

Regarding uke etiquette in our dojo

In the dojo, we devote 50 percent of our training time to being uke. Despite the significant amount of time we spend on giving and receiving ukemi, we have given relatively little attention to mastering this aspect. Influenced by the teachings of Jan Nevelius Shihan and Jorma Lyly, who have always emphasized the importance of ukemi, our dojo made a crucial decision over a decade ago. We dedicated one class per week exclusively to studying the role of uke, incorporating a specific etiquette for uke behavior. Among the guidelines we emphasize are avoiding any attempts to obstruct each other, refraining from teaching fellow students during training, and consistently allowing the technique to succeed from the perspective of uke. This decision has had a profound impact on our aikido practice, not only enhancing our technical proficiency but also fostering a stronger sense of community. In this essay, I will attempt to explain the manner in which this decision has influenced and benefited us.

When exploring the subject of ukemi, we can approach it from two levels: the technical aspect and the broader perspective. Let us begin by examining the technical side.

Which door opens effortlessly?

When discussing the role of uke on the mat, a common question arises: *"Does uke serve as an indicator of tori's technique effectiveness?"* At first glance, the answer seems straightforward: *"Yes, of course! Isn't that the purpose of our training? To execute techniques correctly so they work?"* However, upon closer examination, the matter may not be so simple.

At this point, I would like to differentiate between ukemi for kihon (basic techniques) and jiyu waza (free techniques), as they differ significantly. When practicing kata, our objective is to scrutinize the technique under a microscope, studying it closely with the hope of gaining a deeper understanding each time we repeat it. In my early days of aikido, I understood that aikido techniques harmonize with the energy and direction of the attack, effortlessly redirecting it. This aspect makes aikido suitable for people of all ages and physical abilities. I still hold this belief. Therefore, when studying a particular kata, our aim is to recognize the sensation when, for instance, ikkyo flows naturally and effortlessly.

Imagine this analogy: Tori stands in a room with multiple doors, each labeled with a technique name like "ikkyo," "kote gaeshi," "irimi nage," and so on. When studying ikkyo from shomen uchi, we seek to experience the sensation of the door labeled "ikkyo" opening effortlessly, while the other doors remain firmly closed. Opening any of the other doors would require force or a change in technique, but the ikkyo-door opens almost effortlessly. By developing this sensitivity, we can discern which technique is most appropriate when defending ourselves against spontaneous attacks in jiyu waza. Recognizing the door that opens easily allows us to choose the most suitable technique logically, rather than forcing a technique. As written above, I have always understood this to be an important principle of aikido.

Now, let's contemplate the consequences if uke assumes their role is to make tori's technique impossible. We have all encountered such situations. The teacher demonstrates ikkyo, and uke blocks our attempt to perform ikkyo as demonstrated. Uke can easily do this because they anticipate the technique and adjust accordingly. However, what does this achieve? Tori learns the sensation of encountering a firmly closed door labeled "ikkyo." When instructed by the teacher to practice ikkyo, tori might then resort to using force or searching for tricks to overcome the resistance. This approach does not contribute to our goal of developing a sense of which technique comes naturally.

Nevertheless, let me clarify that I am not suggesting that training in a setting where both partners intentionally make the technique (almost) impossible by blocking each other has no value. Such training can offer insights, but, in my opinion, it should not be our default approach to ukemi when practicing kihon waza, considering the reasons mentioned above.

Cooperative ukemi should not be misconstrued as being sleepy, passive, or readily surrendering without cause. On the contrary, as Jan Nevelius Shihan once stated, *"A good uke should facilitate the intended technique in kata training and make any other technique impossible."* Achieving this requires a profound understanding of the technique from both tori and uke perspectives, signifying an advanced level of practice. The attack must be sharp, the connection deep, and the comprehension of angles and distance precise. Such uke training not only assists tori in executing the required technique correctly but also enables uke to utilize the 50% of training time as the attacker to deepen their understanding of the technique. It's akin to examining a coin from both sides. Both partners benefit and progress together.

I recall training with a friend from New York. After performing the technique four times, I remarked, *"I think it's your turn now."* To my surprise, my friend replied, *"But it is always my turn."* Her response struck a chord within me. It reminded me that every time we engage in a technique, regardless of whether we assume the role of tori or uke, it is an opportunity for us to learn.

But does it work?

To a certain extent, our minds are still inclined to equate physical strength with effectiveness in techniques. However, what does it truly mean for a technique to be "effective"? Is it measured by the ability to execute ikkyo against a resisting partner? Before determining if something is effective, we must first define its intended objectives. A hammer is not deemed ineffective because it cannot be used to drive a screw into a wall. It simply serves a different purpose, excelling at driving nails. Similarly, we must inquire: for what purpose was aikido designed?

