

Sword and Spirit

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— Why Budo? —

Regardless of the times you live in, or the circumstances of your life, success largely depends on things you actually can control:

- **Building strong relationships in a community of achievement.**
- **Forging a disciplined and positive mindset.**
- **Enhancing your physical health and capabilities.**

These are exactly the things membership in a dojo provides.

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Life Hacks from the Martial Arts...

Breathing and Bowing

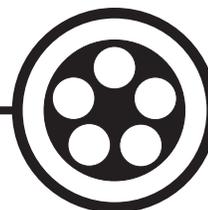
It is said that the beginning and end of budo is reishiki. This is something I've taken to heart. Budo (武道) is the combining form of two ideas: *bu* (martial, or military), and *do* (way, or path). Budo can be seen as a concept covering the martial arts and ways of Japan, followed as a way of life, as you would a path on your journey into knowledge and/or self-improvement. Reishiki (礼式) is a combining form of two ideas: *rei* (to bow), and *shiki* (ceremonial form). Reishiki tends to be more specific, as it refers to the ceremony of bowing and could include other aspects of etiquette as well by implication. Kokyu (呼吸) is a combining form that is generally accepted as "breathing." The focus of this article will be the breathing used in the act of bowing, as it specifically pertains to the martial arts and ways of Japan.

In 40 years of martial arts training, I have been taught how to breathe for punching, kicking, cutting, meditating, calligraphy, archery, and a variety of things. For bowing though, I did what felt natural and after learning to bow properly, a method for breathing developed that felt correct. I would breathe out while my upper body descended and compressed, then breathe in while my upper body ascended and expanded. It wasn't until I found myself training in traditional court etiquette and archery with the Ogasawara-ryu in Japan, that I was taught specifics on breathing during a bow. The instruction I was given divided my original two pieces into four, in the following manner:

1. Breathe in as the upper body descends.
2. Breathe out at the bottom of the bow.
3. Breathe in while the upper body ascends.
4. Breathe out when vertical again.

This felt very strange, but considering the source, I accepted this new information and began to include it in every art I practice.

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It wasn't until the fifth month of bowing this way, that I experienced a natural application of the new breathing pattern that tied it all together. I'll explain how I got there.

Meditative breathing is a topic with many years of diligent study and writing, to support some very cogent thoughts. The basic concept that I embrace is based on a set of data points elucidated by Katsuki Sekida, in his book *Zen Training*. Imagine you are running a race and expanding your lungs fully, to take in as much air as possible. We'll call this "full volume," and it represents, on average, about 5700ml of air, gathered by expanding the chest and lungs fully. Now imagine that you are at rest, breathing normally in what we'll call "tidal breathing," exchanging an average of about 500ml of air between



about 2300ml and 2800ml of lung volume. The act of tidal breathing is normally accomplished by pulling air into your lungs, starting from an even pressure volume of 2300ml, by slightly expanding the chest and lungs. The even pressure mark at the bottom of tidal breathing is a very important concept in breathing from the *hara* (lower abdomen), since we focus on the volume *below* even pressure down to residual volume when the lungs are as empty as physically possible.

Breathing all the air out of your lungs and getting them completely "empty" by way of compression, leaves a residual volume of about 1200ml in the physical structure of the lungs. We reach residual volume in the Yamate-ryu Tachi-no-kata "Kokyu-ho" by coughing. Even pressure in the lungs occurs when the body is completely relaxed and the air pressure is the same inside and outside the lungs without holding the breath. During meditation, breathing below the even pressure zone of the lungs is greatly favored and requires flexing muscles of the *hara* to compress the lungs and force the air out.

While exhalation during breathing from the *hara* is accomplished by tensing the lower abdomen to force the air out of the lungs, the inhalation results from a relaxation of the lower abdomen to allow the air to flow back into the lungs naturally, returning the lungs to even pressure. Experimenting with the Yamate-ryu concept of breath power can be quite interesting in the study of seated meditation, but falls outside the scope of this article. More on that another time.

So where does meditative breathing intersect with bowing? In all previous cases, I would begin my bow at the top of tidal breath, exhaling for the bow, and inhaling to come back up. Then I was instructed to reverse the first part of the bow by breathing inward on the way down. It felt odd, but I decided I would practice it until it felt right and eventually it did, but not before changing the starting point of the breath. I discovered this one morning while practicing meditative archery, alone in the dojo.

In the Chozen-ji school of Zen, the practice of archery incorporates specific breathing patterns to many of the eight standard positions, including the last, *zanshin* (remaining spirit).

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After *hanare* (releasing the arrow) at very near the bottom of the breath cycle, close to residual volume, stillness is observed while inhaling to even pressure. You then exhale while lowering the bow and turning your head away from the target, by 90-degrees. I continued a pattern of hara breathing during my exit from the shooting line, which involves a 90-degree pivot of the body towards the target (inhale) and several steps back to the bowing line (exhale) before bowing to end the round...and this is where I discovered something interesting. When executing a bow from residual volume, the new breathing process blossomed like a flower. I was no longer increasing tension by inhaling from even volume upward, but rather was releasing tension in the lower abdomen and inhaling naturally while bowing. It very suddenly felt correct. During my next archery session, I decided to put my new concept to the test and discovered that I was maintaining *mushin* (no mind) for extended periods of shooting when using the new breathing pattern. I then set to work testing it on my aikijutsu students and finally my kenjutsu students during normal practice, to excellent effect.

The teaching process begins with a short session of meditation, helping the students to begin the initial steps of

hara breathing, downward from even pressure. We then take a few moments to review correct bowing posture and standard reishiki. The breathing method I discovered works well both seated and standing, so you can teach it effectively, either way. Once bowing is proper and students can achieve hara breathing by inhaling from residual volume to even pressure by relaxing the lower abdomen, we can combine the bowing and the breathing in the following method: Have students assume the correct posture to begin a bow, instructing them to exhale fully, then relax to inhale. Repeat this breathing pattern until they can perform it reliably. Next, add bowing as they inhale, exhaling at the bottom of the bow, inhaling on the way back up, then exhaling fully at the end of the bow.

To practice this with repetition, step four leads into step one quite naturally.

1. Breathe in from residual volume, as the upper body descends.
2. Breathe out to residual volume, at the bottom of the bow.

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3. Breathe from residual volume in, while the upper body ascends.
4. Breathe out to residual volume, when vertical again.

This works at a variety of depths and durations, since it begins at residual volume and the movement of air corresponds in both directions. Have students practice three standard depths and durations to appreciate the differences. Then apply the practice to a technique.

Two aikijutsu students approach each other for the start of a technique, and exhale fully in unison, at attention. They inhale to bow, exhale at the bottom of the bow, inhale to stand vertical and then exhale at attention. Students move to *chudan* (middle level guard) with a brisk inhalation through the nose, announce and then begin the technique. The technique completed, they exhale from *chudan* to attention, inhale to bow, exhale at the bottom of the bow, inhale to rise and then exhale at attention. ☸



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