

# Relaxation: Kime and Ki Revisited



Relaxation has long been underestimated in Shotokan **Karate**. **Kime**, understood as muscle tension, was the major aim. However, recent developments call to revisit Kime and Ki in the light of relaxation. Relaxation before and after a technique should be the focal point of Shotokan Karate. By Dr. Wolf Herbert

When you have learnt Shotokan Karate at its beginnings in Europe, the 1960's up to the 1980's, the word you most likely have heard most often in the **Dojo** was: "**kime**". It was mainly understood as a contraction of the whole body's musculature at the end of a technique. It was (and is?) the hallmark of the powerful and dynamic way Karate was/is practiced and spread by the JKA (Japan Karate Association). However, Funakoshi Gichin mentioned "**kime**" nowhere in his books. So where does the notion come from?

John Cheetham explored this question amidst an ongoing discussion in some insightful articles in his "Shotokan Karate Magazine" (Cheetham 2019 a/b).

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## Early Definitions of Kime

### Nakayama Masatoshi

He claims that Nakayama Masatoshi never used the term “*kime*” in his first book. I leafed through the Japanese original (Nakayama 1965) and found that he does not in fact use “*kime*” as a noun anywhere, however as a verb (*kimeru*) it appears on p. 116. It corresponds to the following passage in his book *Dynamic Karate* (Nakayama 1966: 102). My literal translation from the Japanese original would be:

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“Generally ‘*waza (technique) o kimeru*’ means to let a well-controlled power explode instantaneously on a chosen target.”

In the English version (where there is no mention of *kime* or *kimeru*) the translation reads: “Remember that an effective technique in karate is produced by a concentrated blast of power at the moment of impact.”

Nakayama repeatedly writes about “*kimewaza*” in the sense of “decisive technique”, however not of “*kime*” as an isolated notion. It almost seems that *kime* as a word/noun and concept has been taken out of its context and reduced to its physical/muscular aspect.

### Nishiyama Hidetaka

The word “*kime*”, however, is explicitly used by Nishiyama Hidetaka in his book *Karate. The art of empty hand fighting* and he calls it “focus”:

“Briefly, ‘*focus*’ in karate refers to the concentration of all the energy of the body in an instant on a specific target.” (Nishiyama & Brown 1960: 21).

This definition notably resembles the one we have seen in Nakayamas use of it as a verb. Nakayama and Nishiyama obviously shared the same idea about *kime* and its application. John Cheetham quotes further from Nishiyamas book (Cheetham 2019a: 10; 2019b: 30):

“As the fist nears the target its speed is increased to its maximum point, and at the moment of impact the muscles of the entire body are tensed. ... This, in essence, is what ‘*focus*’ in karate means.”

Now, if you read on, you find the following:

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*“It should not be forgotten that this maximum exertion of energy is instantaneous and in the next instant is withdrawn in preparation for the next movement, i.e., the muscles are relaxed, the breath inhaled, and a position appropriate for the next technique assumed.” (Nishiyama & Brown 1960:21)*

## Relaxation!

I would argue that exactly this (“relax”) was forgotten by many practitioners (and teachers!) back in the early days of Shotokan in the West. “More *kime*, more *kime*!” was the battle cry or mantra of the day and lead to hypertensed, stiff, and awkward Karate-moves.

We all know the term *waza no kankyu* as being one of the principles that should be observed when executing a **Kata**. It relates to the slowness and quickness of technique. The term *kankyu* (緩急) is written with two characters, of which the first means: “to loosen, relax” and the second: “swift, rapid”.

Nakayama Takatsugu, a karateka and physiotherapist, gives this an interesting interpretation in regard to “kime”. He describes “kime” as a flow from “loose” (*kan*) to “rapid” (*kyu*) to “loose” (*kan*). The body goes from very loose to strong for an instant, only to loosen up again (Nakayama 2013: 92). It is a snapping move like the one of a spring, which is compressed, then releases its power and immediately returns to its original state. The bigger the amplitude is between relaxation and tension, the bigger the power unleashed. It can also be likened to a wave hitting the shore and pulling back.

