

Appendices



Kanji: “Bu • do”

Appendix 1: Uke and Tori

In looking at aikido, you see two people at times whirling around in sometimes incomprehensible fashion. One seems to be attacking, but at the same time does not always behave as you would think an attacker would behave. So what do they actually do?

Uke attacks, tori defends by moving and executing technique, uke follows, falls, rolls, is immobilized. Just a brief summary of the division of roles played by uke and tori during aikido practice. It is however, a tad too brief. A lot is missing from this summary many will agree. The strange thing is however, that it is quite an accurate description of what happens almost 90% of the time in aikido practice. Even during demonstrations with high level practitioners ukes are simply airborne most of the time. At times it seems a bit too easy.

It's a type of dynamic which rules aikido. But is it a dynamic of consensus of patterns or veritable aiki technique we much endeavor to train in?

The relationship between uke and tori, the dynamics of their energies is what in my opinion is the essence of aikido training. One of the translations of the symbol which is pronounced ai is “together”. The coming together of these two people, the roles they play and their ki is what aikido is all about. The coming together of energies, this aiki, in a martial (combat) context is so difficult to capture.

So what do they do, what should they do? What enables aiki to be established. To understand that we must define the roles and the behaviors of uke and tori. Before we look at what we do as uke and tori, I want to define what uke and tori should not do:

- Tori does not attack uke
- Tori does not throw, or apply locks on uke (sounds strange, it will come back later.)
- Tori does not dictate, does not force matters
- Tori does not push or pull.

- Uke does not offer himself up to tori's whims. He is certainly no cannon fodder for tori's throwing pleasure.
- Uke does not do tori's work for him by throwing himself or accepting the minutest of locks.
- Uke does not spar tori.
- Uke does not anticipate on tori's moves.

So what do they do?!

Tori reacts to the intention of uke. Tori lets the throw, the lock or the immobilization evolve as a result of the attacking energy of uke and his own body movement. Tori must feel uke and match that feeling step by step. He gives uke what he gets from uke, nor more, not less. Uke makes himself available for tori's training of defensive techniques. Uke is the attacking party. He attacks with determination, commitment and powerful energy. Uke is not stupid, he does attack, aiming his attack on tori, but he does not forget his own defense and protection. He receives the lock or throw which tori initiates out of the moment of aiki not because it is agreed upon but because of the dictates of martial logic.

Nice snappy sentences, but what in heavens name do uke and tori actually do?

Aikido techniques are created by the coming together of energies. An offensive (attacking) energy and a defensive energy. Tori is the one of the defensive energy, and his role is fairly obvious. He protects himself and (partly) uke by allowing the technique to create itself from the accumulation of energy (its force, direction and speed). This is an important item as far as I am concerned because we often speak in training about tori doing or executing the technique. What is behind this way of verbalizing tori's part is the idea that tori somehow can dictate what technique to do "to uke". The risk of this way of thinking is that there is no aiki. Tori will want to do the technique and will be speaking with his energy in stead of listening to uke's energy.

Technique on a timeline.

It is interesting in the above mentioned context of interchange of energy to look at the chronological 'lifespan' of the technique. This enables us to look at the behaviors of uke and tori and the interpretation of their roles.

Fase 1: Uke and tori face each other. In essence tori should be in kamae, which means his position is attentive, focused and closed. His mind is empty and ready to react. He can either keep a closed guard offering no openings to uke, or give uke an opening as an incentive to uke to attack.

Already we are faced with two problems: if Tori's kamae is really good, than there can be no attack (at least if uke is any kind of budoka). If the opening is good, this same intelligent budoka will recognize this 'trap' as such. (Some aikido masters deal with this situation by having tori take the initiative before uke has attacked to force uke to react with an attack. This principle is described as ken no sen by Miyamoto Musashi in the Book of Five rings. To me this is rendering the defensive attitude of tori useless, in effect he is the attacker.)

This also brings us to a second problem. We need to hypothesize that uke has a measure of intelligence or common sense at least which enables his quick and correct actions and reactions during the technique. But the act of attacking itself begins with uke forgetting his common sense. Something of a paradox.

The first problem we solve is to offer uke an opening and reacting as soon as uke has attacked. This is called by Miyamoto Musashi tai no sen or taking the initiative at the time of an attack. The initiative is with tori, but he is not the attacking party. It is up to uke to attack first. After the initial contact uke must do his utmost to protect himself. He has the choice of continuing his attack and/or accepting a technique as it takes place.

