

Hara breathing applied to dance practice

Sasha Roubicek

Institutional Affiliation
London Contemporary Dance School

Abstract

This article sets out to describe the beneficial effects of breathing methods derived from the Japanese martial arts Aikido and Kashima Shinryu Kenjutsu, as applied to professional dance practice and dance education. I wish to illustrate how change in subjective awareness may be brought about through the fundamental human activity of breathing and how this may affirm and validate a sense of self. The article includes extracts from the thoughts of Japanese Budo master, Minoru Inaba, and observations of undergraduate dance students with whom I continue to explore experiential processes.

Keywords

*breathing
hara
Aikido
energy
mind and body*

Aikido, as developed by Morihei Ueshiba, evolved in Japan during the 1930s with its roots in other martial arts such as Daitoryu Jujitsu. Aikido is unusual in that it is not practised competitively as many contemporary martial arts are. It is practised with a partner involving body contact through grips and strikes with an intention to use the attacker's on-coming force to destabilize their balance. Specific joint manipulations and holds are often applied. Kashima Shinryu Kenjutsu predates Aikido by several hundred years, originating on the battlefields of Japan during the sixteenth century. Sword forms are practised with a partner, with the student gradually progressing from using wooden practice swords to using katana. I was first introduced to Aikido in 1984 and shortly after introduced to the sword work.

I have been studying Aikido and Kashima Shinryu Kenjutsu concurrently with my dance practice for more than 25 years. Since 1991 I have attended courses in Japan and Europe to study with Minoru Inaba Sensei who continues to teach regularly, despite his recent retirement as headmaster of the Shiseikan Dojo in Tokyo, Japan. I am an instructor at Tetsushinkan Dojo at Moveageast, Centre for Dance, Martial Arts and Complementary Medicine, London, United Kingdom. My teacher is Paul Douglas Smith, 5th dan. I hold the grade of 3rd dan.

It would be impossible for me to unpick completely how my development as a dance artist has been informed by my study of Budo, but certainly many elements of using breathing techniques were initially brought to my attention through studying martial arts. As a dance student, my experience of

breath as an aspect of training was that although breathing was mentioned, very little time was given to researching its purpose. I was instructed to breathe, but not given clear information as to how to breathe efficiently. That breathing could be understood as a tool with which to develop qualitative and energetic nuance, power, rhythm, timing or dynamics was not explored in depth and, often, not at all. During the late 1980s when Siobhan Davies set up her dance company of the same name in the United Kingdom, I frequently took class with company members Scott Clark, Paul Douglas and Lauren Potter. All had developed teaching methodologies informed by a somatic practice. Clark brought his in-depth experience of the Feldenkrais Method® to Davies's company; likewise, Douglas introduced Aikido, and Potter elements of Yoga, bringing a mindful approach to dance practice, which introduced a far more considered use of breath than I had previously experienced. In my prior experience of dance training great importance was given to expressing the form correctly, with little time given for subjective exploration. At the same time, I attended improvisation classes taught by British-based choreographers Rosemary Butcher and Rosemary Lee. This combination of classes in technique and improvisation afforded great opportunity for experimentation, research and application. These experiences played a large part in stimulating the process of cross-referencing my knowledge as a martial arts practitioner and dance artist. In my previous dance training, in Graham Technique and Classical Ballet, it had been suggested to me that I worked with too much tension; now I was developing tools, such as breathing techniques, with which to make changes. Through this different approach I started to recognize beneficial changes occurring in my body including greater mobility and grounding, which afforded for further detailed articulation and freedom to move.

Fundamental to the teaching and practice of Inaba Sensei's Aikido and Kashima Shinryu Kenjutsu is the creation of the correct state of mind and body, and the use of kokyū is intrinsic to the development of this state. Through practice, awareness is brought to respiration and its role in facilitating relaxation of mind and body. Through specific methods of breathing there is also an intention to generate power. Development of the hara (lower abdominal centre, centre of gravity, focal point for breathing in Japanese martial arts) is essential for this purpose; one way to develop the hara is to aim the breath into this area of the body.

*Figure 1: Kashima Shinryu –
Movingeast Summer Course,
Wales 2007. Photo: unknown*



The question arises, 'What is the physical act of breathing into the hara?' It is not air that enters the lower abdomen, but as the diaphragm contracts with inhalation, it sinks into the abdominal cavity, creating greater space in the thoracic cavity for oxygen to efficiently enter the lungs. As the diaphragm descends, pressure is applied against the abdominal walls and as the abdominal cavity becomes smaller it feels as if air has entered. Inaba Sensei (2006: 74) explains that:

functionally there is not a direct relation between the breath and the pressure inside the abdominal cavity but if you exhale and inhale whilst keeping pressure in the belly, with a properly developed body and posture, instant concentration becomes easy...

