

# Ki: A Universal Concept

By Brent deMerville, Ph.D.

For years, serious discussions of the Martial Arts have included the concept of Ki (vital energy). Fighters have attributed their winning or losing to high or low Ki levels. Instructors give lessons on increasing one's level of Ki and masters are sometimes given respect in acknowledgement of their level of Ki. Recently, however, western martial artists professing strong Christian beliefs have written letters to the editors of Martial Art magazines complaining about the attention paid to "heathen" concepts, myths, and mystical powers. They contend that these are fictitious concepts that have no bearing on the martial artist; are foreign to Christian belief; and contribute to the arguments of those who would class the martial artist with the Satanist. While their concerns may be sincere, they are not grounded in a complete understanding of their own traditions. The concept of "vital energy" may be found not only in the traditions of India, China, and Japan, but also in the traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This article will explore the terminology and cultural expressions for this concept in both the eastern and western traditions.

Probably the earliest recorded writings regarding the concept of "vital energy" come from the Indian religious traditions. The Hindus called this vital energy Prana. Prana is one of the two basic building blocks of nature. The Hindu's believe that the material of the universe is made of Akasa. Akasa is anything having form, from gases, liquids, and solids to animals, plants, and the human body. This physical creation is given life and power through Prana. Prana is all energy and force, from gravity and magnetism to brain waves and neural impulses. The Hindu's see this energy as flowing into the body with the breath. The energy is not part of the air but flows in with the air. Many of the yoga exercises are attempts to channel and direct this energy through the body. The continual flow of Prana is considered to be a necessity of life. Improperly balanced flow or blocked flow of Prana is thought to be a major cause of illness. The Pranayama breathing exercises were developed as the most efficient method of channeling the direction of flow.

The Taoists of China fostered a similar concept regarding the existence and flow of "vital energy". They called this energy, Ch'i. Again, like the Hindu, the Taoist found the universe to be composed of two primary entities. The first, he called Li. Li is the essential matter of the universe. Li is the same for all men. The factors that distinguish one man from other come from Ch'i. The Ch'i then determines the nature of the man. The foolish would have little or hidden Ch'i while the wise would have a high level of Ch'i. D.T. Suzuki in his book, Zen and Japanese Culture, described the application of Ch'i in relation to the teachings of Taoist Chuang Tzu.

*In hearing do not use the ear but the mind; do not use the mind but Ch'i. when you use the ear, the hearing stops there, and the mind cannot go further than the symbol; Ch'i is something empty and waiting. Tao abides in the emptiness, and the emptiness is mind fasting....*

When Chuang Tzu defines "mind fasting" as seeing and hearing with Ch'i, the idea is to transcend the ego consciousness as the center. To the Taoist, this energy not only created one's individuality, but was the true source of our existence. The martial artist uses his Ch'i by cutting

through the din of his thoughts and preconceptions and allows his natural awareness to dominate. The Japanese took the Chinese concept of Ch'i. With the Japanese pronunciation, Ki, the "vital energy" became an integral part of the samurai tradition in Japan. Ki literally means breath in Japanese. Like the Hindus, the Japanese felt that Ki could be channeled through proper breathing techniques. Similarly, Ki could be expelled with proper exhalations. The Kiai shout of the martial artist is, when properly done, a directed channeling of Ki. The Japanese went on to consider the Hara or belly as a sort of storage depot for the "vital energy". The Taoists, who called the lower cavity the Tan T'ien, also shared this concept. The Japanese power of Hara-gei is another example of controlled extension of Ki. The Hara-gei literally means the "art of the belly" and it is thought that one can sense the presence of another's power if one centers his consciousness in the hara. The suggested method of centering the consciousness is correct breathing. So again, we fall back to the Ki or breath.

