

The Role of Ukemi in Aikido

by

Quentin Cooke – Aikido for Daily Life

It is common when you start aikido to think that nearly all the learning is to be gained from performing the techniques. So taking ukemi is simply a necessary evil, allowing your partner the opportunity to have their turn. Of course, this is completely false. The roles of uke and nage are simply two sides of the same coin. You cannot have one without the other and there is just as much to learn in either role, (*though if you pinned me up against a wall and forced me to toss that coin in the air, I would actually say that the role of uke teaches you more*).

Given its importance then, it is surprising how little emphasis is placed on teaching ukemi in most classes. Think for a moment about all the classes and seminars that you have attended and try and recall how of them focused on this aspect of our study. As a teacher, I know that I am as guilty of this as most, and so to re-dress the balance somewhat, I decided to write this article. (*I would love to have others add to this and give me their feedback*).

The following list sets out what I think are key principles that need to be followed if you want to improve your ukemi, your practise and your learning:

1. First and foremost, you are not working against your partner, you are working with them. It is a shared experience, where you both have the opportunity to learn.
2. Uke should act as a mirror to nage, reflecting back to them exactly what the consequences of their response to an attack are.
3. Uke needs to establish the appropriate level of energy/degree of power that they need to attack with, in order to maximise the learning experience for both parties.
4. Uke needs to be mindful of attacking in a way that allows them to maintain their coordination of mind and body for as long as possible.
5. Ukes need to ensure that their commitment to the attack is maintained from the moment that it starts to the final moment when they are thrown or the technique breaks down.
6. Uke needs to trust nage.
7. Uke needs to maintain martial awareness.
8. Attacks need to be purposeful, honest and without ego.

Let's now consider these in a bit more detail.

Working with your partner

Uke's job is to be as helpful as possible to nage in moving them forward in their learning. You are not there to defeat them, you are seeking to provide a learning opportunity. Only when you work together as a partnership with an honest desire of enquiry will you create the right environment for the most learning. It is no coincidence that aikido can be translated as the way of harmony with nature/life.

Acting as a Mirror

This is an incredible skill to learn and in itself, it is a lifetime's learning, but we need to start with this goal in mind. In essence, we want to reflect back to nage the consequence of their response to our attack. If they perform well, then the technique being practised is concluded successfully. However, if a mistake is made by nage then the move should either break down completely at that point or at least feel like some modification is required. Ideally, both nage and uke notice and take advantage of the kinaesthetic feedback. So don't fall down for no reason and don't be stubborn either, just follow honestly.

Gauging the Appropriate Level of Power

Rushing in, without gauging what you are up against is a common error and can be dangerous, particularly when you don't know who it is that you are practising with. When you commence your practise, there needs to be a period of sizing each other up, even when you are practising with good friends. You simply do not know how they feel on that particular session or how they will respond to what their teacher is asking of them. A golden rule should be to start from a low base and work from there. If the movement is static, then you certainly need to give your partner something of yourself, but using your full power right from the get-go, is simply inappropriate. If you are starting with movement, then your first attack should be at a slow walk. See how both you and nage cope and build from there.

This might go a number of ways. Uke may have more power than nage, in which case they need to dial back their power to a level that nage can cope with, but which will stretch them. Working on the borderline is a massive theme in aikido and deserves a paper in its own right. This basic premise though is fundamental to all learning. There is no joy in never moving beyond two plus two, but equally there is no point jumping from simple addition to algebra. To grasp the latter, students need get to grips with many other mathematical concepts first. I think that uke is always there to teach their partner, as you can learn as much from a brand new student as you can from a master, but that said, if you find yourself having to dial back your power, you are taking the role of taking your partner from one level of practise to the next as efficiently as you can.

When you find that you are taking uke for someone with more power than you, then it's really important not to attack at a level, where you do not have the skills to take a controlled fall. That's when injuries happen. Your job in these circumstances is to find a level, where you can maintain your coordination of mind and body successfully throughout the technique. It isn't nage's job to determine the speed of a move, it is yours. Their job is to come up with an appropriate response, not the response that they are capable of. That task for nage is also a lifetime's work, so there is plenty to learn under these circumstances for them. By slowing down, and maintaining your centre you will much more accurately reflect back to nage what they are doing throughout the technique. Most of us always have plenty of room to improve our technique and having an uke that is able to reflect back what is really going on, is our best chance of doing this.

Finally, we often find that we are well matched and largely speaking practising with someone at a similar level. The only advice here would be to maintain respect for your partner and not to be assumptive. Every session and indeed every moment within a session can bring change, and assuming that things will be as they usually are, can be dangerous.

Maintaining Coordination of Mind and Body

In order to maintain the integrity of the attack and to maximise learning experience this is essential. It is linked to the level of energy that you attack with, but it is a separate point. We might have to lower the level of energy that we attack with in order to maintain coordination of mind and body, but reducing speed is not enough in itself.

All too often, when the first attack fails, perhaps because when you went to grab the wrist, nage directed your energy/ body down, uke is prone to let events take their course, rather than seeking with all their being to regain their centre and continue their attack. In a real life attack, your best chance of survival when the first attack fails is to regain your coordination of mind and body, and follow nage's movements as closely as you can in the hope that they make a mistake, which will allow you to regain the initiative.

When we work on centring, grounding, relaxing or extending, four central pillars of aikido, on our own, we only have to think about what is going on with us and it is fairly simple to use these ideas to coordinate mind and body. In these situations you are effectively uke and nage, so unifying mind and body is relatively simple, but when we work with a partner, the whole dynamic changes and it becomes more complicated. The trick here is to realise that the object of your practise is effectively to become one with them, (to really feel connected in mind and body).

