Many students have asked the question, what is Ki? When first introduced to the subject, the practical application seemed rather obscure. Ki exercises are practiced with little or no understanding of its true essence, nor are the implications of such a truth. In more advanced training, we begin to incorporate some of its virtues into our techniques such as unbendable arm, pressure points, etc. Shiatsu and Acupuncture are prime examples of manipulating Ki. When Ki is used in training, it “Maximizes Efficiency with Minimal Effort”. Does it take less effort because you are more practiced at a certain technique, in which case you become more focused on the task at hand, or is there something more? Could there be something tangible, something we could put our finger on? Is there something more? Could there be something tangible, something we could put our finger on? Is there something our western curiosity can dissect and analyze? Is it a myth, a theory, is it fact of fallacy? Or can there be something deeper, more profound, more universal? A question bordering on the religious to be sure. Basically, What is Ki? This is an attempt to shine a light through the darkness of misunderstanding, however dim it may be, on this particular question.
Universal Ki  
by Brian K Norin ~ 1992

In order to gain a better perspective on Ki, we should look into the past, about 3000 years ago or so. Its origins come from ancient India and China. Philosophical and religious beliefs governed their medical procedures. The dissection of cadavers however, was forbidden for centuries. It was considered an insult to the dead persons ancestors. Therefore, medical practitioners of the time relied on observations of the external evidence of internal workings, and on metaphysical beliefs, to determine their course of action. Holistic healing traditions are derived from philosophical and religious beliefs: Taoism in China and Hinduism in India. The belief of these countries influenced each other over the centuries, gradually spreading to Japan, Korea, Indonesia, Tibet, Persia, and Southeast Asia.

Acupuncture and Shiatsu are the most widely known holistic treatments in the world. The healers task is to attune mind and body with the Universal Ki. A healthy person is said to be one who is in harmony with the Universal. When this is achieved, the patient's own life force acts as an immune system warding off infections. But what is this life force? Oriental belief is that behind all phenomena there is an invisible life force that animated the universe and individuals alike. In humans this cosmic energy flows through the body, mind and spirit on an invisible network of branching channels called meridians. This meridian network feeds and nourishes the mind and body. The channels connect the exterior of the body to the interior. Keeping the meridians unblocked so that the Ki can flow freely is essential for good health.
The symbol of perfect harmony was envisioned by the father of classical Chinese medicine, Emperor Fu Xi, about 3000 B.C., when he created the Yin-Yang. The Yin-Yang represent the apparent opposites of the Universal; light and dark, positive and negative, male and female, heaven and earth. These are not necessarily opposites, but different aspects of the whole, each needs the other, and each carries the seed of the other. The forces are perfectly balanced, any upset of this balance leads to illness. Eastern medicine relied on these metaphysical beliefs concerning the human being as a reflection of a greater cosmic order. If we take this one step further, you begin to see that this invisible life force is in every living thing, every animal, every plant, tree and drop of water has this Universal Ki coursing through its veins. Western society calls this the Holy Spirit. I tend to believe that they are one and the same no matter what you call it.

Carl Sagan once said that we are all children of the stars, which is true. Before there were stars there was only hydrogen. When there was enough concentrated mass to ignite a star, helium was produced. These cosmic torches brought forth light from darkness. Only when a star exploded, did the heavier elements come into existence. These heavier elements are the substance of our physical being. Therefore, we are irrevocably inseparable from the universe around us. We as human beings are a microcosm of the universe, composed of the same materials, the same universal energies, subject to the same laws.
So it was that in ancient eastern healing, for instance, there came to be six “solid” or yin organs: the heart, lungs, liver, kidneys, spleen and “heart protector” or pericardium. These were balanced by six “hollow” or yang organs: the small intestine, large intestine, gall bladder, stomach and the “triple heater”, a collective name for what is perceived as three metabolic centers within the body’s trunk. It was believed that each organ is dominated by one of these five elements, or phases of energy, that compose all matter and figure in the universal harmony: fire, wood, earth, metal, and water. Each of these elements express predictable patterns in nature. Traditional eastern doctors derived the functions of the human body which must, they reasoned, adhere to the same patterns.

