

Breathing (**kokyu no don-to**)

When one speaks of “breathing (kokyu no don-to: inhale and exhale)” in karate, people generally think of Sanchin. In this article, I examine the breathing in and out through Sanchin.

1. Origin of Sanchin

The origin of Sanchin is described in Motobu Choki's *Okinawa-kenpo Karate-kumite* (1926), which states that Sanchin is one of the kata practiced in Okinawa (Ryukyu) since ancient times.

There were two main theories as to when Sanchin first came to be in Okinawa: that of Higaonna Kanryo and that of Kojyo daitei (Kojyo-ryu). As an inheritor of koryu karate, I prefer the Higaonna theory. I will explain why after listing the Sanchin of each style (excerpted from the introduction to Okinawan karate).

Sanchin of Higaonna Kanryo

As related by Higa Seiko (who studied under Higaonna Kanryo and Miyagi Chojuun, the founder of Goju-ryu):

- The Sanchin of Kanryo Higaonna has a very fast and open-hand style. Higaonna Kanryo Sensei's Sanchin is an open-hand (kaishu) kata, with little audible breathing sound, fast shuto thrusts, and a short breathing sound when the hand is pulled. In his later years, Kanryo Sensei's thrusting changed to a slower motion.
- When Miyagi Sensei, who had studied Chinese martial arts in Fuzhou (Fujian), asked Higaonna Sensei about the difference in Sanchin breathing sounds. Higaonna's breathing was more natural but Miyagi followed the Chinese approach to their version of the form. He observed that “the breathing sound of the other side's kung-fu was like a roaring serpent,” Higaonna Sensei replied, “This one is real and that one is real, too.”
- The history of how the Higaonna Sanchin was changed to the current closed-fist version with the emphasis on breathing sounds was under the direction of Miyagi Sensei after the death of his Sensei (Higaonna Kanryo) (*1).

(*1) The reason for the change from open palms to closed fists is said to be due to the fact that when karate was adopted for physical education in schools in Okinawa Prefecture, kaishu (open hands) was considered too dangerous and not good for an educational setting and so was not adopted.

In Ryusei karate we have changed back from closed fists to open hands in Sanchin. The reason for this is we want to release tension in the arms and to loosen or relax the arm muscles, making it easier to perform side shime.

Goju-ryu Sanchin

Goju-ryu Sanchin uses a breathing technique called "ibuki" (breath blowing). The kata involves loud and intense breathing sounds that are coordinated with the powerful movements— a characteristic feature of this karate style. Regular practice of this kata cultivates high defensive capabilities, endurance, concentration, and great immediate force.

Sanchin in Toun-ryu, Uechi-ryu, and Ryuei-ryu

- In Toun-ryu, as in Goju-ryu, Sanchin is practiced by gripping the hands into fists and moving forward and then reversing. Unlike Goju-ryu's breathing method, the breathing associated with thrusting in Toun-ryu is quiet and long and continuous, and is done with no breathing between steps.
- Uechi-ryu Sanchin is considered a basic form. The movements use open hands and its breathing is more natural than Goju-ryu's.
- Ryuei-ryu's Sanchin is also considered a "basic technique." Sanchin and Seisan are considered to be integral parts of the style's basic training, like the upper and lower phrases of the tanka (Japanese poem).

Higaonna Theory

Following are my reasons for adopting Higaonna's Sanchin theory (*2).

- 1) The credibility of Higaonna's Sanchin, as written by Yoshiyuki Higa, is confirmed (seen note following).

(*2) The corroboration is that the Tensho of Higaonna Kanryo Sensei, which I inherited from Chitose Sensei, is very similar to Higa's description of Higaonna's Sanchin movement.

The movement involves a spiral movement of the open hand, and a very short breathing sound is emitted when the kake-te or tori-te is performed. The short breathing sound is produced by a series of "tan-don-to" (short inhalation and exhalations), which is unique to the koryu style.

2) Sanchin and Tensho should be taken together.

I based this conclusion on the video recording of Chitose Sensei's Sanchin and the contrast between the two forms of Okinawan Goju-ryu's Higaonna Morio Sensei (*3).

