

Ukemi

By Tres Hofmeister

In budo, training generally follows the kata training method. In the kata training method, two people train together as partners, each taking a pre-arranged role. In budo, these roles are *uke* and *nage*. For training to be fruitful, a proper understanding of these two roles and their relationship is important.

The role of *nage* is sometimes misunderstood as the "side that wins," with the role of *uke* "the side that loses." In the original Japanese, *nage* is a stem of the verb *nageru*, to throw. *Uke* is a stem of the verb *ukeru*, to receive. Thus, *nage* throws or executes a technique, while *uke* receives the technique.

The distinction is an important one. **Uke and nage do not compete with one another**, with one individual emerging the victor. Instead, together they explore the intricacies of a particular situation and the application of a particular technique. The role of *uke* is to create a setting where *nage* can apply budo principle in a specific contest. In this setting, *nage* learns to apply technique in a fluid and effective manner. If either misunderstands their role, training is hampered.

In actual physical conflict, there are of course no fixed roles, and no rules. In order for the kata method to be effective, *uke* and *nage* must both understand the distinction between actual conflict and what goes on in the dojo. When *uke* resists unreasonably, he has forgotten that *nage* is constrained to the technique being practiced only by their mutual agreement. Often people resisting a technique do so from a fundamentally weak position with no apparent awareness of the martial alternatives available to their partner.

When *nage* throws with unreasonable force, he has forgotten that *uke* is offering an opening, and has foregone any attempt to counter. No reasonable person will give someone an open opportunity to injure them; *uke* receives the technique in a spirit of trust. Conversely, *nage* trusts that *uke* will attack appropriately. *Nage* too can then practice with confidence that he will not be injured by an unexpected attack. In this way, we develop confidence and trust in one another, and the intensity of training can increase.

This agreement between *uke* and *nage* is flexible and allows for a wide variety of training. The important thing is that *uke* and *nage* both understand the nature of the training situation at a given moment. Sometimes training is soft or slow, sometimes hard or fast, sometimes gentle, sometimes severe. This variety is only possible when *uke* and *nage* understand the nature of the training at hand, and understand each other. Everyone has a different level of experience and different physical and emotional make up. These must always be taken into account when training. Each training situation is unique. The ability to adjust appropriately and train with everyone is a good example of the effective application of principle.

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Practicing ukemi gives us the opportunity to experience budo techniques from the receiving side and gives us a more complete understanding of technique. Our application of principles such as *kuzushi* (breaking one's partner's balance), *ma-ai* (control of distance), and *musubi* (joining) is improved by experiencing them directly. In addition, the practice of ukemi develops skills and physical ability that only serve to improve our budo. The best uke are often the best technicians.

Fifty percent of the time we spend on the mat we spend taking ukemi. Rather than spending this time waiting for "our turn," we can take advantage of the rich training opportunity available.