

Over the years, Karate-Do has become a very popular martial art and competition sport. It is not uncommon to pass nearby a dojo and hear karateka's loud yells. For somebody not familiar with the art, such yell might be surprising. One could wonder what can be achieved by screaming that much on the first place. In this essay, we will see that this yell (called *kiai*) is much more than just noise. It has a deeper meaning, and is an essential part of Karate-Do practice. *Kiai* comes from the Japanese language, understanding its meaning is the first logical step. This essay continues with the different types of *kiai*, as well as few applications and concludes with my personal thoughts on the subject.

When broken down, the term "ki" (Kanji: 気) refers to the spirit or inner energy of a person. The term "ai" (Kanji: 合) usually translates to union or harmony. Put together, "*kiai*" (Kanji: 気合) is about focusing our energy to a single point. Notice here that the translation does not actually refer to the sound aspect of the *kiai*. The shout has still a use as it will be explained a bit later in this essay. *Kiai* is then the ability to channel our energy to a single defined location in a controlled manner. Achieving such *kiai* takes of course practice, and involves different components. The Karate stance should be strong and rooted to the ground. A well rooted stance permits a greater relaxation of our body, and accumulation of energy from the Earth to our lower abdomen (*hara*), which is our main energy battery so to say. A correct breathing is also important, understanding the rhythm, the location where breathing should occur (diaphragm area). Breathing will help tighten the muscle of the abdomen area, and minimize the effects of the force returned on impact. The state of mind, focus and attitude are also keys. The mind should be totally committed to the target, empty of thoughts, while still be aware of the immediate surroundings. The sound during the *kiai* is not just a scream, it is the manifestation of the breathing (exhaling) and energy when leaving our body during the execution of an attacking or blocking technique. Last but not least an essential criteria is the attitude; only with an empty state of mind, without emotions like anger, fear, arrogance, can a *kiai* be truly effective and meaningful. These concepts combined form the real *kiai* that all karatekas try to learn and achieve over the years of practice.

One example of such level of *kiai* was done by Master Matsumura Sōkon. While visiting a local craftsman, Matsumura got recognized as the Okinawan royal family bodyguard, and Karate expert. The craftsman, being also a skilled karateka, requested a training lesson with the famous master. Matsumura declined the request. Irritated, the craftsman challenged Matsumura for a sparring match. After a long debate, Matsumura agreed to fight him the next morning. The agreed time came, and both men faced each-other ready. The craftsman was confident in his strength, size and skills but he discovered a Matsumura calm, stoic, alert like an eagle looking at its prey. The presence and focus of Matsumura were so overwhelming for the craftsman, that he sat down without even the fight starting. After a while, the craftsman went up and tried to engage the fight again. Matsumura did not move an inch, and the craftsman could not attack him. That is at that moment, Matsumura realized his *kiai*, a decisive, short, full of intent shout that immediately ended the fight. The craftsman recognized the superiority of Matsumura and apologized. The *kiai* was but one part of Matsumura's victory. His presence, state of mind, focus, attitude, awareness of his opponent were also involved to win this match without a single strike. This is what we call "Satori" in Karate.

There are multiple shades of *kiai* found in different schools, many having different sounds and energy to them. Additionally not all schools use *kiai* the same way or some may not use it at all. It is however acknowledged that Karate has three different types of *kiai*: vocal, respiratory and abdominal.

The vocal *kiai* is a short, intense scream coming from the throat. The sound aspect of *kiai* is mostly generated here, together with exhaling as we will see later. Its main purpose is to surprise and create an opening in the opponent's focus, permitting to gain the advantage. Since the abdomen here is

little involved, the energy is purely vocal, hence minimal. In case of self-defense, such *kiai* can be used to confuse the attacker, and alert the neighborhood to investigate and help. This type of *kiai* is usually the first learned by beginners. The vocal *kiai* is executed as a short syllable “ei” or “hi”, and shout to a level audible in all the dojo. The karateka should not however scream to exhaustion, just enough to set his intent to the opponent.