Which brings us to the solution to problem two. It is not so much a solution as it is a premise which we need to enable aikido training to actually take place. We must accept the blatant hypocrisy in the role of uke as he launches his first attack. You can theorize this moment to death, but there will always be situations in which an attacker has reason and sees an opportunity to attack. We need that premise to come to aiki. The attack is result of the intellectual wisdom (or lack thereof), the rest of uke's actions during the technique are (hopefully) based in his physical wisdom.

Back to our timeline:

Fase 2 - The attack: The first thing uke has done is that he has moved towards uke using his center. Through moving his feet (taisabaki) he eventually uses the weapons of his body (primarily legs and arms) to force his offensive energy on tori through a kick, cut, slash, punch etcetera). He will focus this attack (force, speed and direction) on an abstract and variable point of impact somewhere on tori's body. This point of impact is the point he has chosen to maximize his destructive energy on tori.

Fase 3 - Taisabaki: Tori must ensure that this point of impact to which uke is aiming is not where uke thinks it is. It must be moved before uke's attack strikes home. As uke he uses his feet to move his body (moving from his center) away from the line of attack and towards making contact with uke. (In essence the attack is not the problem, the attacker is.) Almost in every case tori must disrupt uke's attacking cadence or rhythm and uses atemi to do so. After that, tori can make contact with uke on his turn, creating a new cadence. This enables harmonization with the offensive energy by the defensive energy (in effect the first moment of aiki). Taisabaki and atemi are necessary to break uke's rhythm and balance and to control the cadence through contact.

Fase 4 - Making contact: The aim of this contact is solely harmonizing with and gaining control over uke's energy. Tori does not control uke, he controls the cadence of their combined energies. From this contact a number of things is possible:

Uke has the choice to stop or to continue his attack. Keep contact or break contact.

Tori in no way tries to break or stop uke's energy. He actually needs it. He does break uke's balance (kuzushi) so that the offensive energy is rendered harmless (though it is still there). Uke will try to regain balance. He can do that by distancing himself from tori (breaking contact) or look for it by trying to break tori's balance in return.

Tori deflects and blends with uke's energy, guiding it, while maintaining proper distance and contact. This contact enables tori to react to new energy surges from uke if the latter for example believes he can attack again or take over the control of the cadence of the movement. In these moments, tori can use the contact to continue the kuzushi.

Fase 5 - Energetic interaction: If uke chooses to abandon ship so to speak and break contact, the confrontation is at an end. Harmony has been reestablished. This breaking of contact in itself gives energy which tori can use to direct uke away from himself. In aikido training we do work with at least one more moment of attack or at least a reaction from uke. Because of the fact tori does not break the attacking energy this is actually possible. (Blocking tori's technique, something you see quite often in aikido practice is not so much the result of bad technique by tori but simply a result of the fact that tori does not enable uke to actually attack. Tori is too restless and must be patient.)

Depending on uke's position in relation to tori he can try to attack again and regain his balance. Oftentimes this happens from a less profitable position than at the beginning of the confrontation. Uke is actually trying to escape from his lesser position by attacking. However, being a lesser position the attack will often be less dangerous for tori and easier to neutralize. (Tori could have used the first attack to neutralize uke's offensive energy in short powerful form. This way is very irimi in spirit and requires a great sense of timing, movement and determination.)

Fase 6 - Technique, the conclusion: Executing technique should be no more (or less) than simply bringing back the offensive energy to uke. The technique aims the energy at uke itself and uke must react so that this energy does not harm him. He does this by receiving the lock (not blocking the locked joint), moving his body and accepting tori has control of the cadence and energy of uke, or to roll following tori's redirection of the combined energies.

What you find by looking at this chronological life span of the technique is that uke is not necessarily only attacking, and that tori is not only defending. We can deduce a few rules from this simple conclusion:

Uke's attack on tori must always be "real". The intention of uke is to unbalance tori and to be able to control him through his offensive action. Uke is not aiming at any form of harmony in the first attacking moment.

Tori must move and accept uke's attack. In other words, do not fight or block the attack. It is there, deal with it through dealing with the attacker. Tori makes contact with uke. Uke must keep attacking until his own balance is so strongly disrupted by the bringing back of the offensive energy to himself, that he must accept this energy through accepting the lock, rolling or break-falling.