(*3) I was convinced that the Sanchin shown in this video is the kata described by Higa Seiko as "Higaonna's Sanchin, in which the thrusting movement changed to a slower form in his later years," and that the following short video of the movement in kaishu (Yui) is connected to the Tensho which I inherited.

In the kata system, Sanchin and Tensho are considered two different kata, but this is a classification in the training program, and they are in fact a pair of kata called Sanchin Yui Tensho.

3) The fact that Higaonna Sanchin and Tensho are different (*4) from the current Okinawa Goju-ryu kata.

(*4) Typical of this is the thrusting action with long breaths out. The difference is that Ryusei Karate performs two long breaths out; as opposed to one long breath out use in Okinawan Goju-ryu. As for the difference between once and twice, no one knows today, as I cannot get an answer from my predecessors. It is an unfortunate state of affairs, but if I were to give an answer through my practice of Sanchin, I can put forward the idea of "Omote-no-Kata" for Goju-ryu and "Ura-no-Kata/Yin-Yang-No-Kata" for Ryusei Karate.

I will discuss the details of this answer in detail in "3. Breathing Techniques."

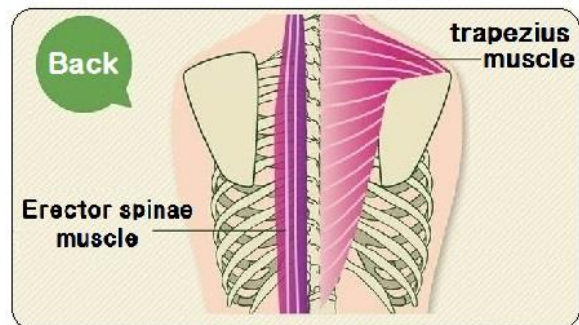
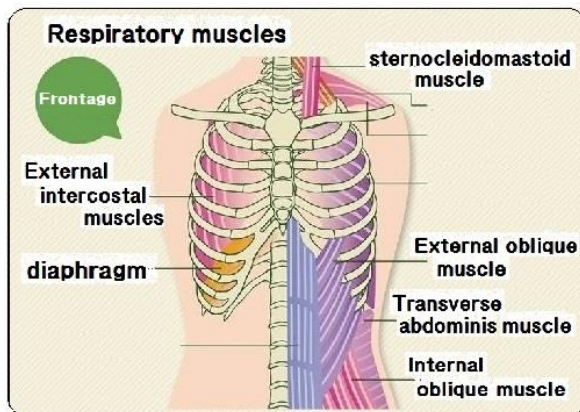
Before that, as one of the inheritors of "Chito-ryu Karatedo based on physiological anatomical medicine" developed by Chitose Sensei, I would like to share the knowledge about the mechanism of breathing.

2. Respiration (citing medical books on physiological anatomy)

Breathing is maintained by voluntary movements that can be controlled by the will and involuntary breathing movements that are automatically controlled by the brainstem (medulla oblongata), even while sleeping. Conscious breathing is a voluntary movement.

1) Breathing Mechanism in the Lungs

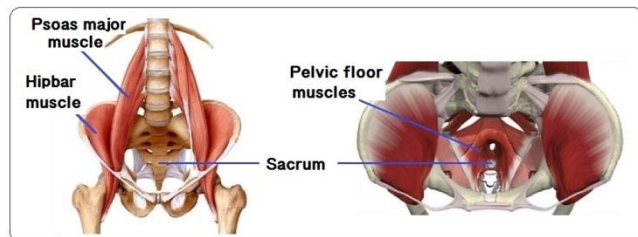
The lungs cannot contract on their own and require the assistance of the diaphragm, intercostal muscles, and other respiratory muscles (see figure below). When the diaphragm and intercostal muscles contract, the rib cage expands and air is drawn in; when they relax, the rib cage narrows and breath is expelled.



Breathing with the diaphragm is called “abdominal breathing,” and breathing with the intercostal muscles is called “thoracic breathing.”

Abdominal Breathing

As we inhale, the diaphragm contracts and moves downward, pushing the internal organs down. The viscera are then pushed forward by the abdominal muscles and downward by the pelvic



floor muscles, and the muscle fibers of the pelvic floor muscles respond to this force by stretching and spreading.

