

Ki Lecture: Plus or Minus Ki?
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Good evening everyone. I think this is our third Ki Lecture this year, and in this one we are going to address the question of “Is there Plus Ki and Minus Ki?” or positive Ki and negative Ki. This is a question that actually a teacher on the mainland just emailed me recently and asked about. And I think I mentioned that this is a question that comes up often in seminars. Someone will ask, “What about Minus Ki? If there is Plus Ki, is there then Minus Ki?”

So I wrote this little summary and sent it to everybody ahead of time with the request that you read and study it and decide what the implications of it are.

“Is there Plus and Minus Ki?”

This all depends on where we are looking from, doesn't it? In other words, as usual, there are levels of perception involved here.

On a shallow level of perception, we see that when we are negative with ourselves we cause ourselves harm, by holding ourselves back. When we are negative with others, we cause both them and ourselves harm, as we hold back everyone involved. When we do this, from the perspective of the person who is harmed, self or other, it feels like negative, or minus Ki.

On a deeper level of perception, we see that, whether our intension is either “negative” or “positive,” still there is a distortion caused by the intention to alter reality as we see it, as if our small, petty selves were in charge of correcting the perceived “errors” in the universe.

Actually, Ki is just Ki. Our intension is what causes it to be colored to feel positive or negative. It's like a thought is just a movement, but the content of that thought, which arises out of the original intension that caused the thought, can make it feel positive or negative, and like-wise with spoken words or actions.

Ultimately Ki is amoral and neutral, neither good nor bad. It's what we do with it is that gives it its apparent quality on the relative scale.

A calm, relaxed mind of equanimity is one that is free of intention of any kind, and so allows the free and unrestricted movement of Ki of the Universe.”

So when we say “intension,” the word intension means just what it says. You are in a state of tension, in-tension. When we have tension in our body in the dojo, we can't get anything done. We become very ineffective. Tohei Sensei teaches us that we have to be relaxed completely for Ki to flow smoothly through us.

So what makes us have tension? Well, whenever we are trying to do something, to alter

the condition the way we see it, to make it better, or if we are feeling nasty, to make it worse, but to alter it in any way. Any time we want to alter something we create tension in our bodies, because that is an intension. In other words, we want to do something. Or like when we are trying to figure out a problem. When we are trying to figure something out, we have tension in our body. When we have the intension to figure it out, we have tension in our body and Ki can't move smoothly.

You know, Albert Einstein wrote about this a lot in talking about his life. And he said that all of his great realizations came like 3:00 AM in the morning. He would wake up and go, "Oh, that's it!" It just popped into his mind. So he said that creativity happens when we let go of the intension to try to figure something out. In fact, if we just eliminated the word "try," to "try to make something happen, to try to figure something out." Whenever we are trying, we are creating a tense situation within our mind and hence within our body. So we don't try. When we are in a state of harmony with the universe, Ai-Ki-Do, a state of harmony with everything and everyone, then we just do. When the time comes we respond appropriately. It might be with silence, it might be with words, or it might be with an action, but it is appropriate because it is on time and free of tension. Or in other words, it is free of intension, completely free of trying to alter conditions that exist.

OK. That's asking a lot. I mean what we are going for in Aikido, what we are working on is a radical change from the way most all of us lead our lives, the way we perceive the world to be and the way we respond to that world. We are used to aggressively responding, reacting to whatever stimulus comes up, and either agreeing with it or disagreeing with it and attempting to do something about it in both cases. We want to acquire something, we want to change something, or we want to push something away. So asking us to not do that, sounds like asking us to not do anything. Suzuki Sensei said "do nothing." But he would always hasten to explain to us that that doesn't mean "don't do anything." It means "do no thing." Don't try to do any thing. Don't try to make any thing happen. Don't try to figure any thing out. Be here, in the moment, for everybody all the time. And if we are in a state of awareness and relaxed and open, then our creative juices flow freely, and we understand or we perceive what is going on. We find creative responses to whatever is happening around us.

It's just like, if a child is crying, you just hold them. You probably don't try to explain the meaning of universe to them. You just hold them. That is a direct response. That's just doing it. That's just being there for the child. Sometimes with adults that is all we need also, but sometimes we something a little different. But we never know ahead of time what that might be. If we try to figure out ahead of time...this is why I said Ki is "amoral." It's not "immoral." It's not "moral." It's amoral. It has no distinction. When we try to figure out a rule ahead of time, that is an appropriate reaction to something that happens, that is called morals, your moral principles. "When this happens, you do this, no matter what." Or "when this happens, you don't do this, no matter what." Those are morals. And this is based upon a belief system that things are always a certain way.

