

## **Shokushu #11 – The Definition of Ki**

### **Friday, May 31, 2013**

#### **C. Curtis**

Good evening everyone.

Tonight is the 11<sup>th</sup> Shokushu, entitled “The Definition of Ki.” The most common question we get asked is “What is Ki?” Even students who have been training for years sometimes ask me this question. So Tohei Sensei put this together, which offers a definition of Ki, or whoever translated it entitled it that.

*“Shokushu #11 – The Essence of Ki.*

*We begin with the number one in counting all things. It is impossible that this one, even reduced to infinitely small particles, can ever become zero. Because, just as something cannot be made from nothing, one can never arise from zero.*

*Universal Ki is the infinite gathering of infinitely small particles. This Universal Ki condensed becomes an individual, which further condensed becomes the One Point in the lower abdomen, which in turn infinitely condensed, never becomes zero. In this way we are one with the Universe. Thus we realize the essence of Ki.”*

Sayaka, please read the original text in Japanese. (Sayaka reads)

Let me read from the Shokushu book, #11, The Definition of Ki:

*We begin with the number One in counting all things. It is impossible that this One can ever be reduced to zero. Because just as something cannot be made from nothing, one cannot be made from zero.*

*Ki is like the number one. Ki is formed from infinitely small particles, smaller than an atom. The universal Ki condensed becomes an individual, which further condensed becomes the one point in the lower abdomen, which in turn infinitely condensed never becomes zero, but becomes one with the Universe. Thus we understand the definition of Ki.*

Interesting. So the literal translation has some fundamental differences. To begin with, the title is not “The Definition of Ki.” In Japanese the title is “The Essence of Ki,” which to me makes a big difference and is preferable. I can only assume that, because the question gets asked so much, the translator chose to call it a “definition.”

However, it's not quite a definition. In the literal translation, the first sentence is very similar. “*We begin with the number one in counting all things.*” The second sentence is, “*It is impossible that this one, even reduced to infinitely small particles, can ever become zero.*” This is different than “*it is impossible that this one can ever be reduced to zero.*” The third sentence says,

*“because, just as something cannot be made from nothing, one can never arise from zero.”* The Shokushu book is not that much different here.

Then, in the Shokushu book it says, *“Ki is like the number one. Ki is formed from infinitely small particles, smaller than an atom.”* But it literally says, *“Universal Ki is the infinite gathering of infinitely small particles.”*

The next is almost the same in the literal translation, *“This Universal Ki condensed becomes an individual, which further condensed becomes the One Point in the lower abdomen, which In turn infinitely condensed, never becomes zero.”* In the Shokushu book it says *“...never becomes zero but becomes one with the Universe.”* The subject of that sentence is “Ki” and Ki is already one with the Universe. So this is an incorrect sentence, saying that Ki, then, becomes one with the Universe. No. What it says in Japanese is that’s how we become one with the Universe, not how Ki becomes one with the Universe. It’s just an incorrect translation.

The last sentence in the translation is, *“Thus we realize the essence of Ki,”* not, *“Thus we understand the definition of Ki”*.

Some of these differences are important, again, not that we necessarily want to change the way the Shokushu is written. But, as I’ve said before, I want to do these translations for us, and hold these discussions, so that we get a clearer understanding of what Tohei Sensei is trying to say, which can be very easily misunderstood.

You know, Tohei Sensei uses this Shokushu #11 to try to point out to us the nature of what he calls “Ki.” Ki, to Tohei Sensei is like code for that which cannot be known, or that which cannot be spoken, or the infinite, the inconceivable. This is what Ki means to him. Everything in the relative world is measurable, until you look really closely at it, and then it becomes infinitely small and it can no longer be measured. Same thing if you look out into space. It is all measurable until you keep going, and then it becomes immeasurable and unknowable, infinite, we say, or inconceivable. So the shift that happens between that which is measureable and knowable to that which is immeasurable and unknowable is what Tohei Sensei calls the difference between *shoga* and *taiga*, or the relative world and the absolute. Ki is his code word for the absolute here, which curiously includes all of *shoga* as well, but seen from *taiga* perspective, or that which is infinite and unknowable.

Ki is everything. Sometimes you hear someone say that the teacher has a very strong Ki, Tohei Sensei or Suzuki Sensei has a very strong Ki. Well, that’s a relative thing you are saying there, so it’s not quite right, simply because you are looking at it from a relative perspective. A person that has trained a lot may be experiencing this unknowable essence on a higher or more profound or intense level than others who haven’t trained so much. And it might then appear that that person somehow “owns” a bigger section, or part of Ki. But it’s not that at all. Ki is everything already. Tohei Sensei is saying everything is made of Ki whether it’s in the *shoga* world of seeing or the *taiga* world of seeing. It’s just that we don’t experience it in the relative view. We only experience in *taiga*, in the infinite. Until we reach that point, that shift in our

way of seeing doesn't happen.

