

The Art of Kiai  
A Black Belt Thesis  
By Chantal DeAngelo  
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In order to become a well-rounded martial artist, it is important to study and understand each component of your chosen system. This is especially true with Kenpo, since it is considered an “eclectic” art that combines many ideas from other systems into one. Today, many people study and learn the best way to throw a punch, or the best way to block a kick; however, many people tend to overlook something so seemingly simple, yet so fundamentally important, as the kiai. Prior to studying and writing this paper, so did I.

First, what exactly is a kiai? A kiai is more than just a sound made when we strike. What a kiai is, is unity. The word kiai itself is a compound word, made up of “ki” (meaning spirit, mind, or will) and “ai” (a contraction of the verb “awasu” which means “to unify”). In other words, it can be said that “kiai” means “to unify the spirit”. In his series *Infinite Insights into Kenpo*, Senior Grand Master Ed Parker stresses unification by saying, “To be of prime effectiveness, the unification of all power sources is necessary. Mind, breath, and strength must culminate simultaneously.”

One of man’s first reactions to danger is to shout. Whether it is to call for help, distract an attacker, or to warn friends; the shout is a natural reaction that every person has. Shouting is also used to intimidate. Almost every army, including the Greeks, Romans, North Africans, Hebrews, Assyrians, Phoenicians, Persians, and many others, have all had a history of using the shout to intimidate. In ancient Japan, they recognized this and the kiai was created. It became not only a shout, but a weapon that was perfected and mastered by warriors.

In ancient Japan, kiai was the name given to the art that used the voice as a weapon. The concept was considered miraculous to the people at that time. The kiai could be used to prevent or win a battle without ever physically touching the opponent! In time, certain warriors refined the kiai to such lengths, until it became an art. The art of kiai was complete with ranks, students, and masters. The ancient masters of kiai placed more importance on the “inner arts” (such as focus and control) than over the “outer arts” (such as weapons and techniques). This is much like Kenpo’s placing importance on “knowledge over power”. Due to this, the art of kiai was reduced to pure, immaterial power that focused one’s whole being on the desired target. It required years of training, breathing, and shouting exercises to become a master. Becoming a master also required perfecting the pitch, tone, and vibration of the voice. Every high ranking warrior was expected to master kiai. At the highest level of mastery, kiai did not even depend on the voice, but on presence. This was evident in the test required to become a master. The test involved the would-be master going out alone into the mountains to seek out a den of wolves. He was then required to walk into the den while the wolves were still there. His test was to frighten the wolves out of their own den without making any sound; his very presence was supposed to be enough to complete the test. There are many other examples in literature of the power of kiai. In more recent years, a master and his student were walking along the street en route to the master’s favorite restaurant to have lunch. On the way, they came across some teenage boys that were fighting on the sidewalk. The master glared at the boys and they froze in place as if they were terrified of him. The master then uttered a low-pitched “bark” and the boys turned and ran as if fearing for their lives. Another example of the power of kiai was when western knights faced eastern warriors. The knights would require intense concentration, bordering on fanaticism, to reduce the crippling effect that all of the combined kiais had on their ears and brain.

Today, while the kiai is not used as it was in ancient Japan, it remains a very important part of martial arts. Senior Grand Master Ed Parker realized this and stated that proper kiai could not be emphasized enough. He also recommended various breathing exercises to condition the body. One such exercise is to

take in a deep breath of air through the nostrils while raising both arms and crossing them in front of your face. As the arms cross, the air is transferred to the lower abdomen as all muscles are tensed. The air is then slowly forced out through an open mouth and the arms are lowered to the waist with a rasping sound that ends with a gasp to force out the final bit of air. The process is then repeated. High resistance to pain is achieved as a result of this exercise and abdominal muscles and the diaphragm become well developed. They become so strong that striking wooden poles against their bodies would have no effect. In fact, the poles themselves would be shattered. Kiai also contributes to stability. It settles the body and allows you to focus. Kiai adds power to strikes, relaxes muscles, and allows attacks to be executed with greater speed. Kiai conditions the body. Also, during a kiai, the abdominal muscles tighten and prepare the body to absorb shock, thereby taking less damage.

Although we no longer need to prove mastery by creating homeless wolves, or by standing in a face-off to communally shout our foes insane, kiai and its important historical role remains a most valuable tool today. It is psychologically important in scaring a potential attacker, causing their aggressive intent to waver. It is important in adjusting our spirit and in physical conditioning. I no longer underestimate the role and value of kiai within the martial arts.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the wonderful supporting people in our kenpo family who have helped me so much on my journey.

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#### References

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