"Aikido is the Way of Harmony. It brings together people of all races and manifests the original form of all things. The universe has a single source, and from that core all things emerged in a cosmic pattern. At the end of WWII, it became clear that the world needed to be purified of filth and degradation, and that is why Aikido emerged. In order to eliminate war, deception, greed, and hatred, the gods of peace and harmony manifested their powers. All of us in this world are members of the same family, and we should work together to make discord and war disappear from our midst. Without Love, our nation, the world, and the universe will be destroyed."

— Morihei Ueshiba, The Art of Peace

As I never had the privilege of meeting O Sensei, my response to this question is based on my own interpretation of his translated words. While I do not disregard the notion of aikido as self-defense (as budo principles rightfully form the foundation of our techniques), my understanding is that O Sensei developed aikido to unify humanity. Therefore, when questioning the effectiveness of aikido, perhaps we should also consider this perspective, delving into the metaphysical aspects of the practice.

What kind of person do I want to be?

Another impactful quote by Jan Nevelius Shihan that greatly influenced my training attitude is, *"Maybe we don't only need to ask, 'Is my technique effective?' but also ask ourselves, 'What kind of*

person do I want to be?" To me, aikido is a remarkable tool for self-development, not only on a physical level but especially on a spiritual level. It provides a unique opportunity to examine ourselves, particularly our ego, in situations of conflict and learn about our reactions and behaviors. In light of this perspective, we should consider the effects of constantly blocking each other. It means we are training, possibly every day, to be uncooperative and difficult in our interactions with others. However, let us contemplate this: What we train becomes deeply ingrained within us. Is this truly the type of person we aspire to be?

For myself, I can say that I would much rather spend my training time fully aware of my interaction with my partner, aiming for a deeper understanding of our communication and working towards a higher resolution for our conflicts, rather than being obstructive and uncooperative. Although it may seem that a training partner who doesn't block is being passive or lazy, the opposite is true when we replace blocking with the notion of refining and polishing the technique from the uke's perspective.

"But," you may be thinking, *"am I not helping my training partner by blocking them and highlighting their shortcomings? I have good intentions!"* While I can empathize with this notion and held similar thoughts for many years, allow me to share an excerpt from a text by Prof. Rachel Naomi Remen on the concept of helping:

"In recent years the question of How can I help? has become meaningful to many people. But perhaps there is a deeper question we might consider. Perhaps the real question is not How can I help but How can I serve?"

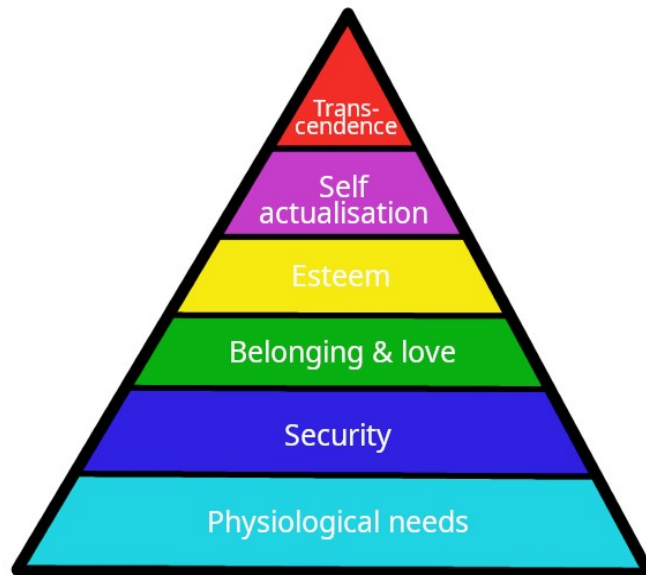
Serving is different from helping. Helping is based on inequality; it is not a relationship between equals. When you help you use your own strength to help those of lesser strength. If I'm attentive to what's going on inside of me when I am helping, I find that I am always helping someone who is not as strong as I am, who is needier than I am. People feel this inequality. When we help we may inadvertently take away from people more than we could ever give them: we may diminish their self-esteem, their sense of worth, integrity and wholeness. When I help I am very aware of my own strength. But we don't serve with our strength, we serve with ourselves. We draw from all of our experience. Our limitations serve, our wounds serve, even our darkness can serve. The wholeness in us serves the wholeness in others and the wholeness in life. The wholeness in you is the same as the wholeness in me. Service is a relationship between equals."

