

The concept of *ki* (気) in Japanese

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Summary

Several centuries before the birth of Christ, the Chinese had already identified energy as the basic component of the universe. Furthermore, they had discovered ways of increasing and controlling the flow of this energy through the human body, not only to maintain health, but also to overpower adversaries, and even to cure sickness in others. This intrinsic energy is known as "ki" (気) in modern Japanese and "qi" (气) in Mandarin Chinese. It is only in the last 25 years that this energy has been scientifically measured, and medical experts in developed countries have begun to recognize its full potential as the missing link between 'mind and matter', and as the key to understanding the body's natural healing powers.

In modern Japanese many of the numerous everyday expressions in which the word "ki" appears seem to reflect its close association with 'consciousness'. What is more, analysis of these expressions also suggests that there are important fundamental differences in the way orientals and 'Westerners' view the world.

To control "ki" a person has to enter "an altered state of consciousness". The various exercises and meditation techniques associated with building up "ki" — which are now commonly referred to in various countries by the Chinese word "qigong" (气功, pronounced "kikou" in Japanese) — help the practitioner to enter this state by stimulating normally under-used areas of the brain. It is claimed that by controlling "ki" we can not only achieve and maintain physical and mental health, but also fully realize our potential as human beings and begin to understand our place in the universe.

Section 1: The Concept

1.1 HISTORY AND THEORY

Like many other ancient *kanji* [Chinese characters] the origin of 氣 is obscure, and it has undergone numerous changes. Until the last century in both China and Japan it contained the radical for rice (氣), and it seems that it probably had some connection with the staple food of the Far East. But it also seems to have been connected with the wind, rain and other natural phenomena, as well as with breath and the atmosphere.¹ In Japan the character has now been simplified to 气 (normally pronounced 'ki'), and it is in this form that it will be referred to in this paper. In modern Chinese it has been even further simplified into 气.

It is known that by the third century BC, 氣 had become associated with some sort of fundamental energy. The well-known Taoist philosopher, Chuang-Tzu (莊子) referred to it as the basic building component of all matter.² In the centuries that followed there emerged a coherent philosophy which held that it was the movements and fluctuations of this unseen energy which resulted in the existence of everything in the universe, both material and non-material.³ However, it took almost another thousand years before Western science was finally able to discover that the basis of all matter is energy.⁴

In traditional Chinese medicine in humans and other animals this intrinsic energy (氣) is thought to flow through the body in a series of channels or meridians (經絡). There are twelve of these meridians which flow out from the center of the body to the hands and feet. Although these meridians are thought to run just below the surface of the skin, each of them is connected to one of the vital organs of the body. It is on these meridians that the pressure-sensitive points (ツボ) used in acupuncture and

¹ For a very good account of theories on the origins and development of this character see Ikegami, Shoji 「氣」の不思議 Chapter 3.

² Quoted in Tsumura, Takashi 氣功=心の森を育てる page 26. Also compare Shinagawa, Yoshiya 氣功の科学 page 42.

³ Kondo, Hiroshi 氣と正しくつき合う本 pages 65 - 66. He refers to a comment made by another expert on 氣, Maruyama, Nani in 氣の構造

⁴ See Shinagawa, Yoshiya 氣功の科学 page 48.

'shiatsu massage' (指圧) are located. In healthy people 気 flows smoothly along these channels, and ill-health and disease is thought to be caused by blockages or interruptions in this flow. Applying finger pressure or inserting needles into the pressure-sensitive points serves to ease the flow and restore the patient to good health. The fact that these meridians exist on the outside of the body, on the border with the outside world, represents a fundamental difference between Western and Chinese medicine. Whereas Western⁵ medical science views the human body as an essentially 'closed system', simply feeding off the outside world, the Chinese see the body as being one element in the universe as a whole, and stress the importance of the body's interaction with its outside environment.⁶

It is also thought that certain body movements, combined with a correctly disciplined mind, can increase the flow of 気 through the meridians. This is one of the fundamental principles of the movements of Tai-Chi, which was both a fighting technique and a way of achieving and maintaining a high level of mental and physical health. Other traditional martial arts also put great emphasis on developing 気. By a combination of vigorous training and meditation techniques designed to still and control the conscious mind, martial arts' experts are able to store 気 in certain specific areas of the body (which are remarkably similar to the Indian *charkas*), and direct and release it to overpower opponents. Similarly, it is believed that, with the correct training, certain gifted individuals have the ability to transmit stored 気 to others to cure illness and restore health.

