

Letting Go Discussion – Ch. 20
Kokyu and Equanimity
Friday, January 21, 2011

Good evening. Tonight is the 20th chapter of our *Letting Go* discussion group, entitled “Kokyu and Equanimity.”

There have been a lot of people over time who’ve come to me with difficulties with Ki Breathing, and as a result, somewhat erratic kokyu. In this chapter I say that, when we practice Ki Breathing it increases kokyu, which is breath power or life force. And how that kokyu is manifested in us really depends upon our understanding of Kokyuho, or Ki Breathing, and that we are doing it correctly.

I was taking a walk with a student in Europe one day, and I asked him how his Ki Breathing was going. He said, “Uh, I just hate it. I have such a hard time with it. I don’t know why.” So I said, “Oh. OK, so just stop a minute and take a deep breath with me, in your abdomen, and slowly let it out. And again, take another deep breath, and slowly let it out.” We did this three times. And then I said, “Now, how do you feel?” “Really good, very calm,” he said. “That’s Ki Breathing,” I said. “But no, you told me that I have to do all of this stuff...!”

A lot of people make Ki Breathing into an object, something to do. However, breathing is what you have been doing since you have been born, only Ki Breathing is doing it fully, with the greatest amount of usefulness for you, so that you can enjoy the full benefit of the life force that is available within you. It’s not a torture that Tohei Sensei invented to wreck your life, or to make this practice particularly difficult. In most schools of spiritual training, we can choose which practice we like, and leave the one’s we don’t like on the side for others. But this is harder to do in Aikido because Tohei Sensei, Suzuku Sensei, and I are always confronting you with Ki Breathing.

As I say in this chapter, kokyu and equanimity go hand in hand. We don’t want to have one without the other. And when you do Ki Breathing correctly, it creates a great depth and sense of calmness in us. And when we have this sense of calmness, we have a kind of natural clarity, a clear seeing. But when we are agitated and upset and not feeling like things are going right, there seems to be something wrong, our breathing is agitated. When we think there is something wrong, we are not seeing clearly. This is not equanimity.

So they go hand in hand. You can’t really have equanimity without kokyu, and visa versa. Well, you can have them alone, but it is very unbalanced. I’ll read about that, maybe now.

And by the way, I have just finished editing this book, *Letting Go*, for the electronic edition, which is going to go out soon, so I have corrected some word usage and so forth, in case it doesn’t quite follow exactly what your book says.

“Kokyu and Equanimity

We often have questions about the meaning of “kokyu” and how it relates to the rest of our practice. Both kokyu, which literally means “the power of breath,” and what I like to call equanimity, are fundamental aspects of our practice. These are integrally connected with each other and with what we do in the dojo and in our lives.

Conditioning

The Buddha said that when we hear, or taste, or touch, or smell, or see, or when we think of something, or imagine something, there is always a response that arises in us, and that response is either one that is agreeable or disagreeable. This seems fairly straightforward. We all have the same common experience. There is no one on earth that doesn't have this basic experience, and there is no one else that has some different kind of thing happening. Everyone has the same thing going on. We can easily see this, if we take the time to notice.

Whether we are seeing, tasting, touching, smelling, hearing, or thinking of something, there is an arising in us in reaction to that, and that which arises is either agreeable or disagreeable.

What is so remarkable about this response of agreement or disagreement with what is, is that it is completely dependent upon our conditioning, our past. The feeling of agreement or disagreement with what is that arises within us depends entirely upon some historical factor in our background. All our past experiences combine to cause whatever is arising to be pleasant or unpleasant. Of course we are all different in these preferential reactions, but also the same in many ways, relative to our culture. People that grew up in the same culture share a kind of group conditioning. So the chances are there are a whole lot of things that they react to similarly; people and events are mutually agreeable or mutually disagreeable. In the United States we have red states and blue states, for instance, differing political, social, religious, and economic groups who share their own conditioning, but reject another groups' conditioning. This is essentially just being a slave to a kind of group think; no matter which side we choose, we find ourselves exhibiting this habitual liking and disliking.