Whenever we feel the urge to correct, teach, or "help" our training partner, we can view it as an opportunity for self-awareness and learning something about ourselves. We can examine the origins of that urge and why it arises within us. Perhaps we feel the need to correct to alleviate our own insecurities. Maybe it's our way of asserting that we understand what's going on. It's painful to admit, but there may even be a small part of us (likely our ego) that seeks to feel superior. Despite feedback often being well-intentioned, it can change the dynamics of the relationship from one of equality to something else.

Instead of approaching training with a mindset focused on "helping," let us adopt the perspective of "serving," as described in the aforementioned text. Serving implies a mutual learning process based on equality, with the shared objective of attaining the highest possible understanding of the technique.

Theory of Learning

You may already be familiar with Maslow's hierarchy of needs, a valuable framework for understanding human development and the essential elements required for self-actualization.



Interestingly, this hierarchy also holds relevance in the realm of neuroscience. Some brain scientists argue that in order for learning to occur rapidly and sustainably, the fundamental need for a sense of security must be fulfilled. The learning process is hindered when it is interrupted by punitive measures for making mistakes. Notably, we have observed the same phenomenon in our dojo. When we began emphasizing the avoidance of blocking each other during practice, concerns arose that it might diminish the challenge and consequently impede learning effectiveness. However, over the years, we have discovered quite the opposite to be true. By refraining from punishment every time a mistake is made, we open the door to free exploration, development, and creativity. The collective progress we have witnessed in our dojo over time has reaffirmed the validity of Maslow's perspective.

Speaking of learning, there is another aspect to consider, which highlights the benefits of minimizing correction by training partners in the learning process. If we rely solely on our partners to point out openings or flaws in our technique, we relinquish the need to actively observe and seek out these weaknesses ourselves. By being permitted to identify shortcomings in our waza independently, we assume responsibility for our own progress and take charge of our learning journey. This necessitates a close and mindful study of our actions and enhances our ability to avoid repeating mistakes that we have personally recognized. Moreover, when we actively search for openings in our technique, rather than having them consistently pointed out by others, we gradually develop the skill to identify and address these mistakes. It represents a crucial step in our learning process.

Another significant consequence of this shift, which should not be underestimated (and can also be understood through the lens of Maslow's pyramid), is the growth and strengthening of our community. While it may not be the sole factor behind it, we have witnessed our dojo community flourish as a result of the change in uke etiquette. It appears that people's trust in one another has deepened, leading to stronger physical connections and fostering deeper mental and emotional bonds.

Additionally, ask yourself this: How often have you genuinely embraced unsolicited advice or criticism? How frequently has uninvited criticism or feedback left you feeling self-conscious, discouraged, and, let's be honest, even annoyed? Every time we criticize someone without their

request, there is a risk of causing a slight strain on the relationship. Is it truly worthwhile to take that risk for the slight possibility of some technical improvement in the other person's ikkyo? Especially when we consider that feedback given in response to a direct request is much easier for the recipient to accept and work with.

“As soon as you concern yourself with the “good” and “bad” of your fellows, you create an opening in your heart for maliciousness to enter. Testing, competing with, and criticizing others weakens and defeats you.”

— Morihei Ueshiba, The Art of Peace

Of course, there is an exception to this rule, which pertains to the teacher of the class. Usually, the teacher provides feedback without explicit solicitation. However, by attending the class, students implicitly grant permission for this feedback. That, of course, is an entirely different dynamic and context.

The Power of "Yes" and "No"

In my view, blocking someone in Aikido is akin to saying "no" to them. While there are certainly situations where saying "no" is healthy and necessary, the daily training environment on the mat is different. Just imagine the transformative impact it can have on a community when individuals choose to say "yes" to each other, to the collaborative process, and even to life itself, instead of approaching interactions with a spirit of "no."

I must confess that I still sometimes fall into the trap of wanting to "help" others more often than I'd like. It's just as easy for me to spot mistakes in someone else's technique as it is for others to find flaws in my own waza. However, unless I am the designated teacher of the class, it is not my role to correct others. My role is to study and learn. Perhaps I shouldn't assume that I know better or have a complete understanding of what the teacher has demonstrated. Moreover, we should have faith that the class instructor will observe each student and provide the necessary feedback for individual improvement.

To conclude this essay, I would like to share a poem by Rabindranath Tagore that beautifully sums up my sentiments regarding the practice of uke:

I slept and dreamt that life was joy.

I awoke and saw that life was service.

I acted and behold, service was joy.

"Always train in a vibrant and joyful manner."

-Morihei Ueshiba

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