

What Every Karate-ka Should Know About “Kiai!”

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Can you teach someone “fighting spirit”?

Tricky question.

- Some people would say that you *can't* teach it – it has to come from “the inside”.
- Other people say that we don't *need* to teach it – it's such a “natural thing”.
- And lastly, some people would say that we *shouldn't* even teach it – there's no use for it in “modern society”.

Oh yeah?

With that sort of mentality, perhaps we should just stop teaching Karate altogether? Self-defense is such a “natural thing” that it will automagically come “from the inside” if it's ever needed in our “modern society”, *right?*

Right.

Except, here's the problem with that:

We, as human beings, are such crazily complex animals that we often need to be taught even the most basic, natural things.

I mean, we teach kids how to brush their teeth – even though putting one's hand to the mouth is natural.

In the same manner, people make loads of money teaching athletes how to run, deadlift and squat – even though running, squatting and lifting things are 100% natural movements.

And in Karate, of course, we regularly teach people how to cultivate their innate “fighting spirit” – even though survival is the very first law of nature and should come automatically to everyone.

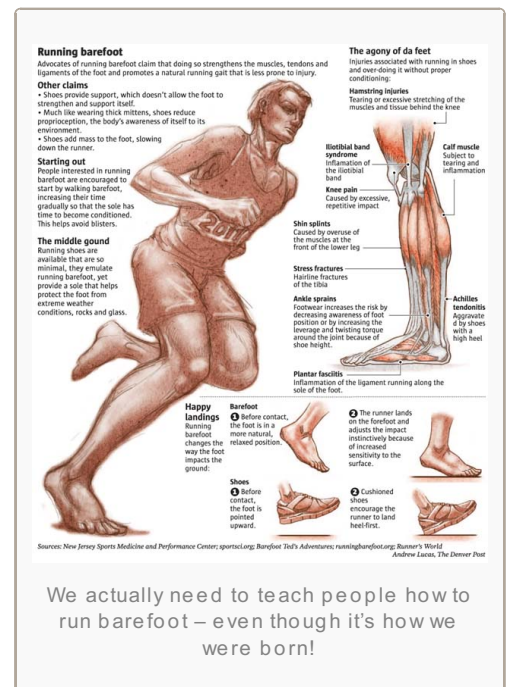
Well.

It doesn't.

Because modern society has lulled us in to a Disney-like sense of constant security; where our biggest fight each day is the internal Starbucks struggle of whether to have a regular caffè latte or decaf.

But here's the thing, compadre:

If there's one single thing that my years of traveling so far has taught me – through interviewing, training with, competing against and observing some of the very best Karate people on earth – it has to be this:



We actually need to teach people how to run barefoot – even though it's how we were born!

The best Karate-ka all possess a die-hard fighting spirit of incredible proportions.

And this unyielding sense of grit always manifests itself in one phenomenon:

Their kiai.

Hence, in my opinion, the quickest way to teach *fighting spirit* – to anyone on any level – is as brutally effective as it is surprisingly simple: Reverse engineer this process. *Learn the kiai*. And don't only learn it, but study it. Watch it. Think about it. Practice it. Re-discover it.

Then let it transform you.

Because not only will a kiai make your throat sore, but more importantly it will kickstart your *fighting spirit* like nothing else can. And that – to me – is the real purpose and value of kiai:

A veritable litmus test of your fighting spirit.

But of course, there's an art to kiai. And even some science too.

With that being said, here's a couple of things every Karate-ka should know about kiai:



First of all, what is “kiai”, exactly?

To put it super simply; kiai is that scream you hear in most Asian martial arts.

(Not to be confused with [grunting](#)).

Although many people think *kiai* means something along the lines of “battle cry” or “spirited shout”, the truth is actually a little bit different. A quick look at the kanji (Sino-Japanese ideograms) that make up the word should give you a hint as to what the term *really* means:

- **Ki** = *Energy*
- **Ai** = *Join*

In other words, kiai is the convergence of your energy.

Simple as that.

Nothing mysterious or magical about it.

Thus, when you scream kiai, you are not only “screaming”, but more importantly compressing and delivering an instant release of your stored energy.