When you look out there into space, beyond what can be measured, just looking, a shift happens. It changes your mind state. And that change, that shift, is what Tohei Sensei calls "Extending Ki" or "Keeping One Point." It alters your experience from just including the relative condition, to including everything, even though *shoga* is a part of *taiga*. So that everything, your emotions, your thoughts, your senses, the objects of your senses, everything that you know is made of Ki. That's what he is saying. And only when you look really, really closely at it, and at the same time include it all, do you experience Ki. It loses its ability to be measured and categorized.

This is all obviously very difficult to talk about. Because, when I use words, words are all definable. I have no words that are indefinable, so I use words like "infinite" which point to something indefinable. For each of us, it does help to talk about it and even for Tohei Sensei to attempt to define it, so that we have something to work with here. But for each of us, it requires our actual experiencing of this shift, which we most easily can experience in Ki Breathing and Ki Meditation. Once we sort of get the knack of this shift, of seeing infinitely into things, then we can carry this into every day life. And then our experience of every day life becomes much more inclusive and less exclusive. We stop taking a position on this side or that side of something, realizing that everything is defensible from some position. If you choose a side, you are always missing at least some part of the story. And, as long as you are choosing one side over another, then you are giving up your ability to experience this shift. Only when you see all sides together at once can you experience this shift.

Tohei Sensei calls this the "Four Basic Principles" of our practice. These are his four ways to come upon this shift, this infinite Ki, this unification where nothing is separate and everything is unified. "Keep One Point, Relax Completely, Keep Weight Underside, and Extend Ki." These are the Four Basic Principles that we can follow, and each of them creates this shift in us, this change of our state of mind so that we see from a much bigger perspective, more inclusive and not so limited. This really was evident when you saw Tohei Sensei doing Aikido. Particularly when he was doing a demonstration, people would try to hold him, to trick him. And whenever they tried that, it turned out that he was always somewhere else than where they thought he would be. He always seemed to have an infinite number of possibilities in his movement. He never got stuck. Surely you understand that when you are practicing in the dojo, sometimes you want to move a certain way and you get stuck and don't know what to do. And Tohei Sensei says, that's because you are looking at it relatively. You are limiting your view. But in fact you can go anywhere and do anything, which he demonstrated all the time. So that is the value of having the experience of the actual physical technique. This is not just an idea. This is something you can practice and get into your body and experience. And as you sit more, if you do sit, then this is a similar experience. You begin to have a deeper appreciation of and experiential bonding with this Ki of the Universe, this unknowable. Or in other words this shift happens more easily for you, and you can not only use it in the dojo for passing a Ki Test or training with another person, but you can use it in your daily life all the time, particularly when

there is some challenge, which is often.

OK, so maybe you have some questions.

*Student: This stems from an earlier conversation I had with you. I have always had trouble with the use of the word “particles” to describe Ki. When you say particle, I tend to think of some “thing.”*

And...?

*Student: And so that has always been a difficult explanation for me. And the translation that you read is much easier, but there is still the use of the word particle, which to me means he is pointing to a “thing.”*

Well, let's think of physics for a minute. The physicists tell us that when you get down to what we call particles, small and smaller, at a certain point (and I'm not a physicist so maybe I can't describe this precisely) but at a certain point we can no longer tell the difference between particle and wave, or matter and energy. It depends on what you are looking for, how it will appear. When you get down to microscopic parts, there is no clear distinction between energy and matter. We understand matter relative to our senses. That's how we come to know matter. When you fall down and bump your head on the hard floor, you learn what is matter. Tohei Sensei's point is that when you look very, very closely at something, then the nature of it changes completely. Even a physicist will tell you that this table right here is 99.9% space, just open space. If we look at the nucleus of an atom as if it were the size of my fist, the nearest electron would be 300 yards away. And that's the only so-called matter that there is, the nucleus and the electrons. Other than that, there's nothing. It's all space. We “should” be able to put our finger right through that table. But we can't. So our senses define for us how we perceive the nature of matter, limiting the nature of the world we live in.