When we exhale, the pelvic floor and abdominal muscles contract, pushing the viscera upward again. In this way, the pelvic floor muscles and diaphragm work together to play an important role in breathing.

Chest Breathing

Intercostal muscles are responsible for the expansion and contraction of the lungs. The contraction and relaxation of the intercostal muscles causes the rib cage to widen and narrow, which in turn causes the lungs to contract and relax. Through this action, the oxygen taken in is delivered to cells throughout the body via the bloodstream and becomes a source of energy for the body.

Shallow breathing with little lung contraction and relaxation results in insufficient oxygen being supplied to all the cells in the body, leading to a lack of energy, which in turn makes the body easily fatigued and prone to illness. For this reason, it is very good for the body to take deep, leisurely breaths and to use a “breathing method” that allows the body to take in a lot of oxygen.

(2) Autonomic Nerves

The function of breathing is also related to the function of the “autonomic nervous system.” The autonomic nervous system works independently of our will to maintain healthy bodily functions. The constant movement of the stomach, intestines, and heart is due to the work of the autonomic nervous system.

The autonomic nervous system consists of two nerves with opposing functions: the sympathetic and parasympathetic nerves. The sympathetic nervous system is dominant during activity, tension, and stress, especially during the daytime. The parasympathetic nervous system is dominant during rest and relaxation, especially at night and during sleep.

Sympathetic Nerves

Chest breathing works in the direction of the sympathetic nervous system. When the sympathetic nervous system is dominant, we feel refreshed and clear-headed.

On the other hand, although we usually use chest breathing, it tends to be shallow and short. Short chest breathing causes the inhaled air to be exhaled without reaching the lungs, which leads to a buildup of carbon dioxide and other unwanted substances in the lungs. If this condition persists for a long time, it can lead to decreased blood circulation and dysautonomia.

Parasympathetic Nervous System

Abdominal breathing, in which the diaphragm beneath the lungs moves up and down, increases the function of the parasympathetic nervous system. In abdominal breathing, the stomach bulges while inhaling through the nose, and the exhaled breath causes the stomach to contract.

Because the abdominal pressure is applied, the rhythm of breathing is naturally slower than the chest method. In particular, by focusing on “exhaling breath,” you can increase the function of the parasympathetic nervous system and balance it with the sympathetic nervous system. Also, when you breathe abdominally, the autonomic nerves are concentrated near the diaphragm, so the more you exhale slowly, the more the autonomic nerves are stimulated and the parasympathetic nerves become dominant, leading to relaxation.

We usually breathe unconsciously, but we can consciously control the speed and frequency of our breathing. This breathing technique enables us to balance the sympathetic and parasympathetic autonomic nerves.

Oriental way of thinking

In Oriental thought, the energy of life (ki) is taken in through “food” and “breathing,” and breathing is the function of circulating life energy, and can be seen as a spiritual activity that connects man to nature. In this regard, trying to balance mind and body is the essence of Oriental medicine.

3. Breathing techniques

The breathing techniques of meditation and yoga are generally widely known. This is tanden breathing, which deepens abdominal breathing,

There are others breathing techniques, such as Systema’s, which was created by the former Soviet Union, and use long breaths to train inner muscles. Each breathing technique has its own method and way of thinking (philosophy).

Sanchin also involves differences in breathing techniques, training methods and ideas, depending on the style. Following, I summarize Shito-ryu and Goju-ryu breathing techniques.

Shito-ryu (*5)

- 1) Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth, with your belly stretched out, and when you breathe, imagine breathing on your back.
- 2) When inhaling, do so naturally, without effort. When exhaling, exhale with a little “huh... huff” through the mouth, not exhaling all of the breath, but leaving a little behind.

Inhaling and exhaling is always continuous, without stagnation. If you stop breathing, the flow of ki in the body becomes stagnant. The trick is not to be overly conscious of the breath at first, but rather to match the breath with the movement of the kata. Be careful not to breathe too strongly, as this will cause unnecessary tension in the shoulders, neck, arms, and other parts of the body.