1.2 RECOGNITION AND EVALUATION

In the early 1950s China's Chairman Mao announced his unequivocal support for traditional Chinese medicine within the framework of the modernization of China. This had the effect of ensuring that traditional herbal medicines, and treatments such as acupuncture and *shiatsu* massage, would continue to play an important role in the Chinese health system alongside more technologically advanced Western medicines and treatments. Mao's declaration also gave a new legitimacy to a number of disparate

⁵ In this paper the term 'Western' is used in the sense of the Japanese 西洋, and refers to Europe and America.

⁶ Yuasa, Yasuo 気とは何か pages 80, 81.

methods of achieving 'enlightenment', fighting techniques, and health regimes, all of which were based on the principles of understanding and developing 氣. These were formally brought together under the name of *qigong* (氣功, pronounced kikou in Japanese) in 1953. *Qigong* is now officially divided into two types: (1) 'hard' or martial (硬氣功), and (2) 'soft' or curative (軟氣功). Type (2) is further sub-divided into external *qigong* (外氣功), and internal *qigong* (内氣功). The latter includes practices such as Tai-Chi and various meditation techniques through which an individual seeks to increase and control the flow of 氣 in his own body. The former, which is also known as 射氣功 [projecting *qigong*], is more dynamic in that a master-practitioner actually projects his healing 氣 into a patient's body.

The curative wing of *qigong* has been attracting a growing number of believers and practitioners since the 1950s. Its popularity was given a boost in 1972 by the discovery of certain wall paintings on the tomb of a prince who lived in the second century AD near the Chinese city of Changsha in Hunan Province.⁷ The paintings depicted various figures in poses which are remarkable similar to movements which are still part of modern Tai-Chi. In the early 1970s there were also a growing number of reports of the successful treatment of cancer and other 'incurable' diseases using *qigong*. Then in the second half of the 1970s there were a number of exciting scientific experiments with 氣 in China and Japan, which created something of a stir in both countries and even sent ripples of interest into Europe and the USA.

Using the latest technology scientists were actually able to measure the 氣 radiating from the fingertips of *qigong* masters. One such clinical trial took place in a leading Shanghai hospital in 1978, and was witnessed by several leading foreign medical experts.⁸ The practitioner, Dr. Lin's 氣 was found to contain something which was measurable not only as infrared light and visible photons, but also as magnetic energy, low level electrical waves and static electricity.⁹ What was more important was that the transmission of 氣 noticeably affected the measurable brain activity of the patients, proving conclusively that something significant had been transmitted.

⁷ See Ikegami, Shoji 「氣」の不思議 pages 36-39.

⁸ Shinagawa, Yoshiya 氣功の科学 page 16.

⁹ Yuasa, Yasuo 氣とは何か page 133. Compare Ikegami, Shoji 「氣」の不思議 page 15.

Two years later, Dr. Lin also took charge of the first major surgical operation to be performed using only the 気 radiating from his fingers as an anaesthetic. Since then scientists have also had some success in measuring 気 running through the meridians, but this seems to be more difficult to verify. However, the existence of the meridians is becoming increasingly difficult to refute in the face of acupuncture and *qigong's* successful use as an anaesthetic for surgical operations in China, and acupuncture's remarkable success in treating a large number of ailments in an increasingly large number of countries.

