

That's a Nice Compliment

In 2000, we started using the idea of “mirrors” in our training. Compliments are a related concept, also for accelerating learning through installation of generalization. Training with compliments also builds the ability to apply, and to achieve fluid henkawaza between terminating techniques under dynamic conditions.

This is the entry from our student handbook regarding compliments:

Compliment (complimentary technique):

Every Technique or Method has a direction of movement or force, and the most natural resistance against a technique also has a most-natural direction of movement or force. Complimentary techniques are those that evolve along natural lines of such forces. (Ex: Gokkyo-Nikkyo: When receiving gokkyo, the natural resistance is to bend the arm - facilitating nikkyo, for which one natural resistance is to straighten the arm - facilitating gokkyo.)

These ideas are not surprising to experienced Aikidoka. Anyone who has practiced henkawaza understands how nikkyo flows with resistance into gokkyo; how sankyo flows with resistance into yankyo; and how kotegaeshi flows with resistance into nikkyo, just to mention a few examples.

The concept of compliments is based on three things:

1. Ai - Ki - Do says to go WITH the flow of force.
2. Related things are more easily learned in association with each other. (We learn ABCs - all of them - as a single “thing” called the alphabet - for just this reason.)
3. “In the real world, you seldom get the first technique” - Tom “Doc” Walker, Sensei

“Henkawaza is advanced-level practice”, some will say, but my rant on “advanced training” is in another article. For now, I’m writing about a specific opportunity for accelerating learning through presentation.

It’s easier to learn something in context with a related thing: It’s easier to learn how to turn a faucet OFF, when you’re also noticing how the faucet turns ON. This reminds me of the old rhyme for remembering which way to turn a nut: “Rightie-tightie; leftie-loosey” - which is easier to learn (and more useful) as a whole than if one tries to learn each half individually, and in different contexts.

If I’m operating with Uke’s left arm, then “rightie-tightie” (from my perspective) corresponds to Kotegaeshi. Doesn’t it make sense to point out that within that context “leftie-loosie” corresponds to Nikkyo (AND Sankyo)?

You may find it interesting that in many cases (like the kotegaeshi-nikkyo example), complimentary techniques are also “mirrors”. More on this in my article on mirrored techniques.

The simple pairing of complimentary techniques as a matter of course serves many purposes beyond the trivia of accelerated learning:

1. This presentation is often just one observation and one exercise away when the “mirrors” presentation is being used.
2. Competence in flowing - Aikido is about flowing, isn't it?
3. Competence in dexterity of manipulation and pick-ups. Notice how much faster, easier, and more confidently students will do both Kotegaeshi and Nikkyo after practice that trains them as complimentary.
4. Understanding of structural relationships. If you install a presupposition that for every rightie-tightie, there's a leftie-loosey, students will be finding those things on their own before you know it. They will be CREATING counter-rotational terminations dynamically by surfing the energy.
5. Experiential understanding of one of the most fundamental truths and powerful metaphors of Aikido - that there is a technique (success) to be discovered in every direction in the universe.
6. The vital “practical application” skill of coping with someone actually resisting a technique that the student may actually need for self-preservation, NOW (not 30 years from now).

“Yea, yea, henkawaza - we do that sometimes - this isn't anything new.”

Henkawaza is usually presented as “advanced” training and framed as “difficult” (an installation of a perception that retards student progress). It's also practiced as “something different” from usual - an unusual case - not the norm - which is a lie because in reality Uke is likely to resist Nage's every effort. And, Uke will likely have that opportunity because statistically, Nage isn't likely to be the reincarnation of O'Sensei.

One reason Aikido receives so much criticism is that Aikidoka can't generally deal with a resistive “partner”. Putting on their best Hans Christian Anderson, some simply assert that the problem is others' inability to see their powerful Budo. When the “blind” un-believer is a family member or friend, some Aikidoka excuse their lack of competence by calling it “restraint” - a comment that's more likely to comfort the Aikidoka than to convince the undisturbed other party.

As a matter of practical reality, we may notice that the ability to cope with a resistive Uke is a rather fundamental component of a “martial” art. The fact is that the greener the student, the more likely they are to NEED henkawaza because they’re less likely to nail the first technique!

