

A Brief Introduction to Omori Sogen's Breathing Method

Fellow Iaidokas and Kendokas of Shidokan,

The question of how to cultivate the “Ki” (or “Chi” in Chinese) power has generated a lot of interest especially among the martial artists in the recent years. Although I have been exposed to the training of “Ki” or “Chi” for many years, I have to honestly tell you that I did not know if there was a recommended breathing method in Kendo/Iaido until very recently.

It was almost half a year ago when I went through an old book written in Japanese, given to me by Okimura sensei before he passed away. The title of the book is Muso Shinden Ryu Iaido by Yamatsuta Jukichi sensei. For your information, Yamatsuta sensei was one of the most accomplished students of Nakayama Hakudo sensei in both Iaido and Kendo.

I was surprised to discover in the book that the method of breathing exercise recommended by Yamatsuta sensei was the method known to be the “Omori Sogen's breathing method”. I was equally excited to realize that I happened to know this method of breathing. Since then, I have been thinking of sharing this exercise with the students in our dojo.

According to Omori Sogen, to sit well, one must harmonize the mind, body, and breathing. Only when the three are realized as one, will it be possible to succeed in stabilizing and tranquilizing the body and mind at the same time. Any one of these three things is inseparably related to the other two. If the body is correct, the mind and the breath will be reasonably correct in themselves.

Clothing:

It is important to wear clothes that are loose enough for good circulation. It is also important not to look untidy so that there is dignity in appearance and feeling to establish the proper mood for sitting.

Position and hands:

You may sit in “seiza” or in “crossed legs” position. If you choose to sit in “crossed legs” position, you may put a cushion under your buttock and sit on the edge of the cushion.

You may place your left hand with palm up and fingers together on the palm of your right hand. The inner sides of the tips of both thumbs gently touch, creating an ellipse. Viewed from above, the thumbs must be in line with the middle finger.

Alternately, you may also grasp the tip of the right thumb between the web of the thumb and the index finger of the left hand. Form a loose fist with the left hand and enclose it with the right.

Stabilizing the body:

A well-seated and very stable body is in the form of a pyramid. The base is an imaginary triangle formed by the lines connecting the two knees and the anus (or area of the tail-bone). The diagonal ridge-lines extending from the two knees and the anus to the top of the head complete the pyramid.

- a. Rock the body from right to left and again from left to right. The amplitude of this oscillation should be large at first and gradually decrease until the body stops moving and becomes stable.
- b. The center of your eyebrows shall be aligned with your navel (belly button). This will help straighten the spine into a natural position.
- c. The lower jaw is drawn in and the back of the neck is straight.
- d. Let the tip of your tongue touch the upper jaw with the teeth in light contact with each other.
- e. Sit at ease, like a mountain soaring into heaven and overlooking the seas.

Adjusting the vision:

Adjusting the vision helps to focus attention to prevent it from being taken up by internal or external stimuli.

- a. The eyes should look straight ahead, and the visual field should span 180 degrees. Lower the eyes to a fixed position on the floor approximately three feet ahead. The eyes should be half-closed in selfless tranquility neither seeing nor not seeing anything.
- b. In order to enter the state of Zen concentration and to raise your inner power to the utmost, it is better to keep the eyes open (half-closed). This will also help to prevent you from falling asleep in meditation.

Initial deep breathing:

Deep breathing harmonizes the mind and the body.

- a. Exhale slowly through the mouth as if to connect the atmosphere with the lower abdomen. Empty all stale air with the strength created by the contraction of the lower abdomen. At the end of exhalation, relax the lower abdomen.
- b. Due to atmospheric pressure, new air will naturally enter through the nose and fill the vacuum in the lungs.
- c. After inhaling fully, pause slightly before exhaling (count 1 to 6). Repeat this type of breathing 7 to 21 times (usually 10 times will be sufficient).

Breathing in meditation:

- a. When the respiration is adjusted, start breathing through the nose with the mouth closed. Inhaling is natural through the nose. Of course the inhaled air comes to the lungs but by relaxing the muscles around the pit of the stomach, you can actually feel the air filling the area below the navel.

- b. Exhale through the nose. It should be long and directed toward the “tanden” (1.50 inches below the navel) with the power of the abdominal muscles. Contract the muscles around the anus and push the hips upright and slightly forward. You should feel the power as if coming out of the area below the navel. In the process of exhaling powerfully, the pressure on the lower abdomen recesses the stomach and relieves the pressure around the stomach area. The concentration on the lower extremities of the body should relax the shoulders and the upper body.
- c. Inhaling should be left to occur naturally as new air fills the vacuum in the lungs.
- d. In inhaling and exhaling, concentrate energy (mind power) rather than physical power on the lower abdomen.
- e. When the vital power is at the “tanden” and confined in the “hara”, this spiritual strength and vital energy will radiate through the entire body.
- f. Repeat the above inhaling and exhaling from 7 to 21 times (it would be good if you could complete the full 21 times).
- g. After the above, relax, inhale and exhale naturally for 5 to 20 minutes.
- h. Remember to be natural and do not forget the notion of “smile inside”.
- i. Before finishing, rub both palms and cover them on your eyes and move down as if washing your face. Repeat this 3 times.

Have a good practice!

Sincerely,
Santoso Hanitijo

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