Generally, it is said that there are twelve “regular” channels, or primary meridians, all terminating in the toes or fingers. Each is associated with a particular internal organ and is referred to by the organ’s name. There are also eight “extra” or “extraordinary” channels and many minor connecting ones, along these channels there are 365 Acupuncture points of classical Chinese theory. These points are where Ki can be manipulated and regulated.

In theory, Acupuncture can stimulate the flow of Ki or drain off excess. This can be done in a number of ways. The insertion of needles is the most recognized form, either by themselves or with special herbs attached and then set aflame. The United States has pioneered the use of lasers instead of needles for treatment. The narrow, pulsating veins of energy is said to accelerate the treatment and eliminate side effects such as infection or damage to nerves or blood vessels.

In order to maintain strong mental and physical health one must extend Ki on a regular basis. When extending Ki your body is replenished with fresh Ki. This Ki comes directly from the Universal. Exercise and discipline are the keys to a healthy soul. The mind governs the body, the body is a reflection of the mind, and both are intertwined with the Ki of the universe. Most people don’t realize that everyday Ki is connected to the Ki of the Universal, or that a connection even exists.

Everything around us is saturated in the Universal Ki. But what is the real nature of the Universal? Anything that has force must have a beginning. What is the origin of the Universal? Apparently, the Universal has no beginning and no end. What of the physical universe? There must have been a beginning. Scientists call this beginning the “Big Bang”. To date this is the most popular theory.
So what was there before that nothing? Zen uses the term Mu, which means a state in which, though nothing exists, there is still something. This something is the Universal Ki or God, depending on your point of view. Universal Ki is in everything we do, it is in the food we eat, the air we breathe, and the friends and family whom we associate. All one needs to do is tap into it and access the power. The Ki of the Universal is available to everyone, to be used for good or bad.

There are of course, two sides to everything, a positive and a negative. In the Orient, this dualism is called the Yin and Yang. Yin represents the shade, or negative. Yang, the sunlight, or positive. Extending Ki is positive, drawing it in is negative. When one extends Ki, it is replenished with fresh Ki from the Universal. When one draws it in with negative thoughts, Ki becomes stale, powerless.

People, in times of crisis have been able to move heavy objects or lift cars, exceeding by far the limits of their own physical abilities. This is done by total concentration on the task at hand, with total disregard of the actual feasibility of moving the object. Using positive Ki will help you overcome any obstacle from public speaking to golf, or any sport, or overcome disease or even improving your luck in gambling. Positive attracts positive and negative attracts negative. Your own self confidence will be reflected in everything you do.

The concept of Ki is one of the most important in Japanese philosophy. It directly concerns everyone’s daily life, since it is nothing less than the vital energy of that life. In Chinese philosophy this concept is known as Qi, pronounced Chi. The center from which this psychic force radiates in our bodies is called the Dantain (Tan-t’ian) or Hara, located just below the navel. A similar concept is found in Indian philosophy in the idea of Prana. As the concept of Ki is found at the root of all Japanese activities, it is also found at the root of all the Martial Arts.
Ki is creative energy, the divine breath in every being. This mental force can be projected outside oneself, by means of the KI-AI. The result of such concentration of energy is to produce both a great psychic force and, at the moment it is released, instantaneous physical power. When the KI-AI is uttered by a Martial Artist, the vibration of the sound may momentarily paralyze the opponent’s functioning and render him more susceptible to an attack. KI-AI can also be used in resuscitation techniques called Kuatsu. Kuatsu can be employed by black belt Martial Artists to bring back to consciousness anyone who has been strangled or subjected to a sudden shock. The contention by Japanese Martial Arts experts that the KI-AI enables one to liberate mental and physical force very rapidly, and so influence another who is in close proximity. Shiatsu practitioners incorporate a form of KI-AI, or extension of Ki. Shiatsu is very similar to Acupuncture except for the absence of needles. Ki can be extended through the fingertips and applied to certain pressure points along the meridians to achieve the desired effect. Thus, there are four kinds of KI-AI: low and weighty at moments of action, high and piercing with a cry of victory, normal for purposes of resuscitation, and silent (Kensei) in certain meditation exercises.

