult to try something different, something more conscious.

That same self-control may be really helpful, say, if you're threatened or confronted by something sudden and unexpected. The out of control self would panic, hold breath, cringe. I've read that most accident victims are found with a look of terror on their faces. Yikes! The conscious being, the yogi or martial artist, practices awareness and flexibility. In the face of threat, one breathes, relaxes, and takes in the situation. One, tiny, relaxed moment can make the difference between acting consciously or not. Ever hear Sensei say, "During a spirited jyu waza, you should hold your breath, tense up and panic." Of course not. Because when you're relaxed you're flexible and fluid on every level: physical, mental, emotional and physical.

The exhale projects energy. It is the yang, the creative force. It's the sprout, bursting from its seed, sand as it smoothes the rocky ledge, lightening crackling to the ground. It is not necessarily violent or forceful. Water as it passes through a canyon is yang energy, slowly but inevitably deepening the gorge. In yoga, you exhale when

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exerting strength, when bending forward or curving inward, compressing. In Aikido, we exhale in concert with a strike or powerful technique. We kiai. Even a silent exhale is a kiai, and in it is remarkable power.

Kiai (which, by the way, is Japanese for "energy practice") is a means through which your body and breath work together. It's as if you create an energy channel through your being, and at the moment of ultimate expression, release it in a torrent. Your body – your hips and arms – and your ki blast outward, like a big sonic wave. It's a signal to yourself and others that in this decisive moment there is no force greater or more unified than yours. To your fellow students, it says you're completely present and focused. To Sensei, a dojo echoing with kiai means students fully engaged in practice. To an attacker, it means he's screwed.

Breathing in is key to breathing out. Okay, that may seem a little pedantic, but this is what I mean: if you can measure your inhale you can control your exhale. I do that a couple ways:

— I focus on how Aikido movement expands and contracts. Practices like the 31 jo kata and ki musubi no tachi are excellent for breath practice. Aikido movement is like a sine wave, rising and falling, advancing and regressing. Follow that movement with your breath. Make it a conscious practice. As you draw your weapon back, inhale; as you strike or block, exhale. Start slowly and you'll see how quickly it becomes natural. You will also notice how your stamina increases.

— I use every opportunity to integrate conscious breathing. For example, doing awase practice with Sensei. At first I found it terrifying, and couldn't possibly keep up. I stood there, petrified and tense, waiting for him to move. He'd finish his strike before I could even start to respond. Now as we face each other, I exhale, very, very slowly. As he moves I inhale, using the yin energy to raise my ken, and exhale, using the yang energy to affect the strike. The breath helps get the sword up, and gives it life coming down.

— Do lots of suburi. Tanren uchi is a fine opportunity to practice breathing and kiai. If you've done 1000 bokken strikes, you'll understand this: you can't do it by strength. Oh, maybe you can rely on your arms for the first few hundred. Then what? Then you need your breath. By 650, your whole body helps. By 750 it's internal energy that's raising the sword, and by 950, it's your breath. This may seem like a big ol' helping of hokey-pokey new age sugar water. Want proof? Stop reading this and raise your left arm straight up from your side about 500 times. Then let me know what you think. In any event, remember: raise the sword and inhale, strike and exhale.

So what's with all the noise? Why is it helpful to make noise? I think it's because that loud, explosive noise requires such force. New students are often very sheepish about kiai. You hear them peep or sigh as they struggle through learning new techniques. But as students become more powerful, their ability to express that power in many ways also increases. It is confidence manifest.

Kiai is also an expression of who you are. Are you a big roaring beast? You'll ROAR! A sly strategist? You'll hiss. A cautious defender? You'll yell sharply. Obviously I'm just making examples. You're you. When you find your power, you'll find your kiai. You can always do a kiai audit on the mat and out in the world. How does Jet Li, Chow Yun Fat or Michelle Yeoh kiai? What about Bruce Lee's chirps and hoots? What about Sensei and our sempai? Try a few out for yourself.

So just to wrap this up, I'll recap: breathing is your life energy; your life energy can be shaped and formed, focused to your needs; when you need an outburst of power, unleash that energy. In the meantime, keep breathing.

