

Ukemi: It is Better to Receive...

When an experienced student (and some instructors) explain the meanings of “uke” and “nage” to a new student, they often present it as “taking turns”: “Uke gives use of their body for Nage to practice Aikido. Later, the other acts as “uke” so their partner gets to “practice Aikido”. The inference is that Uke isn’t practicing Aikido, but “waiting their next turn” - that the role is passive. This isn’t just wrong; it’s wrong-headed.

We find more such inference in the Aikido technique-naming convention: [attack]-[finishing technique], e.g. “tsuki-kotegaeshi”. Most non-practitioners take the hint that an attack is to be answered with an injurious counter-attack. And, if you think kotegaeshi is “non-violent”, check out the injuries an honest one will cause someone unprepared to receive it. And, ask that guy if he would rather have just been punched in the face ...

New students are encouraged to apply kotegaeshi – a potentially injurious technique they’re not yet competent to survive themselves - to a partner they’ve just met.

In my view, this is neither “martial” nor “artistic”, and certainly isn’t “benevolent” – not in practice, and more importantly, not in the larger implications. In my view, if you can’t receive a technique without harm or fear then you’re not competent to do it safely to someone else.

This brings us to the real-world application of “Aikido mind” - or the attitudes and social competencies many claim Aikido practice will produce (it will, when done properly).

If Aikido is about “blending” with force greater than one can oppose, isn’t the role of Uke most purely Aikido? Doesn’t it offer the more graceful and healthy mindset for dealing with the most challenging parts of life?

If my boss is a manipulative, power-hungry jerk who enjoys terrorizing employees with bureaucratic barbarism, where should my mind be – on the revenge I want to take (my kotegaeshi to his tsuki) – or on how to safely blend – to survive the attacks?

The way of Uke is to move; adjust; survive; avoid injury through harmonizing – in the service of survival, health, and the connection to partner (maybe keeping one’s job in the above example).

Which is more important to learn first - how to survive something - or how to inflict it upon another person? Which will be more useful in everyday life - patterns of comfortably blending, surviving, and freeing your mind from daily discomforts and stress - or patterns of counterattacking?

During practice, Uke must RELAX parts of them which may be suffering discomfort and even exposed to potential injury – as they refocus their mind, allowing their attention and creativity to dwell on and to employ the vast resources within their control. This is the fundamental structure of generative personal development as taught by many different masters of therapy and change-work.

“Good ukemi” is more than “skillful falling”.

At the moment of technique - kotegaeshi, for instance - who is “attacking” whom - and who is practicing “the way of blending”? The answer is obvious to some experienced Aikidoka. But, for various reasons, the opportunity to bring Aiki theory out of the dojo and into the rest of the student’s life isn’t always seized...

Admittedly, there is a time and place for an enthusiastic Kotegaeshi, or even a punch in the nose. But, the mental pattern of kotegaeshi-for-tsuki may equate to the “eye for an eye” mentality that we purport to rise above through Aikido practice.

All the best Aikido instructors I know were in their time very dedicated to – and very good at – receiving technique. Within ukemi are found the ways to bring Aikido into one’s daily life, as well as secrets of kaishewaza, and more. Fully appreciating, teaching, and practicing the meaning, metaphor, and magic of ukemi is the path not only to the best technical Aikido, but also the transformational life-skills that are Aikido’s promise.

Always learn to receive a technique - how it may cause pain, and how to prevent injury - before trying to apply it to others. The social application of this principle is a reminder to use empathy before applying judgment...