

# "MOKUSO" by Tim Shaw

*I originally wrote this short article as a response to requests from a number of my students regarding the practice of Mokuso/meditation that we perform at the beginning of every training session.*

## History

This practice goes back hundreds of years in both China and Japan. Throughout history meditation training has been acknowledged as a vital part of the training of anyone wishing to penetrate the depths of the martial arts. Many of the great masters achieved a level of superb technical mastery; their deeds are clouded by time and no doubt have been elaborated over the years. However, if only a fraction of these legends show a grain of truth, the contribution of the meditative aspects of martial arts training cannot be overestimated.

## Objectives

Short term – At the beginning of a training session to compose the mind and focus on the task ahead.

Long term - To return to a state of pure thought and action untainted by ill conceived and inappropriate responses.

## Training of mind and body

The mind has to command the body to enable the practitioner to reap the benefits of the practice. A settled and controlled mind as a result of prolonged correct practice can have escalating beneficial effects on the body and boost and retain supplies of vital energy. ("Chi" chin. "Ki" jap.)

## How it works

Posture is the first basic principle. Correct positioning of the body centres around the spine, which must be erect, and even when straight must not feel "collapsed".

In oriental thought the human being is the conduit between what they refer to as heaven and earth (The use of the word heaven must not be confused with the Christian understanding of heaven. Heaven in eastern philosophies means, the universe, or the cosmos.)

Mokuso/meditation can be performed in a number of ways, including sitting on a chair, standing or even lying down. (Ohtsuka Sensei endorsed the practice of laying down meditation; he called it Ouchaku Zazen. However the customary way is in traditional Seiza (kneeling) position.

Seiza is convenient, as it is also the accepted way to sit while bowing or resting in the Dojo. There is practical reasoning behind this posture. Obviously it is a position that enables the hands to remain free. It was also an economical and dignified way of sitting in a Dojo of limited space. It was also safe; if a fellow student were to fall or stumble neither party would be injured. If students find that prolonged sitting in Seiza is uncomfortable, or painful as a result of injury, then it is permissible to sit cross-legged, but the spine must be erect.

### Hands and other considerations

Again, there are various schools of thought as to the correct positioning of the hands during Mokuso. Traditionally the position adopted is of the Zen practitioner, i.e. the hands in the lap, left hand upturned resting in the right hand. Thumbs of both hands are joined at the tip. (Some say that for women the hand position is reversed, i.e. right hand in left.) The hands must not be in a position that causes the shoulders to lift or cramp. Also of vital importance is the position of the tongue. The tip of the tongue must rest on the palette just behind the top teeth. The reason for this is that the tongue acts as a connector to the cross over of two meridian channels and without the connection vital benefits of the practice will be lost.

### Concentration

A wandering mind is a hindrance to advanced practice. It is probably a good idea to start by occupying the mind by just concentrating on a mental count of your breathing. By just focussing on the numbers you will prevent your practice deteriorating into just idle daydreaming.

In Zen training the goal is to try and empty the mind to contact your true essence.

### Gaze

Look at the floor about two metres in front of you, with eyes half closed. This prevents unnecessary visual distractions and also discourages the tendency to fall asleep.

## Breathing

Breathing is the keystone of correct practice. Over hundreds of years many techniques have been developed, but they are all based upon a series of central principles. Correct breathing benefits the body in many ways, but first it must be recognized that our everyday breathing is hindered and restricted by a number of influences, ranging from stress and tension to poor posture. Observe the breathing of a newborn baby or animals and it is noticeable that the breathing is primarily abdominal, while ours tends to involve the upper chest. Physiologically the diaphragm controls the breathing acting as a pump. It is diaphragm breathing that is used in Mokuso. It is no coincidence that the all-important "centre", the Saika Tanden is situated two inches below the navel. The Tanden is the reservoir of vital energy. Correct breathing charges and replenishes the store of vital energy.

## Breathing Technique

All breathing must involve long, slow cycles of breath. Inhale through the nose, slowly drawing air into your lungs, but feeling as though you are drawing it down into your lower abdomen. Naturally this encourages abdominal breathing, correct use of the diaphragm and awareness of the Tanden. Stop inhaling just before you are completely topped up. Don't push it too far, as it will cause tension in the wrong places. Retain your breath for a couple of seconds. Not too long or you will feel faint. Then slowly release the breath through your mouth, again concentrating on the use of the abdomen. Do not force or squeeze out the last of the breath and do not hold, just allow your natural reflexive inhalation to begin the next cycle of breath.

## Establishing a routine

The Mokuso practice prior to an average training session although it settles and composes the mind will not promote long-term benefits. The serious student needs to establish a routine supported by real commitment. Do not expect results overnight, it takes a while for the body and mind to settle, but after about a month of sustained daily discipline of only 15 to 30 minutes per day you will notice a difference.

If practice is correct, then the energy boost and feeling of well being will become an indispensable part of a positive daily regime. Obviously you do not have to be a martial artist to practice these breathing/meditation techniques, and not all martial artists are prepared to embrace this discipline. Many think that the short-term paybacks of the "external" aspects of training are sufficient to meet their needs. It all depends on how high you set your goals.