

The Secret Power of Isshinryu

By Master William Scott Shamblin

If you have been a student of Isshin-ryu Karate for any amount of time, I am sure that by now you have heard the story of how Master Tatsuo Shimabuku liked to do his carpentry work. In demonstrations he would often drive a six-penny nail into a two-by-four using a shuto, or a hammer-fist, or sometimes the heel of his foot. He also had a peculiar habit of climbing up telephone poles and then down them head first. As a matter of fact, it was the witnessing of these feats and others that brought some of the first American servicemen to Shimabuku's dojo doorstep.

How could a man barely five feet tall, maybe around 125 pounds generate such power and focus when other men, sometimes twice his size, could not? That is a very good question. It has been said that Master Shimabuku himself said that he could do these things because he was "in good shape". Master Angi Uezu relates the story of how his father-in-law would point to his forearm and then to the concrete floor of the dojo, smile and say "same, same!"

Part of the answer also lies in the fact that Master Shimabuku understood, and was able to use the concept of chinkuchi. Pronounced "chin-koo-chee", it literally means sinew, bone and energy. Chinkuchi can be defined as a method of body management and breath control that allows the practitioner to move ki (Internal or bioelectrical energy. It is known as chi in Chinese.), to various places in the body, depending on the need.

The concept of chinkuchi no doubt came to Okinawa through the influence of the Chinese martial arts. The word itself comes from the hogen (local dialect) of Okinawa. It has been said that Master Shimabuku used the term when explaining and demonstrating Sanchin kata. Apparently to Shimabuku, Sanchin was the primary tool used for developing ki. It is worth noting that he also used the Makiwara (striking post), as a tool for not only conditioning the body, but for developing chinkuchi. Some have said that the master would speak of chinkuchi at other times as well; sometimes during kumite sessions.

According to accounts, Master Shimabuku would say that Judo-ka didn't understand chinkuchi, but Kendo-ka did. He would often illustrate by picking up a

bokken (wooden sword), strike downward with it and explain that one does not merely strike down or in at a target, but both down and in at the same time. By doing so one eliminates any unnecessary follow through and still allows for proper balance. When proper balance is maintained, the result is focused controlled energy specifically where it is needed.

Before a person can fully understand chinkuchi it is essential to understand some important concepts of Okinawan karate. The main three are ki, control, and centering. Chinkuchi can be any or all of these components, working together or individually to result in tremendous, controlled energy. It is (somewhat) like having a turbo engine in your car!

Ki

Ki is the most important component. Ki can be thought of as an electrical current that runs through the human body in cycles, giving power to the muscles and organs. It is this energy that makes the body go. Ki transference can be compared to a sudden burst of electrical current. It is generated from the center of the torso (Tanden, or Dan-Tien) and is transmitted by proper body manipulation. It is considered the most important component because without it our striking, blocking, and grappling techniques can become weak and ineffective. Physical strength is great while it lasts, but as we get older we sometimes lose our pure physical strength and speed. However, if developed properly our ki does just the opposite, it gets stronger!

Remember the stories of the old masters, and the amazing feats that they could do? Master Chojun Miyagi toe-kicking through a kerosene can and ripping the bark off trees with his fingers. Master Chotoku Kiyama is said to have had such control over his ki that he could root himself to the ground by extending his ki down through his legs and into the ground by about a foot! (Wonder how they measured that?) When asked how he was able to overcome men three times younger and stronger than he Master Kiyama replied, "Develop your tanden. Drop your mind there and operate all your actions from there. Practice your kata until your kata moves from your tanden. When you become the kata, you will have achieved the secret." Master Kiyama was also known for the following statement, "Always fight with your back straight." This relates directly to centering,

proper body mechanics and unimpeded energy flow, which are all components of chinkuchi.

Many say that Master Shimabuku taught that ki was not only used for punching and kicking, but could also be moved to any part of the body for focusing or blocking a technique. For example, if an opponent were to strike towards your head with a club, maximum energy could be moved to your arm as split second before impact, protecting it from the blow. Shimabuku implied that high-level Isshin-ryu stylist could bring energy to any part of their body if it was needed. Energy can also be distributed throughout the entire body at once to offer full body protection, because one does not always know where the blow may land. It is also important to remember that ki can be used against you. An example is the softer more circular techniques found in some kata. In Seisan for instance, the hook blocks redirect an opponent's incoming arm. The technique flows with the energy of the opponent's attack, leading them into an off-balanced and perhaps vulnerable position.