## Muchimi and the Loosening of the Hip

### *Muchimi*

This reminds me of *muchimi*, one of the Okinawan principles, which defines a powerful technique. *Kime* is not emphasized in Okinawan styles. It really seems to be an invention by Nakayama and Nishiyama based on the assumption that tension as such produces power, a (mis)conception imported from Western sports science. John Cheetham (2019a: 11) actually asked **Kanazawa Hirokazu** after a course in 2004:

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“Where did this ‘physical *kime*’ concept originate and who developed it?”

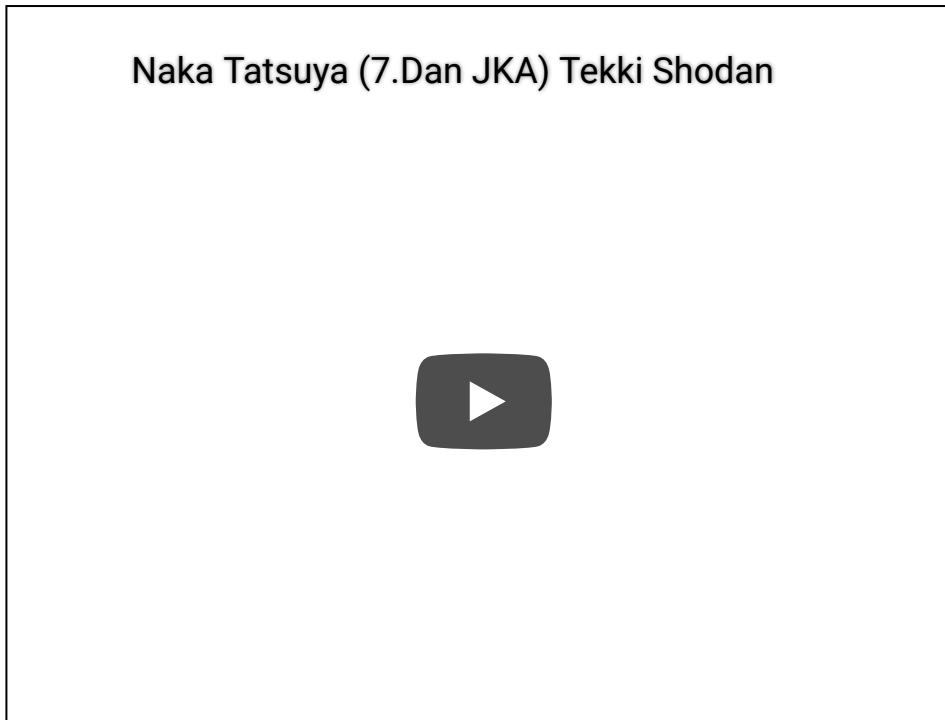
He replied without hesitation:

‘It was Nakayama sensei’s idea.’”

*Muchimi* is interpreted in two ways: *Mi* (身) can either stand for “body” or differently written (味) for “taste” (metaphorically: “feeling, quality”). “*Muchi*” is the Okinawan pronunciation of the Japanese “*mochi*”. This is a sticky, glutinous cake made of pounded steamed rice. In this sense *muchimi* describes a tough, but supple body and also technically to stick flexibly to your opponent in an altercation. One more meaning derives from the Japanese word “*muchi*” (鞭 whip), thus implying one should use one’s body like a whip. A whip lashed out causes as much damage by its initial impact as it does by the laceration due to the pullback movement.