My understanding of concentration in this context is both the concentration of mind and body, with a concentration of breath and ki (energy, universal energy) in the hara. In developing a useful state of mind and body Inaba Sensei believes that it is necessary to create a body which is mobile, but also a body that is stable:

One can call the moment when power is gathered in the centre the state in which the mind and body are most stable. It can be said that the aim of learning BUJUTSU is to make the mind and body as stable as possible in a pressing emergency [*sic*]. (Inaba Sensei 2006: 73)

With exhalation one aims to drain extraneous energy from the upper body down into the hips and hara where it might be concentrated for dynamic purpose. This process combined with the direction of breath into the hara assists in developing an understanding of grounding in the body.

Stability is not to be interpreted as solidity or stasis. One aspiration within Budo practice is to achieve yawarami, that is, a soft, flexible state of awareness in mind and body that is adaptable or mutable. This is practised through different breathing methods, for example; sustained breathing whilst sitting in seiza, or timing breath with very slow sustained practising of techniques. When understood, breathing methods are applied and integrated when moving vigorously.

Figure 2: Sasha Roubicek.

Photo: Pari Naderi, courtesy of Siobhan Davies Dance.



When teaching dance studies to both students and professional dancers, my observation has been that tension and effort are frequently distributed inefficiently through their bodies. Their backs, shoulders and torsos are held rigidly and whilst they may have gymnastic flexibility, their bodies appear brittle and restricted. They have little discernable connection to their hara with insufficient application of the use of breathing in their work. As Donna Farhi observes 'When we obstruct our breathing we cut ourselves off from the most accessible and readily renewable source of energy a human being has' (Farhi 1996: 76). When observing my students working with formed dance material, I am not looking for an ideal correctness of form but rather looking for states of mind and body, which facilitate their technical and expressive development. Time is given during the class to consider how we breathe. Students are encouraged to relax their diaphragm and aim their breath into their lower abdomen with attention drawn to noticing how breath changes sensation in the body state. I form choreographed sequences of movement, which create associations with these sensations. These vary in complexity and vigour, and cover a wide energetic spectrum. This method gives the students an opportunity to research and apply their understanding in different ways.

Students report that this approach is different from other forms of dance pedagogy they have experienced, particularly in the amount of time given to exploring fundamentals such as breathing. Whilst some students find this slow and mindful approach challenging and have on occasions expressed feelings of frustration at not being able to 'dance' in class, the gradual process of research and self-reflection has led to the realization of positive changes occurring in their bodies, changes they feel able to apply and express through their dancing. 'I felt fluid and mobile through the upper part of the body, a floating through the upper body, with grounding through the legs' (Poles interview 2009). In paying attention to fundamental human activities such as breathing, some students' perception of themselves, in relation to their dance practice, changes. As dance student Gareth Mole describes, 'Understanding that I am my own person has allowed me to explore movement in my own way [...] I have been given the chance to explore all possibilities within every process' (Mole interview 2009).

My experience of breathing methods learnt through Japanese Budo has been that they bring both a sense of relaxation to mind and body with a sense of contained power and grounding within the body. Powerful energetic sensations are evoked and awareness is brought to sensing a dissolving of the body's physical boundaries that creates the potential for physical possibility. There are fundamental differences between the disciplines I practise; one is of martial intent and the other is performance related; however, central to them both is the ability to keep calm or stable in moments of stress or challenge. Utilizing breathing techniques became an intrinsic part of my preparation that enabled me to maintain a state of mind during performance that was focused, but open to creative decision-making. It takes time and intense practice to recognize change but if practised regularly, with purpose, it is possible to evoke the same states relatively quickly.

Other practices such as yoga incorporate methods of breath control, utilizing these methods to create similar states of being. Vanda Scaravelli, founder of the Scaravelli Yoga Method, refers to breath as being 'the essence of yoga' (Scaravelli 1991: 176). She refers to the act of breathing as being, '...an "undoing" movement in which tension is released' (Scaravelli 1991: 178). In the interview with Scaravelli by Esther Myers and Kim Echlin entitled 'Awakening The Spine', Scaravelli is cited as saying

What yoga does particularly is through the breath [...] there is no yoga if there is no breathing [...] When you inhale there is that energy, that strength, that comes like a wave and the body follows. It's a relaxing feeling [...] you become very supple and elastic, and there are no difficulties. (Myers and Echlin 1996: 69)

The experiences Scaravelli describes are similar to those I have had, in that releasing of unnecessary tension produces surges of energy through the body. Her experiences of having 'no difficulties', I equate with sensations of physical boundaries dissolving – allowing pathways for movement to remain open.