(Of course, there exists heated debate among people in the martial arts community regarding the whole “ki/chi/qi” energy thing. Most of those people live on fluffly clouds. [Here's what ki really is.](#))

So...

When should you use kiai, then?

Here's when you should use kiai:

- When you want to channel your energy.
- When you need to kick your fighting spirit in the ass.



KI AI

- When you're attacking or countering an opponent.
- When you do a kata.
- When you want to demonstrate your power.
- When you need to breathe.
- When you want to startle your opponent.
- When your friend's dog poops on your Oriental carpet for the third time in a row (note: stop screaming when the cops arrive).

Simple enough.

So how exactly should one perform a proper kiai?

Well, there's more to it than screaming.

Check it:

Here's how to do a pretty awesome kiai, mate.

- Open your hands.
- Put your hands by your sides, standing like a boss.
- Push hard on both sides of your belly (below your ribs) with the inner ridges of your hands (the space between your thumb and index finger).
- Now cough.
- (You heard me.)
- *Cough again.*
- Feel that? That was your kiai muscle.
- **Congratulations!**

The intra-abdominal pressure you're experiencing with your hands is exactly where your kiai should originate.

(That's right – not in your throat!)

However, at this stage you're just letting your **body** work subconsciously. The next step is to do it consciously, with your **mind** (using a shout instead of a cough), and then in conjunction with a **technique**.

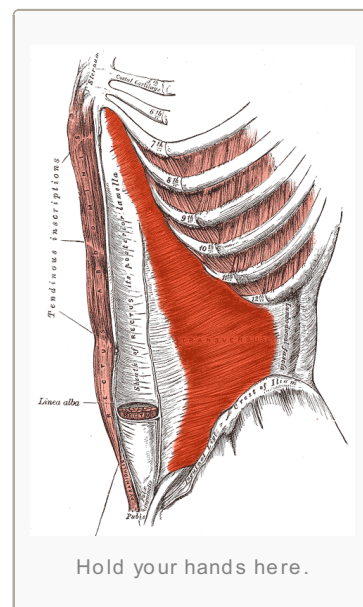
These three steps are known as “shin-gi-tai” (lit. “mind-technique-body”), and together they represent the very glue that holds your kiai together.

Fighting spirit.

Now, let's top this off with three commonly asked questions:

First one:

“I think kiai is pretty silly. Do I really need to scream just to “re-discover” my fighting spirit?”



Short answer: Yes.

Long answer: Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes.

More likely, you're probably just afraid of *looking* silly. But the only one who looks silly in a dojo is the person who doesn't scream. Also, even if you think kiai is "silly", don't underestimate the value of placebo, closely related to [the secret of reigi](#).

Second question:

| *"I can't find "my" kiai. How should it sound?"*

Imagine the dark sound of rolling thunder. Then, suddenly, a crack of lightning viciously strikes down!

Now copy that sound!

Many people try to articulate the word "kiai" with their lips, not knowing that this is just the *name* of the term – not the actual thing you shout.

So how should a great kiai sound, then?

It's 110% personal.

Some scream "eei!", some scream "yaa!", some scream "ooh!". But the sound coming out of your mouth is actually secondary.

Focus on the breathing and fighting spirit parts first.

Last question:

| *"But Jesse-san, I'm too shy. I can't scream!"*

Shy? *Oh please.*

If somebody held a gun to your head and told you to scream at the top of your lungs, you would scream without even blinking.

So use that imagery and

Let.

Go.

You're not shy.

You're just undermotivated.

Now, to really bring this point home, let me end with a story – as told to me directly by one of my old-school sensei back when I used to live in Okinawa:

The Story of the Lion on the Savannah



“You are standing on a savannah.

There are no trees around. No buildings or people. Nothing.

But there’s a lion in front of you.

And this lion is very hungry.

The lion roars!

“Ohmigosh, he’s gonna attack!”, you think.

The lion roars again, even louder.

In approximately three seconds, you’ll become lion food.

The lion shows its sharp teeth.

You have two seconds left of your life...

You can’t run.

You can’t fight.

You can’t hide.

One second left...

The lion roars a third time, louder!

You have ONE last chance to convince it to not eat you – that chance is RIGHT NOW.”

...

What do you do?

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