



Kokyū 呼吸

The word *kokyū* literally means breath in Japanese.

Breath can also be called “iki” 息. Both *kokyū* and *iki* are more or less interchangeable when talking about the physical act of breathing.

But the word *kokyū* has many other fascinating aspects to it, that are connected in different ways, to the literal meaning.

Kokyū has a deep cosmological meaning; it relates to the concept of cosmic dual forces, called *in / yō* (yin and yang in Chinese).

In 陰 means shadow, and represents among other things, the negative force or darkness, and *yō* 陽, meaning light, represents among other things, the positive force. This *in / yō* concept of dualism permeates Japanese culture in very many ways, and I will try to give some examples of this in this text that relate to the concept of *kokyū*.

The concept of *kokyū*, with its inhalation and exhalation in balance, is necessary for living beings to sustain life. In Japanese Shinto cosmology, the universe itself is thought to “breathe” – in that it is believed that the universe expands and contracts. This is a concept that goes back to ancient times, and it is interesting to note that modern science indicates that this is actually true.

Kokyū and *ki*: 氣 or 氣 (old version kanji) go hand in hand. *Ki*, the universal energy, is generated through *kokyū*, and the concept is that one inhales the *ki* of the universe into one’s body, and through exhalation purifies oneself – the exhalation working as a filter of sorts; exhaling and expunging the impure energy in a cyclic manner. This creates a kind of build-up of *ki* while cleansing one’s self – spiritually and physically / internally at the same time. This again is the workings of *in / yo*.

Kokyū also represents a connectivity in terms of person – to – person interactions. When one has a good relationship with another person the phrase *kokyū ga au/aimasu* 呼吸が合う is often used. This means literally that the two people’s breathing fits together, or is in synch. In English we sometimes say that we are on the same wavelength as another person. This has the same meaning – but in Japanese it is the harmonization of one’s breath with the other that is used to emphasize this unity.

In Japanese society, there is a tradition of doing *Taisō* 体操 (calisthenics) to start off the day. This is often done as a communal practice. Throughout Japan, in the mornings you will often see groups of people standing outside their place of work doing gymnastics together. There is an inherent understanding in Japanese culture that the body and the mind work together, and that it



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is important to move the body in order to sustain its good condition; to stretch out the muscles and to breathe in and out vigorously in order to stimulate both the respiratory system as well as the body's blood circulation.

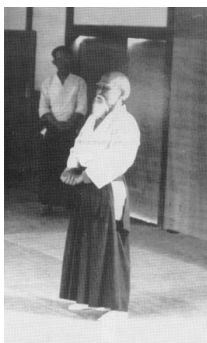
The calisthenics done throughout Japan are very standardized – you have what is called *Rajio Taisō* - ラジオ体操 (radio calisthenics) where a speaker on the radio tells the listeners which exercises to do and how to do them - and how they should feel. If there isn't a radio speaker telling you what to do, one person in the group will lead the others through the exercise routine so everyone is doing them in synch. This also creates a kind of bond between those exercising together, enhancing the spirit of togetherness that is so important in Japanese culture.

And when the exercises are almost done there is a cooling-down exercise used to finish the session. This is called *Shin Kokyū* 深呼吸 meaning deep breathing. This is usually done by standing in a wide stance and lifting one's arms upwards and outwards – this is the expanding (*yō*) part of the exercise. While opening the arms one breathes in deeply through the nose, all the way down to the pit of the stomach. One leans backwards at the apex of the movement; the opening of the arms fully and the leaning back opens the lungs and enables one to inhale fully. While doing the physical movements, one imagines that one is inhaling the *ki* of the universe, with all its positive energy and attributes.

After the inhalation one moves into the exhalation part. This is done by leaning forward, knees bending slight and arms moving downwards and inwards and releasing one's breath outwards through the mouth, emptying the lungs completely, while relaxing the body. This is the contracting (*in*) part of the exercise.