Equanimity

Please don't exclude yourself from this because you think your "cause" is just. We are all the same. If we are defending a position, a point of view, then we know it is simply something from our past that we have not yet addressed as conditioning. Turning within and noticing the fact that this is just that way it is and not a bad thing or a good thing but a fact of the human mechanism of life, and thereby not buying into it or being attached to it — this is already what we call equanimity. The simplest act of bringing our awareness to address this relative reaction to what arises within ourselves; this is already equanimity. We just notice this. And as soon as you notice, the one who notices is not affected by the agreement or the disagreement, because the one who notices is not that which is noticed. You see that this is not you, but only your conditioning. That's it! That's awakening already. Of course, that is just awakening in that instant. That's why you can never say, "I am awakened," because this kind of awareness is something that only exists in the present and is not a fixed or permanent condition. So we must practice this kind of awareness. "Practice" means repeating this noticing over a long period of time.

Kokyu

One of our methods of practice is Kokyuhō, or Ki Breathing. I mentioned that Ki Breathing is special because it develops something called "kokyu." We said that kokyu is a Japanese word meaning "breath" or "breath power." But an easier way for us to see this in English is simply to say "life force." Kokyu is life force. The degree of life force available to us in any moment governs the intensity with which those things arise within us, both plus and minus, agreeable and disagreeable. It is possible to have strong life force and no equanimity. And it is possible to have calm equanimity and yet weak life force. Yet it is also possible to have both at the same time. However, achieving both together can be a very difficult kind of training.

Breath is directly connected to our life force. Without breath, we have no life. By practicing Ki Breathing, whatever reaction we have to people or events, or even our own thoughts, is intensified. The act of tasting, touching, hearing, smelling, seeing is not necessarily more intense, though it can be. But the arising force is more intense. The inner emotional movement caused by past associations, our conditioning, becomes more intense. If you have not arrived at some level of equanimity, you don't necessarily have much control over the life force that is arising, and chances are you will become afraid,

even overwhelmed, and you will shut the whole process off. You will do anything you can to limit the intensity of the arising. In short, you will not practice Kokyuhō! In fact, just a little bit of it will scare you off. You may not notice right away, but sooner or later you will realize, “Oh my God, this makes things more intense. And I am already having enough trouble as it is. I already can’t keep myself out of the emotional storm. I already find myself jealous, angry, proud, and envious without being able to calm myself with equanimous seeing, so why would I want to intensify this process!?” Naturally you don’t want that. So you avoid it.

So, to keep things in balance, we practice a combination of equanimity practice balanced with kokyū practice. Don’t ignore either one of them. Both of them need to arise and develop together within you.

As I said, you can become calm and clear and possessed of something like equanimity, but with very low life force. We call someone like this “detached” from life. This can be cynicism, or even dullness. This often happens with those who meditate extensively and live an isolated life. But is this sufficient?

On the other hand we see those who are very intense, but out of control. We call these “loose cannons” sometimes. That is also not desirable. What we want is a way to have both of these conditions at the same time. We sometimes talk about this in terms of “calmness” and “intensity.” When I met Suzuki Sensei he was the calmest person I had met while at the same time he was surprisingly intense. This was a shock to me, because normally we meet each kind of condition, but never both in one package, so to speak.

So this is why we do the kind of practice we do, seeing the natural condition that all of us possess, this arising of reaction to events and people, which is the constant choosing between the various levels of what we perceive as good and bad, and the need in all of us to both increase and celebrate life force, while viewing what comes to us with equanimity, not preference.

There are many avenues of expression in Aikido. For instance, you might be very developed in your physical practice. But remember, what you are transmitting, through that practice, to yourself and to others, is going to be shallow or deep, depending upon what you are expressing. If what you are expressing is a deep power and surety, you will have a feeling of fullness. Whereas if you find yourself with a feeling of need, then your expression through movement may be very shallow. By a “feeling of need,” I mean you may find you crave support and affirmation, rather than confidently giving that to others, expecting nothing in return. This is sort of like doing a peripheral dance around the

outside of our practice, but never entering into the meat of it, and therefore never really benefiting in any profound, life-enhancing way. And let's remember that the physical movement is an expression of the level of your practice itself. How intense is what arises within you, and to what degree can you accept whatever that intensity brings to you?"

