



Episode 351 – Why Do Martial Artists Yell? | whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com



Jeremy Lesniak:

Hey everybody, thanks for coming by! This is [whistlekickmartialartsradio](http://whistlekickmartialartsradio.com) radio, episode 351. Today, we're going to talk about one of the most publicly seen, heard, I guess is a better way to put it, the most mocked element of traditional martial arts, the noises we make. In Japanese the Kiai we're gonna talk more about that, a lot more about that it's after the focus of today's episode but before we do little bit of housekeeping, if you're new to the show head on over whistlekickmartialartsradio.com, check out our show notes for every episode, photos, videos, links all kinds good stuff as well as transcripts. Now if you want to check out whistlekick.com, you can save 15% on every single thing we have over there by using the code `podcast15`. We've been rolling out a number of new shirts and other apparel items. In fact, some of them are coming out just for a limited time, so if you're not in the habit of checking out what we have at whistlekick.com every couple weeks or so, you really should. And if you get on the newsletter list, we'll give you the highlights what's going on behind the scenes both on the website, with this show, other projects we've got going on, there's a lot happening. If you are a passionate traditional martial artist, you really should be getting the newsletter. We don't spam you, we don't give you Bunch of crud, bunch of waste. Just try to keep it to the high points. Yeah. Let's talk about the stuff, let's talk about this subject .

Now why do martial artists yell? It's a topic it's a question that if you're traditional martial artist, you've received probably a bunch, at least once and it's a question that I received even as the host of the show from other martial artists. People do it and they don't even always understand why they do it. Now you



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may have seen some martial arts movie or maybe going to a competition and you've noticed that when people execute certain moves, they yell they yell while they do it. No not always but they do in many cases and in fact in some more modern styles of forms competition, there's a lot of noise happening. And maybe you're wondering why. Maybe you think that it's a waste of energy and this yelling is completely unnecessary. Or maybe you think is just part of the tradition that is passed from previous generations in some forms and in some spots in the form. Now, let's skip all that assumption and let's talk about these [00:02:44.29] these Kiai.

What is a Kiai? First the term kiai has a meaning and kiai is a Japanese term that means energetic yell I've also heard it translated as spirit yell. Ki means energy while ai is the conjunctive stem of the verb aw, so it becomes in emphatic marker. A Kiai is only a short yell and it's usually expressed or uttered said however you want to choose that verb, when performing an offense of move a particularly important one in some forms. If we're going to use spell this out the usual spellings might be hiya or ahya, iya, hiya, or something like that often it is two syllables, not just I but iyah, e-yah. Now keep in mind that not all noises that martial artist make are these yells. They're different, they're you know we can kinda classify them is as kiai and if you practice other arts and in you don't do the Japanese, don't get on me about that. I got to pick one collective term somewhere we are gonna talk about how it relates to tae kwon do and others in a moment but we've got Kiai and we call them grunts, it's different. You can tell, you can hear, you can feel it. You can feel that difference. Now Korean martial artists, they've got this this concept to and it's often call the kiyup or kihop. Ki in Korean means energy while hop or yup means to join. So it's joining or concentrating your energy and then you release it through yelling. And what I find fascinating about this is that, we have this concept of projecting energy it shows up in a ton of fighting games, and it shows up in movies, it's really something that whether you aim or a martial artist are not, this idea this fantastic idea of being able to project your energy outside of your body it's something that I think really interests it fascinates us and it's something that is so common to the culture of martial arts at least the way we discuss in the Western world that maybe there are some roots in reality.

Now less common there is the silent kiai. Instead of yelling it's done by exhaling strongly now back in the days and in Okinawa, practicing karate was prohibited so the practitioners had to be silent when practicing their kiai. The loud kiai is more popular now and of course if you've ever practiced your kiai, If you've gotten good with it if you know how that feels, try practicing that without making much noise. Mind blowing stuff, stuff that will send you back to the drawing board for sure.

Now the purpose, what's the point of doing these yells, these kiai? And there are different purposes. For example, in Japanese martial arts, like judo he has used to intimidate the opponent or to maybe express confidence or a victory. In kendo, kiai can be part of an attack, kendo practitioners do a loud kiai along with their attacks to earn them point for every successful hit in some competitive spaces. A kiai when its properly done, will constrict the muscles in the stomach, in the diaphragm and those can be used to lessen, to reduce the damage received from an abdominal attack. Along with this, martial artist will learn proper breathing when executing their techniques especially those that are part of a series. In



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other words kiai, when you get hit in the solar plexus, and it's not gonna hurt as much and I can attest to that doesn't always happen intentionally but if you can stay relaxed, yeah good stuff.

Are there rules we are doing your kiai? Kiai, in some tournaments it's required for certain points for example, in some traditional karate tournaments when you're doing kata, the you have to kiai. And moreover kiai have to be done in certain spots in the kata. You can't just throw a kiai in wherever you want as opposed open competition where you might have it in other spots or where ever you want or depending on your definition and the practitioner maybe on every move, I have participated in schools where they kiai on every move. It's exhausting and I don't like it but there is some logic there.

Now you can do it yeah when everyone but here are some thoughts. A properly done kiai doesn't come from your throat or your vocal cords it comes from your diaphragm, from your guts. It's gotta be from a deep part of you and it's like, it's like singing. We've all heard someone who sings really well, really passionately you can tell it comes from a part of their soul that's a properly done kiai. We've also heard people who just kinda sing. Yeah it's there there but there's no passion behind it. Doesn't resonate. Try not to tighten the muscles in your throat to make a louder kiai, try to use your abdominal muscles. Try to imitate the muscular usage you would have during a cough, that's the best way I can express it. There is almost nothing more intimidating then getting ready to spar with someone and having them actually kiai. I mean a real kiai, a loud one because let's face it, it's kinda goofy. So to have that, have that confidence to express that in that space, whoo, people know that you're there for business.

