

Listen!

Quite often we hear sensei Lewis Bernaldo de Quiros in seminars say: "Listen to your partner!"

Why "listen"? And not rather "watch" or "feel"? What is the advantage of this listening-attitude for an Aikidoka? Why is it a mind opening approach in a partner situation?

It is first of all obvious that this of course is meant primarily metaphorically and not literally. It means that all our senses should be consequently set to the listening-mode. Rarely we really close our eyes and try to "catch the noise" of the movement of the opponent to be aware like the blind samurai Zatoichi in fiction. But what means "Listen!" in that metaphorical sense exactly for our awareness?

To understand this better, we should note that language knows several pairs of terms to describe the difference between a receiving and an active way of perception:

see – watch, hear – listen, feel – sense. We differentiate between an open, active and focused presence and a passive, receiving one. In our case we need to specify what advantage active "listening" has compared to "watching" or "sensing".

The most important consequence is as simple as effective: when you listen, you cannot talk. Watching and sensing usually start our inner commentator like a reflex. Listening needs a silent mind and mouth. In a metaphorical sense: your whole presence is in the listening mode, not analysing, not talking to someone else or to yourself in your head. There is silence on the mat because of pure presence and full neutral engagement with the partner. Like in Zen meditation the noises of the world and of your inner monkey mind are diffuse, distracting and therefore irrelevant for the total presence in the here and now of a martial art situation.



Listening in partner situations is usually also an active start or support of a true dialogue without preconception, without signalling that you do or want something. You can invite someone to an action without attacking, just by connecting. In a physical sense this means, you are just there, present, actively receptive. While a glance can already be offensive, true listening evokes pure respectful presence.

The initial listening moment is followed by a sequence, which we can describe as a musical process: The silent mind is open for the whole hearing horizon. The focal point of the moment of attack feeds the right rhythm of the movement as a merging answer. Our capacity to intuitively merge form and flow, stability and flexibility, space and movement, self and togetherness is nourished more by our 'musical' than visual capacity. 'Musical' in the sense of feeling for tempo, rhythm, dynamics and timing as a sequence, in music called a phrase. As Michael Ormerod pointed out correctly in the discussion about these phenomena, our visual perception is usually slower and takes more complex processing in the brain. This is the reason for example the 100m sprint is started by a pistol firing and not by a visual sign like a flag. But at the same time tempo, rhythm, dynamics and timing can apply just as much to visual sense as to musical sense.

This leads us to an interesting comparison with an old martial art poem, which points out how we should sharpen our mental capacity in combination with our physical. The two lines in there about seeing and hearing are:

"I have no eyes – the lightning flash will be my eyes
I have no ears – the five senses are my ears".¹

So listening as a metaphorical help to connect all senses to create a 6th sense seems to be an old topic.

Our ears cannot be closed by reflex like our eyes. In that sense, listening is more instantaneous and intuitive than watching and therefore valuable as a direct spontaneous interaction. So the listening attitude seems to offer a wonderfully paradoxical mix of conscious AND intuitive connection in a situation.



¹ quoted by Michel Random in: "Martial Arts or the spirit of Budo", published in 1977. He took it from a samurai poem on a Makimono (paper roll).

Think of a movement as a sound

But the metaphorical teaching-directive "listen!" means more than catching the right moment and timing for a sudden interaction and answer to an attack out of nothing. It means also to listen to the movement itself and the awase as a sound-sequence, called before musically "a phrase". We can understand this easily when we turn our attention to the weapons work, where we actually hear the result of the movements.

Lewis often emphasizes the relevance of our wooden weapons as "percussive weapons". It means we usually hit and do not "cut". The sound of the two weapons hitting each other reveals directly how the movements and the awase are done. Like in music when a movement of a skilled player is executed naturally, based on training and knowledge of every detail of it, the resulting sound is natural: clear, round and with a core, not hard and garish or dull. Hit a drum or gong and you can experience this yourself. So the timing, rhythm, tempo, swing, rebound and spin of a movement are essential for its precision, power and responsiveness. The "klack!" shows us the energy and intention behind the hit.