## Whip-lash Hip

Now, the **whip hip or double hip**, which has been revived in Shotokan by Naka Tatsuya Sensei, is applied mostly and widely in short range techniques in Okinawan Karate. *Kagi zuki* (鉤突, *hook punch*) in Tekki Shodan can serve as a good example. Executed in “whip hip style” means, that a slight pulling back of the hips before the punch, initiates relaxation, and is followed by the speed of the thrust and throwing in of the hips in the direction of the *tsuki*. On impact the hip snaps back and again a full body relaxation is achieved. This is the perfect cycle between relaxation – momentary tension – relaxation.



Naka Tatsuya using the “whip hip” during Tekki Shodan. This is the foundation for relaxed motions in Shotokan.

This corresponds to John Cheethams **bow and arrow analogy**. The orthodox understanding of *kime* looks at the end of the technique, whereas it is equally important how the action starts.

*“If you forget about the completion, and focus on the start, the drive from the legs followed by the rotation of the hips and trunk in conjunction with the breath – as long as you have a good, strong fist position, (which is vital) the arm should just fly out like a missile with unimpeded speed which ends with the fist doing the damage at whatever point or distance it lands. ... It’s the speed and release of the rotation of the body which fires the punch (arm and fist). The Archer will focus on the target with calmness, relaxation, before releasing the arrow. We should apply that same principle to our karate!” (Cheetham 2019b: 30-1).*

A Shotokan-Karateka in Osaka displaying an exemplary whip hip (muchimi 鞭身) and nimble alternation between tension and relaxation:

While the *ki*-flow is mentally guided in Taijiquan and the movements are soft and of uniform tempo (andante) in an uninterrupted flow, in Karate they are swift, forceful, abruptly stopped and explosive. The velocity with which the *ki* is transported is different, but the effect is the same in the end. From a health-exercise view the flow of the *ki* is harmonized, and blockages are removed. *Ki* is virtually sent through the whole body from head to toe, thus one feels refreshed after a good Karate training session, even if one is physically exhausted.

## Kime and Ki

Kanazawa Hirokazu makes a connection between *Kime* and *Ki* in his autobiography *Karate – My life* (2003: 266):

*“There are three kinds of ki, which manifest in the tanden, or lower abdomen, which serves as the central powerhouse of our bodies. Tai-ki is the energy drawn from the atmosphere, chi-ki from the ground, and nai-ki resides within the body. This flows through our spine and explodes out of our fists, and this instant is termed kime, or focus.”*

It may be noted that *kime* (or “*kimeru*” as a verb) can actually be written with two different characters. The one denoting “to decide, determine” (*kimeru* 決める) is often used and well known. The other character (*kime* 極め) means: “to go to the end, to go to extremes, the apex”. In the Japanese original Kanazawa prefers the latter for “climax” rather than the former in the sense of “decisive point”. Written with 極 *kime* has a strong psychological connotation with the nuances of “sharp, one-pointed concentration” or “maximal single-mindedness”.

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One more linguistic remark: the *ki* in *kime* (it is just the first syllable) has nothing to do with the *ki* in the Chinese meaning of “**universal energy**”, which is a word in itself and written with a completely different character (氣 simplified 气). The term “*ki*” has an esoteric tang in the West, but it can be understood quite rationally. Allow me to give a brief explanation. I shall concentrate on the aspect called *nai-ki* by Kanazawa and pick up an attempt to describe it from a **former article on the fore fist (seiken)**.

## What can Qi/ki mean? An approximation

*Qi* (Chn.)/*ki* (Jpn.) is a psychosomatic holistic concept. In Western anatomy one tends to dissect and separate everything according to function, whereas in eastern thinking the interconnection and homeostasis of the whole body/mind/spirit is central. A mind/matter or soul/body-dualism is not dominant.

Thus, *ki* has material and immaterial aspects. It is and flows in the bones, the marrow, the muscles, the blood and circulatory system, the lymphatic and the nervous system, the organs, glands, spine and brain and the meridians which connect everything. *Ki* pervades the totality of physical functions and the mind, which is the conductor in this orchestra. *Ki* is the regulator or monitor of a fluid balance and the harmonious interplay of all the above mentioned elements.