Figure 3: Sasha Roubicek.

Photo: Laurie Lewis, courtesy of Siobhan Davies Dance.



Researching fundamental human activities such as breathing within my practice is both fascinating and informative. Through years of research, exploration and experimentation I have found breathing techniques, initially learnt through Budo, to be valuable

tools in embodying movement and integral to becoming an articulate dance artist. Understanding how I breathe has led to physical discoveries that afford nuance, differentiation, grounding and mobility. Integrating the knowledge gained through the disciplines I study has enriched my experience. I have striven to develop a sophisticated approach to the application of the methods discussed, to enhance my range of expression in dance, both as educator and dance artist, and aspire to imbue that practice with a discernable somatic intelligence.

Acknowledgements

With thanks to Paul Douglas Smith, director of Moveeast, head of Tetsushinkan Dojo; Susanne Lahusen, Somatics course tutor, Postgraduate Diploma/MA: Advanced Dance Studies LCDS; Dr Mary Evelyn, head of Postgraduate Studies, LCDS.

Glossary of Japanese terms

Budo: Japanese word for martial arts

Bujutsu: Martial techniques

Daitoryu Jujitsu: Form of Japanese martial arts predating Aikido taught to Morihei Ueshiba by Takeda So Kaku, founded during the reign of Emperor Seiwa (850–880 AD)

Hara: Lower abdominal centre, centre of gravity, focal point for breathing in Japanese martial arts

Katana: Single-edged curved sword used by Samurai warriors of medieval Japan

Ki: Energy, universal energy

Kokyu: Breath

Seiza: Traditional Japanese form of sitting (kneeling)

Sensei: Teacher/Master

References

Farhi, D. (1996), 'Holding Your Breath', *Yoga Journal*, March/April, p. 76.

Gleason, W. (1995), *The Spiritual Foundations of Aikido*, Rochester, VT: Destiny Books.

Inaba Sensei, M. (2006), *Researching Japanese Budo*, Tokyo: Meiji Jingu.

Myers, E. and Echlin, K. (1996), 'Awakening the Spine', *Yoga Journal*, May/June, p. 69.

Olsen, A. and McHose, C. (2004). *Bodystories: A Guide to Experiential Anatomy*, Hanover, NH: University Press of New England.

Scaravelli, V. (1991), *Awakening The Spine: The Stress-Free New Yoga That Works With The Body To Restore Health, Vitality and Energy*, New York: Harper Collins.

Shioda, G. (1968), *Dynamic Aikido*, Tokyo: Kodansha International.

Stevens, J. (1993), *The Essence of Aikido: Spiritual Teachings of Morihei Ueshiba*, Tokyo: Kodansha International.

Tufnell, M. and Crickmay, C. (1993), *Body, Space, Image: Notes Towards Improvisation and Performance*, London: Dance Books.

Ueshiba, K. (1984), *The Spirit of Aikido*, New York: Harper and Row.

Websites

<http://www.movingeast.co.uk>

Interviews

Gareth Mole (2009), LCDS

Aurelie Poles (2009), LCDS

Gareth Mole and Aurelie Poles are third-year undergraduate students at London Contemporary Dance School. I taught this group of students a daily technique class and worked with them on the restaging of *White Man Sleeps* (choreographed by Siobhan Davies) four afternoons per week throughout Term 1 of 2009–10. During this term I worked with them consistently on fundamental processes of my methodology, including reflections on breathing. The students were interviewed and asked for their reflections on the learning processes at the end of term. Both Aurelie Poles and Gareth Mole have given their permission for quotes from the interviews to be included in this article.

Biography

Sasha Roubicek: Lecturer in Release-based Dance Practice

Sasha trained at London Contemporary Dance School 1982–86. In 1987 she co-founded Reflex Dance Company with Paul Douglas, with whom she toured internationally. She has performed with Motionhouse Dance Theatre, Yolande Snaith Theatre Dance and Siobhan Davies Dance Company. Sasha was a founding member of Small Bones Dance Company, directed by Paul Douglas.

Sasha has led master classes for many dance companies including Siobhan Davies Dance Company, DV8 and Shobana Jeyasingh Dance Company and has taught in vocational dance schools and studios, in the United States, Russia, Britain, Scandinavia and Europe. Sasha is artistic adviser to Movingeast and an instructor of Aikido at Tetsushinkan Dojo – she is graded third dan. In 2007 she was awarded the Lisa Ullman Scholarship to study Aikido in Japan. Sasha is presently lecturing in Release-based Dance Practice and the work of Siobhan Davies, at London Contemporary Dance School

Contact: sasharoubicek@yahoo.co.uk