Medical experts and scientists in several countries were excited by the results of the experiments with 気 because they appeared to suggest that it might be the 'missing link' between mind and body. Although it was now a measurable entity, 気 seemed to be the mechanism by which the mind influences the health of the body. In other words it seemed to be a strong candidate to be 'spiritus animalis', the mysterious entity which Descartes, the leading author of the mind-body dichotomy, had put forward to explain how mental states can affect the physical body.¹⁰

Fueled by the scientific recognition of 気, as well as by the growing number of cases of the successful treatment of cancer using *qigong*, several leading Chinese hospitals established *qigong* departments in the second half of the 1970s and early 1980s. There was also something of a '気 boom' in Japan in the 1980s, which produced literally hundreds of books and several television documentaries on the subject. In Europe and America more and more doctors are now studying acupuncture and shiatsu, and *qigong* has become part of the steadily growing 'alternative therapies' movement. In 1988 the first World Conference for *Qigong* Medical Research was held in Beijing, and a series of conferences followed in Tokyo, Berkeley and New York. By 1993 there were delegates from no less than 81 countries at a *Qigong* World Conference in Beijing. In addition to the 70 million Chinese who regular practise some variety of *qigong*, it is estimated that there are another 30 million practitioners in other countries. In 1999 *qigong* made headline news when over 10,000 followers of Falun Gong, a quasi-religious group who practise a form of *qigong*, staged a demonstration in Tiananmen

¹⁰ Yuasa, Yasuo 気とは何か page 35.

Square in China. The demonstration provoked a severe crackdown by the Chinese Government, but actually helped to promote interest in *qigong* in other countries.

Section 2: 気 in Japanese

2.1 PUTTING 気 INTO ENGLISH

In the Japanese language there are an extraordinarily large number of expressions involving 気. One way of finding out more about the nature of 気, and what the concept means to the Japanese is to look at how the word is currently being used. Several of the many Japanese books on 気 which appeared in the late 1980s and early 1990s use this approach. It is a fruitful exercise because words tend to stay closer to their original meanings in Japanese than in other languages, and there is a lot less confusion of similar terms. In English, for example, terms like 'heart', 'mind' and 'soul' have come to be used almost interchangeably; there is no longer a clear distinction between them unless they are being used either as specialist terms in, say, psychiatry or religion. In Japanese, the use of *kanji*, which are essentially pictorial representations of meaning, helps to ensure that words cannot easily wander too far from their original meaning. The precise and tidy Japanese mind also helps; the Japanese seem to like to make distinctions between the uses of words even when there are no real distinctions to be made. In this vein, Dr. Hiroshi Kondo divides the use of 気 in modern Japanese into six separate categories.¹¹ Another author, Mr. Shoji Ikegami, uses ten, one of which is further divided into no less than seven additional categories.¹² However, for the purposes of this discourse it is sufficient simply to divide them into two large groups: (1) terms which usually apply only to people, and (2) those which do not.

Group (2) consists mainly of words for naturally occurring phenomena such as 天気 (weather), 気候 (climate), 気温 (temperature) or 電気 (electricity). With these terms it is perfectly understandable, if not appropriate when translating them into English, to think of them as referring to manifestations of intrinsic energy in the natural world. Even an expression such as 空気 [air, atmosphere] could be understood in this way,

¹¹ Kondo, Hiroshi 気と正しくつき合う本 61 - 75.

¹² Ikegami, Shoji 「気」の不思議 pages 210 - 211.

for, according to modern physicists, although it appears to be 'empty' (空), the air around us is, in fact, a mass of constantly moving and interacting energy particles. However, in group (1) there are actually very few expressions in which the normal English translation has anything to do with energy or power. There are a few exceptions such as 気力 [energy, spirit]. It would, however, seem a little too contrived to translate the phrase お元気ですか as, "Do you have your spiritual energy in the right place?"

A lot of group (1) expressions can be put into English using the word 'mind'. Expressions such as 気がある could be translated as "having a mind to do (something)" and 気になる could be rendered as something which "plays on the mind". Even a common expression such as 気を付けて, which is usually translated as "Take care", could in some cases become "Mind out!", using the word 'mind' as a verb. Similarly 気にしないで is normally translated as "Never mind". To the English speaker, what is happening is seen clearly as belonging to the realm of the mind, as opposed to matter. However, it should be noted that in the Japanese way of thinking, these situations (or states) are actually being explained in terms of the movements of one type of scientifically measurable energy.

In many other cases 気 is better translated as some kind of feeling. The English equivalent of 気持ち is precisely that, and one possible translation of 気がする is the verb form, "I feel (that's right)". 気が向く could be translated as "feel inclined to do something", whilst 気を落とす could simply be rendered into English as "feeling down". In English "feeling" is also thought to belong firmly in the mental, rather than the physical world.