(*5) The founder of Shito-ryu is Mabuni Kenwa Sensei. He learned Shuri-te from Itosu Anko Sensei and Naha-te from Higaonna Kanryo Sensei, and was in contact with Chitose Sensei since he was a police officer in Okinawa. Although I do not have it with me, Chitose Sensei showed me a photo of him and Mabuni Sensei taken together at the Osaka station. He told me about their times in Okinawa and their memories with Funakoshi Gichin Sensei.

Gojukai (Gojyu-ryu)(*6)

- 1) The breathing method is called “breath blowing” or ibuki. Ibuki has yang, yin, and semi-yang and semi-yin usages. That usage can be adjusted according to the strength of the breath and the tightening and relaxing of the body.
- 2) The yang breath is strong and the muscles are tightened to match the strength of the breath.
- 3) The order of the breath is divided into inhale (sui/don) and exhale (haki/to), but in martial arts usage, the “tai” (hold/keep) is placed between the inhale (sui/don) and exhale (haki/to). And after the exhale (haki/to), the “kyoku” (climax/extreme) is used to finish the breath.
- 4) The breath for the uke stance should be in accordance with “don” – “to” – “kyoku,” and the breath for the strike should be in accordance with “don” – “to” – “kyoku.”

(*6) This is the Sanchin breathing technique of Gogen Yamaguchi (pictured next page), founder of All Japan Karatedo Gojukai (now International Karatedo Gojukai). Yamaguchi Sensei is the person who received direct instruction from the founder of Goyu-ryu, Miyagi Chojun Sensei, and was awarded the name “Gogen” (1938) and the title of “Hanshi” (1951).

I offer these facts in the hope that they would give a glimpse into the essence of Miyagi Sanchin. Also the contents of (1)-(4) made me recall the image of "Go no Chojyun" (who was very strong) that Chitose Sensei talked about. Incidentally, it was Chitose Sensei who introduced Yamaguchi Sensei to Miyagi Chojyun Sensei, and one of Yamaguchi Gogen's disciples is Oyama Masutatsu Sensei (Kyokushinkai).



Funakoshi Gichin Sensei and Chitose Tsuyoshi Sensei
(August 18, 1955, Toshima Ward, Tokyo)



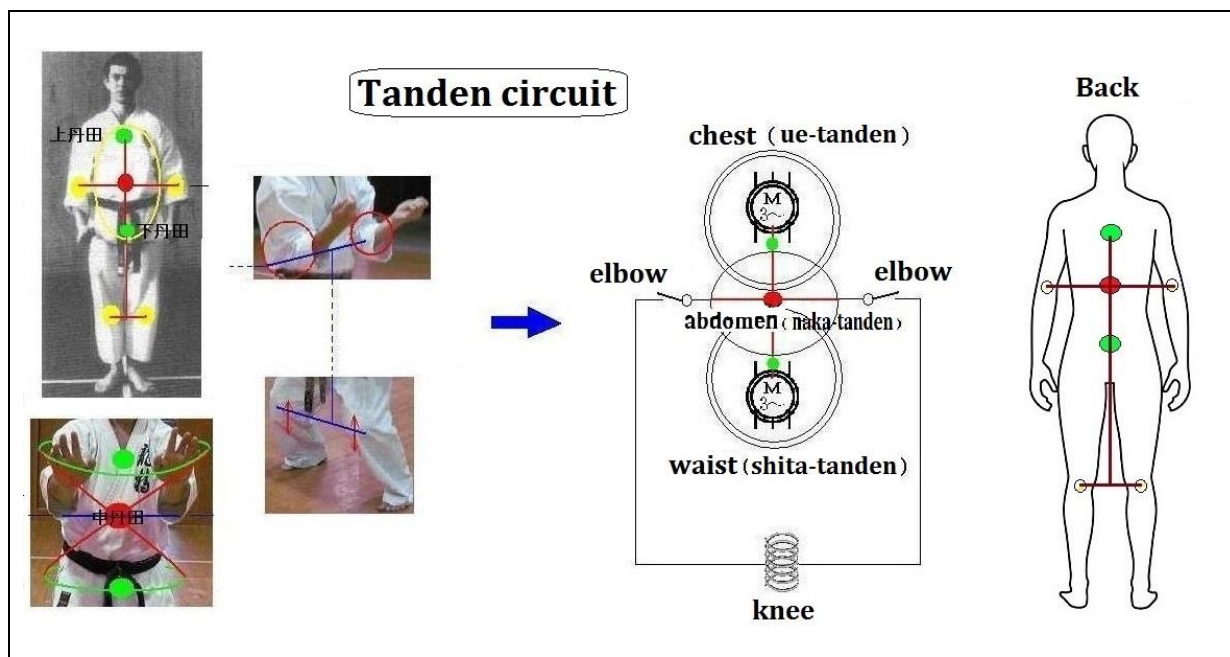
A meeting with Yamaguchi Gogen Sensei (Kansai - Tokyo)