RICHARD LEVITT

ON MY SHODAN TEST

Shodan – to read the Japanese characters with which this word (what we would call "first degree black belt") is written is to perhaps change our definition of what it means and what sort of status it implies. In Western culture it is a common belief that to have earned a black belt in a martial art confers some sort of physical or spiritual power on a person not present in others. It is a destination, a point of arrival after which one is certainly a force to be reckoned with. However, in the traditional reading of the word, we are confronted with an idea much different from this now apparently erroneous conception. The first character of the word literally translates as "beginning," and it implies that even after all that we have been through to come to this point, we are only treading the first steps down the path. In my position, looking back on the years of training that have led me to today it is hard to imagine this as only a beginning. But then I am reminded each and every time I step onto the mat that my knowledge of this art is truly shallow when compared to the depth and scope of that possessed by others further down the path, and I am inspired to continue on.

As I have walked this road it has seldom been the natural state of my mind to contemplate the metamorphoses that I, and indeed all people, undergo on a daily basis as it is happening in the present. As one who lives and grows with a sibling or a child will seldom notice those changes in the other unless separated for a time, one will not without conscious effort focus on the retrospective so as to objectively note the

revolution of the self. So it is that I now look back and see that I have indeed changed in the four years leading to this day, and in no small measure.

I believe that if I were to distill that change into words (though this be an abstraction at best, as Sensei often points out), or to sum it up in letters it would be best captured by the dojo code of the Aikido Institute of Texas – "humility, awareness, and perseverance." These three virtues have steadily grown in my consciousness until they have become a daily mantra. Neither are they any longer words which I must recall with effort, but a code which materializes in my mind when I find myself at an impasse. Humility, or in speaking transitively the slaying of pride, is of the utmost importance in remembering one's place in the larger picture, while with awareness we come to see a greater portion of that picture in sharper detail. When these virtues come into accord the natural progression is then toward perseverance and thus continuance down the path.

I have read in the works of noted Zen Teachers that compassion is the manifestation of wisdom in the real world, and so it is that equipped with the three High Merits of humility, awareness, and perseverance we are able to manifest our training in the world beyond the mat and the dojo doors. When we come to understand the meaning of this code, the code of the dojo learned through our training in Aikido, we come to see the world in a new way as a place in which we can indeed make a difference beginning with our own selves. Though I have only taken the first steps down this path it is with a sense of social responsibility and compassion that I will proceed. And as I persevere I await with patient expectation the changes to come.

JARED HAM

BOOK REVIEW

Helm

Helm, by Steven Gould (not the anthropologist Steven J. Gould) 469 pages, published by Tor.

Let me tell you a story idea. Imagine that the time has come to leave the Earth behind – it's become the bombed-out hellhole of science-fiction tradition – and we have two amazing inventions that let us escape. One is a spaceship that can carry the usual cryogenically frozen colonists a few stars over until they land on a nice, virgin planet. The other is a helmet with some astonishing properties. Once it's programmed with the knowledge and memories of the brightest person we can find, this marvelous device will download that information into anyone else who comes along. In other words, once the colonists set up shop on Planet Perfect, this Helm will help them get back to up to a suitable, civilized level of technology by crash-coursing prominent leaders in the group. It does a few other tricks, too, but that's the big one: university education? Bang, no problem. Neurosurgeon? Done. Unified quantum gravity superstring theory? Five minutes, tops.

A lifetime of training in aikido? All part of the package.

Needless to say, one of the vital skill sets chosen to make it on this brave new world is the Way of Harmony, conveniently available because of the forty years of training the template genius had put in. And needless to say, the intended purpose of the helmet doesn't quite come to pass.

Steven Gould assembled an odd collection of pieces for his novel, Helm, because once the intrepid colonists lose track of how to use this helmet, it takes only a few generations to end up with bows and arrows, shield and swords, and a horse-based economy. Into this sci-fi/medievil/aikido setting comes Leland Laal, the youngest son of a wise and benevolent local ruler. Leland goes through a grueling couple of days to get his hands on the mysterious glass helmet, and – sorry if this big surprise is too much information – learns the secrets of the universe along with a lifetime's training overnight. Much of the phrases and concepts floating around in his overstuffed skull don't make any sense to him, but he takes to aikido like a duck to water, not least because it's the most immediately practical of his many new skills.