Although 気 is energy it is also matter. So it is not surprising perhaps that a number of Japanese expressions refer to the physical properties of a person's 気. Interestingly enough, neither 'mind' nor 'feeling' are particularly good pointers as to how to translate the most commonly used of these expressions. 気が小さい [timid], for example, does not exactly mean "small-minded" in English; and the English equivalent of the opposite expression, 気が大きい, is usually closer to "big-hearted" than "broad minded". Similarly, it would not make much sense in English to describe someone as

having a "short mind" 気が短い [short-tempered] or even a "long mind" 気が長い [patient]. These are all expressions that must be dealt with individually.

Kondo suggests that there are so many phrases involving 気 because the Japanese people are particularly sensitive to this invisible intrinsic energy.¹³ He also suggests that they value the importance of the vagueness of the term. As an example of this he refers to the phrase 気は心で [as a token of good will]. This polite expression is almost only ever used when giving someone a gift, or doing someone a favour. There is, in fact, no confusion of terms in this phrase; but rather it is a way of avoiding a straight expression of one's own feelings, something which Japanese people still consider to be a point of politeness. It is important that, unlike the word 心 [heart], 気 does not specifically refer to oneself. The point Kondo is trying to make comes across much more clearly a little later in the chapter when he considers various phrases relating to social intercourse.¹⁴ It is more polite to say 気に入っています rather than 好きです because the former phrase does not suggest an active feeling; there is a sense that the feeling is somehow beyond the speaker's control. However, in English it is difficult to avoid translating both phrases as "I like" since any other translation such as "It takes my fancy" sounds clumsy or antiquated. Modern English seems to prefer to attach feelings, intentions and states of mind directly to the people involved.

There is also another interesting shortcoming in the usual English equivalents of almost all the Japanese phrases containing the word 気. In the Japanese mind there is no clear distinction between the 気 in, say, 天気 [weather] and the 気 in 気が合う [get on well together]. In some way they both refer to intrinsic energy in the world. For, as Kondo points out, 気 was seen as being the fundamental building block not only of all material things but also of spiritual things, such as people's minds or life itself.¹⁵ But, partly because of the mind-body dichotomy, which has dominated European scientific thought and philosophy since Descartes, it is difficult for Westerners to see

¹³ Kondo, Hiroshi 気と正しくつき合う本 page 61.

¹⁴ Kondo Hiroshi 気と正しくつき合う本 pages 72, 73.

¹⁵ Kondo Hiroshi 気と正しくつき合う本 page 65. He refers to a comment made by another expert on 気, Maruyama in 気の構造

any similarity at all between, say, a high pressure trough and a character-trait.

2.2 気 AND CONSCIOUSNESS

One way to get closer to a better understanding of the nature of 気 is to consider the relationship between 気 and 意. In English the nearest equivalent to 意 (pronounced *i* in Japanese and *yi* in Chinese) is "attention", in the sense of "turning one's attention to something". This can be seen most clearly in the expression 注意する [pay attention to something], which is literally "a pouring out of attention onto something". When we recognize(識) where our attention (意) is we are conscious (意識) of something. In relation to 気, 意 is most usually thought of in the sense of 'consciousness'. However, 意 could also have the sense of being our representative image of what the world is like; it is how we expect the world to be. This shade of meaning is clear in the expression 意外 [unexpectedly]. But without 気 it would only ever be an image: it is 気 which makes this image into something real. Many of the ancient Chinese sages who wrote about 気 stressed the importance of the inextricable link between these two concepts: 意が気をみちびく [intrinsic energy goes where attention takes it] appears to have almost proverbial status.¹⁶ The idea is that nothing actually exists until the spotlight of 意 is shone upon it; turning our attention to something causes 気 to bring it into existence. This 'something' could be a material entity we are expecting to see, or something non-material such as an intention (意向, 意図) to do something. This view of the world recalls Western philosophers such as Berkeley, who held that nothing exists until it is perceived by someone, or by God. In *qigong* the correct use and control of 意 through meditation and 'image training'¹⁷ is considered to be of great importance; eventually simply being aware of 気 flowing smoothly through one's body will actually cause the flow to increase. The relationship between 気 and consciousness is also of great interest to scientists and medical experts. It is precisely because 気 can somehow be consciously controlled that it can be the link between mind and body, and the key to understanding the body's internal healing system.

