



David M. Valadez
Senshin Center
Dojocho

The Senpai/Kohai Model and Issues of Ego by David M. Valadez

Many people believe that a solid senpai/kohai hierarchy within the dojo may lead to a development of the self that is antithetical to Aikido's overall aims. In particular, many believe that such a structure leads to the inflation of a practitioner's ego whenever the role of senpai is emphasized on the mat. Such an assumption is based upon a misunderstanding of the senpai/kohai model.

One should not assume that the senpai/kohai model leads inevitably to big egos – especially since the model was designed, via Confucian thought, to function precisely against such things. Perhaps when people make such assumptions they are referring to an abuse of that model and not so much to the model itself. What can one do about such things? People that will abuse such things will abuse anything – even a silence concerning such models or the opposite of such models. Thus, sweeping such issues under the rug, or entirely dispensing with them, will not alleviate the problem of inflated egos. In short, the senpai/kohai structure is not the problem – the big ego is the problem.

Under Confucian ethics, the senpai is the giver, the more humble, the more responsible, the more owing in servitude, and the more compassionate. Confucian ethics, in many cases, should actually have us employ the inverse of what we often encounter in many dojo concerning how senior students are to relate to junior students. This is true whether such models go unsaid and/or unrecognized. The senpai/kohai model is primarily a means to check the development of an inflated ego, particularly as senpai. It is a means by which one can halt the abuses that stem from one's incapacity or unwillingness to address one's own will to power through their training. As such, a properly understood senpai/kohai model may lead us to practice interpersonal relationships that are quite different from what we may first expect and/or witness. This difference can be clearly seen when we look at the senpai/kohai structure within practical manifestations. For example, pertaining to the senpai/kohai model within kihon waza training and our understanding of the uke/nage dynamic (see "The Nage/Uke Dynamic – Some Guidelines"):

Most times senior uke's cry about "too much muscle," "bad form," "newbie not getting it," whenever a junior throws them with any decent kind of energy – whenever a junior challenges their deficient ukemi skill, their small self, ego, etc., and their attachment to such things. The big ego is hidden in the false benevolence of trying to "help" uke "see the light." Here in the guidelines, on the other hand, senior students as uke have to expect the highest energies their juniors can produce, and they have to expect that level of energy as much as it is expected of them to make any and all energies (even those coming from poor form, too much muscle, or newbie not getting it) safe. By this means, senior uke give of themselves so that junior students can advance and thus so that the dojo as a whole can advance in its efficiency toward being a productive training environment.

Senior students who are out of shape, out of their prime, stiff, plagued by chronic injuries, or who have plateaued in their training (or are even regressing in their training), etc., because they have neglected their training, often use their senpai status to pull out of forms. Seniors often practice to not commit to specific energies and/or attacks. They work to resist any and all elements which might actually shed some light on how they have stopped training altogether and are just riding on the coattails of the cultural capital (e.g. rank) given to them by an institution that ultimately has nothing to do with Budo. Here in the guidelines, on the other hand, the senpai/kohai model dictates that one should participate fully in kihon waza training as uke, whether senior or junior. When total participation is fully mandated, those weaknesses by which a senior cannot totally participate are brought to the surface. They are no longer hidden under the guise of “skill,” “rank,” “wisdom,” etc. Being left with only what one can do, what one can’t do, and what one is supposed to do, brings a clarity and an honesty to oneself and to ones relationship with their training. Such a thing does not come about by “seniors” pulling out of every repetition as they see fit according to their own egocentrism. By this means, in practicing self-honesty, a senpai cultivates the necessary ingredient to produce a genuine humility within themselves – a humility by which they can actually benefit both their kohai and the dojo overall.

When the senpai/kohai model is not properly understood, seniors often enter into a silent contract with their partner. Such silent contracts are basically a type of violence, in that they are often a type of threat. The tenets of this contract are usually of the following nature: “I get to throw you hard, you don’t get to throw me hard,” or, “I set the pace of training: If you throw me hard, I will throw you harder.” In most other arts, this is something to be ashamed of, but in Aikido, it is often the norm. Personally, for example, I have never ran into a karateka that shows their “toughness” by striking a beginner harder than said beginner strikes them. Karateka show their “toughness,” their preparedness, and their conditioning, by letting beginner karateka strike them harder than they are striking them. Yet, time after time I have seen Aikido seniors thrash their junior uke. Some have done it right next to me at various events, only to take on a different training level when we are to pair up. When we pair up, as senior or even as peer, all of a sudden the gusto is gone from their training – “Let’s go easy,” they say. This is especially true at seminars and summer camps.

In any other art, in any other environment, this would be labeled as nothing more than bullying. In Aikido, if at all, it is often only addressed with the bigger mistake of trying to solve this departure from the true senpai/kohai model by saying “Nage is supposed to take care of Uke’s safety.” In saying such things, no one points out to the senior student the true departure from the senpai/kohai model, nor its reason, which pertains to being dominated by ones own will to power. Most teachers never point out to such senior nage the obvious lack of reconciliation with Fear and Pride that is dominating their training. They never say, “Hey, I just saw you training so hard with that other uke (junior), why don’t you train just as hard with this uke (peer or senior)?”

Here in the guidelines, on the other hand, each member of a dojo is both a senior and a junior, and as such each person experiences the hard and soft of Aikido but in a way that is more rooted in honor and humility, in respect and in compassion. If one truly wants to purify the ego from him/herself or from ones own dojo, one should not opt to remain silent about senpai/kohai matters as they come to the surface in nage/uke relationships. If one is truly serious about such things, about the abuses of such seniors within nage and/or uke roles, place such a practitioner in an environment where juniors are expected to “pound” the heck out of such individuals for the sake of their own training, for the sake of the dojo, and for the sake of the art. Put such practitioners where he/she is expected to constantly improve in his/her ukemi skills so as to keep all levels in intensity safe, where his/her cultural capital means nothing, where he/she is only left with

what he/she can do, can't do, and what he/she is supposed to do. Place them where they are expected to be in shape, strong, and flexible for as long as they training. Make sure they are not allowed out of policy to make or to enforce silent threats (to juniors) or silent agreements (with peers or seniors). Moreover, seal it all by placing them in a spontaneous training environment where all of the above still applies – where they come to know firsthand what some spiritual masters have called “the terror of Compassion.” For when we truly understand the terror of Compassion, we will truly understand what it means to be senpai.