



The Kiai

Everyone who's been training in karate for more than a week or two knows that the *kiai* is a loud yell. That would seem to be pretty simple. But in reality the subject of the *kiai* is complex and profound, involving critical aspects of the body, the mind, and the spirit, and having numerous uses and applications. In truth, no one masters or even understands a martial art without mastering the *kiai*. So it is important that students realize from the very start that "the yell" is not a trivial, expendable, slightly silly bit of melodrama; rather, it is a core concept and an essential skill to be taken very seriously and to be practiced and refined at every opportunity.

Derivation

As the word implies, a central aspect of *kiai* is *ki*, originating in the Chinese word *qi*, in reference to breath, emotions, and (in Oriental medical theory) life energy force. Martial artists in the Orient have long believed they can harness this energy through correct training and use it to achieve paranormal fighting abilities. One method of channeling *ki* energy is the *kiai*.

Actually the *kiai* is most common among the Okinawan and Japanese martial arts, possibly because it is more compatible with straight-line powerful techniques rather than "soft-style" evasive and circular techniques which characterize most of the surviving modern styles of Chinese kung-fu. It is also quite commonly used in Korean taekwondo (a style derived from Japanese Shotokan karate brought to Korea during World War II and revised to place emphasis on kicking); the Korean term for *kiai* is *kihap*. In taekwondo kata performance it is often used to excess for showmanship purposes; Okinawan and Japanese kata are commonly limited to three or four *kiais*, but Korean kata

can have ten times that many. Japanese styles of swordsmanship, however, often require a muted *kiai* on virtually every cut.

The term *kiai* is a contracted nominal form of the phrase *ki ga au* (literally, *to harmonize*), which in the martial arts means to channel your own energy in harmony with that of your opponent so as to increase the destructive force of your technique. A related phrase is *ki o awaseru*, to blend or harmonize with another's intent or action. This is a high-level concept in fighting, to "become one" with your opponent rather than clashing ineffectually, and it is interesting to find it embodied in a word which seemingly refers to a yell. This accounts for the common but perplexing translation of *kiai* as "spirit meeting." In tactical terms it means that the stronger mind fuses with the weaker in order to control it. For the samurai this was an aspect of *shinki-jutsu*, the general art of uniting opposing minds under the control of one. In an even broader interpretation, *kiai* is sometimes regarded as the manifestation of the Active Principle (*Aiki* or God) of the Universe.

In the sense of its harmonizing effect, *kiai* also bridges the mind and body of the practitioner himself to achieve a perfect meeting and coordinating of the timing and focus of a technique at the moment of execution.

Kiai-Jutsu

The refining of *kiai* ability as an art and a weapon in itself was once known as *kiai-jutsu*. Legend has it that the early masters could stun or even kill an opponent without touching him. The training is said to have required years. In practice today, a good *kiai* can indeed stun an opponent (and even an audience) momentarily, so it seems likely that several years of training in the use of the voice as a weapon would be able to achieve even more extraordinary results. Unfortunately, *kiai-jutsu* is essentially a lost art, there being no surviving masters who can teach the full original training program. But at least the basic aspects have been preserved as a part of most Oriental martial arts.

The *kiai* is so fundamental to karate training that instructors commonly use it as one measure of a student's progress. Donn Draeger, in his 1973 book on *Classical Budo*, wrote:

A well-made *kiai* produces a characteristic sound that makes the ears ring: it seems to come from a source deep within the trainee, and not merely to be caused by the vibration of his vocal cords. The tonal fidelity of the *kiai* is much like the unforgettable, deep-seated rumble of a lion at bay. The *kiai* indicates the degree of integration of mind and body in the execution of a technique. It is an unfailing source of information for the master, who thereby knows the trainee's level of achievement.

Draeger's comparison of a good *kiai* to a lion's roar is perceptive. To be in the presence of a real master performing a kata can be quite an experience when he comes to a *kiai*, especially if you are sitting in the front row. Something deep in your primitive midbrain suddenly tells you you're about to become lunch!

Kuatsu Kiai

Because *kiai* liberates mental and physical force rapidly to affect another person in close proximity, it is also used in some resuscitation techniques (*kuatsu*). A trained practitioner can utilize it to revive someone who has been rendered unconscious by

strangling or sudden shock. *Kuatsu* also involves percussion, pressure and massage of vital points, in the same manner as *shiatsu*. The particular method of resuscitation involving *kiai* is known as *kappo*.

The Meaning of Kiai

Kiai is clearly a deceptively complex and even philosophical subject. What, exactly, does the concept of *kiai* mean? E.S. Harrison, in his 1913 book *The Fighting Spirit of Japan*, described *kiai* as “the art of perfectly concentrating all of one’s energy, physical and mental, upon a given object, with unremitting determination, so that one achieves one’s goal.”