So when we are talking about Aikido and how to live in the moment and be in harmony with the universe, we are taking a radical departure from that way of seeing. And it is not just something that I am spouting off about. It is something that we practice all the time and want to continue practicing in the dojo. This keeps us free of conflict, or at least debilitating conflict. We practice this daily, every moment. It is something that we practice, a way of being, not a philosophy. It's not a bunch of ideas. It is a way of experientially being with each other. And of course, we screw up all the time, because it is such a radical departure from the way we have been taught, the way we learned when we were young, and the way all of our friends react to things. So it's quite a different way of being.

So this is asking a lot. And we can choose to ask it of ourselves. And the way we choose that is to Keep One Point. That's the choice we make, to Keep One Point or not, to be present in awareness and open, without an agenda, without any intension to do anything or make anything change or happen, to get something or push something away. We just Keep One Point. And we are always available immediately for anybody and their needs.

So...do you have any comments or questions?

Student: Yes, Sensei, I have a question. You are using the words "being present in awareness." When you sent out your message earlier this week, the first thing I thought of when I read that, thinking about Ki being perceived as being positive or negative, was that I think that everybody, when they start Aikido, wants to know what the definition of Ki is. And I think that it just jumps out, begging the question, "What is Ki?" Some of us have trained for 30 years and our understanding of that has evolved. So could you put it into words please? A lot of these students here are beginning students, and maybe they are struggling with that but don't want to ask this question. If we say that there is no negative and no positive Ki, there is just Ki, please define Ki.

OK, so good question. Mele wants to know what is Ki. Ki is indefinable, and that's why it is so difficult to come upon a definition. If you could define Ki in some way, that would make it a relative thing. So by trying to define it, you automatically point in the wrong direction. But, like everything that is indefinable, it can be pointed to. Shinichi Sensei, for instance, started the last seminar in Japan, at World Camp, by saying that Ki and Mind are not the same. Mind, in the way that he is using it there, is where our attention is, where we place our attention, where we place our consciousness. What do we focus on? That's the use of mind. And a further clarification or refinement of that, that he gave us, is that mind can also have an intension, to change something, to get something, or to get rid of something. And Ki he never attempted to describe, or explain, nor did Tohei Sensei. Generally speaking we only point to Ki.

Sometimes we call Ki "the life force" or that which gives us animated life. But a boulder has just as much Ki as us, the mats have just as much Ki as my body, the air has just as much Ki. It's all the same. Ki is everywhere. Tohei Sensei defined Ki as "that which makes up the universe." Depending upon how we study it, it can appear to be matter or it can appear to be energy, but it is the fundamental, infinitely small particle or energy wave

that makes up what we know of as the universe. And it is constantly in motion.

What we know is, when we are relaxed and calm and it's flowing freely, or let's say when we are relaxed and calm and feeling very good, we say "Ki is flowing freely." Tohei Sensei used to say when you are very hungry and you come home to a nice dinner and eat it, that's experiencing Ki of the universe. So it is natural to assume that means there is "good Ki," like when you are really enjoying yourself, and "bad Ki" when you are really not feeling well. The Japanese even has the term "byo-ki" which refers to when you are ill. So this is pointing to something. Things are not working well. But what it is important to understand about the nature of Ki is that it's not Ki's fault that you don't feel well. There is not something wrong with your Ki. There is something wrong with your body and it's creating a situation where the Ki cannot flow freely. Hence Tohei Sensei developed Kiatso, so that a healthy person can hold in certain ways a less healthy person, or an exhausted person, or a depressed person, and help them relax and accept the Ki of the universe so it can move through them.

I still haven't defined Ki for you, except to say that it is everything that there is. It's both everything that there is, and it is that which makes possible everything that there is.

Student: Except mind. You said Ki isn't mind.

Shinichi Sensei said, "Ki isn't mind." But I clarified that to say what he means by mind in that sense is not Mind but he's talking about your attention, where your attention is, the use of mind. Sometimes we say to beginning students, "Extend Ki" and they use their attention to look very intensely at something, or they assume what I call an "Aikido persona" and start to be filled with their idea of whatever this Ki is. But it is so far beyond that. It is beyond thinking. It's beyond using as some kind of intension. All we can do, Shinichi Sensei was telling us, is in our use of attention, to relax completely. And when we do, this Ki of the universe can move freely through us.

I think, to answer your question, it is important to point out, that not only does Ki move freely through us, but it is also us. It is that which it is moving through. It's not like a river that runs through a valley. There is no opening in this body that Ki moves through. It's emanating from every iota of itself, constantly. And when we squeeze down on our body with tension, we tend to inhibit that, and change it, so that it feels (to another person maybe or even to our self) like negativity or depression. Someone who is depressed is very squeezed down. Or in anger your One Point comes up and your breathing becomes very shallow. So when these kind of things happens to us, and these are extreme examples, it is obvious that Ki is not moving freely. Alright?