4. Ryusei Breathing Technique

The breathing method is the tanden breathing method, using the tanden circuit shown in the figure below, in which the consciousness of being (ishiki-gake) and turning your consciousness outwards to nature (ishiki-nage) are included in the inhale (don) and exhale (to).

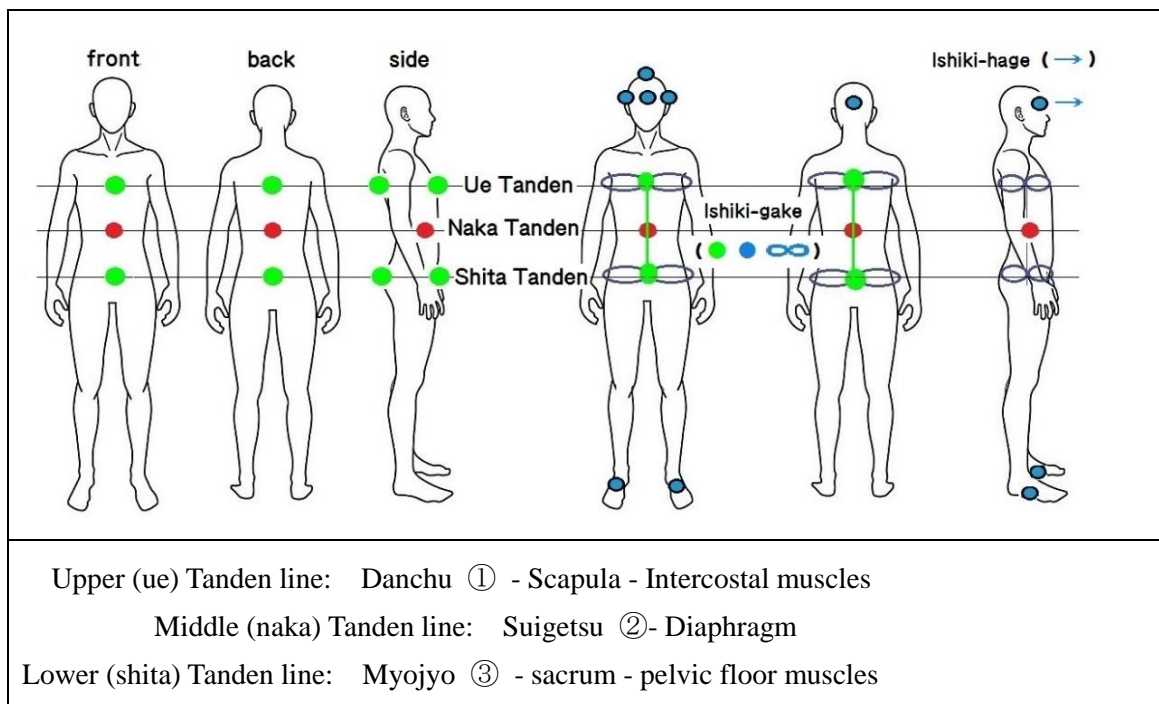
This can be represented in the diagram as “inhale (don) – consciousness intention (i) – exhale (to),” during the movement, when that correction and adjustment can be felt in the breathing in and out, and the circulatory breathing method (*7) is incorporated to maintain the flow of the movement.