But then we sometimes have experiences that seem to transcend these senses. These kind of experiences are not so common, and usually only come about through intense practice of one kind or another. The nature of this kind of experience is that we seem to be free of the limitation of matter as we know it. I don't mean relatively, where we can walk through walls, but absolutely, when we experience the world in a completely different way, much more energetically than oriented around matter. Tohei Sensei is pointing to this and saying this is when we are experiencing this Ki, which cannot be defined as one thing or another, but is beyond such explanations.

I understand your hesitancy about the word “particle.” But think of it as Tohei Sensei trying to find a word for an “infinite part of something,” which is no longer a thing. At that infinitely small state, we already know from physicists that it is not any longer strictly matter.

*Student: Well, particles we can measure and count, whereas Ki is not something that is measurable.*

Yes, I think, again, as we look closer and closer we lose our ability to define and count and pin things down. At that level strange things start to happen. If you change something in a particle over here, it changes something in a similar particle over there somewhere. We lose the logical definitions that we use to navigate daily life.

It is mysterious, and we don't need to be physicists here. We don't need to figure anything out. We just need to know, as we do from our practice, that our senses are often fooling us, convincing us that we are limited and unable to move in some area, when actually if we let go of that limited way of thinking and Keep One Point so that shift happens and we see things inclusively, then we can move, then we have options in our life. We see the opportunities everywhere, instead of thinking, "I can't go there, or there, or there." So this creates a tremendous sense of freedom and joy in everyday living, let alone on the mat.

So I think this is an important discussion to have. For instance, I just received an email from a teacher on Oahu who was reporting something one of his students had spoken to him about, which indicated that the student had a pretty profound misunderstanding of the teachings of Aikido. And I took this personally, in a way. I am the Chief Instructor of Hawaii Ki Federation. How is it after all of these years of teaching, I can still have a student out there that can still have a such a fundamental misunderstanding of what it is that we are practicing. Well, it's very difficult. When I was training with Tohei and Suzuki Sensei, it had to be repeated to me over and over again. Sometimes it is easy to forget how difficult this all is. Suzuki Sensei used to say that our brain is like a sieve. You have to keep putting it in over and over until it starts to stick to the sides and fill up the holes, and then at some point it fills in the holes and you get it. But it takes a lot of material until it stops just falling through the holes in the sieve.

So I thought of this today when I read this email. It is difficult to understand, and for me it is difficult to express to you. Which is why I want to have these discussion groups, so that you have a chance to ask questions about what it is that I am teaching. I may be experiencing it, and Tohei Sensei certainly was, but it was difficult even for him to express. And he was speaking Japanese, and so relied upon someone to translate into English, and that person maybe was not so clear. This is why we need to look at the original text. As you know Sayaka helps me with that, so that I can find in there some of the juice that went into this originally, and sometimes it is lost in the translation.

Many of you are teachers, so I know your students want to know, to understand this. What is the essence of Ki? Do you feel that there is no problem now, that it is perfectly clear?

*Student: In the Shokushu, the idea is expressed that Ki cannot become nothing, and I am curious about that.*

OK. I think I mentioned, Tohei Sensei is working with finite words and concepts to try to point us to this shift I was talking about. He wants to point to the nature of, or essence of, this thing he calls Ki. He says it is everywhere. It's what makes up everything. It's not evident to our senses, but when you look either infinitely large to infinity in space, or when you look infinitely

small, at some point it registers with us, "Oh, that's beyond knowing." I don't think it is no important that there is no such thing as zero. Except that some people, in this kind of a practice, might become nihilistic. When you are sitting in meditation sometimes, for instance, you have an experience of emptiness. There doesn't seem to be any person home. There doesn't seem to be anything. There is just a sense of complete, vast, openness, free of anything, emptiness. Now, the experience of this is incredibly intense, but intellectually you might look at that and think "there's nothing then," nihilism. But actually, that nothing is not nothing. It's no-thing, but it's not nothing. It's filled with Ki. That's what you are experiencing, the intensity.

So, I'm struggling around using the phrase "Ki is something." It's not exactly a thing, because it can't be perceived on the level of things.

Does this help? What troubles you about the fact that when you split something in half, no matter how many times, you never get to zero?

*Student: I wouldn't say I'm troubled by it. I'm just curious as to why he mentions this two or three times. It must be important.*

Well, for instance, Tohei Sensei says, "The Universal Ki condensed becomes the individual, which in turn further condensed becomes the One Point in the lower abdomen, which in turn infinitely condensed never becomes zero," but continues, half, half, half. I don't know if this is sufficient intellectual explanation, but if you practice that half, half, half, you will continually experience this intense feeling, which we call Ki. If you stop that and allow it to become nothing, that feeling disappears. Ki, in that sense, disappears from your experience.