You know, when you read this, or listen to it like that, it is a very simple, straightforward explanation, very easy to understand, right? But look out, because this kind of conditioning we are talking about, which causes us to judge everything as good or bad, or in other words, to have preference, is very deep-seated in us from a very young age. This is not easy to see in ourselves. Any of you that have been practicing this kind of thing for years know how difficult this can be. And as you do more and more Ki Breathing and the life force becomes more and more intense, these preferences, whether they be of another or of our self, become more and more intense. That's why I say, it's not enough just to have kokyū. You've got to have a sense of no preference, a sense of equanimity. Otherwise you'll drive yourself nuts. Because, folks, it's not ever going to be over till you die, and even then I don't know. I haven't been there yet. But definitely it doesn't just go away. My experience is it just gets more and more intense. But, of course, if you are doing the practice, it becomes clearer and clearer, as it becomes more intense.

In my experience, we are never given anything that we can't handle. That's the good news. The bad news is that, if you are not getting anything that you feel you can't handle that is a challenge, then you are not doing any practice. Then that is proof to you that you had better re-double your efforts. It should be challenging all the time. And if it isn't, you're not noticing. You want to sit down a little bit more.

OK? So...got any questions?

Student: As I'm reading I come to the "cynical and detached" and I say, "Oh, that's me." And then I keep going and it says "loose cannon" and I say, "Oh, no. This is me." So rather than stop at the question of "who the hell am I?", I'm just watching this vacillation back and forth. So my question is actually, can you help me as my teacher, in the relationship that I have with you, in noticing more in that vacillation? How does that work?

First I should congratulate you on having only two opposites. The rest of us have a whole village in here, none agreeing with each other. Yes, you're both, of course. I mean, I characterized that, as I was writing it, as there being maybe a predominance in certain people. But there are times in our lives when we are in each of these conditions. I mean, we need saving from both. In other words, we need insight. And the only way to get that is to practice these things in conjunction with each other.

But since that is the title of the chapter, Kokyu and Equanimity, then we can just address those two tonight, and let the rest of them take a vacation, the rest of those personalities that plague us.

So, tell me your question again a little more simply.

Student: These talks are about having a teacher. The content of it is constantly shifting and changing and evolving, but it invariably comes down to the fact that you are my teacher, and you have an experience of this that I don't. And if I keep training with you, I will maybe have the experience that you have, but then you are having more experience ahead of me. My practice is very chaotic and very spastic, but I am still here.

OK, I did ask you to make it a simple question. Can you?

Student: Can you help me?

Just keep coming.

Student: Thank you Sensei.

You talk about the teacher/student relationship. Sometimes there is the right thing to say. Sometimes an explanation is helpful. And I can certainly say a lot, as you see from this book. There is a lot that can be said. But sometimes, it is better not to say anything. Which time would you like this to be? Be careful now.

Student: What comes to me is that I want the fullest experience that I can possibly think of, or have. It's the fullness of the experience that I cannot realize without coming here and doing it.

Yes, and you are having it right now. Yes? OK? Congratulations.

Student: Thank you Sensei.

Student: On the thing of no preference, I have a student who I really trigger in such a way that she hates my guts. And I much prefer when my students love and appreciate me. I realize that there is something that we have to work through together in that, but it is very difficult to be the object of someone's hatred in that way, and still be equanimous, and not prefer it to love and affection.

It's difficult to be the object of someone's dislike, and remain equanimous. Why is that?

Student: Well, because of my preference. You know, I definitely feel a preference for a positive experience instead of a negative experience.

Excuse me for saying it this way. This might be a little crass, or blunt. This is the kind of situation where we are just blinded to what is at hand, if we are having a preference. Can you do anything about her? No. She has to come around. You know, haven't you found that when you feel some discomfort from someone, that they are going through some discomfort, you're better just to keep your mouth shut? This has come to me late in life. I still haven't learned it completely. You know, no one can say "I got it." But in the beginning of seeing this I began to suspect, "Oh, maybe the other person is actually doing what I am doing, practicing." So I wait a little while and see. And sure enough then, it's gone. But if I jump in and say, "Hey, hey," it escalates, and pretty soon we have a serious problem.

