

“Cha Yon Ryu is a healing art.”

- Grandmaster Kim Soo

Breathing correctly is more important than anything else you do in karate. It is the source of your strength and the cause of your weakness.

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We've heard this many times: in our school, everyone exhales with every move. We want to make sure that we are getting a lot of oxygen. Breathing focuses our energy into one solid movement. It also helps our body to work in unison, having our feet and arms begin and end each movement at the same time. Kihops do the same thing.

In karate we are taught about energy and how that relates to our breathing. When we do a form, we cast our energy in all directions, and when we here “go-man,” we gather our scattered energy and come back to our center. We do this through breath and focus. When we hold our breath we are holding in a lot of stress, and that stress collects in our abdomens, in our organs, and in our backs. Improper breathing causes weakness, pain, and illness.

It is equally important to practice proper “belly breathing” outside of karate, too. The craving for an afternoon snack / energy boost might just be your body's way of asking for more oxygen. It is a documented chronic pattern that we breathe incorrectly all the time, using our muscles at the base of our necks and shoulders to lift our rib cages instead of expanding our ribs to the sides using our diaphragm. This is doubly harmful because less air is transferred into our blood per breath and it stresses our shoulder and neck muscles while locking our muscles in our lower backs.

I am aware of proper breathing technique and even teach it to our students. I was doing all the breathing, exhaling when I move, and kihopping during sparring matches. But when my back started to hurt, I started holding my breath. I noticed this, but I didn't know what to do about it. Breathing actually hurt.

Even though I was taught to expand my lower abdomen outward when I breathe, I was instead contracting my stomach inward. The spot where I tensed my stomach muscles is the spot where my back hurt.

When Grandmaster Kim came to visit our Wimberley School recently, I told him about my back problems. After class he showed me how to breathe properly, which I did about 100 times. He explained that he used to have back problems, and by meditating, he realized how important breathing was. He fixed his back through proper breathing technique, something doctors had failed to do. That night my back released during my sleep and was healed 85%, and I was able to spar for the first time in six weeks the next day.

I started concentrating on breathing correctly. I discovered that the tension point in my stomach muscle was where my strength was. It was difficult to do any basic move without that strength. I was unbalanced, trying to find a spot to hold onto for support. I felt like I was a white belt, having to learn everything all over again. But it was also exciting, because I eventually realized that I was a lot stronger without a tension spot. My whole body worked equally in balance. All of my muscles worked together in unison creating more strength, and that strength came without tension and felt easy – too easy, until I realized what was happening.

I quickly wanted to apply this in my everyday life. I still catch myself holding my breath, and when I do, I incorporate the breathing technique Grandmaster taught me. Breathing correctly opens something - whether it is a thought or an action - that was closed off by holding my breath. It allows me to keep going or helps me realize that I should try something else. It makes my days flow by with a lot more ease and allows me to do more, just like with my karate techniques.

For longevity and for health, breathing is very important and is not to be ignored. This can't be stressed enough.

What really caught my attention, more than anything else, was how Grandmaster explained that Cha Yon Ryu is a healing art. When one thinks of karate, healing isn't the first thing that comes to mind. It makes me understand and appreciate more who a "karate master" really is.

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