What Tohei Sensei is always pointing to is the experience he is having. With this Shokushu, he is trying to find different ways to help us have the experience he is having. So just reading this, and trying to understand it intellectually is not nearly enough. You have to actually do the practice, and then you see for yourself, "Ah, I see what he means. If I let that go and become nothing, it dies." So by infinitely allowing it to continue and never become zero, half, half, half, it becomes more and more intense. That is something that you experience in Ki Breathing and in Ki Meditation. So let's do more of that and you can have that experience, OK?

*Student: Sensei, what is the relationship between Ki and kokyu?*

Good question. When we say "kokyu" this literally means "breath." Or when Tohei Sensei would say "sono kokyu da," meaning "that's kokyu right there," meaning the "power of breath." So what is the power of breath? As you practice Ki Breathing you come upon a tremendous freedom from the fear of death. Because, when you're Ki Breathing, you have to give up the idea of gulping in air. And your body, as you start practicing Ki Breathing, is going to tell you, "You have to take a breath here!" Right? And you start to get intensely worried about the breath, and this is the fear of dying. So, by mastering breath, you begin to master this fear, and you access therefore a deep level of calmness.

As I said before, sometimes we say, "Tohei Sensei has a lot of KI," meaning he has a lot of kokyū. This means he has access to the experience on a deeper and more inclusive level than we do, or that the students do. You know, we often say the teacher is a certain way, Suzuki Sensei for instance. But that didn't mean that he owned something that was different than we have. When I first met him I said, "Were you born like this?" (meaning with all of this incredible intensity) And he said, "No. You want to be like this? Ki Breathing every day one hour. Start tomorrow." That's what he told me. Because I recognized it and was intensely drawn to that, then I did what he suggested. I thought, "Wow, I'd like to be able to experience that."

So of course, by mastering the breath, then you become very calm, and you have access, this shift takes place and you allow yourself to experience the intensity of Ki that's right now in this moment. Suzuki Sensei would just say, "Live your life completely." And if you are thinking about, or reflecting on, the moment, then you are dead to the moment. You are just thinking. That's not empty, but it's very, very shallow. It is not intense. The more you surrender to whatever is happening, without judgment, in the moment, the more you experience Ki of the Universe. And this is everything, your thoughts, feelings, senses, objects of senses, everything. And when you are experiencing that on a very intense level, Tohei Sensei would say, "Sono kokyū da!" "There is that kokyū!" So it literally means breath power, but it is pointing to your experience of Ki being very intense.

Sometimes we talk about throwing with Kokyū, and people think that means smashing someone down. But it doesn't at all. It's very relaxed. Suzuki Sensei may have looked like he was smashing me, but my experience of it was completely different than that.

*Student: Sensei, the definition of Ki, both the old and the new, is satisfying, and yet to me it's still incomprehensible. I can't say, "OK, I got it." Yeah, maybe I can explain it to someone, but it is really a bit of a conundrum to me. Maybe it's not so much "what" but more "why." In a way, I just sort of go back and forth from a physics approach to a philosophical approach. What's it all about?*

OK, Tohei Sensei doesn't provide this definition for us so that we can try to figure it out, or to "get" something intellectually. That's not really what I was asking you. All of Aikido is experiential. It's not intellectual, it's not philosophical, and it ain't physics. It's experiential. Sometimes we use some philosophical conceptions and sometimes we use some physics ideas or discoveries, to point to the nature of this experience. But it is an experience. It's not an idea. And the only way we ever really get there is by sitting and by practicing on the mat. But that doesn't mean that a discussion about it is unimportant, because when we have a discussion about it, the misconceptions that we have that hold us back from training freely and openly, get dealt with, hopefully. Only if you ask me, do they get dealt with. If you don't ask me, if you don't want to tell me what's happening with you or what you are thinking because you are afraid it will sound stupid or something, then maybe I don't get the chance just to remind you that this is experiential. I see that you are always willing to ask me. But don't worry. There's nothing to worry about. Just practice.

That's what I always end up answering, because that's really what it's all about.

*Student: Sensei, is being in attention the same as kokyū or extending Ki? Like, today I was trying all day to be in attention. And of course I got lost and tangled all up in thoughts. But I just want to know if being in attention is the same as extending Ki.*

Yeah, I don't really like "the same as." Yes, without attention there is no experience of Ki or kokyū, there is no experience of this shift. If you turn your attention to listening very carefully right now, to all the sounds, just that listening creates this shift in you. And it changes the way it feels in your belly instantly, right?