Unfortunately, Webster has no definition of Ki, but I was intrigued by the mathematical approach given by Koichi Tohei: “Ki is the infinite gathering of infinitely small particles”. His explanation is thus, The earth is one. A pebble is one. If it is reduced by half infinitely, what remains is still one. It will never become zero. If there is one, half of it always exists. Just as the universe will never become zero, we will never become zero. We are one with the Universal, and our lives are part of the life of the Universal.

Some people express the mind and body as one, calling it the mind-body. This illustrates the inseparability of the two. If we believe that we are born from the Ki of the Universal, then we must have been one at some point in the past. The mind is refined body, the body is unrefined mind. They are mirror images of each other. It should not be difficult to coordinate mind and body since they are different aspects of the whole. But that is not the case. We have been trained to believe that they are separate entities.
Once we realize that the mind moves the body, we must learn to refine the mind. We must learn where to concentrate it. That place is the Hara, approximately one inch below the navel. Concentrating on this one point, one develops a strong lower stomach and the ability to manifest great physical strength. If you merely tense your stomach you have lost the concept of this exercise.

The best way to approach this is to first understand that the universe is an infinite sphere with an infinite radius. If this sphere is condensed to one point, it will reside in the Hara. This is possible because you are always in the center of the universe. If you move to the left or the right, you will still be in the center. Focus your mind on this one point. Once you have reached this one point of concentration, take that one point and reduce by half infinitely. When it reaches the verge of being too small to be conceived, keep holding it in your mind. At that moment you have become one with the universe. Once you have mastered concentrating Ki in this manner, you will have the ability to move with unified mind and body. This is the first principal of mind and body unification.

There are four basic principle of unification. If one principle is achieved, the other three will follow. Conversely, if one principle is lost, the other three will fall as well. When the unification is complete, your mind and body enter a state of living calmness. Living calmness is infinitely dynamic and contains infinite power. When the Hara is reduced to infinite smallness, infinite calmness will prevail. This state of being is not only essential for Martial Arts, but for a productive life as well.
The second principle of unification is to relax completely. We all know that tension can accumulate in our back, neck, head, feet, etc. But, we don't always know how to properly get rid of the tension or how to prevent it from accumulating in our body. Stress causes tension and we need to know how to relax in stressful situations. Many people assume that true relaxation is a weak or limp state, but this is far from the truth. If we try to get rid of stress by more exercise, more stimulation or massage we are only dealing with the symptoms. Relaxation must be practiced so that we can become a more mature person who can be relaxed under pressure. One point concentration will bring about the living calmness and relaxation.

The next principle of unification is keeping weight underside. The weight of all objects is naturally underside. Mass generates gravity. An object as large as the earth possesses a lot of gravity. We are naturally drawn to its center. This same principle also applies to subatomic particles. When you relax completely, all particles of your body will automatically fall underside. The best example of this is the unbendable arm. With mind and body coordination, every strike of the hand or foot should be done naturally and according to the laws of the Universal. When this is achieved, every blow will contain terrific power. When you relax by keeping one point, your weight goes underside, calming your mind as well. If this is practiced consistently, relaxation will come without effort. The second and the third principles are one and the same.

Finally, one needs to extend Ki in order to unify mind and body. Strong Ki is Ki that is strongly extended, instilling confidence. Weak Ki is Ki that is poorly extended, which retards the maximum output of an individual. I once read a book on psychic development which contained the statement “I believe therefore I am”. A powerful statement to say the least. You must believe what you are doing to be true in order for it to become a reality. So it is with extending Ki. Ki flows forward when you believe it to be. You must use your mind positively to achieve a positive result.
These four principles point to the same thing – unification. Although they seem to be all different, they are different aspects of the whole. Basically, the first and the fourth principles are of the mind. The second and the third are principles of the body. Since mind and body are ultimately one, all four principles deal with the same thing – achieving a healthy mind-body. The mind possesses real power. When it is focused, the body will reflect this power. When you keep one point, your brain waves become infinitely calm. Everything is clearly reflected by the mind in this state. When you learn Ki meditation and keep your mind calm, Ki extends naturally. When this is done on a regular basis, there is nothing you can’t do with your life.

Koichi Tohei motto: “Let us have a Universal Spirit that loves and protects all creation and helps all things grow and develop. To unify mind and body and become one with the universe is the ultimate purpose of my study”.

All of us have the power of the Universal at our disposal, but only if we have the desire and the knowledge to use it wisely.