And my favorite use of a kiai in forms is to work with transitional movements. In any form you have the sort of sections that come through and connecting those sections depending on the form can be difficult sometimes it doesn't look right. I found it by adding a kiai in certain spots, it can better connect make the form more fluid. Now if you're an ultra-traditionalist, maybe idea that I'm adding in a kiai bothers you that's too bad, I'm gonna do it anyway. Of course these noises come from different people so they're going to sound different and that's not only okay, it should be and should be yours, it should be your own signature sound and what's important is that, is the feeling that you get when you do it the one tells you you're doing it right. If you've never done a proper kiai, you don't know what I'm saying but you know it when you've experienced it. And that's really the best way I can express it.

There's a story in karatedo: my way of life by Funakoshi that talks about kiai. And it was about Master Matsamura who defeated another Master without any attack. And yes, I know it's a bit of a gimmicky story but supposedly this happened. Funakoshi considered it a legendary story that's why was in the book and here's a summary of that story. Matsamura once visited an engraving shop that was managed by a man who is in his 40s. The engraver had a great physique with a rippled muscles, Matsamura on the other hand was in his late 20s and he was less muscular as compared to the engraver. The engraver recognized the visitor, recognize Matsamura upon seeing him. Matsamura was a well-known karate teacher than and he was the only one qualified to teach the head of the clan. The engraver took this chance of meeting Matsamura and asked him if he could teach him karate. Matsamura said no, he declined that request and he said the he was unhappy with Karate and he no longer wanted to teach.



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The engraver persistent and so Matsamura told him the reason why he had quit teaching. Matsamura was no longer teaching the head of the clan because he was reprimanded and commanded to leave immediately. He taught the head of the clan a lesson for being too indifferent and injured him pretty seriously in the process. Matsamura knew that the engraver was a karate expert as well. So he was wondering why the engraver was so persistent in seeking instruction from him a man so much younger. The engraver told him at last that he was just curious how Matsamura taught karate. Matsamura still said you know what I'm all set and so the engraver invited him to a match and Matsamura didn't agree right away, he asked the engraver and he said are you ready to die? Were both experts here. And the engraver said yeah without any hesitation. So they scheduled the match immediately. The match began with the two of them standing face-to-face about 12 yards apart. The engraver drew near to Matsamura and Matsamura remained calm. The engraver was baffled with much more's defenseless posture. As Matsamura stood with his head just kinda resting on his shoulder. Matsamura must have a plan, he thought and the posture might be a trap. So as he launched his attack Matsamura reacted only by opening his eyes wide and staring deeply into the eyes of his opponent. The engraver drew back immediately as he felt that something was about to happen. Matsamura didn't move but the engraver started sweating heavily his heart was pounding hard. They both sat down and continued to match shortly after. Matsamura still stood in the same position. The engraver now decided to with that same intensity he did before and the engraver couldn't take his eyes off of him. He was sure that if he did, something would happen he would regret it. But he was stuck in a difficult situation so we chose to employ a loud kiai. It was so loud it echoed back from the surrounding hills and he expected that Matsamura would be intimidated that it would break him. But he was wrong and Matsamura remained unmoved, in fact he smiled he told the engraver that the match would not be finished just with the shouting. Now the engraver was even more determined to go on and he told much more once again that he would fight to the death. So they began again. The engraver attacked without hesitation over what's more immediately gave his own loud kiai, and the engraver was immobilized actually fell to the ground helpless. Finally, the engraver gave up he realized that much more skills were way beyond his own and before they parted ways Matsamura left the engraver with a little bit of wisdom: I'm a human being and a human being is a vulnerable creature who cannot possibly be perfect. After he dies he returns to the elements, to earth to water to fire to wind to air. Matter is void, all is vanity. We are like blades of grass or trees of the forest, creations of the universe, of the spirit of the universe. And the spirit of the universe has neither life nor death. Vanity is the only obstacle to life.

And the story teaches us that our opponents can be intimidated by our body language. Master Matsamura gave his opponent a death stare in the first two rounds. Though the engraver never lost for this time according to the story, Matsamura's strong resolve overwhelmed his own and when the engraver did kiai, Matsamura did it too. Intimidation can really prove useful not only the martial arts but in other sports. To me, there is nothing more powerful than a properly executed kiai yell. It's something that when I hear it, I can tell you a lot about the martial artist. I can tell you about their awareness of their body, I can tell you about their confidence and I can honestly say I've never experienced because



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you don't just hear it. I've never experienced a great kiai from someone who is not a great martial artist. It is probably the single best indicator to me of someone's martial skill. And maybe that's why love them so much.

Hope you enjoyed today's episode, I hope you learned something. And I asked that you not send me voice recordings of your kiais to critique because I'll get a headache, there a lot of you there. What I would love is free to check us out on social media @whistlekick YouTube, Facebook, twitter, Instagram. You can email me directly Jeremy@whistlekick.com, you can find the show notes and transcripts at whistlekickmartialartsradio.com and you can find all of our products at whistlekick.com, don't forget the code `podcast15` to save 15%. A lot of what we do is also on Amazon if you would like to purchase there. I want to thank you for your time today, thank you for listening, thank you for your support of whistlekick, of martial arts radio, of everything that were trying to do here. I appreciate you. Until next time, train hard, smile and have a great day.