If 気 inevitably follows where consciousness leads, then it seems reasonable to suppose

¹⁶ Quoted in Takashi Tsumura 気功=心の森を育てる page 19.

¹⁷ See Kondo, Hiroshi 気と正しくつき合う本 Chapter 5. Shinagawa, Yoshiya 気功の科学 (Chapter 4) actually uses 意念 which is a kanji equivalent of the English word 'image' used only in China.

that 気 and 'consciousness' may actually have become fused into a single concept. In Western thought, where the concept of 気 does not seem to exist, this is very likely to be the case. The fact that 'mind' is so often the best translation of 気 lends support to this supposition. If we reconsider group (1) expressions (see 2.1 above) in terms of 気 being some kind of consciousness, the results are interesting. In fact, there are a few expressions which are normally translated in this way: 気を失う, for example, is usually rendered as "lose consciousness", and 気がつく usually means "notice" in the sense of "being conscious of". In several other cases where the usual translation involves the word 'mind' it is not difficult to replace it with 'consciousness': 気を付けて could be rendered as "Be aware (of what is happening around you)" or simply "Beware" in some cases; 気になる could refer to something of which one cannot help being conscious. In other cases the translation can seem a little unnatural. 気にしないで, for example, would have to be something like, "Don't let it into your consciousness". But such a translation, contrived as it may sound, does at least recognize that in *qigong* consciousness is closely associated with 気. Furthermore, it gives a much clearer and more consistent image to 気 than translations involving vaguer terms like 'mind' or 'feeling'. It makes sense, for example, to think of a person who is described as being 気が小さい [timid] as being unaware of a lot of things that are going on around him. The expression 気が利く [smart; considerate] describes someone who is conscious of the feelings and needs of the people around him. A person who is described as 気が多い [(having) a lot of interests] is someone whose consciousness extends in various directions.

However, although considering 気 to be consciousness does help to give it a consistent image, it still fails as a translation in one very important respect: it does not convey the important nuance, referred to earlier (2.1 above), that 気 is somehow 'impersonal' in Japanese. Consider the expression その気がする [I have that feeling]. Normally this is translated in terms of 'feeling', but it could just about be translated as "I am conscious of that". However, the Japanese is actually closer to a more passive expression, such as "That's the way things seem to be going (and I'll just go with the flow)". Unlike 気, 'consciousness' is certainly not an 'impersonal' word in English. In fact, partly as a result of the identification of mind with consciousness,¹⁸ Westerners tend

¹⁸ Yuasa, Yasuo 気とは何か page 15.

to regard 'consciousness' as centering on the self.

Imagine you were so absorbed in reading something that you became totally oblivious to what was happening around you. When at last you relaxed your attention, you might become aware of your posture, or the temperature of the room. You might even become conscious of the cars going by outside your window, or notice that it had started raining. It would be as if you were looking out of yourself at the outside world. In Western philosophy this description is sometimes referred to as the 'ghost in the machine' theory of consciousness. The body is seen as being merely the 'machine' from within which the 'ghost' (self) observes the world. This image fits in very well with both Descartes' mind-body dichotomy, and the Christian idea of every human being having an individual soul.

However, there is at least one other very different type of consciousness which many people experience at some time in their lives: an acute awareness that 'self' and the world are inextricably connected. The 'ghost' is no longer in its 'machine'; it is outside both the machine and its environment. In some ways this is a more logical description of our world, since we cannot really be conscious of self without being conscious of the world in which self exists. In other words, the 'ghost' cannot exist without the 'machine' and the 'machine' cannot exist without its environment. This recalls the 'open system' of traditional Chinese medicine mentioned above (Section 1.2). In fact, Shinagawa specifically associates this second type of consciousness with the oriental mind.¹⁹ In one sense it is an 'impersonal' type of consciousness, in as much as it reduces self to being simply one element (albeit a special one) in the world. However, in mainstream Western philosophy, which has traditionally supported the Christian concept of individual 'free will', this way of looking at the world is normally associated with the sub-conscious.