(*7) This breathing is said to be one of the techniques of playing wind instruments in which the breath is inhaled and exhaled simultaneously. This breathing is done only by the individual's own will, and no third person can see or feel the movement. So I call it that “hidden breathing” (kakure kokyu) as a personal term.



Inhale (don)-consciousness (i)-Exhale (to)

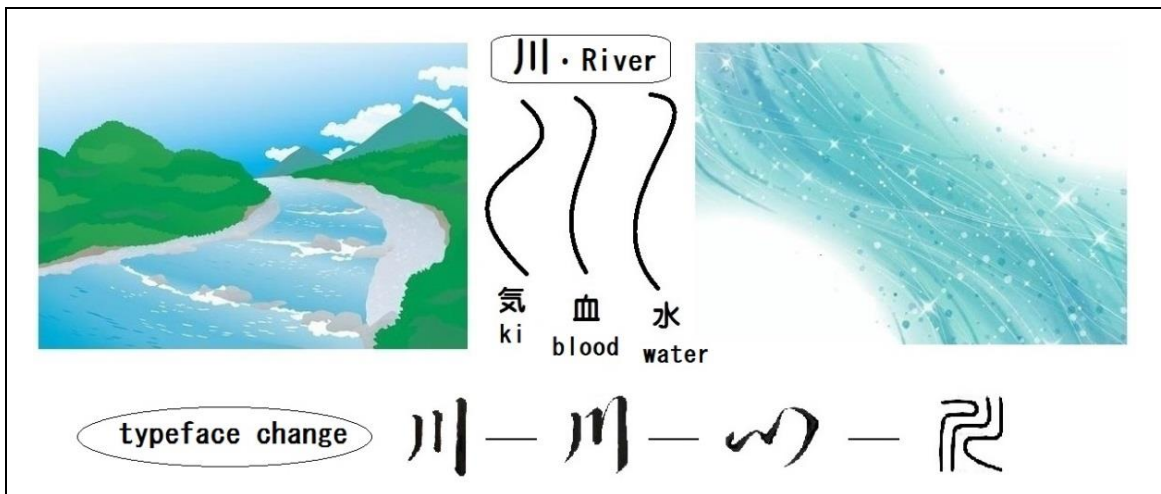
- (1) Inhale is short, and ishiki-gake is done to the back (ura) tanden instantly.
- (2) When moving forward, backward, left and right, use a short exhale-inhale (tanto-don) to match the footstep.
- (3) Uke-te (block) makes a ishiki-gake in the shape of the letter 8 (∞) in the lower and upper tanden with a short inhale and a long exhale.
- (4) Tsuki-te (thrusting hand) is done twice. The first movement is forward and back, and the second movement is right (left) with small swaying movement while doing ishiki-gake in the shape of a letter eight to the upper (ue) and lower (shita) tanden. Ishiki-nage (consciousness throw) is done by one's own will.
- 5) The mawashi-kake and hands moving with a swaying motion like the fins of a fish should be performed with a mixture of short and long exhalations.
- (6) The degree of breathing pressure during long exhales should be neither strong nor weak, and should be selected according to the individual's level of training.



The above supports the previously mentioned idea that Sanchin in Ryusei Karate is “Ura-no-Kata/Yin-Yang-No-Kata.” And if I may add that the breathing method of “soft (jyu*8)” Sanchin is one of the essential elements in the development of koryu kata techniques.

It is also my impression that Yamaguchi Gogen championed a strict and intense Sanchin throughout his life, and his explanation/philosophy of the kata, including the terms yin and yang, resonated with me in no small measure. This is because my own physical memories of intense Sanchin training create a sense of familiarity with it.

(*8) What is softness? Rather than giving a definition, I understand it as the flow of water and rivers (pictured below), the graceful (delicate) dance, and the movement of swirls and spirals. And I try to explain this based on related scientific learning (◆).



(◆) If you are interested, I suggest you study “fluid mechanics,” which examines the motion of objects in fluids, particle theory, or the flow mechanism of ki and blood in Oriental medicine, and formulate your own theory.