Eventually he sets off to learn properly what has fallen into his lap. In doing so, he makes some valuable friends, meets The Girl, and of course falls inevitably into the middle of a raging torrent of schemes and counterschemes set to topple his family from the throne and generally disrupt life as they all know it. The story that follows is entertaining; an easy read that keeps moving. He writes action sequences with simple techniques that come easily to your mind's eye, and he has quite cleverly titled his chapters with aikido concepts and phrases that fit the storyline — I almost wonder if he adapted the story to match the available titles. As an

added bonus, including the Art in the story gives an easy way to tell the heroes from the villains — anyone who trains is, ipso facto, a good guy!

There are some other high notes to be recognized about this work. Gould's characters weave a believable net of relationships; he plays around with language a little to reflect the different lifestyle of this world; he is willing to follow events to conclusions that aren't necessarily what we've come to expect. For me, however, the most rewarding part of reading this was taking a moment to ponder the concepts he uses as chapter titles. Following the plot of the chapter, considering how well it illustrates the relevant idea, is an excellent exercise in aikido metaphors.

I think that this novel has historically served best in bringing sci-fi readers to aikido, more than bringing aikido to science fiction. And that's fine with me, really. If you're already both, though, it's certainly worth taking a look.

Scott McCormick

REFLECTIONS ON TRANSITIONS: CONFESSIONS OF A BEGINNER

I woke up Sunday morning relaxed and rested. It was a fabulous Sunday, like Sundays normally are, especially for Oakland uchi deshis. I did not feel any different; same amount of stiffness and soreness. In my mind, I was the same person. The fact that I had earned my shodan, received a new color belt, did not make me any different. My passion for training and learning had not changed. Being a shodan certainly was not a propellant in my decision to be uchi deshi. I did not want to feel any change with the attainment of this new belt. It is after all only a piece of clothing.

One might argue that "change", albeit relative in its definition is ultimately unavoidable especially in transitory stages such as moving from kyu to dan ranks. Needless to say, Monday morning came and I reluctantly started feeling a difference.

One of the first things to notice was the extra fabric, the hakama. Indubitably, the wide legged flared pants bestow a martial elegance. It exudes an air of charm and respect. Having worn them in a previous time, I felt poised when I was faced with the thought of wearing them again. All my poise disappeared Monday morning during the ten minutes that it took for me to dress myself! After wearing the hakama a few times now, I have improved my time, although I am still working on reducing that time down to less than one minute, as suggested by a veteran hakama wearing practitioner.

Many have told me that I look as if I was born to be in this hakama. I am certainly flattered but also feeling slightly awkward to receive such statements. I have encountered many compliments, some to the extent of awe. Surely I am grateful for the support and admiration everyone has given me but I feel it to be a bit unnecessary. I am after all still the same person, only now I have different color clothing.

Although as adamant as I am with this transition, I find myself feeling somewhat different. While wearing more clothing and sometimes feeling a bit clumsy, my ukemi feels more solid. I figured it is a result of all the ki passed onto me from the hakama's previous owners. As for the rest of my Aikido, I still know my basics, being able to perform them adequately. However, I catch myself feeling as if I just began training.

Initially I was afraid that I went into shock and lost all that I had learned. This certainly was a very silly thought. After some contemplation, I realized that it was not shock and that I still know some Aikido. I am hoping that this feeling of not knowing is merely an opening to the path of greater learning.

It took a couple of days, after receiving shodan, for me to realize that this transition was not all that dreadful. I had accomplished something. When I first begun my journey in Aikido, it was a goal of mine to be a black belt. The longer I studied the art, the less central it became in my aspirations.

Attaining rank is an important tool for some, whether it is used as a gauge for improvement or a way to gain more confidence. I found it difficult to accept this transition primarily because the acquisition of rank became secondary to my purpose in learning Aikido. Also, I was unsure of the change associated with this new rank, both in me as a student and in how others perceived me as a teacher.

As I reflect on what this new rank means to me, I must confess that it is not as daunting as I originally thought it to be. It has been said that once one has become a shodan, serious learning begins. I do not see much difference in me yet. I am basically the same as when I wore the white belt, still eager to train, excited to learn, embracing the feeling of being a beginner.

Jennifer Velasco

Evening Keiko 2004: The Lineup

EVENING KEIKO 2004

Photos by Richard Levitt

Evening Keiko 2004: Extension

Evening Keiko 2004: Kokyu Nage

Evening Keiko 2004: Extension

Evening Keiko 2004: Ikkyo

Evening Keiko 2004: Extension

Evening Keiko 2004: Nikkyo

Evening Keiko 2004: Yonkyo