Although we only hear the result of the movement, we can think of it as a whole "visual" sound sequence: "sssssSSS klack!" like in a comic strip. Starting point, flow, hitting point and relaxation. Skilled singers are starting a musical phrase of a breath length without a noticeable inhalation and partition the breath over the whole phrase. It comes out of nothing and goes to nothing. Just like a movement in martial arts: starting without signalling and happening as a natural, simple and effective phrase –a "silent movement".



Onomatopoetic teaching and kiai as kinetic sound energy

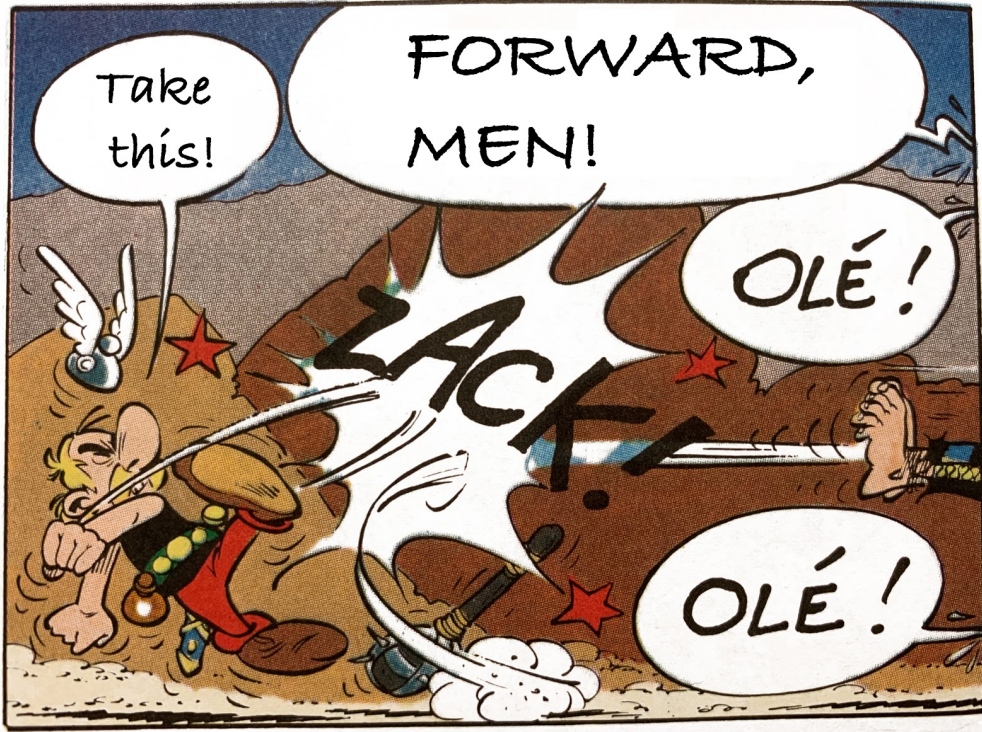
So that is maybe the reason why Lewis in teaching also often intuitively uses onomatopoetic sounds to describe and explain a movement. "k, k, k", "uuuuuuu gong" can help to understand a movement physically and directly and not by language logic.

This is now even meant literally: hear your movement!

On the other hand we should anyway train the effectiveness and directed power of a movement with a strong kiai. "Ki-Ai" is written with the same Kanjis as "Ai-Ki". So it should help us to bring body energy and mental presence into focused flow by "acoustic" breathing from our centre. We hear a kinetic and directed sound as a natural result of inner rhythm in response to an attack, a sounding togetherness. The subsequent Zanshin is a result of this: a powerful silence, in which the flash moment of interaction resonates and reflects in space and attention.

Now we have a beautiful Paradox: we should move invisibly, means silently, but also with a natural intense kiai sound which makes the birds fall from the trees.

Or as a new Zen koan: How can you HEAR a silent movement and SEE the kiai?



Picture from: Asterix in Spain (1971)

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