A common topic of debate is how to generate this ability (in less than the usually-stated 30 years). I think we may take a lesson in this regard from the local high school wrestling coach or the local BJJ dojo.

For starters, those martial arts begin with the presupposition of resistance by the partner. When they learn a maneuver, the natural (or tactical) resistance is expected (rather than ignored or dismissed) - and is specifically trained-for. Perhaps this is why the average junior-varsity wrestler can work with the energy of a resisting opponent and achieve a technique - and why they can do that while they’re still in high school (before they’re forty). Perhaps this is also why people are “so amazed” at the learning curve and success of the BJJ schools. IMO, it’s not because their structural technology is so superior but because their training methodology is.

Most of what I see in Aikido is by comparison like trying to learn how to swim in the desert, where the only water is a mirage...

I think our objectives include building actual martial capabilities - and promoting real-world non-violent application of the Aikido metaphor. I think to this end, we may want to model some of the successes others have achieved by teaching in a different way. In this article, I’m specifically talking about teaching in complimentary pairs or sets - and doing that from the very beginning.

So much for the justification, reasoning, and logic - Here are some methods I use to achieve what I think are solid results. Your mileage may vary.

Complimenting Your Students:

Compliments can be taught easily, any time. Students may at first say “it’s hard”, leading you to think “it’s advanced”, but what they really mean is “it’s new” - just as rolling was when they started that. It will only stay “new” or “hard” to the extent that it’s not presented and practiced often enough to be “normal”. So, my first recommendation is to use it often enough that it’s normal. Then, watch out for the accelerated progress...

We define two kinds of compliments - “perfect” and imperfect:

- Perfect compliments are bi-directional: The most common resistance to one technique will feed directly into the other technique. Nikkyo-Gokkyo is my favorite example of this.
- Imperfect compliments are not really bi-directional: A common resistance to one technique will feed into another technique. Resistance to the second technique will not readily feed-back to the first technique. Sankyo-Yankyo is an example I often mention.

All compliments:

The most important component of teaching compliments is use of the term Compliment. “Henkawaza” is an all-encompassing term for “flowing from one to another”. It’s a general umbrella that doesn’t cement specific techniques together with a specific relationship. When we say that one technique is a compliment of another, we’re using the glue of context to draw a specific association, and to activate neural pathways between the two techniques.

Perfect Compliments: (two-way streets)

- Show any technique and let students do it only once or twice.
- Teach a perfect compliment to the first technique and let students do it only once or twice.
- Mention that it’s a perfect compliment (define that), and demonstrate the henka in both directions. Caution care for Ite owing to the dynamic nature and energy of the interaction.
- Practice is to enter either technique, encounter resistance, and decide to convert - or not, based on the dynamic of the moment. Do some conversions multiple times. Again, caution care for Ite owing to the dynamic nature and energy of the interaction.

Imperfect Compliments: (one-way streets)

- These are more like conventional henkawaza: technique → resistance → new technique.
- As mentioned above, the most important thing is to present the second technique as A COMPLIMENT OF the first one – to tie them together cognitively in this manner so the association is always there. We begin to understand the constellation of terminations thusly formed as a word spelled from letters rather than individual, isolated letters of the alphabet.
- Get creative, and find circles of complimentary methods that lead back to the first technique. (This is a method stolen from Filipino martial systems, they commonly refer to as “sumbrada”.)

Mirror-Based Compliment Training:

- When you use mirrors training (from my article on that), you may notice that many mirrors are also compliments of each-other.
- Once you've done the mirrors, you're one observation away from connecting the dots: "Hey, these mirrors are complimentary!" And, one exercise away from compounding the learning by adding the resistive practice to the mirror context. At that point, you'll be building strong generalization of movement as well as an ability to cope with changing dynamics of energy (resistance).

Whenever you want to add something new to your curriculum, you can change your culture to include the reality of resistive response - (or maybe it's "responsive resistance") training, you can compliment whatever you're already doing by thinking of compliments to give to your students. And, maybe afterward they'll compliment you ...

Have fun.