I said to Mark that sometimes there is just the right thing to say for a teacher, and sometimes there is nothing to be said. You can't make a rule about it. You just never know until the moment. But from what you say, in that kind of a situation it's very important to recognize that it's not about you and your preference. Of course, we would all like to be loved by everybody, but as a teacher that doesn't happen. People look at a teacher and they think, "Everyone loves her or everyone loves him." But if you are a teacher, then you know that is not the case at all. There's plenty of people that get really upset because you're dealing with things in those students that are, like I was saying, deep-seated and very, very difficult to approach. And your job is to help them face those things in themselves.

Student: There is a line in Hakuan Zenji's Song of Zazen where he says that when someone becomes a sworn enemy, that's actually an expression of the Buddha's boundless kindness. And I've never been able to really get that, because I don't like it when somebody doesn't like me.

Let me speak to that. I was in a kind of a training situation with this guy, years and years ago when I was quite young. We had a teacher. This guy was a real jerk and he was driving me crazy. He was just so crude and so much didn't respect what I considered the teaching and what needed to be respected. He certainly didn't respect me. Now I wasn't his teacher. We were both chelas, students. So I finally wrote the teacher and said, "I'm going to get rid of this guy. This is crazy. He's screwing up the whole deal." And my teacher wrote me back and he said, "Do you mean that you would throw away the opportunity to earn your fortune in self-realization?!" He said, "Don't forget. God bless those god damned bastards!" Because without them, we would have no growth.

So next time you are judging your partner or your enemy, remember, "god bless those god damned bastards" because without them there would be no growth. And at the same time, let me add, please treat each other with loving kindness at all times.

Student: Thank you.

Student: Sensei, on Ki Breathing, when we did that exercise of holding our breath, walking, and then letting our breath slowly out, it was painfully obvious to me that I wasn't doing enough of Ki Breathing. You know, I have been reading a lot of Zen books and listening to podcasts, so I think I was just doing Ki Breathing when I wanted to and then not when I didn't want to. Basically, I think I have been day-dreaming for a year. I really noticed that, the other morning when I sat. You say that there is no work to do, but it seems that, with Ki Breathing, when I did more work and was doing it, I mean without cheating, it came better. And then with sitting the next time the clarity came much faster than when I was just lolly-gagging around. I mean, I thought I wasn't doing that, but apparently I was. That's what I think, anyway.

Do you have a question?

Student: Yeah. Well, the Ki Breathing. Is it doing the Ki Breathing, I mean like staying with it all the way, where you don't get that cheat breath in there, or try not to, like fifteen seconds all the way through?

I think you are working at it a little too hard there. It's like I said in the beginning. Take a deep breath, let it out slowly. There's no cheating. What are you talking about? There's no cheating. It's your thing. You can do whatever you want. You have to teach yourself Ki Breathing. But you don't have to teach yourself my Ki Breathing or Tohei Sensei's Ki Breathing. You have to teach yourself your Ki Breathing. Start by taking a deep breath down in your belly. Let it out. Take another one. After you've done five or ten, keep going. Do an hour of it. Do this for a month. See what you learn about Ki Breathing.

See, we give ourselves this regimen, these rules that we have to follow, even to the point where if I don't do it exactly how I think it's supposed to be done, I'm cheating! So this is kind of nuts. Do yourself a favor. Be kind to yourself.

Student: OK. And one other question. Is Ki Meditation part of equanimity?

Every bit of life is equanimity practice, everything we do in every moment. It's nice to do Ki Meditation. It's nice to sit still and quiet and have a very positive practice that we are following. Whether it's the breath, or Ki Breathing with bigger, longer breaths, or whether it's just sitting in Ki Meditation, preference will arise, as will the opposite. So every moment is an opportunity to notice this propensity we have. And when we are sitting, hopefully very calmly, we have a natural clarity, an ease, an ability to see. That's why, if you are doing Ki Breathing, for instance, and agitated and worried about cheating and having issues, that's not Ki Breathing. That's not helping you. Don't do that.

