

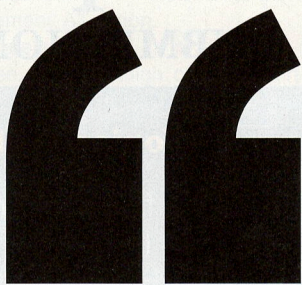
## \* **The Cure for Bad Breath**

It's been said that breathing is the greatest pleasure in life. It's also a powerful tool for martial artists. The use of breathing and breath control has a long history in the traditional arts. From the teachings of the *budo*, we learn that a *kiai* can enhance our power as we execute a technique. The Korean arts similarly emphasize the *kihap*. While it's often thought of as just a shout that accompanies a physical movement, it has a deeper design.

Properly used, a *kiai* connects the mental and physical elements of a technique, and serves both defensive and offensive functions. The word connotes a unified spirit and mind, and breath control is an integral part of it.

Executing a *kiai* entails forcefully exhaling and contracting the abdominal and diaphragmatic muscles. Defensively, the exhalation prevents the wind from being knocked out of you, and the muscle contraction helps shield your internal organs. Offensively, the shout may frighten or distract an opponent, and the contracted core musculature strengthens the kinetic chain, enhancing the power of your blow. With the *kiai* comes an explosive release of inner energy, not just a shout.

Another simple advantage of the *kiai*, of course, is that it reminds you to breathe. That alone makes it valuable for martial artists. When someone new to the arts or to combative sports begins sparring, it's



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common for him to hold his breath and tense his muscles. It's a natural reaction to someone trying to punch you in the face, but it can be a bad habit.

Your muscles need oxygen to function properly. Tense muscles require even more oxygen because tensing is a muscular action. Your body

gets most of its oxygen from the air you inhale. If you're not inhaling, you're not providing a steady supply of oxygen to your muscles and to vital organs such as your brain and eyes. That produces a higher "oxygen cost" and ultimately causes your mind and body to perform less than optimally. Holding your breath for too long can also spike your blood pressure and lead to dizziness. Furthermore, your muscles will get tired more quickly. The result is you become winded in a very short time. There are other problems, too, but you get the idea.

Police officers and military operators recognize the importance of proper breathing and integrate proven methods into their training. Sometimes referred to as "tactical breathing" or "combat breathing," the strategies are designed to be applied quickly, even in high-risk encounters. If you're clearing a building with an unknown number of bad guys or anticipating an ugly encounter on the street, you don't want to assume the lotus position, close your eyes and begin a breathing exercise. But you should definitely breathe.

Lt. Col. David Grossman, who along with Bruce Siddle founded the Warrior Science Group, often teaches a simple form of combat breathing that involves inhaling for a four count, holding for a four count, exhaling for a four count and pausing. They say it helps you keep your heart rate in a better

range, thereby reducing your perceived anxiety. Research also shows that the resulting expiratory response sends calming signals throughout your body.

In the reality-based martial arts, *systema* is renowned for its focus on breathing properly in a threatening encounter. In their training and writings, Vladimir Vasiliev and his colleagues advocate a technique known as "burst breathing." Rather than teaching long and deep breaths, they encourage students to use a regular series of sharp exhalations through the mouth at the moment of impact, followed immediately by a sharp inhalation through the nose. They claim that this method prepares them for hand-to-hand and close-quarters combat while reducing tension and upping oxygen intake.

There are many ways to breathe correctly and many uses for different breathing techniques and exercises. The main thing is to select a system and stick with it. Remember that you probably won't get very far just telling yourself not to hold your breath. You'll have to program yourself to breathe right. ✖

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