*Student: Right.*

OK. So, with Ki Meditation, we do that with everything, all of your senses, everything is wide open. That's really being in attention. But even a little bit of attention, paid for one tiny thing, allows you to experience that more openly and more inclusively, even if it's just one sense, or even the object of one sense.

So to say that it's "the same as," well, it's very important that that is our practice, practicing in attention. If we are not practicing in attention, we are not practicing. But it sounded to me, from what you said, like what you were doing today was a little bit like working at it, trying to make paying attention happen. And, I'll admit, in the beginning, sometimes it's going to be like that, that's all. But instead of trying to make yourself be a certain way, sometimes it's better to just relax, back off a little. Just rest, and then suddenly here's attention. It comes all by itself.

*Student: Right, like in the dojo you experience that more and more, like when you are taking Ki test, or when you are called up in the front. And then in the outside world, it's just baby steps, I guess.*

Well, that's fine. We're not in a hurry. It's practice. It's not performance. We're just practicing. Everything that life throws at us is another opportunity to practice. Sometimes we practice with it, sometimes we don't. And the more we practice, the more we'll be able to practice with whatever comes along. The less we practice, the less we'll be able to do that.

You know, I mentioned earlier about the teacher mentioning what one of his students had said, but I didn't tell you what it was. It was basically the idea that Aikido teaches how to increase pleasure and lessen pain. This is a fundamental and hugely mistaken notion of the practice. You cannot manipulate the world to make it bring you less pain and more pleasure. You can be in attention, so that whether it's pleasurable or painful you don't react to it and suffer. Suffering is a reaction to what we're given in any moment. If it's pleasurable, we suffer because we are afraid it's going to go away and we won't have it any more. If it's painful we suffer because we don't want it around us because it's too uncomfortable. So that's a reaction, an inability to accept whatever is brought to us. This is the fundamental nature of our practice. To accept whatever comes, in attention, at every moment.



So that's why, when I heard the student had said this, I wondered how could this student think this after how ever long he or she has practiced. There was no name, so I don't know how long the person has been practicing. But that's one of those things that is not easy for us to let go of. Even as you are practicing to stay in attention, you are often using that practice to get rid of pain and bring more pleasure! This is OK, but that's not quite it. That's why I said that maybe you should just relax a bit and not work at trying to manipulate conditions in yourself so much. Just rest and be with whatever is happening, be in it and notice. And then there is attention right there.

*Student: Sensei, you mentioned earlier that we're all teachers here. And you said also that the essence is more experiential as opposed to intellectual. So we're all teaching at different levels. If you are teaching to youngsters, how would you explain the essence of Ki?*

How would I explain it? Well, I certainly wouldn't even try to explain it with youngsters. I would just have a really good time with them, love them with all my heart, and let them experience that kind of attention. Now, if you see a good children's teacher, they are also very strict, because the children do need to learn to pay attention, and the one thing about kids is that they are all over the place, right? So when they learn to pay attention, then it gives them access, just like us adults, to a deeper level of fun, true fun, love and appreciation.

This one thing is true whether you are a teacher of children or of adults. The important thing about being a teacher is to exhibit what it is that you are teaching. In other words, you have to be experiencing this when you are teaching it. And kids will really see that, if you are. They will respect you and love you if you are having this experience. But if you are trying to figure out how to communicate to them in some way, they are going to get bored really soon.

I know that you have been doing this for a while, and you love to do it, you like the kids, right? So that's the key, loving the kids, and making sure they pay attention. Does that help? You don't have to explain anything to children.

*Student: But isn't there always going to be that one child in the class that wants to know what is Ki? How do you explain it to them, if they want to push you for an explanation?*

Have you had this experience?

*Student: Well, not yet.*

Well, I have, often, from adults, who insist on an explanation. With an adult I can help them understand that it's an experiential thing, not intellectual, and that they are really pulling themselves away from what it is that we are doing, when they try to figure it out. But with the child you need to do that a little more directly, without explanation, in other words, with some kind of a game. When they are having a good time, that's Ki. When the ice cream tastes good, that's Ki. You know, they get that. Well, it's not untrue, let's put it that way.

*Student: Thank you.*

Tohei Sensei used to say that when you are hungry and you get something good to eat, this is experiencing the Ki of the universe. I would also add that when you hit your thumb with a hammer, that is also experiencing the Ki of the universe. It's not just pleasure, but also pain. And when you start to open to what I am talking about, then everything becomes as intense as hitting your thumb with a hammer.

OK. That's enough. Thank you all very much.