And I do speak from experience here. I did years of self-torture, thinking I was

doing Ki Breathing. It took me a long, long time to teach myself to do Ki Breathing. No one ever taught me, or could teach me, that. I was trying to do Suzuki Sensei doing Ki Breathing. But that's his Ki Breathing, not my Ki Breathing.

Student: Thank you, Sensei.

Student: Sensei, when reading the chapter, I found that I had particular difficulty in understanding the Ki Breathing and the increasing of intensity at the same time. What happens to me when I do Ki Breathing, usually my experiences are less intense. My thoughts about something that maybe had occupied my mind go away and I feel more and more relaxed. The only exception is when I have to go on stage and do a concert, I get very intense, and the more Ki Breathing I do the more intense I get. It's like it seems that just because of the Ki Breathing I get less relaxed and more intense. However, it suddenly stops when I am out on stage. When I am there it is suddenly "do or die" so that part is gone.

Well, let me say that when I watched you play piano in that concert, while you were playing you were plenty intense. OK? So you might say that you are experiencing calmness when you are performing, but let's be careful about what words we are using here, maybe identify the words. You know, I used to be a performer. And I would become nervous before going on stage, but as soon as I stepped out there and started doing whatever it was I was doing, then the nervousness subsided. Right? So that's one kind of intensity, that sort of nervous, adrenalin hit. But the kind of intensity I am now talking about is maybe, in a way, something that you are so used to when you are performing, that you are just experiencing calmness. But we who are watching you are experiencing lots of intensity, believe me. And this is a good thing.

So, in a sense, when you are playing like that and I see the level of your attention and the level of your intensity, I know there's a deep level of calmness. Because with that much intensity you couldn't perform like that unless you had that calmness, that relaxation. So when we get good at something, this is what begins to happen.

And to address what you are saying there, of course the more Ki Breathing you do, the more intensity you are going to experience in your life in all situations. How you, let's say, deal with that intensity depends upon your capacity of equanimity, your capacity to see clearly, not intellectually, but to know what's going on while it is happening. So you can have all that intensity, but not, I said, get addicted to it, or carried away by it. It just is there.

And the one other thing you said, when you began, was "When I am doing Ki Breathing I feel more calm." Well, me too. I mean, that is the idea of Ki Breathing. It does produce a state of deep, deep calmness. But that's when you are doing Ki Breathing. And that calmness is a kind of an opening. That deep

calmness opens us to ourselves more and more and more. So we are more vulnerable to whatever propensities we might have that we carry from ages ago. So when something comes up, it comes up big time. And the more we practice the more that tends to happen. But at the same time, because of the practice, the more we are fit to be able to engage that without going crazy. And when it's something like performing a piano concerto like you do so beautifully, everybody gets to benefit. So everybody loves Otto.

Student: Thank you, Sensei.

Student: Sensei, can you explain why, after Misogi, this ultra intense activity that we are doing, we go right into this really calm breathing? Why do we do that? It seems like we switch from one to the other.

Actually, we go into meditation first, and then we pick up breathing once everything is calmed down. That's why we have the meditation session between the violent activity of yelling and hitting the bell, and having to do Ki Breathing. Because Ki Breathing would be very difficult to do right after Sokushin no Gyo.

On one occasion, I started breathing right after the yelling, so everybody could experience what that would be like, and it was torture. I don't know how many of you were there, but it was very difficult.

At any rate, it is very difficult to go directly into Ki Breathing, so that is why we take that break and do meditation first. That said, even after five minutes of resting in meditation, when everyone has caught their breath and has calmed down a bit, I still make each breath 30% shorter, because there is still a residual of fatigue. You know, the body has its own requirements in terms of oxygen and so forth. You know, it needs to release and release and release.

Actually, I am sure that you are aware that even after we read Norito and it's time to finish, there is still a sense of heightened awareness in us. And I feel that changes the whole nature of the second class, the weapons class. That's why I always encourage people, if they are going to come to the weapons class, please come to the Sokushin no Gyo first, because that will change your experience of the weapons class radically. That's why I love it so much. I mean it changes that whole day, and probably the whole week.

