

KIME AND KI. By Dr. Wolf Herbert.

Allow me to add some remarks to the endless discussion about kime (“focus”), thus also proving that the term “endless” is pertinent. I want to put the focus (no pun intended) on an aspect that seems to me to have been underemphasized. My musings are sandwiched between two articles penned by the editor John Cheetham in the Shotokan Karate Magazine issues No. 141 and 142. One may forgive me therefore for repeating some salient quotes for those who do not have them at hand. John Cheetham writes that Nakayama Masatoshi never used the term “kime” in his first book. I leafed through the Japanese original (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* (1966, p. 102). My literal translation from the Japanese original would be: “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.

The word “kime” however, is explicitly used by Nishiyama Hidetaka in his book *Karate*. The art of empty hand fighting (1960, p. 21) 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.” This definition notably resembles the one we have seen in Nakayama’s use of it as a verb. Nakayama and Nishiyama obviously shared the same idea about *kime* and its application. John Cheetham quotes further from Nishiyama’s book: “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.” (end of quote). Now if you read on, you find the following:

“It should not be forgotten that this maximum exertion of energy is instantaneous and in the next instant is withdrawn in preparation for the next movement, i.e., the muscles are relaxed, the breath inhaled, and a position appropriate for the next technique assumed.”

I would argue that exactly this (relax!)



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was forgotten by many practitioners (and teachers!) back in the early days of Shotokan in the West. “More kime, more kime!” was the battlecry 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* 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. It is a snapping move like the one of a spring, which is squeezed, 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.

This reminds me of *muchimi*, one of the Okinawan principles, which define 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. *Muchimi* is interpreted in two ways: *Mi* can either stand for “body” or differently written 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*” (whip), thus implying one should use ones 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.

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-tsuki* 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.

This corresponds to John Cheetham’s Bow & Arrow Analogy article SKM 142. The interesting points are the start (relaxation), the target/impact/“end” and 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”. 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.

Kanazawa Hirokazu makes a connection between *kime* and *ki* in his autobiography *Karate – My life* (2003, p. 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” is often used and well known. The other character 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”. 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. 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:

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. 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.

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 (visualisation) were developed from time immemorial to guarantee an unimpeded *ki*-flow. The martial arts were practiced in this context. 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 (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*. As so often,

the characters in this term have various meanings and can hardly be translated by just one word: *I* means “mind, heart, thought, idea, intention, care”; *nen* means “idea, feeling, concern, attention, caution” and in a Buddhist context *nen* is used as the translation of the Sanskrit term *smriti* (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. Thus if one concentrates on the fist, when one focuses (*kime*) a punch, this will stimulate a surge of *ki*.

John Cheetham 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



Wolf Herbert with his sensei, the late SKIF Grand Master Hirokazu Kanazawa Soke.

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 a strong mental focus rather than a mere somatic one.

As an aside: 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, 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 wrote in SKM Issue 141: "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:



"I learned the whip-technique from JKA's Naka sensei (above) and a Shorin Ryu practitioner." 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. 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 characterises 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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