This movement embodies the feeling of releasing the old stored-up energy in a purifying way. These two movements are done slowly and mindfully several times to finish the exercise session.

There are several variations of exercises that we do in aikido that serve the same purpose; the exercises called *tamafuri undō* 魂振り運動 (spirit-shaking exercise) and *funakogi undō* 船漕ぎ運動 (boat-rowing exercise) are two examples of this. Both are done as *misogi* (meditation and purification), as well as to train the *in / yō* breathing and to strengthen one's *ki*.



Tamafuri Undō



Funakogi / Funekogi Undō



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We, as martial artists are aware of the mind/body/breath connection. And it is wonderful to see that Japanese people in their everyday lives are also aware of the important positive effects of physical exercise, here in the form of calisthenics, and that a very important part of that is kokyū.

The training of breathing in this way and the focus on not only the physical but also the mental and spiritual benefits of breath training is so important for us as human beings, in order to make sure that our bodies and minds stay healthy.

It makes me happy to see that Japanese society is so aware of this. I can only hope that Western societies could be as aware of the benefits of this training as the Japanese are.

In our aikido training in the Iwama tradition, we always begin each class with *tai no henko* (body pivot turn) and *morote dori kokyū hō*. *Hō* means method, and this means that we are using the physical form of a designated technique – traditionally this is *morote dori kokyū nage (kokyū hō form)* – as a means to train kokyū. So, taking in to account the aforementioned aspects of kokyū we can understand that this isn't just a "breath technique." The *hō* indicates that the designated technique is a method in which we train the many aspects of the concept of kokyū.

In aikido the concept of kokyū also embodies the channeling of ki outwards; initially in *morote dori kokyū hō* by means of the *tegatana* 手刀 (sword edge of the hand). We learn to imagine and feel that we are channeling our ki powerfully outwards through the *tegatana* throughout the technique, until we finish the throw. At this point our hand position changes to the palms up position; and in this position we should still feel an outwards surge of ki, now projecting out from our fingertips.

The kokyū concept inherent in this technique should also embody the concept of connectedness – as in *kokyū ga au*, both in a mental sense, where we sense our uke's mental energy (their thoughts, feelings, state of mind, and more), as well as on a physical level, where we are feeling our uke's physical energy; sensing their state of balance, feeling their grip and their connection to us as nage for then to harmonize (*au* 合 う) with them and lead them through the technique, firmly yet carefully.

Our intention as aikidoka is to learn to fit our technique to the person we are doing the technique on (uke) so that we can lead them (*michibiki* 導き in Japanese) through to the end firmly but with consideration. To pacify the attacker without harming them is our goal in aikido. And by using the unification of body and mind inherent in the concept of kokyū we may be able to attain this goal.



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Kiai 気合

In general terms, when we do an aikido technique, be it tai jutsu or bukiwaza, there is a way, or actually several ways of breathing throughout the technique. This is of course also connected to the concept of *kiai* 気合.

Note that *ki ai* is composed of the same two kanji as *ai ki*, just in the opposite order. One might interpret this reversal as a means to put emphasis on the *ki* that is to be coordinated or harmonized, where the reversed order – *ai ki* – could refer to the emphasis being on the *ai* – the coordination or harmonization of *ki*.

Kiai in Japanese refers not only to the spirit shout that we use to generate our *ki* and to channel it and project it outwards. It refers to the harmonization of one's *ki* with someone or something. The term is often used in daily life to indicate when you are doing something wholeheartedly. A very often-used version of this is when one is out enjoying social time together with good friends, and the drinks taste especially good, resulting in a higher and higher level of intake. The phrase *Kiai ga haitteiru!* 気合が入っている is often heard: *hairu* (verb) / *haitteiru* (present active tense) means that something is being put into something; and in this social context it means that people's *ki* is being put into the job at hand!

