

# The Role of uke

It is said that the best Aikidoka are the best ukes. This is something worth thinking about very carefully - why should being a good uke be so important?

The important parts of Aikido training are not about fighting - this is something that many people don't get. Aikido is about learning to blend and feel the direction of an attacker's energy: sounds 'airy-fairy' but in order to learn the 'feel' much of the training has to be cooperative rather than combative.

## Intent

In a normal street fight each person is usually trying to knock the other person out, or hurt each other in some other way (head butt, kick to the groin, bite, use a weapon etc). To attack effectively requires a commitment: the attacker has to come forward and then do something with a fair degree of energy behind the attack if they have any hope of making an impact. This energy is usually described as intent.

Without intent an attack is meaningless. Without intent behind an attack you don't actually need to do anything because you are in no danger. In some quarters Aikido is accused of being unrealistic because of the nature of some of the attacks: weak grasps and feeble punches and kicks. Some of this criticism is perfectly valid, but there is also a degree of misunderstanding about what is actually being achieved. But one thing is for certain: Aikido can't have it all ways - if you are going to train in a non-combative way then it must be done the right way so that it can then be applied effectively in a real combat situation. And eventually you must pressure the technique to see if it really works.

Uke must provide intent with his/her attacks. Telegraphed yokomen attacks, punches that don't go anywhere near the vicinity of tori and grasps that a child could break do no one any good whatsoever. Making tori 'look good' is not the aim of the game. Whilst the idea is not to fight, the idea should be that if tori does not get out of the way of ukes attack then they get a damn good clump! Without this then tori never learns to respect attacks and will fold under real pressure, and it is amazing how quickly tori learns to move after getting a good punch on the nose!

## Constant and consistent energy

Aside from intent, the next thing uke must provide is constant energy - this is very important for the beginner. Some common faults:

- 1) **Inconsistent energy:** For example, uke grasps tori's wrist and pulls and then just as tori goes to react, uke changes the direction of energy and pushes or, just as bad, stops pulling and gives no energy. The beginner ends up very confused and has no clear idea how he/she is supposed to react.
- 2) **The wrong type of energy:** Another common fault is that even though ukes energy is consistent, they pull when they should push, and vice-versa, or don't give any directional energy at all when required. Unless uke gives the correct energy for the specific technique then tori has absolutely no chance of learning

the correct response. For example, if you are practicing an irimi type movement from a grasp then it makes absolutely no sense for uke to push. Seems obvious yet it is astounding how often this happens.

- 3) **Resistance:** When practicing technique, especially with the beginner, it is important the uke does not resist. But neither should he/she just fall over when touched. Uke should just 'be' - this is a very difficult balance to achieve, and requires a high level of understanding by uke.

When training with the beginner the experienced uke needs to put them self in the correct position for tori so that he/she gets to understand quickly how their body positioning should feel and where uke should be - this supports and reinforces the development of form and has nothing to do with throwing in the early stages. Eventually it won't matter what uke does: uke will get put where tori wants him to go. This process requires an understanding uke who knows the techniques and who has the ability to guide the beginner.

## Uke versus ukemi

It is very annoying to watch ukes jumping out of techniques, especially those like kote geishi. Whether this is through fear of potential pain in the wrist or in the misguided belief that they are helping tori by swan diving, the point is that they are not helping tori at all.

Flashy big breakfalls that bear no relationship to the technique being performed also miss the point: You can have excellent ukemi but not understand the first thing about being a good uke the lesson can be a very, very painful one when you come across an Aikidoka who can really throw you. The lesson? Go where tori puts you and blend with their energy.

Perhaps one of the least understood principles of being a good uke is ensuring that no matter what position you end up in or what tori does to you, you must be in the strongest position possible for you. This means correct foot movement and body movement and reading of tori's intent and uke putting themselves in the right position. The aim is that in randori if tori does not do the technique properly then uke is able to counter effectively or apply an effective atemi strike to tori, despite being in an apparent position of weakness.

By applying this principle religiously in training, if you get attacked and are used to the art of self-preservation then you will be far more likely to have the ability to regain the initiative in a difficult situation. It might be hard to understand but it is actually about maintaining your kamae - and is much easier said than done!