But it is important to understand that any time we are misusing this tool that we have been given, the mind body, in order to get something for our self or make something the way we think it should be, any time we misuse our tool in that way, then natural emanation of Ki is limited, is hindered, is squeezed off. So again, the reason it is so difficult to describe or define Ki is that it is totally non-linear and non-spatial. Everything we perceive with our senses, you know, has shape and color and sound and

smell and taste. It has dimension. It is definable. So when a student asks “What is Ki?” they are thinking in those terms. “Please point to the thing that is Ki.” But that can’t be done. Ki is not only everything that is, it is also the one that is pointing at, or looking at, everything that is.

OK? Someone else?

Student: I’m not sure if this is a question. Ki is like, when you are in your One Point, I feel it, I notice it, and when I am not, I know. I feel it. But Ki is not necessarily feeling with our senses. It’s everything, that which makes up everything. But you know, you can feel when you are not in your One Point, or when you are not extending Ki.

OK, well I have to say first that I know exactly what you mean and I think everyone here does. One time in Japan Tohei Sensei said to a student (and this turned out to be the subject of the whole seminar) “Can you feel your One Point?” And the student said, “Yeah.” Then Tohei Sensei said, “Then it’s not your One Point.” And we all went, “Wait, wait! I can feel my One Point. I can feel when I am Keeping One Point.” So what he was saying there is that feeling, like hearing, smelling, tasting, seeing, is a sense. It’s feeling, touching, only inside. It’s a kinesthetic sense. So he is saying that your senses can only feel that which can be defined, that which is relative. Senses only can perceive those things. Senses cannot perceive something that is not physical, that is in a different category, something that is meta-physical, or not-physical or beyond physical.

So, the question that you are really asking , or the question that brought up in my mind at that time in Japan, is “So what is this business that I feel so good when Ki is moving smoothly through my body?” Well, when I am relaxed and calm...I think what he did in the seminar was...he said, “Take three deep breaths.” [takes a deep breath] It’s already happening with one breath. Are you doing this with me? [takes two more deep breaths.] After taking three deep breaths, no matter how calm you were before, you are now even more calm. And what happens when your body is really relaxed and calm? You feel really good. So what he is saying is, don’t think that is the “Ki of the universe.” The Ki of the universe is everything. This is the feeling of being open and receptive. But we humans, we like to make us as harbingers of the meta-physical. You know, like, “I feel the spirit of God. I feel it in me now!” And basically Ki is like the spirit of God, right? And Tohei Sensei says, no, no, that is a confusion. You are feeling your state of mind/body, which is a relative thing.

Of course, I always say that this One Point is the gateway between the relative and the absolute, or the world of shoga, relativity, and taiga, absolute, because it embraces both. There is an area in our body where we experience this, which we call “the lower abdomen.” And there are things we can do, like our physical posture, using our mind to imagine all the weight of our upper body dropping down to this area, taking a few deep breaths and relaxing, opening our mind to all the possibilities which we might call Extending Ki, and feeling the movement of the universe here in our lower abdomen. So we do all these things, but they are all relative things we are doing, mind/body things that we are doing. And we call those things “The Four Basic Principles.” And these Four

Basic Principles are four ways of looking at, or approaching, going to, mind/body unification. When mind and body are unified and calm, Ki moves more easily through us.

So Tohei Sensei is just saying, what you are experiencing is mind and body being unified and calm. You can't say you "feel Ki" because that would be that Ki feels Ki.

Student: Which is the same as saying that as soon as you notice something is happening, it is gone.

Well those are two similar paradoxes, yes. OK?

Student: So in the study of mind and body unified, we are really just identifying secondary consequences or feelings of being unified or not unified. We are not really feeling unification or non-unification?

No, I don't think that's quite what I said. Yes, you are feeling a state of mind/body unified or non-unified, if you want to say it that way. You feel really good or you feel a little bit out of it, when you are worried about something, probably. There is some issue happening. There is some tension somewhere, so you are not feeling mind/body unified. What I am saying is that the Ki of the universe is everything, so Tohei Sensei says you are not feeling Ki. You are feeling mind/body unification. Ki cannot feel Ki. Again, we don't want to anthropomorphize it.

Student: No, but we're taught that we use Ki, in our teaching.

Yeah, and the reason Shinichi Sensei, because we say "Extend Ki" for instance, he said to understand that the way you use your mind, and Ki itself, those two are not the same. When Tohei Sensei says "Extend Ki" he means to use your mind in such a way that Ki can move freely. But Shinichi Sensei is making that distinction, saying you are not actually doing something with Ki. You are doing something with your mind, with your attention. And the consequence of that is, you allow Ki to move freely.

Student: So, we don't do anything with Ki. So there can't be, back to the original question, a positive or a negative Ki.

