

Sword and Spirit

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— Why Budo? —

Regardless of the times you live in, or the circumstances of your life, success largely depends on things you actually can control:

- Building strong relationships in a community of achievement.
- Forging a disciplined and positive mindset.
- Enhancing your physical health and capabilities.

These are exactly the things membership in a dojo provides.

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A Deeper Exploration of the Martial Arts...

Soul of a Dojo

The Sacred and the Spiritual

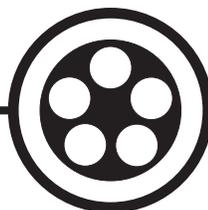
One of the more sensitive issues that every instructor is forced to deal with upon occasion is the reaction of some new students to the dojo shrine. While most newcomers can accept the standard explanation that the shinza is merely the focal point of the dojo and has no religious connotations, others find the concept of a shrine disturbing. Even when the sensei gives them extra instruction on the nature of the dojo *kami* (spirit), they may still regard bowing to the shinza at the start of every class as some sort of idolatry.

So, although most of you are familiar with the basics of the shinza and the kami it holds, let's take a closer look at the subject.

Kami

To talk of anything of a spiritual nature in Japan means you must begin with kami. Unfortunately, the word may not be easily translated into Western terms. The Japanese have the phrase *yaoyorozu-no-kami*, meaning that there are eight million different types of kami, so any general definition of the word is impossible; it may only be understood in context. In other words, we are only interested in kami in the context of the dojo kami—the fact that there are many other types may be safely disregarded. Still, we should start with at least an attempt at a general definition in order to establish a general framework for our dojo-specific definition.

Possibly the greatest classical scholar in Japanese history was Motori Norinaga (1730–1801). Physician, lecturer, philosopher, and poet, he was also a prolific author, producing over 90 titles in 260 volumes, and his works are considered essential reading for anyone interested in the fundamental identity of the Japanese civilization. His life work was the *Kojiki-den*, a detailed, 44-volume analysis of the *Kojiki* completed in 1798 after 34 years of research. (The *Kojiki* is Japan's oldest chronical, composed in the year 712.)



During his research, Motori devoted considerable time to the historical concept of kami and his statements on the subject may be considered as definitive.

According to Motori, kami may be defined as:

- 1) The deities of heaven and earth who appear in the ancient texts, and the gods enshrined in shrines.
- 2) Any being which possesses some eminent quality out of the ordinary and is awe inspiring, including not only human beings but also such objects as birds, beasts, trees, grass, seas, and mountains.

The first definition is concerned with Japan's mythology, so we may ignore it. It is his second definition that applies to the dojo.

Please note that, in Motori's definition, there is no clear distinction between person and kami, or a concept of something that is totally other than human being, as there is in the Judeo-Christian tradition of individual and God. In fact, his definition is so vague that it approaches the status of a non-definition. It does, however, give us a couple of important keys: an eminent quality out of the ordinary and awe inspiring.

Although these terms may not seem to apply to your dojo shrine—it may be, after all, just a simple shelf containing some dried flowers and an incense burner—read on...

One of most impressive things students ever learn about their dojo is that they can actually feel the shinza

from a distance. The experiment is simple: stand several feet away from the shrine, face to the side, close your eyes, and concentrate on the skin of your face. You will note a feeling of warmth and pressure on the side of your face that is toward the shinza. This works on everyone, assuming it is a proper dojo shrine, and many people find the experience almost frightening. In any case, it is definitely out of the ordinary and awe inspiring.

Just what is it that you feel? What makes the side of your face closest to the shinza feel warmer than the other side? It's the kami living in the shinza.

While such an explanation may not satisfy the pragmatic who believe that if something cannot be measured on a scientific instrument it does not exist, it is still the best we can do. And, as the effect is noted by both practicing Christians and scientific atheists, the kami-shinza explanation is both physically verifiable and spiritually esoteric enough to be accepted by (or, at least troubling to) all.

The important feature of a kami is that it must have a place. It may reside in a mountain or a tree or, in our situation, a small wooden box on a shelf. In any event, its location is fixed to a specific and limited site. You may not, therefore, equate a kami with Western concepts of ghosts or gods, both of which have freedom of action.

As for the exact nature of the kami, we must consider the *tama*.



Tama

A tama, in simple terms, is a type of soul (although not necessarily a human soul). To be more precise, it as a metaphysical substance of being and, as such, cannot be measured or detected by scientific means.

You should not think of a tama as being exactly the same as the Western concept of soul, which contains elements of ego. That is, a soul is a part of a being, and determines his or her essential nature. This concept is, in Japanese, referred to as the *mono* or *mi*. A tama, however, although it is manifested through a person, is viewed as being more independent. In a person, sickness occurs when the tama becomes weak and death is the result of the tama leaving the body.

Four different aspects of tama are commonly recognized: 1) the *aramitama*, which is active; 2) the *nigimitama*, which is harmonious; 3) the *kushimitama*, which is wonder-working; and 4) the *sakimitama*, which is gracious. These facets of the spirit are all positive in nature, which is a part of the fundamental Shinto concept of a person having varying degrees of perfection instead of being good or evil.

It is not just human beings that have tama (or, more properly, *hitotama*). A country may have a *kunitama*, a tree can have a *kodama*, and a rice plant can have an *inadama*. A tama is, therefore, a non-physical aspect of a physical thing. For example, a *kotodama* is the spiritual aspect of a sound, that property of generating a unique, spiritual feeling. An interesting aspect of kami and tama is that they work both ways; a kami may have a tama, or a tama may become a kami.