Student: I remember you once saying that, in that very relaxed breathing at the end, (which is probably my favorite time for breathing because it feels so good), you said that we want to have the same kind of intensity in the relaxed breathing as we do when we are hitting the bell and yelling. And I do feel that intensity and yet this utter calmness at the same time, which is a very nice feeling. I like that.

There you go. That's it. Thank you.

Student: Sensei, I believe that there is merit in practicing Ki Breathing to establish kokyū. And in reading the chapter, I think, "Well, that's how I want to be, to have equanimity and be able to face life's challenges." And so, for about two years now, I have been involved in this dojo, and have practiced Ki Breathing. But it doesn't seem to be enough. I think that I'm not doing it enough, I get lazy, my proclivity is to sleep in. I don't want to get up at 4:30 in the morning like you do. I hear all of this, "Breathe for an hour," and part of me wants to do that. But I guess there is this default operating part of my personality that is lazy. So my question is, how do I overcome that, like to establish this practice, other than just doing it. Is there a secret or some key, or what is it?

Does anybody else out there have this problem? (laughter)

Thank you, Michael. You are no different than anybody else. Everybody has this, OK? Anybody who says they don't would be lying to you. So we all prefer personal comfort.

You say you have been doing Ki Breathing for two years and nothing is happening yet.

Student: OK, well, that's another discussion. There is this critical judge mechanism saying, "Nothing is happening. You have no results, etc."

No, I want to address that, because this is a reasonable thing to say, and I hear it a lot from students. "I've been doing this practice for two years." "I've been doing this practice for five years, and I'm not any different." But when I ask them questions about their life, it turns out that their life is actually quite different. But not in the way that they thought it was going to be. Because everybody projects what it is that they think that getting equanimity, or getting kokyū, or waking up is going to be like. Of course, it isn't like that. If you knew ahead of time, you would be there already. So it's pretty much guaranteed that you will guess wrong on that.

And the other thing is that this is a long, long, long-term process. How old are you?

Student: Fifty....

Yeah, you're in your fifties. It took you fifty years, Michael, to establish these patterns. Do you think you are going to change that in two years, or three, four, or five years?

Student: Yes please. Is that the blue pill?

Of course, I do want to encourage you. You know that we go through these accelerated learning phases and then we hit a plateau. And sometimes those

plateaus can go for quite a while before it starts to accelerate again. And it's in the latter part of those plateaus, when people give up. There was a famous teacher named Georges Gurdjieff who used to say, "The corner is right in front of you. Just when you think you will never find it, right when you want to give up and walk away, take one more step and it is right there." It's always right in front of you, but you never get to see it if you bail. Which always said to me, just keep practicing.

There really isn't any choice. You are always creating some kind of future. We're always practicing something. We're always getting better at something. We might as well choose some thing worth-while to get better at.

Student: Thank you, Sensei.

Thank you.

Student: We have our preconditions that lead us to things we prefer and to things we don't like. But there are also choices, personal choices. And hopefully we are making choices that improve our life. Sometimes, with a choice we are making, it feels like there is some confusion between it being simply a preference, or something that will truly make us better. Is there a way to clarify that, Sensei?

That's a good question, because, for all of us, we really believe that these are very important choices that we have before us. And we try to figure out what is the right way to go, this path or that path. Yogi Bera said, "When you come to fork in the road, take it!"

You know, if you think about it, any choice we make is based on conditioning. We may be balancing, intellectually, a whole host of different aspects of our conditioning, a lot of historical knowledges that we assemble for this contract that we are about to sign with ourselves, but it is all conditioned response. It's all preference, all liking and not liking, all agreeable and disagreeable. "I am going to try to make my life more agreeable and less disagreeable."

But I always say that the only choice we really have, in any moment, is to be present or not, to Keep One Point or not. And whenever we are thinking, trying to figure out the answer, we are not present, not Keeping One Point. So we have not made the choice. No matter how many choices we make and how good we think they are, we didn't make the once real choice, which is to Keep One Point. If we do that, then we always know what needs to be known to move forward, for ourselves and others. OK?

Student: Thank you.

Thank you very much.