It has to be stated that *Qi/ki* has historically never been defined consistently. The concept changed over the centuries from a cosmological/metaphysical one to a more “anthropological” and recently, even a materialistic one.

**There is a lot of research conducted in the West and in China (under the influence of Western science) to pinpoint what *ki* might be, or even to find methods to measure it.**

Research into bioelectromagnetic fields has shown some correlation with the nervous system and mental states. Others concentrate on mitochondrial function and heart rate variability. But these attempts can only highlight and pick out aspects of *ki* rather than “measure” it in its totality. No single instrument might ever be able to gauge it, not least because of its immaterial aspects.

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Because *ki* acts as a psychosomatic regulatory feedback system it is so encompassing, its definition is pliable and can easily be recalibrated or adapted to beliefs or research interests. We can nevertheless operate with *ki* as a phenomenon, a sensation or hypothesis, empirically corroborated by a legion of practitioners of Traditional Chinese Medicine and martial arts throughout the ages.

## The Regulation of Ki and Health

Health in the Chinese understanding means that *ki* can flow freely and without blockages or occlusions. Latter occurrences lead to sickness and indisposition. Acupuncture, moxibustion, massages, gymnastics and meditation (visualization) were developed from time immemorial to guarantee an unimpeded *ki*-flow. The martial arts were practiced in this context.

It is again the cycle of “loose-taut-loose”. You cannot deliver a fast punch, when you are tightened up at the inception of the thrust.

鞭身 whip hip & kagizuki 鉤突



Dr. Wolf Herbert showing how the whip hip and kagi zuki work. Relaxation is the key.

## Relaxation and the Flow of Ki

Therefore the interesting points are the start (relaxation), the target/impact/”end” and to me even more so: what happens *after* the “end”: the implosion or total relaxation. This is known in **Taijiquan** as “opening/releasing” and “closing/receiving”. “Opening” means that the *ki* (“internal/vital energy”) is sent out into the extremities of the body and beyond while executing a technique (an attack). When “closing” one lets the *ki* flow back and accumulate again in the lower abdomen. This is harmonized with breathing, exhalation when “opening” and inhalation during “closing”.

【11】 【伝統空手】 【shotokan】 受け技 逆突き（鞭身を意識） △...





Good martial art practice is said to open the energy channels, eliminate blockages and harmonize the flow of *ki*. *Ki* can be mobilized, directed and circulated by conscious mental activity. The standard formulas are: “Where the thinking/mind (意 Jpn. *i*, Chn. *yi*) is, there is *ki*.” “Guiding the *ki* with the thinking/mind”.

Another term widely used in internal martial arts (e.g. Taijiquan, Qigong) is *inen* (意念) (Matsuda 2013: 176). As so often, the characters in this term have various meanings and can hardly be translated by just one word: 意 “*i*” means “mind, heart, thought, idea, intention, care”; 念 “*nen*” means “idea, feeling, concern, attention, caution”. In a Buddhist context *nen* is used as the translation of the Sanskrit term *smṛiti* (Pali: *sati*), which means “mindfulness”.

Nowadays, this defines a whole method of meditation. *Inen* thus signifies “consciousness, intention, attentiveness”. “*Inen* guides the *ki*” implies, that every mindful physical exercise leads the *ki* to flow into the parts of the body, on which one concentrates. “If you do not use strength but will, wherever your will directs *chi* will arrive.” (Wong 2002:37; *chi* = *ki* 氣) Thus if one concentrates on the **fist**, when one focusses (*kime*) a punch, this will stimulate a surge of *ki*.

John Cheetham (2019a:11) wrote:

*“Some people say that kime is like putting the brakes on, which makes the energy stay ‘inside the body’ and not transfer to the target.”*

If you understand *kime* in the context of *ki*, the exact opposite is the case!