These ideas of breath as more than merely the intake of air may seem ridiculous and totally foreign to some western sensibilities and traditions. However, closer examination of the Judao-Christian religious traditions and their writings reveal similar concepts. Much of the Western world has its foundation in the concepts and traditions of the Hebrew. Their primary religious source is the Tanach or what Christians call the "Old Testament". The Tanach was of course written in the language of its people, Hebrew. Unlike English, Hebrew makes a distinction regarding the word "breath". Hebrew has three distinct words for breath: Nephesh, Ruach, and Neshemah. In Genesis 2:7 the English reads as follows: "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul." In the Hebrew, the phrase "breath of life" is "Nishmat Chayim" and the phrase "living soul" is "leNephesh Chayah". "Living soul" could as easily be translated "the breathing being". The animation of the primal matter came through the breath of life. The Hindu would easily understand that verse as the animation of the Akasa through the Prana. The phrase, "Nephesh Chaya" is also used in Genesis 1:20,24,30 to refer to the animals of the world as living creatures. From that, one can interpret "Nephesh" as being merely the physical intake of oxygen to support the living being. However, the "Neshemah" is the breath of God as in "Nishmat Chayim", the breath of life. The "Neshemah" originated with God and was given to man directly from God. The "Neshemah" is the spirit inside man and is most closely related to the concepts of Prana and Ki. In Proverbs 20:27, "The spirit of man is the candle of the Lord, searching all the inward parts of the belly." The phrase, "spirit of man" is "Nishmat Adam". The spirit is the breath of God.

In later centuries, the Jewish mystics made greater distinctions in the types of breath. In the Zohar, a classic text of mystical Judaism, Rabbi Hiyya refers to the "three strands of spirit", the Nephesh, Ruach, and Neshemah. The Nephesh and Ruach are linked as mind and body, but the Neshemah is the path to the divine.

In the Christian religious tradition, much is said about spirit but few look to the Greek or Hebrew meanings of the word. Both the "pneuma" of Greek and the various terms for spirit in Hebrew share the meaning of breath. In John 6:63, Jesus is quoted as saying, "It is the spirit (breath) that gives life, the flesh has nothing to offer." The ideal, in Christianity, is to be filled with the Holy Spirit; "Nishmat Shaddal" or breath of God. The Spirit of God is literally the breath of God. The Islamic traditions, growing out of the Judao-Christian background, have similar concepts.

The Arabic “Nafs” is comparable to the Hebrew “Nephesh”. Similarly, the “Nafs” represents the physical side of man and the physical act of breathing. The Sufis, mystical practitioners of Islam, gave seven different stages of “Nafs” as man progressed toward the Holy. The channeling methods of the Muslim were primarily related to prayer or movement in the case of the Sufi Derivishes. The breathing was not the focal point of the exercise, but rather a result. The Muslims also strive for “El Ruh” or the breath of God.

I have read accounts of Christian martial artists who took offense when a Japanese practitioner commented on the artist’s Ki level. The artist might respond, “I have no Ki, I’m a Christian.” I wonder how the same artist would respond if his Japanese friend commented on his hana. “I have no hana, I’m Christian.” Hana is the Japanese word for nose and religion has no bearing on its presence or absence. Like the different words for nose, we are dealing with varying cultures and languages attempting to express the inexpressible. Human beings are blessed with an energy that enables us all to exceed the limitations of our flesh and bone. I believe that Prana, Ki, Neshemah, Holy Spirit, Divine Spark, or whatever term you choose, are all attempts to use the limited facility of language to explain that well of energy that goes beyond our physical limitations. A Christian martial artist should be flattered when someone comments on his level of Ki. That is probably an attempt by someone outside his culture and mindset to express that the Christian’s light is not hidden under a basket. His glory or spirit is evident.

Rather than making our religion slam a cosmic door in the face of the world, we should allow ourselves to see the expression of the Divine in varying cultures. This “open heart” will give us new insights into our own beliefs and deepen our understanding. The Bhagavad-Gita, one of the sacred books of the Hindu faith, states that the Lord Krishna is the only way to salvation. That statement is so similar to that of Christians who profess that Christ is the only way to salvation.

I would rather think that the hand of God reaches toward every being and that the seeming differences are no more than the differences in fingers on that hand. Each finger will lead back to the heart of truth. Why reject the pinky and choose the thumb without first seeing where they lead? As a warrior, take it upon yourself to explore the religious and philosophical traditions that form the basis of your art. And rather than quickly rejecting them as myth, see how they might be expressions of your own beliefs conveyed through a different time and culture. You may still reject that path, but at least then you will know why.