

KI

Part 1

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The word Aikido is often translated as the way (Do) of harmony (Ai) with the spirit of the universe (Ki). Ki is "spirit" or "energy." What does "spirit" or "energy" mean?

This is not a simple question, for if you think about how the word Ki is actually used, it has several meanings. In its broadest sense, for example, Ki is really a subtle philosophical or metaphysical concept, an overall attitude toward and understanding of the universe as the harmonious flow of a "something" that is beyond verbal definition. From this perspective, translating it as "spirit" or "energy" is pretty crude, for Ki cannot be reduced to precise verbal definition. Words, by their nature, can only be partial representations of a reality that is much bigger than words. The word Ki only points at something beyond itself. Zen teachings, for example, emphasize that the finger pointing at the moon is not the moon. In this broadest sense, then, Ki only points at something subtle yet fundamental about the universe, a something which can only be grasped through meditative and life experiences.

In a more limited but more specific usage, Ki is a mental image, a way of imagining things. When you teach a newcomer to create an unbendable arm, you tell him to flow Ki out through his fingertips. How should he do that? A common, although not the only, way is to tell him to imagine something like water in his arm, to picture it flowing through his arm and out his fingertips as if his arm were a fire hose and great volumes of water were flowing through it and squirting out the end.

Insofar as Ki is just an image, it is imaginary, subjective. Imaginary and subjective are negative words for us Westerners, though. If Ki is imaginary and subjective doesn't that mean it isn't real? That it's useless? Yes and no.

If Ki is nothing more than an imagined picture, a deliberate but arbitrary visualization,

the forms in which we image it should be almost unlimited, since we can imagine almost anything. You could picture Ki as molasses rather than water, perhaps as boxes moving on a conveyor belt, or as your arm turning into concrete, etc. You could even try to visualize the various muscles of your arm in an anatomically correct way, with certain ones relaxed and others tense. The fact is, though, that visualizing ki as something fluid that is flowing freely, while subjective, has objective effects: your arm gets strong and unbendable with little or no effort on your part. Images, the subjective, can be a very effective way of guiding your body.

As an example of usefulness, several years ago a friend took me bowling. I'd never bowled before, and was quite awkward. He started giving me tips. Hold the feet like so, grip like so, body like so, twist like this, etc., etc. (Sound like a bad day on the mat?) "Stop!" I cried, "I can't keep up with all these rules and techniques, I'm getting confused!"

I told him I'd have to try bowling using what I'd learned from Aikido. I would visualize a Ki path flowing down the middle of the alley to guide the ball to the center pin. I then made a series of strikes and near-strikes, winning the game and disgusting my friend, who was a good bowler! This went to my head of course, and I started thinking about how good I was instead of focusing on visualizing the Ki path, so after awhile my game went downhill fast!

So Ki is subjective and imaginary in some ways, but it can be an effective use of imagination, especially if your visualization is strong and appropriate. By analogy, the electrical flow comprising the program in a computer is subtle and subjective compared to the solid reality of the hardware. Without a correctly written program to guide it, though, the hardware doesn't do anything useful.

So we have a very effective and practical use of Ki as guiding imagery for controlling your own body movements. In future installments we'll look at Ki as an inter-subjective image that can guide others' energy, and at the possibility of Ki being objectively as well as subjectively real.