But in the techniques of aikido, the *kiai* is what channels our force outwards – using our breath and its vocalization – and is used at the end of a given technique, or in certain cases both during the technique as well as at the end. And in the flowing forms the technique should be done with one long *kiai* from start to finish. The *kiai* helps us to use our breathing correctly. In general, outgoing movements should be performed with an outgoing breath (exhalation). This is also the *yō* part of the technique. But in order to have breath to exhale one needs to inhale before this. And thus, there are certain parts of the technique where this can be done. This is the *in* element or elements of the technique. It is also possible to inhale between the parts of the technique. If one studies the given technique it is possible to find the parts where the inhalation will fit. Generally, outgoing and extending movements give themselves to outgoing breaths / exhalations, and contracting movements give themselves to ingoing breaths / inhalations.

Michibiki 導き Musubi 結び

One of O-Sensei's *kuden* (oral teachings/transmissions) goes: "Suu iki de musubu; haku iki de michibiku." 吸う息で結ぶ 吐く息で導く

Here we see the usage of *iki* meaning breath. But I believe this still is within the concept of *kokyū*. *Suu iki* means to breathe in (inhale). *Musubu* means literally to tie something – like a knot; but it



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refers to the feeling of connectedness to your partner in aikido contexts. *Haku iki* means to breathe out (exhale). *Michibiki* (noun) or *michibiku* (verb) means to lead or guide someone.

So, the idea is that you connect to your partner with the inhalation – almost as if you are inhaling your partner's spirit. When exhaling you lead your partner through the technique until the end.

This concept of connecting and guiding by way of breathing in and out I see as part of the concept of *kokyū* as well, even though this word is not in use here.

Bukiwaza 武器技

When doing our aiki ken and aiki jo we can also benefit greatly from being aware of *kokyū*. A very good example is our san no suburi in aiki ken – the third ken suburi. This is actually also called *Kokyū no Suburi*. O-Sensei's *kuden* for this suburi goes: *uchū no ki wo suikomu yō ni* 宇宙の気を吸い込むように。

Uchū means the universe. *Uchū no ki* means the *ki* of the universe. *Suikomu* means to inhale fully. *Yō ni* means as if. So, the *kuden* means “as if inhaling the *ki* of the universe.”

This *kuden* is used for the *jōdan* (upward) position of the sword in this suburi. The sword should feel as if it is a conduit to be used to channel the *ki* of the universe from above and through it, and down into your center; gathering and storing it there until this *ki* is unleashed through the final cut.

Basically, when we bring our ken or jo into a *jōdan* position we almost always use this position for inhaling and gathering *ki*. There are of course cases when we inhale in other parts of the given technique, and there are cases when we inhale before the technique, keep our breath and release it with *kiai* throughout the technique – in one go.

But in general, I recommend to make it a point to use *kiai* (strong or soft) for your outgoing movements, such as strikes and thrusts, and this will ensure your proper breathing. By focusing on your breathing, it will help you to be aware of where you can inhale in preparation for these strikes and thrusts – and there will be several ways that these inhalations can be done; you need to find them in your continued training.

In the 31 kata, for instance, there are several ways of breathing; the more dynamic the kata is performed the more you will have to do several strike or thrusts using the same breath / *kiai*. The two strikes forward and two strikes back – 5,6,7 and 8 in the kata – may have to be done with one breath / *kiai* for the two strikes to the front and likewise the same for the two strikes to the rear.

There are many ways or forms of timing for the use of breath / *kiai* in our weapons forms – depending upon the speed with which we are doing them. So, it is important that we are able to



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fit our breath / kiai accordingly. By being aware of the timing and placement of our breathing / kiai we will in time be able to use our breathing naturally in all the different variations of our techniques that we are executing, fitting the breathing naturally and automatically to the situation.

These are just a selection of subjects within and also outside of the world of aikido that have to do with the concept of kokyū.

I highly recommend studying this topic as much as possible – there are so many fascinating aspects of this concept to immerse oneself in, and there is so much to learn about this fascinating concept.

In aiki,
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