Control

The next component is control. It goes without saying that uncontrolled techniques leave a person off-balanced and open for counterattack. It has been said that Master Shimabuku would use the term chinkuchi sometimes when he would demonstrate control. One example that I heard he frequently used, was to have a student press a punch firmly into the palm of his (Shimabuku's) hand. Then suddenly the master would withdraw his hand and most of the time the student would fall slightly forward, off-balanced. Master Shimabuku would shake his head and in his broken English say, "No chinkuchi, no chinkuchi." In other words, the student didn't have control of his techniques.

Centering

The third element is centering. Centering is the ability to deliberately and instantaneously place all of one's energy directly two inches below the navel, in the tanden. The result of this is to become completely balanced at all times (even during stance transitions) and if need be, almost immovable. It can be said that centering is the process of simultaneously forcing energy from the feet, up the legs, into the abdomen, as well as forcing energy from the neck and shoulders down through the body to collect

in the tanden. If you are centered properly it is extremely difficult for someone to use your energy against you. You can move and use your ki, but you have control of it at the same time. Centering also relates to the ability to keep your balance point under control; that is, your weight placed in the proper position between your feet, and focused downward. Again, your weight is focused in and down.

So then it may be said that simply put, chinkuchi is the ability to maintain proper balance and control, while generating explosive energy (ki) which results in energy focus (kime). It is my belief that to Master Shimabuku, chinkuchi meant “controlled energy that could be called to use when needed”.

As stated earlier, Sanchin kata is the primary tool for developing this. To obtain the proper tension for Sanchin kata there is very definitely a proper sequence to be followed. The kata begins with tension within the Sanchin stance itself; i.e, gripping the ground with the toes, pulling in the heels and pushing out with the knees. This locks the lower extremities into place and also aids in the pulling of energy up from the ground and through the legs. This is maintained all throughout the kata on both the inhalations and exhalations, but the sequence of chinkuchi begins (after drawing the ki down deep into the tanden through the inhalation) with the exhalation process. According to my notes from Master Angi Uezu, the correct sequence is as follows:

1. Groin area (more specifically, the tightening of the anal sphincter muscles)
2. Inside of the upper thighs
3. Lower abdominal area
4. Sides of the body (latissimus muscles)
5. Upper shoulders (trapezius muscles)
6. Front of the throat
7. Sides and back of the neck, as well as the lower facial muscles

In conjunction with the mechanical movements, the ki is consciously moved from the tanden to and through the strike or block area of the body in which it is needed. The idea is that with practice this becomes no longer so much conscious effort, as it is a natural reaction. However, according to tradition, if this correct sequence is not practiced, the result can be injury or sickness. (I have no way of knowing if this statement is true.)

In the other kata, chinkuchi is practiced on certain moves, but should not be done on every move. Techniques that correspond with kiai are good places to practice chinkuchi, but they are by no means the only ones. Master Uezu used one of the stepping elbow strikes in Chinto kata to illustrate this point. The stepping out into the strong Seiunchin strikes in Chinto kata to illustrate this point. The stepping out into the strong Seiunchin stance, the slight twisting of the hips and arm prior to the elbow strike, and the harmony of both sequential movement and energy transfer, is chinkuchi.

I believe that the development of chinkuchi is the underlying essence of Isshin-ryu Karate. The concept, in one form or another, permeates the entire system. Sanchin kata is practiced to cultivate and control ki through proper breathing methods and specific muscular contraction and relaxation. All of the other empty hand (and weapons) kata allow you to practice and develop chinkuchi during combat sequences. The goal for combat should be to not only control your own chinkuchi, but also that of your opponent. Proper balance, coupled with maximum energy is the key to maximum efficiency. Chinkuchi is not absolutely essential to your karate training, but if you desire this maximum efficiency, then it is mandatory.