

Testing your kamae

Having spent time on your kamae, how do you know if it is improving?

There is a very useful process of testing your kamae. This process enables us:

- to examine each facet of our kamae.
- to develop relaxation.
- to check Centre.
- to reduce the natural inclination to resist applied pressure.
- to check whether our kamae is grounded.

We are not trying:

- to be unmoveable.

Another important facet of testing our kamae is to develop honest feedback between aikidoka. It doesn't matter if you don't get it right every time - what matters is total honesty in the practice with the aim of achieving our ultimate goal: a solid kamae. It can be a frustrating and seemingly pointless process at times - just keep persevering.

How to test your kamae

In pairs, one person takes up kamae (tori). Try to avoid jiggling about and adjusting; just move into your normal kamae. Try to relax. Don't think about being rock solid and unmoveable, just be.

Test 1

Your partner (uke) should now rest their hands gently on your shoulders (front not top). Slowly increase the pressure directly backwards through the shoulders. Don't shove hard and don't increase the pressure too quickly; this exercise is about helping and improving your training partner, not trying to catch him out. Tori can let his hands rest by his sides if he wishes.

Tori is trying to get a feeling of being grounded. If their kamae is right uke will get the sensation of pushing against a wall: the wall doesn't resist but it doesn't go anywhere either.

What happens a lot is that tori tries to be unmoveable and leans into the pressure being applied by uke. If uke feels this then simply take your hands away - tori will fall forward or wobble, and this will demonstrate to tori that they are not letting their kamae do the work.

Uke should be constantly checking whether there is any sensation of pushing back by tori - if there is, give tori feedback on what you are feeling.

Eventually uke will be able to push harder and harder - it won't make any difference, they won't be able to move you.

Test 2

Do exactly the same test but from behind. This is much harder! The principles are exactly the same (in theory) and will highlight the inherent weakness in your kamae. The natural inclination is to push back against uke's pressure - it's already too late at this point! Tori must learn to be honest - a good uke will feel the resistance anyway.

Just to re-emphasise, the idea is not for uke to shove tori. There is no need - if tori's kamae is wrong surprisingly just the slightest pressure will move them quite easily.

Test 3

Tori moves into kamae. Uke then tries to lift their front foot off the ground by grasping the ankle. Uke does not yank at tori's ankle, just simply tries to lift it. Tori is not trying to resist uke's pull - once again it is about letting your kamae just be. Be honest with yourself.

As your kamae improves uke will be able to try harder and harder to lift your foot. Eventually it won't matter how hard uke tries, they won't be able to move you.

Test 4

Exactly the same as test 3 but with uke trying to lift tori's back foot. This is perhaps one of the hardest kamae tests, but is a sign of progress as your back foot becomes increasingly heavier and heavier.

Test 5

Tori moves into full kamae. Uke then lightly grasps either the top or bottom hand and gently pulls. Uke is trying to feel for resistance (tori pulling back). As with all the other kamae Tests, the aim here is for tori to just let his kamae be. What commonly happens is that tori either falls forward or sits back on his hips to resist the pull.

Test 6

The same as test 5 but this time uke pushes. What commonly happens is that either tori's arm collapses or he pushes back against uke.

Our Emphasis

At the Meikyokai Dojo we emphasise the following points when testing our kamae:

- Tori needs to relax - let all the tension out of the shoulders and arms.
- Uke is helping tori improve - not trying to beat him.
- It doesn't matter if you don't get it straight away - keep working on your kamae.
- Be honest with yourself
- Don't think you have to be immovable - that level of kamae will take many, many years to achieve.
- Use the test to improve your kamae - not your ego!
- Examine your kamae using the feedback from the kamae Testing and modify your kamae accordingly - don't keep making the same mistakes.
- Search for a sensation of heaviness and relaxation - not tension.

These tests can be applied to various postures, such as seiza. The principles are exactly the same. You can be in kamae in standing or kneeling or even if someone has you in shiho nage. The latter is obviously very difficult to achieve, but the point is that the principles are exactly the same.

It is also important for you to realise that the aim is for your kamae to be strong whether you are tori or uke. The ultimate goal is to have a strong kamae no matter what position you are in. Sound kamae allows for a strong defensive foundation. This is as important for the role of uke as it is for the role of tori.

It is said that the best Aikido masters no longer worry about stances and postures - they were always in kamae. It is a mind-blowing concept but it is something to aim for. Improvement is not going to occur overnight - it will take years and constant application and training but the end result will be well worthwhile all the frustration and effort.