The respiratory *kiai* is a forced exhaling coming straight from the abdomen. The sound here mostly comes from the exaggerated outward breathing. One aim of this type of *kiai* is to regulate the heart rate via the control of the breathing and blood circulation. The respiratory *kiai* is frequently used in powerful slow-motion blocking techniques such as the first three inside blocks (*uchi-uke*) in kata *Hangetsu*. Hence, this *kiai* is very useful for defensive techniques, since a full exhalation is needed, contracting the abdomen and tightening the muscle, making it possible to block a heavy blow.

The third type is the abdominal *kiai*, which is a combination of the vocal and respiratory types. This *kiai* is a uniform energy flow coming from the abdomen (*hara*), a vocal sound generated by the desperation, willingness to end the fight, a mind totally focused on the target. Its duration is variable (not necessarily very long). The sound level of such *kiai* is usually high, as the sound of our vocal shout and breathing are combined, plus the sound of impact which is not to be ignored. It is the hardest and strongest way of performing *kiai* and therefore require a higher level of understanding of Karate-Do.

We have seen already that *kiai* has both defensive and offensive benefits. Tightening the abdominal muscles while performing a respiratory *kiai* helps doing an effecting block. A short, loud vocal *kiai* can surprise the opponent, generating the possibility of an opening to strike. A *kiai* has many other applications. It firstly provides a confidence boost when starting a combat. It is common to see kumite fighters to engage their fight with a loud *kiai*, to express their motivation and the fact they are into the combat and fully committed. In some cases, engaging a fight in such a way can surprise, demoralize inexperienced or shy adversaries.

Kata is an imaginary fight against several opponents, and the *kiai* marks the last finishing blow in a sequence of moves. We count usually two *kiai* per kata, it is clear that understanding the precise locations of the *kiai* in a kata, helps understanding its main sequences, rhythm and ultimately its application (*bunkai*). The *kiai* also brings strong abdominal support for blocking and striking techniques. For instance, a strong abdominal *kiai* helps releasing the adrenaline and energy needed when doing a breaking technique (like breaking a board, *tameshiwari*). If performed with perfection, a *kiai* can prevent a fight all-together, as described in the story of Matsumura. Since *kiai* is the manifestation of our energy and breathing, it gives a lively aspect to Karate-Do. Instead of a silent, “robot-like” practice, *kiai* brings a spark of life to the training. By using *kiai*, the karateka can mark his presence, his intent and motivation to himself and to his opponent.

Having a background in Aikido, grasping the idea of *kiai* was challenging at the beginning. In Aikido, the aim is to use the force or energy of the opponent and use it against him. Hence, it was a bit difficult for me to understand why I should use my own energy, when I can just dodge the opponent’s attack and redirect his flow of energy against him. When I started to punch and kick, I slowly understood that in order to produce damage to the opponent, I should put my whole body behind the strike, hence the notion of *kiai* slowly entered my brain. Still as a white belt, I was just screaming loudly, producing a noisy but inefficient vocal *kiai*. Everybody was screaming in a kata or during *kihon*, so I was doing the same. After some time of practice, I learned how to breathe and improved my overall body fitness which enabled me to put more energy into my techniques and ultimately improve my *kiai*.

Right now, I am still in the process of understanding the respiratory *kiai*. I try to produce a noisy forced exhaling from my abdomen. I do feel the extra tension of my muscles, but the process drains a lot of energy from me, hence doing that repeatedly during a full session or in kumite, tends to exhaust me fairly quickly. I believe there are two aspects of *kiai* I do wrong: the breathing and the timing. Under pressure from the opponent or under high execution speed, I sometimes breath

shortly and fast from my lungs. Not much air can be accumulated in such way. My body does not get enough air and gets tired more quickly. I tried to make my respiration happen at my abdomen level by tensing and relaxing my diaphragm. I can achieve this easily in a slow-motion sequence, but I still have some issues to breathe quickly that way during fast movements.

In addition, I tend to *kiai* at incorrect moments during kumite. For instance, I may try to attack my opponent and produce a *kiai* but get the wrong distance and do not reach the target. I should basically assess my distance to the target better, and only act when there is an opening and do it with reach. Doing a *kiai* in vain is both useless and drains energy.

