



David M. Valadez
Senshin Center
Dojocho

The Complementary Roles of Uke and Nage

by **David M. Valadez**

In Kihon Waza training, Nage and Uke each have specific roles to play. These roles are predetermined according to the tactical insights belonging to one's teacher and/or lineage, etc. Kihon Waza are ideal phases through which one can condition the body, acquire basic skills, experience a given set of strategies and tactics, and intellectually grasp relevant concepts and/or theories. As ideal phases, there is a high degree of cooperation between Uke and Nage in Kihon Waza training. Yet, while we can understand that there is a high degree of cooperation present, our sense of cooperation must never separate itself from the notion that the “fitting” of Nage and Uke comes more from both parties fulfilling complimentary roles than it does from Uke “giving” techniques to Nage.

When doing Kihon Waza training, and when faced with a “resistant” Uke (which is an Uke that is not fulfilling his/her role in the ideal phase and thus cannot act as compliment to Nage), we should not as Nage reify such antagonism by becoming antagonistic ourselves. Nor should we feed into Uke’s original antagonism unknowingly. That is to say, Uke should not be reifying that type of training by resisting one way or another, but neither should Nage by trying to “go with what uke is giving.” In Kihon Waza training, both Nage and Uke have roles to play, and so they should hold themselves to those roles. If one party cannot, then it should be perfectly fine for the other party to ask his/her partner to adhere to the form being practiced. There are other types of training, or at least there should be, where antagonistic roles can and should be dealt with by an atemi or any other change of technique, etc., as is commonly suggested, but Kihon Waza is not such a training environment. Often it is our ego that hides from us the true meaning and means of Kihon Waza training. Often the ego has us taking upon ourselves antagonistic roles and has us believing that one can “win” and “lose” at forms. One can no more “win” or “lose” in forms training than one can win or lose at zazen or yoga. An Uke's ego that harbors itself within resistance can be immediately quelled in the quelling of Nage's own ego when he/she says, "Hey, let's do the form - stay with the technique please." This is how we should deal with resistant Uke in Kihon Waza training.

Often resistance increases in our Uke as the intensity of Kihon Waza training increases. However, increased intensity should not have us change our understanding of Kihon Waza training. Hence, the added resistance we may be experiencing has to again be understood as a lack of fulfilling a complimentary role. Assuming one has good form, an increase in intensity should not negate a given waza. What we are experiencing when we feel a given waza being “pressured” or outright negated is often not merely an increase in energy. Rather it is often a new and/or different energy that is being employed - one outside of the tactical viability of the initially determined architecture. New energies are often introduced by Uke as habitual reactions to fear, pain, and injury come to preoccupy their body/mind in the face of the rising chance that these things may occur. Nevertheless, the role of Kihon Waza should remain the same. Uke

should work to more fully take on his/her side of the two-man form and not introduce new, additional, and/or unprescribed energies into the ideal phase.

As I stated above, the usual “advanced” response of addressing Uke’s unprescribed energies with atemi and/or with a different and unexpected techniques is not the proper way to address resistance in Kihon Waza training by a deshi. Such responses, which are more ego-based than not, do much to subvert Kihon Waza training, as well as much of the overall cultivation process that is central to Budo praxis. How does this occur? Let us take on the matter of a Kihon Waza that prescribes to Uke the concept of Target Penetration in Tsuki. Now let us increase the training intensity, such that Uke finds him/herself in the midst of the prescribed response (be that a throw, a strike, a pin, or what have you) while he/she is in the midst of his/her own punch. Often times, in order to better post up on the front foot, so as to be able to take ukemi from a state of balance (as opposed to a state of no balance), Uke will start to employ unprescribed energies that lead Nage to describe him/her as “stiff,” “solidly planted,” “having a strong base,” etc. Should such unprescribed energies actually come to subvert Nage’s technique, an immature Uke will also come to see him/herself as being “solidly planted,” or as “having a strong base,” etc.

If Nage lets the ego gain control of the situation, Nage, as Uke already has, will miss the fact that Uke’s intention is no longer directed toward Target Penetration. Nage, like Uke, will miss the fact that Uke’s intention is now directed toward being able to take ukemi from a state of balance (which itself subverts the very notion of Kuzushi). Uke, in the end, has departed from the form for the sake of following habitual responses to fear. As such, Uke failed to enter into the fire of purification and instead has only worked to reinforce characteristic reactions he/she probably held long before Aikido training even commenced. In this way, for Uke, training has only come to preserve the status quo and offers nothing in the form of spiritual cultivation and/or maturity.

Nage contributes to the status quo of Uke’s maturation process (or lack thereof) by adopting Uke’s fear response as the ideal phase to be addressed in opposition to the originally prescribed Kihon Waza. In altering his/her response, rejecting the Kihon Waza response for one more fitting to a strike that lacks Target Penetration, and/or in opting to strike at Uke in attempt to provide him/her with a new fear to respond to immaturely, Nage wrongly reifies poor form in the guise of “ideal” technique. That is to say, Nage has poorly substituted the shaky and ad hoc inventions of someone that is more dominated by fear than by anything else for carefully honed tactical architectures that have been refined by countless generations. Because of this poor substitution, while Nage may feel his/her training has taken on a more “realistic” air, it has in fact moved as far from reality as it has from basic technique. This happens because when Nage does not properly assist Uke with the maturation process, Nage will never come to face authentic strikes – strikes that do have Target Penetration. Nage only develops relevant skills against attackers that wish to move forward but only to be able to post the front foot before being thrown. That is to say, Nage will gain skill only against attackers that do not intend to attack.

For Nage, it is better then to think long term – to not make a single repetition of Kihon Waza the end-all testament of one’s martial virtue. It is better for Nage and Uke to understand the truly symbiotic relationship they both have within Kihon Waza training. Nage and Uke need to be able to encourage each other, in open, immediate, and direct ways to invest more fully in their corresponding complimentary roles. Nothing meets this bill better than simply asking such of one’s partner.