Physically the place or places, (the more the better) where you are joined is where you need to place your focus, (*you shouldn't be thinking of yourself*). For example, if you grab someone's wrist, that is the best place to gain information about your partner's response. Are they trying to pull away, or push in, or perhaps allowing you to push or pull? Your body will tell you everything you need to know about where you need to move in order to stay safe and keep your coordination going. (All too often we ignore this kinaesthetic information, focusing on what we want to do, or expect to happen, rather than the reality that faces us. Focusing your intention on your partner, will help you find the centre of the movement and the centre that exists between nage and uke. In finding this, you will find your own centre and this is what will help you maintain your coordination for as long as possible throughout the technique. If nage allows you to fully express your attack and sticks to the principles, you will be thrown in the end, but it is in fact your own energy that should throw you, rather than nage seeking to impose their technique/will on you.

Maintaining your Commitment

In many ways this is integral to everything said so far, but it is common to see people begin the attack and once they receive the initial response from nage, to stay where they are, like some kind of mannequin. This simply isn't martially sensible and is selling nage and uke short on the learning experience. It's important that having made the initial attack that you continue with that intent until such time as the technique breaks down or you are thrown to the floor. This gives nage the chance to see if what they are doing really works and for uke to explore the technique from start to finish. For me this has been a rich source of learning.

Following all the principles above and below will ensure that you are able to maintain your commitment in a meaningful and realistic way.

Trusting Nage with Your Body

Practising aikido takes courage. As nage you have to be open to attack. To be uke, you have to be prepared to receive your partner's technique/power. In your studies it is not unusual to experience pain and to cause pain in equal measure. It's rare that this happens because of bad intent, and usually, this simply results from clumsiness, or of lack of knowledge and sensitivity. Nevertheless, we cheat our partners if we attack with fear of the consequences. So we have to accept that we are lending our bodies to our partners, so that they might practise and learn. In essence, we have to trust them with our bodies and not worry about the consequences. Paradoxically, this is the best way of avoiding injury.

We can minimise the dangers by ensuring that we follow the two points above, but in the end, after ensuring that we operate within the bounds of safety for both parties, we have to believe that nage will not abuse the trust.

Maintaining Martial Awareness

Personally I do not train with any great desire to become a fantastic martial artist who can look after myself, if attacked on the street. Any move in that direction is a bi-product of my study, but actually I hope I never have to find out just how good I am in a fighting context. Instead I see the practise of martial art technique as being the vehicle to practise an incredibly powerful set of ideas than can improve my life off the mat. Furthermore I believe that if society adopted the principles within aikido, then the world would be a much nicer place.

Nevertheless, the point of using martial technique is because it's stressful to be physically attacked. We shouldn't forget that martial technique was developed for the battle ground. The consequence for one party or another was potentially death. Clearly, we cannot practise in this way, which is where the art comes into play. Like a painting of a rural scene, our practise is just a representation of the real thing. However, if uke loses sight of the martial consequences of what they are doing, then they are selling themselves and nage short. Uke, has to be mindful of what the martial consequences of moving into the wrong space or not following properly are. In simple terms they open themselves up to a killing blow. If we don't pay attention to this, then we are moving further and further away from the reality of martial technique and reducing the chance to learn the principles of aikido effectively. If we are to test, challenge and stretch nage, then we need to keep safe for as long as possible, to look for the openings that allow us to counter or escape, and in doing this we retain the integrity of the principles that we seek to embody in our practise and give our partners the best possible learning experience.

Attacking with Intent, Integrity and no Ego

If you have ever practised with someone who won't attack you properly, (*probably because they are fearful of the consequences for you or themselves*), or who is intent on proving that they are better than you, then you will appreciate how frustrating and limiting this can be. As uke, you need to attack with proper intent. So if for example, you are practising shomenuchi, and uke does not genuinely attack with the idea of slicing you in two, down the middle 'from knave to chaps', then you simply do not know if your defence to this attack is going to work if you are faced with it in reality. The secret here, if you are unsure of your partner's abilities or indeed of your own, is to slow your attack down. Just like driving a car, you require less braking distance with slower speed, so you know you can stop long before you actually hit nage, if they fail to respond or they respond in an inappropriate manner. Driving in this manner still gets you from A to B and on

the mat, attacking more slowly doesn't mean that you lose the intent. You can drive faster when you are more certain of your abilities and the road conditions ahead.

Equally, as uke you diminish the potential to learn for yourself and your partner if you are intent on turning your practise into a pissing contest. Aikido, as taught by the founder, is supposed to be practised non- competitively. The true victory is over self. So park your ego off the mat and treat every engagement with a partner as a first. In actual fact every engagement is unique, and though it may share much in common with other similar experiences, it is in trying to explore the subtle differences that we learn the most.

It is often said that you when you find things out yourself that the learning is much deeper than if someone gives you answer. Indeed this is the logic behind the traditional Japanese teaching method. Actually I believe that the latter is anachronistic and unhelpful, but I do believe that what your teacher tells you only means something when you feel it or experience it for yourself. The art of ukemi done well gives you the best opportunity of doing this.

This is why, when asked:

'Who is the teacher that has taught me the most?'

I always say:

'My students.'

Taking ukemi for them has revealed far more than I would ever have imagined. In fact the only reason why I wrote this, was because we explored ukemi in class together and I realised how much there was to learn.

Finally, I practise aikido always with its applications for daily life in mind. As we worked through our lesson on ukemi, I came to the realisation that many of the above principles would help smooth out the way we engage with other people generally. Life is not a conflict free zone. In fact, it is often a requirement to bring about positive change. So when you enter into conflict observing these rules will serve you well. Aikido really could reconcile the world if we let it.

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