In the dojo, the spirits of the students gradually permeate the room. In other words, their combined tama form a kami that resides in the shinza. Then, when a new student walks into the dojo, he or she feels the tama of the dojo kami which, in turn, generates a particular spiritual attitude.

The Sacred and the Profane

There is, in Japan, a notable lack of the Western concepts of sacred and profane, or good and evil. Instead, Japanese philosophy has a triad of *ke*, *kegare*, and *hare*. Although these terms are often defined as

sacred energy, profane life, and sacred life, such definitions leave much to be desired. It is a little closer to the essence of the terms to think of ordinary and extraordinary.

A fundamental concept of Shinto is that, by the process of *misogi*, a ritual purification, one may attain a state of pure hare. A product of hare is ke, or divine energy—ke is the alternative reading for *ki*, with which you are familiar, and is used to denote a particular (pure) spiritual energy. This energy is gradually used up by daily life, leading to the impure state of kegare. Kegare and hare may be thought of as two opposing energy states and ke as the actual energy. Again, in the West, the traditional concept is one of sacred/profane: one thinks in terms of this is good and that is evil.

In classical Japanese thought, however, life is a continuing cycle of ke/kegare/hare. You can never be permanently pure; you must, at regular intervals, engage in *misogi* to remove the impurities of daily life and renew the supply of spiritual energy.

The application of this philosophy to dojo life is obvious, and is clearly stated in the classical training dictum of twice a week to stay where you're at (assuming, of course, that you regard your dojo as more than a mere gymnasium and budo as more than a mere set of physical movements).

You enter the dojo in an impure state of kegare, with your ke drained and stained by the travails of daily life. Then, a couple of hours later, you leave, vibrant and full of energy. You may with considerable justification, therefore, think of your training as a form of spiritual purification instead of just a learning experience.

The Shinza

Now, to put it all together...

One analogy that you may find useful is that of your national flag. To use Japanese terminology, the flag is the spiritual seat, the shinza, of the national spirit. This national spirit, the nation's kami, is derived from the life-force, the tama, of the nation's citizens. Then, when you see the flag carried past in a parade and feel a profound emotion, you are being influenced by the tama of the national kami.



It is important to note that, in the analogy above, there is absolutely no concept of a divine being. Yes, you feel something special when you see the flag, but it has no religious connotations.

For a second example, consider a military funeral. At the conclusion of the service, a bugler plays Taps and people experience a special emotion. Again, using Japanese terminology, we could say that they were feeling the *tama* of the sound, its *kotodama*. Note that, in this case, there is no mention of *kami*; the *tama* exists in and of itself.

For dojo use, we may summarize all of this as follows:

- 1) Everyone in the dojo, including a visitor, has a *tama*, a soul. Call it a life-force, if you wish.
- 2) When these individual *tama* are focused on a single task—in this case, the practice of a *budo*—they merge and form the *dojo kami*. This effect is cumulative: a student's contribution (either positive or negative) to the *dojo kami* remains after his or her death.
- 3) The *dojo kami* resides in the *dojo shrine*, the *shinza*. This is very important because, without a *shinza*, the spiritual energy becomes diffused and dissipates.
- 4) When the *kami* becomes strong enough it will have its own soul, the *kamidana*.
- 5) When a new student enters the dojo, he or she will feel the *kamidana* and be influenced by it.
- 6) The influence of the *kamidana* tends to mold the student into the pattern of the group, much in the same way as a regional accent tends to be adopted by a new resident of the area.

It is important to note that the *dojo kami* is the product of the members of the dojo. An improper spirit in the membership, therefore, can create an improper *kami* (which will, in turn, create improper members).

Concerning the ceremony of the *shinza*, we can say:

- 1) When you bow to the shrine, you are, in effect, saying, "With this bow I announce that I am aware of the special feeling of this room, an aura that was generated by all the students who came here before me."
- 2) Formal *reishiki* (ceremonial etiquette) toward the *shinza*, such as at the beginning of a class, is actually a form of *misogi*. By sitting quietly, bowing, and again sitting quietly during meditation, you become more sensitive to the *kamidana*. You forget the cares of the outside world and attempt to transform yourself from a state of profane *kegare* to that of sacred *hare*.
- 3) The actual training period is, or should be, an extension of the class-opening *reishiki*. By moving and breathing in a purposeful fashion, you become infused with the *ke* of the *dojo kami*. If you do this very well, your spirit becomes stronger than that of the *kamidana*—we call this *kiiai*, an abundance of *ki*—and will be absorbed by the *kami*. Typically, a junior student takes more than he or she gives; a senior student gives more than he or she takes.

All of this serves to point out a major difference between the life of a student in a school and that of a member of a dojo. The student's primary concern is how much he or she learns and, when the student has learned all that the instructor can teach, he or she may walk away without a backward glance.

A follower of a Way of *budo*, however, lives in an entirely different world. To the *budoka*, although rarely stated or even considered, the actual goal is to become part of the *dojo kami*. And, while the student may achieve notoriety by breaking six boards with a punch, the true *budoka* becomes immortal, with their spirit living on to influence countless generations of *deshi*. ☸

Fredrick John Lovret, the person responsible (at great personal sacrifice) for the successful transplant of the Itto Tenshin-ryu and Yamate-ryu from Japan to the United States, passed from this world in May 2015. His students are his legacy, and — collectively — we are determined to preserve and propagate the arts he bequeathed us. This essay was originally published in *Budo Shinbun* and is reprinted here by permission of Taseki Holdings LLC.