Louis Frederic, in his *Dictionary of the Martial Arts* (1988), observes further that: “the *kiai* enables a person carrying out a violent movement to purify his mind of extraneous thoughts, leaving simply the pure energy (*ki*) which causes him to act, and confers upon him all its intensity.”

Grandmaster Robert Trias, founder of Shuri-ryu, put it this way, in his book *The Supreme Way; Philosophy of Karatedo* (1988):

The *kiai* must be recognized as the ultimate unifying force that brings the body, mind and the opponent into a focused, controlled alignment, with harmony between self and the opponent. The actualization of this potentiality of time and space at one point, physically, and while releasing spiritual potentials, determines the way of development and brings to consciousness an inexpressible awareness of life itself.

A loud *kiai* should coincide with the strike or technique being delivered, with the result that all the power of the body is concentrated at the exact instant and focus of impact. The yell, which intensifies the power of the lower stomach, is an occult cry [executed for offensive or defensive techniques]. According to the *I Chin Ching* [an ancient Chinese book], the energy passes [from the lower stomach to] the shoulders, elbows, wrists, palms and fingertips. The yell will also tend to momentarily disorganize the opponent and will cause him/her to freeze or falter.

Washin-ryu master Hidy Ochiai, once a student of Trias, describes it this way:

Kiai is that which makes it possible to maximize the effectiveness of martial arts techniques by coordinating and concentrating physical and mental strength through the proper exhalation of air from the lower abdomen. *Kiai* gives a certain force—spiritual, physical and mental—to help the muscles and nerves operate more effectively and smoothly.

André Protin, in his book *Aikidô, un art martial, une autre manière d’être* (1970), gives a little more insight into the philosophical basis of *kiai-jutsu* for *aikido* practitioners:

[First comes] *aiki*, the impassive state of mind of the combatant, in which all his or her force is collected in the *hara* [abdomen]. This is the static

mode of the *kiai* of *aiki*. The dynamic *kiai* may be expressed aloud or not; it is this which gives one the power of overcoming an opponent, morally or spiritually, without the use of weapons. It is that psychological condition which demands “win without striking a blow.”

Of course, in reading this one must remember the essentially benevolent spiritual foundation of *aikido* which seeks to defeat without significant injury to the opponent; in this it is unique among Japanese/Okinawan martial arts.

Kiai Training

The process of perfecting the *kiai* requires mastering certain appropriate breathing exercises which, interestingly enough, are analogous to the Pranayama of the Hindus. (This would seem to be a point of evidence supporting the introduction of kung-fu to China from India many centuries ago.) The breathing technique, called *kokyu* or *fukushiki kokyu* in Japanese, involves breathing from the lower stomach area (deep abdominal breathing), which sets the *ki* in motion. It requires perfect synchronization of breathing with body movement.

In his 1986 book on *Traditional Karate-do: Okinawan Goju-ryu*, master Morio Higaonna had this to suggest with regard to *kiai* training:

To develop the penetrating, focused sound of the proper *kiai*, training in wide open, outdoor areas such as the mountains or by the ocean has proven to be very effective. Here one is, in essence, trying to compete with the power of nature. In this type of training environment one's *kiai* can achieve a level not possible from training in closer confines. Sanchin kata training can [also] be very effective in the complete development of *kiai* in its fullest sense.

Types of Kiai

Some masters classify *kiai* into four or five basic categories: (1) low-pitched, at moment of focus in a technique, (2) high-pitched following a technique, like a cry of victory, (3) low to medium-pitched just before a technique is delivered, to shock or confuse an opponent's thinking, (4) medium-pitched for purposes of resuscitation, and (5) silent (*kensei*), for use in certain meditation exercises.

Master Hidy Ochiai remarks that volume is not always a requirement for a good fighting *kiai*: “When you are at an advanced level you can execute a good *kiai* without obvious shouting or yelling. Mere shouting does not mean a good *kiai*, and a good *kiai* may or may not produce a loud shouting or yelling.” Ochiai prefers to categorize *kiais* as *loud*, *quiet*, *short* and *long*, which is to say (1) long and loud, (2) short and loud, and (3) short and quiet. The short loud *kiai* is executed at the exact moment of attack, and the short quiet *kiai* at the moment of defense, whereas the long loud *kiai* can be used prior to delivering a technique, for intimidation and confusion purposes.