Everything in life is energies moving with and against each other. Every law of science is based on this coming together of different forces. Aikido is a study of the human body and mind, the (im)possibilities of human mobility and humane energy. But also of the dynamics of the meeting of two human bodies in a martial context. "The basis of any form of combat is an interaction between at least two opposed energies. Techniques of defense and attack are an expression of this."¹ Aikido is form which studies combat and which deals with this meeting of powers. As such, it is subject to the laws of nature. As logic is to be found in these laws, so logic must be used in aikido.

1. Tokitsu, Kenji. Miyamoto Musashi: His life and writings. Boston. Shambhala, 2004 page 281

We should never accept the explanation of a certain action when it is based on more than the word of one person saying it is what it is. In this sense, aikido is a veritable research of natures expressions through combat. The study of the interaction between uke and tori is an essential part of aikido. The interesting thing about it is that there is a continuous changing and unpredictability to this interaction. "Real" aikido (in stead of aikido practice) can be found in free training where attack and defense are free, but in which the ethics and understanding of martial logic is paramount. In this setting uke must be determined in his attack while tori must not focus his mind and will on the execution of one particular technique, but must let go of his mind in order to allow the proper technique to evolve. He is the guide of the blended energies. Neither of the two must anticipate, but allow the interaction to occur and accept that what arises.

The wealth of freedom is the strength and magic of aikido and that which liberates aikido from boundaries. If two people had enough stamina and grit, their interaction could go on for ever as a veritable perpetuum mobile, free of limitations. Aikido is only limited by the limitations of its practitioners. Anything we can handle, aikido can bring us. This means aikido can offer us a limitless potential for self development.

But what is our first conclusion for uke and tori? My conclusion is that the main task of uke is to establish kuzushi in tori. The main task of tori is to establish aiki with uke. The interesting part is however is that at the end of their interaction, tori is unbalancing uke, and uke is blending with tori's energy. Tori is aiming at kuzushi, and uke is aiming at aiki. Tori becomes uke and vice versa. It is up to tori to choose the timing of that change in moments so wisely that uke cannot use his aiki to take over the cadence of their interaction and prolong it to his own advantage.

So what do we have here, tori becoming uke and vice versa? So there are no real different roles? Then who are we calling what, and what are we actually defining? Do the terms uke and tori stand for two different parts that must be played, or can they stand for the intention of movement.

What underlies the previous thoughts and the interest in the roles played by uke and tori and their interaction is my wish to unite the harmony of aikido and its martial effectiveness. One of the most reoccurring discussion in the world of aikido surrounds the question: "Does aikido work (on the streets?) In other words, are we not kidding ourselves that aikido has any combat usefulness. I don't want to get into this discussion because it also entails defining what "the street is", what realistic aikido entails, comparisons with other fighting arts and speculation upon speculation which is frankly, slightly boring.

What is interesting however is the fact that Michele Quaranta (an Italian teacher who visits Aikido-centrum Utrecht quite often) seems to have bridged the gap that seems to exist between the ethics of harmony and martial effectiveness. Now the principle of harmony, call it aiki, or ju (as in jujitsu and judo) is a well know physical and ethical principle in budo and as such has proven to be useful in various combat situations. But knowing something because stories tell you it is so, and knowing it by feeling it is so are two different things. And in aikido, with its highly formalized way of training, the tension for me seemed even greater. To me it has always been important to see aikido as a martial art and practice it with combat logic in mind. Why?

To me it is important that aikido be more than a capoeira like dance/fighting art (though I highly admire the physical skills of capoeiristas) wherein you can recognize fighting skills but where fixed variations of action and reaction are central to movement. A more or less formalized co-operation (as for example in kata) is not what I want my aikido to be about. As you have been able to read, freedom of movement to me is too important to neglect.

Too much emphasis on the element of aiki, too much focus on partnership in training, too much attention for the care you must have for your partner to me leads to the dulling of the sharp edge of the techniques as they were forged in the fire of martial combat.

We then start moving because we know/feel what is coming. Confrontation is too easily avoided, pain is neglected as a learning moment and we must role, fly, tap out and follow tori's every move because we do not want the impression made that we are blocking, frustrating or not understanding the precept of harmony we must follow in aikido. Tori does less and less, uke's sensitivity may increase, but only for as far as he knows and is used to what is happening. What happens is that tori can only execute his techniques with really good ukes. An aikido technique loses its relevance when it is only possible with a partner that you know well. Aiki therefore, is not enough.

