

Calmness
by William Reed, 1997

Shimizu Jirocho was the legendary “Robin Hood” figure of Japan, one of the undefeated swordsmen in Japan whose reputation eventually earned him the highest certificate of ability from the greatest swordsmen of the modern (Meiji) era, Yamaoka Tesshu. The Tesshu line was to have an enormous influence on Tohei Sensei through misogi training at the Ichikukai, and Ki Society students will recognize the meaning of a story about Jirocho's swordsmanship.

Aware that Jirocho had never lost a fight, Tesshu asked him for his secret. Jirocho replied that there was no secret, he simply chose not to fight if he knew he would lose. When Tesshu asked him how he knew in advance whether he would win or lose Jirocho replied, “I lightly tap the tip of my opponent’s sword. If it bounces off with a crack, then I know I can win. However, if the tip of the sword whips back like a willow branch, then I know I cannot win so I find a reason not to fight.” Jirocho never lost a fight because he never fought a fight he would lose. On the strength of this insight Tesshu awarded him a *kaiden* certificate.

Bokken, or sword practice in the Ki Society always begins with an exercise in which you move the sword back and forth a few times, each movement diminishing by half, until the sword maintains the vibrant stillness of a tuning fork at rest. A partner then tests the sword in the same way as Jirocho, by tapping the tip of the sword to test the response. If the return of the sword to front center is lively, relaxed and instantaneous, this represents the imperceptible movement in stillness known as *seishi*, or living calmness. However, if the return of the sword is sluggish or stiff, this represents the weak and vulnerable state of *teishi*, or dead calmness. It takes an exceptional eye to be able to detect the difference between the two.

Dead calmness is often masked by bluff and bravado, which is borne out in experience when the bully turns out to be a coward, and when the giant has feet of clay. Tohei Sensei himself was frequently scolded during his military training in WWII by superior officers who mistook his relaxed manner for laziness. In bayonet practice with wooden rifles a drill officer once challenged the young Tohei to come at him as if he were the enemy. The officer came at him with stiff arms and clenched teeth, using every bit of muscle and technique he had to attack, however he could find no opening in the relaxed willow branch style. In short order Tohei knocked the officer's weapon out of his hand and continued his attack until the officer shouted, “Stop, you fool! What are you doing?!” Tohei answered that, “I was simply following your instructions, Sir.”

While the coward hides behind a mask of bravado, the truly brave person may appear to others to be too relaxed or too calm for the situation. Being calm in a crisis may

mean that you don't understand the situation, or it may mean that you have had some excellent training. So similar is the outward appearance of living and dead calmness, that even an expert like Jirocho apparently felt the need to test the tip of the sword. This is certainly better than learning from experience, because experience can be fatal. It is said that experience is the worst teacher, because it gives the test before the lesson. In lieu of experience we are fortunate to have one of the best simulations ever devised, the Ki test, which clearly distinguishes between *seishi* and *teishi*. The more experience you have with Ki testing, the better you become at learning to see the difference.

While Ki testing gives you immediate feedback on mind and body coordination, it is also important to develop a clear conceptual understanding of the difference between living and dead calmness, between relaxation and collapse. There are many examples and analogies in nature which demonstrate how apparent stillness conceals imperceptibly rapid movement. Both the spinning top and a helicopter propeller appear to be at rest when they are moving at maximum speed. We are not even aware of the turning of the earth, and yet how quickly the sun sets when it reaches the horizon. Wind and water are some of the most powerful forces of nature, and yet surrounded by them we often forget their existence. When was the last time you saw your hair growing? You may wish as someone did, to "Stop the world! I want to get off," but it cannot be done.

Japanese Haiku poetry celebrates this juxtaposition of calmness and movement in nature, particularly the poetry of Matsuo Basho.

*Into an old pond,
Jumps a frog.
Sound of water!*

*How quiet the sound
Of the shrill cicada,
After it penetrates the rock.*

Without any outside implements you can achieve the same effect of the calm sword through meditation. Correct your posture and rock your body side to side a few times, letting the movement fade by half, half, half... coming to rest in vibrant stillness. After the movement has stopped, a Ki test will immediately show whether you have come to rest in a state of living or dead calmness. You cannot reduce a number by half and ever reach zero. Though the movement may become too small to see, it continues unconsciously. If you try to stop it by saying the word "zero," you arrive at dead calmness and will fail the Ki test.

Living calmness means resting with readiness. After a minute or so have someone suddenly clap to sound the signal to stand up. If you are resting ready you will move with alacrity when required. This is the same state of relaxed readiness you need to receive an attack. If it takes you a moment to gather yourself up, then you have fallen into a slackened state of rest. People complain in the military about having to “hurry up and wait,” which can lead to lethargy. It is difficult to remain calm without losing power, but it is equally difficult to remain calm in the midst of activity. The secret to maintaining calmness in action is to recognize the difference between *seishi* and *teishi*.

Students ask what they should think about when practicing calmness. Calmness can be practiced, but it must become an unconscious habit if you want to use it in daily life. Ki training leads to unconscious calmness, which frees your conscious mind to become active without losing its bearings. Most people think they are calm, but their true colors come out under stress. You may have many fair weather friends, but who will stand by you when the chips are down? Relaxation and calmness are essential in enhancing performance. An excellent way to practice calmness is the relaxation exercise of rapidly shaking the fingertips. Let the movement rapidly fade until the hands appear to be at rest, but in fact are filled with Ki. Demonstrate the difference with a Ki test, and see how it makes both Aikido and Kiatsu techniques more effective. Shaking tension out of the fingertips is an excellent way to warm up a golf swing, and if the club is then held lightly with Ki it will give you the aura of a veteran golfer. However, you will still have to practice to sink the ball into the cup.

A common metaphor for calmness used in Aikido is that of the calm still surface of the lake which reflects alike the moon and the flying bird. Clear awareness is critical to the martial arts, where misjudgment can lead to injury or death. This state of calm reflection is brilliantly portrayed in Miyamoto Musashi's painting of a lone bird's shriek on a withered branch. The eye of the bird, no more than a jot of ink, reflects that same mind which could reduce a dozen opponents to a single state of awareness. In Western painting we have the Mona Lisa, whose eyes mysteriously follow the viewer as he moves past. Leonardo da Vinci and Miyamoto Musashi both knew that a calm mind opens a wider field of awareness. Calmness reveals the difference between *seishi* and *teishi*, between bravery and bravado, between what is real and what is fake.

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