Kiai is essential for students, but ultimately, as Ochiai says, the actual vocalization of a sound becomes optional at the master level. Sun Tsu, in the ancient Chinese classic *The Art of War*, wrote that in swordsmanship the acme is reached when “at last practice is silent.” This is true in the practice of kendo as well, where the most advanced

practitioners can execute their techniques effectively with the very highest quality *kiai* and yet make no noise. The jujutsu master Iso Mataemon (died 1862) recommended that you should “*kiai* with your mouth closed so as not to let *ki* dissipate or escape entirely.”

Defensive Kiai

The *kiai* is also an effective defensive technique, hardening the body momentarily into a rigid suit of muscular armor protecting the internal organs. Grandmaster Trias wrote:

The yell will reduce the effect of the shock from any blow or fall. One almost ceases to exist during the yell, with its suddenly induced tension followed by complete relaxation and little or no sensation of impact.

Trained martial artists (weapons-maker Gordon Garland, for one) have even been known to stave off serious injuries in car accidents and accidental falls from considerable heights by using a loud *kiai* at the moment of impact.

The defensive utility of the *kiai* fits in well with the strategy of some early Okinawan masters who considered it better to simply “absorb” an opponent’s attack by letting it hit you (in the body), without blocking, leaving all of your own arms and legs available for the counter-attack.

Kata Kiai

Kiai is naturally practiced along with other karate techniques in the performance of kata, and is an essential (not optional) component. Surprisingly, though, the exact placement of *kiais* in the original Okinawan katas was not rigorously set. It was felt that the *kiai* should arise naturally from the feeling of the kata and should be emitted spontaneously. Consequently it was left pretty much to each student’s individual preference as to where in a kata the *kiai* would occur. In more recent years the placement of *kiais* in katas has been standardized to some extent, for purposes of tournament competition, group practice in class, and promotional examinations. Most commonly the *kiais* are placed at important killing techniques, usually three or four in a kata. Nevertheless, considerable freedom is still allowed in personal practice and even in tournament competition, as a matter for personal adaptation and interpretation.

Kiai Words

Kiai, as explained, is not a method of yelling but rather a method of breathing. Nevertheless, it is a matter of some practical interest to settle on particular “words” to use in delivering the *kiai*. The most traditional Okinawan words are *toh*, *tah*, *sah*, *hah*, and *yah*. Grandmaster Trias suggested using *toh* and *yah* when attacking and *tah* and *yah* when defending. *Kiais* for katas, he said, should be *hah*, *yah* or *tah*, low-pitched and drawn out. Gichin Funakoshi (founder of Shotokan), on the other hand, preferred the word *ei* (“ay”), and referred to it repeatedly in his 1936 book *Karate-do Kyohan*.

The above options for *kiai* words are all good ones, but in modern practice there are many others in common use. Shorin-ryu kobudo master Timothy Unisa recommends the word *hai* for weapons attacks, either short and clipped or long and attenuated, rising in pitch toward the end. (“Hai,” of course, means “yes” in Japanese, producing a very

confident *kiai*, like saying “Yesss!” with a strike.) For *zanshin* moves following a technique he uses *soh*, short and clipped. Taekwondo practitioners today seem to favor the two-syllable *ay-sah*, with the second syllable rather drawn out.

Essentially the choices involve whether to begin with a consonant (generally *h*, *d*, *t* or *s*) or a vowel sound (generally *ay*, *ee*, *eye*, *oh*, *ah*, *a* as in *hat* or *u* as in *push*), and whether to end by trailing off or with a clipped, abrupt shut-off. Examples that can trail off a bit include *hah*, *ho*, *haw*, *hay*, *hy* and *huh*, whereas the same *kiais* with an abrupt ending would be *hot*, *hop*, *hawp*, *hup*, *hate*, *hite*, and *hut*. Common examples beginning with a vowel sound include *ace*, *eess*, *ice*, *ohss*, *uss* (as in *bus*), *ah*, *ape*, *a* (as in *hat*), *ap*, *eeyah*, *eeyaw* and *eeyawp*. Examples beginning with consonants include *sy*, *soap*, *sup*, *die*, *doe*, *dup*, *tie*, *toe*, *tup*, *dah*, *tah*, *chah* and *sah*. Occasionally a simple hiss, like *sss*, is also used. Not recommended is *ow*, since this may suggest to your opponent that it is you who have been injured! But others not listed here, particularly two-syllable *kiais*, may also be in use.

Conclusion

Whatever word(s) you choose as most comfortable for you personally, remember that the delivery technique is more important than the word. The *kiai* must issue from the power of the abdomen, and must be a manifestation of your fighting spirit! Don't be shy with your *kiai*...it is nothing less than your source of power and your route to victory.

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