In the later part of the first section of this essay, I describe the changing of roles or intention by uke and tori a few pages up. *The interesting part however is that at the end of their interaction, tori is unbalancing uke, and uke is blending with tori's energy. Tori is aiming at kuzushi, and uke is aiming at aiki. Tori becomes uke and vice versa. It is up to tori to choose the timing of that change in moments so wisely that uke cannot use his aiki to take over the cadence of their interaction and prolong it to his own advantage.* To me this is the beginning of the bridge that we need between the ethics of harmony and the reality of conflicting energies (combat).

You could conclude from these sentences that uke and tori denote more a state of being, an intention or spirit of movement than a role one must play. Even the words attacker and defender seem to fall short of the full nuance of the way two opponents behave towards one another. If we negate the role playing we might say that uke stands for the intention of bringing about kuzushi in one's opponent. Conversely, Tori stands for establishing aiki with one's opponent (or opposing energy). The precepts of combat state that Uke wants to unbalance with his energy = kuzushi. In fact he wants to destroy tori and unbalancing tori is just a part of that. The ethics of aikido state that Tori's wish is not to share in that spirit, but to go for aiki, and blending with uke's energy. But that is by no means all, after aiki, the moment in which he meets this offensive energy with his defensive movement, he works towards unbalancing uke. In other words, he goes for kuzushi. In that sense he is taking over the role of uke. One might say the defender works from aiki to kuzushi and as we have seen, the attacker works from kuzushi to aiki. Rolling, receiving a lock are examples of the moments in which uke must endeavor to harmonize with the kuzushi aimed energy of tori and as such is uke endeavoring to establish aiki.

In this sense, kuzushi is the state of conflict which is solved through aiki, and uke and tori encounter this at different moments in during their interaction.

However, even in the kuzushi tori works for, his spirit is different than that of uke. Kuzushi for tori is aimed at neutralizing; kuzushi for uke is aimed at defeating, destroying, maiming, etcetera.

Now the real bridge I am talking about is not the recognition and intellectual understanding of the changing of "energetic principles" between uke and tori and the proper timing of that change. This sense of timing of "ma"² (distance) in a temporal sense rather than a sense of distance is the essence of the bridge, what determines the fact that it does combine the ethics of harmony and the demands of combat. Within these ethics of aikido is included that the kuzushi intent/spirit of uke is essentially different from the kuzushi intent and spirit of tori.

In aikido training, uke and tori must not be aware of different roles they are playing, but rather different spirits which they represent within the context of the technique practice. They represent this spirit. Uke must represent a spirit of attack with force, speed and agility. He must try to establish the point of impact in the most real sense. He must endeavor to hit, strike, punch, grab and destroy tori's balance with his attack and his focus must be on doing factual physical damage. Tori's spirit is based on energy of defense (which gives him an edge over the offensive energy of uke) and he must move, guide, make contact with uke, control the cadence and with great sense of temporal as well as physical ma make a flawless transition from aiki to kuzushi to establish pure and effective aikido technique.

Now this theoretical stuff is all fine and dandy, but what use it is in practical aikido training, let alone combat? The point here is that with the understanding of principles and the changing of intent in the correct rhythm, you start feeling better and better the moment in which you must react and act as a defender and when you must take initiative. Your timing and the understanding of timing improves. As your mind comprehends, your body starts feeling. You will feel that what we call hard and soft aikido is actually the difference in spirit and they become the hard and soft sides of aikido. Form your conscious competence you will be able to make the step towards unconscious competence and embed your knowledge into the fabric of your body as it moves in aikido and in combat. And this unconscious competence will enable you to be not too hard not too soft, not too quick or too slow, not too powerful or too weak, but exactly right in every sense. Effectiveness is united with the essence of aikido.

So how can we unite this principle with the earlier remark that a technique in fact is not executed but rather evolves from the energetic interaction? If the moment of change (from aiki to kuzushi or from tori spirit to uke spirit is not chosen correctly, we can speak of executing technique. Tori has a preconceived idea of what he wants to do and will almost always fail to merge that with the balance and cadence of the interaction. If the moment is chosen correctly from a good sense of "ma-ai" (distance of two people together) then we can speak of maximum flow between the principle of aiki and the principle of kuzushi. Then there will be possibility for uke to block the technique or come back. Tori will be in complete control of the situation precisely because he negates the will to control. In these moments, aikido is harmonious and effective.

2. "Generally this term is translated 'distance' or 'gap', but it expresses not only a spatial gap (or distance) between objects or persons and a temporal gap (for example, the moment in music when rhythm changes) but also the dynamic tension of the relationship between two or several persons, Tokitsu, Kenji. Miyamoto Musashi: His life and writings. Boston. Shambhala, 2004 page 397