5. Soft Sanchin

Moving Zen

As mentioned earlier, there is a number of different breathing techniques, and it is no exaggeration to say that most martial arts practitioners are interested in them. In particular, some practitioners who seek spirituality in karate-do see Sanchin and kata in general as “moving Zen,” combining technical movements and breathing techniques with Zen philosophy.

I believe “moving Zen” is essential to acquiring a higher level of skill and spirituality. With this in mind, I would like to describe how my experience of walking Zen (*9) during a short period of time at a Zen temple (Ryutakuku Temple in Mishima City, founded by Zen Master Hakuin) when I was in my mid-20s. The experience has had a positive influence on my practice to this day.

(*9) Walking Zen (Ho-Zen) is a Zen practice of walking slowly by using the same posture and breathing as when sitting in Zazen.

In connection with Walking Zen, I have a memory of something I experienced when I made a courtesy visit to Suzan Shaolin Temple in September 1996. When we visited a temple in Fuzhou City, Fujian Province, the old master of the temple asked me to perform a martial art. Without hesitation, I performed the Koryu Tensho without hesitation, and when the master saw it, he nodded with a smile and said to me, “My Zazen is quiet and static (Sei-ko), and your martial arts is moving and dynamic (Do-ko). You should continue to train hard in the future.” These words still motivate me to practice.

Mountain training (Yamageiko)

Sanchin takes about four minutes to perform. During this period of time, I make the long exhalation (breathing out for about 30 seconds) that I had learned in Susokukan (few breath/Zen), and absorb it into Sanchin's breathing. I do this night training at the nearby Tatsuda-yama (Nature Dojo).

The moon shining in the sky and performing Sanchin under the starry sky feels very comfortable, and many times I forgot the passage of time. I also have experienced other strange phenomena, such as minor out-of-body experiences, tantric sensations, sightings of mysterious luminaries, or encounters with the unknown.

Practice

As I mentioned in the (◆) on page 7, I believe in the hard (Go) of Sanchin to harden my body like a rock, and I have been practicing hard for many years while using training tools such as chishi, sashi, and stone mill (ishi-usu). For that reason, I am one of the people who is truly familiar with Sanchin.

The process of my transition from the hard to a softer Sanchin that emphasizes the inner vibration of the body, and then to the soft (jyuhō) Sanchin, was based on my learning and practice of Naihanchi, which I learned from Okinawa Matsubayasi Shori-ryū Shinzato Katsuhiko Sensei, and the body control based on Naihanchi Jyuhō theory that the Sensei developed.

<Swimming Breathing>

One of the insights that came to me in the process of practicing swimming is, perhaps surprisingly, the basic breathing of swimming. It involves inhaling through the mouth, stopping, and exhaling through the nose, or: “inhale - stop (hold) - exhale.”

I focus on the “hold breath” and “stop (hold) breath.” The meaning of “hold breath” is explained as swimming while keeping the body buoyant.

And next, what about the inside of the body while holding breath during swimming? As a matter of course, the circulation of vital energy (ki/qi, blood, and water) is in constant flux to maintain the workings of the body's biological functions.

I therefore changed the idea of “holding the breath ⇔ buoyancy & unstoppable flow of life energy” to “exhaling ⇔ flow of consciousness” and incorporated it into Sanchin's breathing techniques. As a result, I was able to steer the course toward the creation of Sanchin, a soft method that emphasizes inner practice.

Conclusion

In order to delicately draw the unique spiral hand sequence of koryu karate and form it into a single flow (line) like flowing water, it is necessary add awareness and circular breathing to the short inhale and exhale (tan-donto), short inhale and long exhale (tendon-tyodo) breathing.

The Sanchin (+ Tensho) of Juho is a form that exists to accommodate this.

And when you have Sanchin (+ Tensho) of Juho as a close friend, you are able to lightheartedly practice anytime, anywhere, even while meditating or have taking a bath.

I have a hunch that there is an unknown world lurking in the connection between spiral-te and breathing techniques. In order to prove this, I would like to start preparing for a second attempt at gungfu, which I attempted in 2006, in this year of the *Mizunoto-u*, when a new gate will be opened.

Translation edits __ Peter Giffen
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