Kanazawa Hirokazu was able to split the very board that was indicated to him in a stack of four or five without breaking the rest. His explanation was that he could consciously control and direct his *ki*. He describes it in his autobiography, which I have translated into German. During the translation process, I spoke to him directly about this, because it has always intrigued me. He told me that everything is connected on a molecular level in the sense that everything is vibrating energy in the end. He described it as visualizing the indicated board vividly and projecting his consciousness into it, becoming one with it, and thus being able to pulverize it.

He added with a laugh:

*“People usually wanted me to break the second or third board, hardly the last one and never the first one. But to stop the *ki* at the first board and not break the others would have been the hardest task to fulfill.”*

Kanazawa also used to say that a punch does not end at the fist, but goes way beyond, because the *ki* shoots out far on and yonder. It is quite clear that *ki* in this context is connected to an intense mental focus rather than a mere somatic one. Thus, *kime* is coupled with the mobilization of *ki*. In good combination with relaxation it makes the technique strong on more than a physical level and leads to a balanced, hence healthy *ki*-flux.

## Ki as a Psychosomatic Concept. Again: relaxation!

When we look at other Southeast Asian martial arts, namely many soft Kung Fu styles, **Pentjak Silat** or **Kalaripayattu**, they are very fluid and do not apply *kime*. Even in Shotokan, its first offspring, the Shotokai, headed by Egami Shigeru (1912-1981), who deemed himself to be totally loyal to Funakoshi Gichin and his Karate, suppleness and relaxation are emphasized. Kata in Shotokai are performed in a continuous flow, almost

tensionless. The fixation on *kime* in the sense of a physical tightening up of the body seems to be the exception rather than the rule in the wide world of bare hand fighting arts. Therefore it is worth revisiting.

John Cheetham (2019a: 12) states:

*“30/40 years ago, kime to me was a totally muscular concept, now it’s changed: now a ‘decisive’ blow is a combination of power generated from relaxation, speed, breath, intention and mental focus!”*

This is a wonderful, comprehensive definition! As we have seen, intention and mental focus are exactly the elements, which mobilize *ki*. I say this with tongue in cheek: but when the Japanese instructors back in the days exhorted us to put more *kime* into our techniques, they might just have meant that we concentrate more, focus our mind, and put our heart and soul into every single movement.

To do something with total commitment and dedication is deemed a great virtue in Japan. This pertains to minor tasks like sweeping a garden or cleaning the floor of the **dojo** – you ought to give it your full attention. So the Japanese instructors might have meant the mental aspect of “*kime*”, while we Westerners misunderstood it in the way that we should display physical power and strength.

From the Chinese perspective, *ki* can flow best, when one is totally relaxed. Actually too much or extended tension impedes the *ki*-circulation. As a Karateka of a certain age, what happens after the technical *kime* is much more interesting and important for the physique than what happens during tension. The alternation between tension and relaxation characterizes the physical discipline of Karate. Now when we put the focus (*kime*) more on the latter, it might be good for our health and well-being – and our performance of Karate too!

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## About the Author

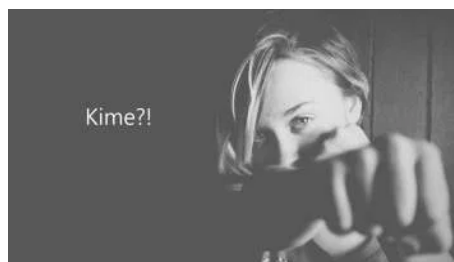
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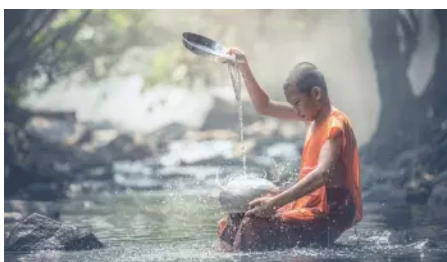


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