I also notice that I perform a decent *kiai* only when my mind is not thinking about the current technique. In the case of katas like the Heians, the movements are in my muscle memory, hence I do not need to think about the steps, and the *kiai* comes automatically. However when learning a new kata, for example Meikyo, I have to think what move to do next and forgetting to do the *kiai* is very common. The same happens during kihon, when performing a new and unfamiliar sequence. My mind is so busy thinking about the movements that the *kiai* does not come. In my opinion, to be able to perform a good *kiai* at the correct instant, one needs to perform a sequence slowly many times to get the movement in the muscle memory, then when increasing the speed the *kiai* can come more easily.

Overall, *kiai* helps me in many ways in my Karate. When performing a *kiai*, my focus and precision of the strike are improved. Once I have selected the location I want to strike, the *kiai* helps me release the needed energy and focalize it to that decisive spot, for example to score a point in a competition.

I also feel that I have more power, kime in my techniques. As explained before, doing a *kiai* tightens the abdominal muscles, permitting an efficient block or strike. When all my energy and intent are committed to the target, I sometimes get too committed, which results in getting away from the dangerous zone too slowly. An all-out attack with *kiai* is one thing, being able to relax after the *kiai* and move away quickly from the hot zone is another. A typical example is my kicks. When I kick, a *kiai* helps me put my knee up and hit, however in many cases, I withdraw my legs far too slowly, which is subject to grab and throw. Hence after performing a final technique with a *kiai*, I should learn to quickly move out of the way.

In addition, the way I breathe is not yet optimal, but performing a strong *kiai* makes me use my abdomen and push me to open my mouth, which is a good remedy against holding my breath. *Kiai* gives me as well a motivation boost. When executing a long kihon sequence in low stances, my legs usually start hurting. When that happens, I hit my own legs, and perform a *kiai* to release the pain, go lower and continue the exercise. In that sense, it acts as a relaxation and focus method for me.

In general, I can tell a lot about a karateka by hearing his/her *kiai*. A very low, barely audible *kiai* tells me that the person is shy, not sure of her/his technique, and obviously has little or no kime. On the opposite, an overly loud *kiai*, without a hint of exhaling, is basically just a scream. In such a case, I see the person performing a very powerful but slow technique. The karateka who performs a *kiai* via a noisy exhaling tends to get my attention. It usually means they are using their abdomen, have a good control of their technique and power. So far, I cannot say I heard a real, close to perfection abdominal *kiai*. I see *kiai* as a decisive moment to release our energy in order to end a fight. Following that logic, and what I discussed in this essay, I see it very challenging to reach the ultimate *kiai* performed for example by Matsumura Sokon in a dojo, since in a normal practice, we have to show control and stop our attack one centimeter from the target. The practice at the dojo is within a friendly environment, which lacks the urgency and gravity of a real situation. Only in a real situation, our inner energy can be released with intent and without restraint, with the only goal to end the fight right here and now. Nevertheless, by spending countless hours of practice in a dojo, I get to practice *kiai*, get comfortable with it and hopefully some day fully understand it.

In conclusion, I see *kiai* as a true means to improve breathing, focus and intent, a real battle-cry; similar in ways to the “all-blacks” rugby team who always start their match with the traditional Maori Challenge “Haka”. The energy generated by the New Zealand team’s battle cry sets their focus, motivation and really tends to intimidate the opposing team. It is very comparable to the Karate *kiai* when it is used to start a kumite.

I believe that *kiai* is much more than just a yell and it is surely not about screaming the word “*kiai*” loudly. *Kiai* is about releasing our inner energy and channeling it to a specific location. With meaning and emotional content (no anger, fear or thinking), the karateka can use *kiai* to improve both his attacking and blocking techniques. Therefore, *kiai* is an important part of Karate-Do, it should be practiced and not neglected: one advice to all karateka: show spirit, show energy, show decision (kime), do *kiai* !

## SOURCES

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