

## Ukemi: It is Better to Receive...

Ever watch a new student learning about the roles of Uke and Nage?

This is usually explained by some seasoned practitioner as “taking turns”:

“Uke gives service and use of their body and provides a physical interface for Nage to practice Aikido. Later, it’s the other person’s turn to get to practice Aikido, while their partner shifts into the role of Uke.”

The inference is that Uke isn’t practicing Aikido. In fact, why should Uke invest much energy, when Uke means “waiting your next turn”?

If Aikido is about “reconciling”, or “grounding”, or “resolving” potentially harmful or negative energy, then isn’t answering a tsuki with a kotegaeshi – a bit contrary to the spirit of benevolence?

The Aikido technique-naming convention is: [attack]-[finishing technique], e.g. “tsuki-kotegaeshi”.

Practicing that repeatedly and using that naming convention creates certain associations, and suppositions - PATTERNS of thought: An attack is returned by a potentially injurious counter-attacking response. (Forget the nonsense that kotegaeshi is “non-violent”. Ever seen a non-practitioner’s wrist that was subjected to an honest one? Ask that guy if he would rather have just been punched back.)

What about taking that first-day student onto the mat – where are typically encouraged to apply kotegaeshi – a potentially injurious technique – and one 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 patterns of thought created by inference. In my student handbook, one comment on ukemi describes it as “a de-facto measurement of one’s competence to apply a technique to another”: If you can’t fall from it then you’re not competent to do it on someone else.

We all applaud the ass-kicking Nage who coolly throws four Uke in randori. We talk about building THAT (action-movie) skill, as if it were a good representation for, or path to the real-life-skills that Aikido is so famous for \*claiming\* to build.

When you imagine three or four real-life non-violent situations for which Aikido skills would ostensibly be useful, which role is a more accurate metaphor – is a more appropriate vehicle for building the mind-set that will be most useful – Uke or Nage?

If my boss is a manipulative, power-hungry jerk who enjoys terrorizing the employees with heavy-handed bureaucratic barbarism, where should my mind be – on the counter-attack or revenge I'll figure out for him (my kotegaeshi to his tsuki) – or on how to safely and comfortably bend and blend and control the things that remain within my control – including my own mind (my ukemi for his kotegaeshi)?

If Aikido is about “blending” (with an energy or force or circumstance greater than one is capable of directly opposing), then isn't the role of Uke more purely about Aikido? Doesn't it offer a more appropriate paradigm for dealing with daily forces that are beyond our control?

The way of Uke is to move; adjust; and harmonize – in the service of survival, health, and the connection to partner (keeping one's job in the above example).

During practice, Uke must RELAX parts of them which may be suffering pain and potential injury – as they learn to refocus their mind, allowing their attention and creativity to dwell on and to employ the vast resources that they do 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 waza - Kotegaeshi, for instance - who is “attacking” whom - and who is practicing “Aikido” (the way of blending)? This may seem obvious to experienced Aikidoka (or not), but it seems surprising that the Aikido culture hasn't seized upon the opportunity to present Ukemi as an active application of Aikido principle; as an active practice; and as an overtly-taught metaphor for bringing Aiki Mind out of the dojo and into the rest of the student's life.

Eagerness to the role of Nage or slackness in the role of Uke belies serious errors in thinking, character, or perhaps teaching. 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?

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

Fully appreciating, teaching, and practicing the meaning, metaphor, and magic of ukemi is one way to walk that talk - and to easily support building the transformational life-skills that so many Aikido students are seeking.