Well Ki is not a thing that you can get ahold of and do anything with. It's not like that. That's the mistake we make. We don't just anthropomorphize it, making it a human thing, we make it a "thing," an object of our interest. When we ask "What is Ki?" we are asking "Point to Ki for me." You know, "Pull it out of a hole and show it to me. What's the definition? What defines it? What are the boundaries of Ki? What are the limits of Ki?" And of course there are no boundaries, there are no limits, and there is no definition. If you defined it, if you put a boundary around it, if you said it's this, you'd be making it a relative, limited thing. And it's not that. Not only that, but the one who is asking the question is made of Ki. It's like fish swimming in the ocean and wondering "What is water?! What's this water everyone talks about?" Not only are they swimming in it, they are made of it.

That's just a metaphor. It doesn't hold up ultimately, because Ki is more indefinable than that. But it gives us an idea of how far off we are to ask the question, "What is Ki?" And

that can be very frustrating to a beginning student, as Mele is saying. You want to define it. And other people ask you, "What is this Ki thing you are studying?" And what do you tell them? Uhhhhh. Something like that. Uhhhhhhh. You know, I just don't talk to people about it much. I talk about the practice, yes. But I don't talk to people about Ki. You can't. It's like a religious person talking about God. They have to anthropomorphize God and say "God does this and this and this." They have to turn it into a human extension, which is not all right. That's not happening.

This is a very unusual kind of thing to look at, with an enquiring mind, because of course you see nothing. There is nowhere to go there. There is nothing to find. And yet, the name of our martial art is Aikido, the way to union with Ki. And sometimes for the word "union" you could say "the way to loving Ki," or "the way to experiencing Ki." Union means not separate from Ki. I am not separate from Ki. You are not separate from Ki, already. Tohei Sensei says "you are born of the Ki of the universe." It is our nature. But it is our indefinable nature. If you point to any aspect of our body or mind, that won't be Ki, because that has a definition, a boundary, and a limit to it.

Is that... is this becoming clear? We have to be very careful how we point to this so that it is clear to the student what the Four Basic Principles are pointing to, which is mind/body unification, and what is that mind/body unification. Yes, it can be experienced, it can be perceived, it can be felt. It can be perceived in another person. I can see if you have mind/body unification or not. It can be perceived. And maybe you can say that I am seeing Ki there, because when you have mind/body unification, Ki is moving more freely, somehow, because the mind/body isn't prohibiting or preventing it from happening, isn't preventing that phenomenon from taking place. But as you say, Fincher, it's a secondary manifestation. What we experience is the relative thing.

Ki of the universe is infinite. We say that we can practice moving with Ki. So Ki movement comes from infinity and goes to infinity. And I do that by not trying to do it. If I try to do it, I have a beginning and an end, and it becomes very rigid. It begins and it stops. Suzuki Sensei's favorite thing was always "shenggg!" showing us Ki movement. So this points to the infinity of Ki, and how it moves freely through us.

We are out of time. So we just go on practicing and don't worry about positive Ki and negative Ki, or plus Ki and minus Ki. The main thing is to keep an open, present mind at all times.

Note: I add this email exchange here that took place following the discussion group:

Student: Sensei, in light of what we discussed at the Ki Lecture tonight, I'm thinking some more about your answer to my question.

Saying with Tohei Sensei that Ki is "everything that is," --- and notwithstanding the big unknowns about what "is" (dark matter, dark energy - if they exist) --- if we say that Ki is everything that is "the boulders, the mat, our bodies," etc., then Ki is some-thing, even though it is "everything." Even though we learn that on the sub-atomic level that stuff can act like particles and like waves, and cannot have its exact location be known, it apparently is some kind of "stuff," some-thing. So, Ki is material on some level? What do you think?

Thanks for your further thoughts on our discussion. I would say that trying to determine whether Ki is a “thing” or not, seeking some kind of definition, is missing the point. It is true that Tohei Sensei described Ki as being the “infinitely small particles” that make up the universe, and as such that sounds like it is “something.” But once again, he is attempting to point to that which is indefinable, invisible to the dual consciousness, and out of reach of the discriminating mind of thought. He is just trying to get as close as possible for us, metaphorically speaking, to give us an idea of how unreachable this is in any kind of ordinary seeking.

Any kind of speaking about it is really just a pointing out exercise. Our normal consciousness so doesn't get this possibility. And yet it is right here, and all there is, at the same time. It's something like the “I.” This “I” can't perceive itself, because it is always the one looking, and anything that it perceives is therefore an object of its self, and never its self. Any efforts in this direction always end up pointless and therefore frustrating.

My talk last night was only to help us all leave that kind of fruitless struggle behind. While I admit that this is probably the most difficult challenge we could offer ourselves, I see no other way to be than the way we actually are.

I hope this helps just a little bit!

Aloha and thanks,

Christopher Curtis