In the light of these two very different types of consciousness, it is worth considering two apparently quite similar Japanese expressions, 気を変える[change one's mind] and 気が変わる[have a change of heart/mind]. The former expression, 気を変える[change one's mind], is rarely used in Japanese, and its existence could well be the result of

¹⁹ Shinagawa, Yoshiya 気功の科学 pages 194-196.

the influence of Western thought upon the Japanese language. Western thinking stresses the individual's ability to impose her (or his) will (意志) on the outside world; the conscious mind likes to feel that it is in charge of its own destiny. The former expression, however, is used much more often. It describes a common situation: what seemed like a good idea a few minutes before quite suddenly no longer seems so attractive, but it is often impossible to explain the reasons for the change of heart. In Western terms, this is effectively the result of a message from our sub-conscious mind. However, it could also be seen as a sudden 'consciousness' (in the 'oriental' sense mentioned above) that the decision was somehow not in harmony with the universe. This could well be the key to understanding the apparently impersonal nature of 氣 in Japanese: it does not belong to one individual person in the same way that feelings or thoughts do, but since it is a fundamental element in the universe it is naturally accessible to everyone.

Section 3: Controlling 氣

To summarize the main points of this paper so far:

- ① According to ancient Chinese sages 氣 was the intrinsic energy of the universe and the fundamental building block of everything within it.
- ② There is strong empirical evidence that 氣 flows through the body along a number of meridians. Blockages in this flow result in sickness, but can be rectified by applying various types of pressure to certain key points.
- ③ 氣 is scientifically measurable energy which can be transmitted from one person to another to overpower opponents or cure ailments.
- ④ Unlike the body's other circulatory systems, it appears that the flow of 氣 through the body can somehow be consciously controlled. Medical experts and scientists have identified 氣's potential as a link between mind and matter, and as the key to understanding and fully utilizing the body's natural healing system.
- ⑤ 氣 has a strong association with consciousness (意, 意識), and this association seems to be reflected in the way 氣 is used in modern Japanese.
- ⑥ The 'impersonal' nature of 氣 in the Japanese language can be partly explained in terms of what appears to be a peculiarly oriental consciousness of 'self' as being just a part of the whole universe.

It is clear that, although 気 can be consciously controlled, the type of consciousness which is required to do this is substantially different from what Westerners normally mean by the term. In Western terms it requires a fusion of the conscious and sub-conscious mind. This is what Shinagawa calls 'an altered state of consciousness'.²⁰ He goes on to explain that this state seems to be attainable when both sides of the brain are working in unison. The problem is that we live in a left-brain-dominated civilisation, where the capabilities of the right-brain are not being fully exploited.²¹ However, many of the various meditation practices and breathing exercises associated with *qigong* actually have the effect of nurturing the right side of the brain.

Looked at in another way, the fusion of the two sides of the brain could also be seen as a union of the two different types of consciousness referred to earlier (2.2 above). In this altered state of consciousness one would be simultaneously conscious of being the center of one's own universe and a part of the outside universe to which everyone and everything belonged. To use the analogy of the previous section, the ghost would be both within the machine and outside the entire universe at the same time. Such a notion also reflects the fact that *qigong* is historically associated with the quest for spiritual enlightenment. This 'altered state of consciousness' is tantamount to being 'at one with everything'.²² In this state one could not only control the flow of 気 through one's own body, but also begin to have an influence on the 気 outside one's own body. This would, in one sense, represent a fusion of Eastern and Western thought. This is an interesting and appealing interpretation in an age when an in-depth interchange of culture and ideas finally seems to be taking place between these two fascinatingly different areas of our planet.

²⁰ Shinagawa, Yoshiya 気功の科学 page 56-64.

²¹ The idea that *qigong* can help to redress an imbalance in the way we use our brains is touched upon by other authors, notably Tsumura, Takashi 気功=心の森を育てる page 115.

²² Shinagawa page 199.

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