

Good Uke, Bad Uke

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To Uke or not to Uke? That is the question.

When we use the Japanese word Uke a few common thoughts come to mind. The word has several meanings, depending on the Kanji and how it is used. The most common meaning to us would be a person on whom an art is being done, and that is the subject of this article.

Being in the martial arts realm for a while now, I have heard the terms “Uke arts” and “Ukeing”. We hear lines such as “Who is your Uke?” and “Are you going to Uke?” And “We need Ukes.” When we go to the dojo we like working out with our favorite Uke. When we test, we always pick the Uke who will “be just right for me”. This Uke will almost always be our size and hopefully weighs a bit or a whole lot less, than we do. I have also heard and seen Ukes than can make or break an art or an exam, for that matter.

There seems to be a fine line between what an Uke should do so Tori can properly demonstrate an art and what extremes Uke may go to so Tori “looks good.” In a classroom or clinic, when instructors demonstrate an art, they often call out their favorite Uke, one that goes flying across the room and/or pats out like a wild screaming set of Taiko drums. After all, they want to look good.

I have seen a few times when an instructor demonstrates an art “perfectly” and tells the students to practice, then none of the students can do the art or they just go along with the phony motions knowing it’s not working as specified. Is it because they don’t understand and need more practice, or is it because Uke made the instructor look good, AKA “Uke art”? So the question comes - good Uke or bad Uke? I will say that most of the time we don’t understand and need more practice and, of course, we know that not every art will work on every person all the time. But then there’s the “Uke”. Instructors should be aware that if their favorite Uke, or a very polite one you choose, is letting you go through a technique incorrectly you could be putting a false confidence in your students. This could be dangerous or deadly if they ever had to call upon it to save their lives. This is both the instructor’s and the favorite Uke’s fault.

We make close friends in our martial arts world, and we get very close to our instructors. We want to help them out and never want to embarrass them, and I am not talking about instructors that can’t physically perform the art due to age and/or health. In this situation they may be performing a very effective art that they physically can’t do any more. If this is the case, be very grateful that the instructor is sharing the knowledge with you.

My suggestion would be, after the instructor is done, the Uke should quietly and politely tell him that the art did not work as intended (good Uke). The instructor should not be offended at this, but grateful. The instructor should then reevaluate the art by practicing it more on a less cooperative Uke until he can do it, or alter it so he can do it, or find someone to give him further instruction on it. Worst case, throw the art away.

For every art there is a counter; some Ukes will subconsciously or consciously counter an art when Tori is learning it (bad Uke). After all, if you know what's coming, it's real easy to counter it. I will add that if the Uke counters the instructor in the middle of the demonstration, he is a bad Uke. Now Uke should not counter every time a person tries to do an art. When a person is new or learning a new art, he needs to get the feel of it and produce muscle memory. This is why we practice kata a few thousand times per art. And part of being a good Uke is to tell Tori what he is doing wrong. After all, you know what works on you, so don't keep him guessing if you can help him. In the course of training, when Tori has a good feel for the art, then Uke should not be so helpful, to ensure that Tori is fully doing the art.

After a great deal of time, when Tori can do the techniques well, Tori should carefully try the arts out on a resisting Uke in a sparring, randori, or grappling situation. Tori should also practice his arts with as many different Ukes as possible. Tall ones, short ones, thin ones, heavy ones, weak ones, strong ones, ones with no pain tolerance, and others that don't seem to ever feel pain! After all, you will never know who you are going to face if you ever need to get out of a bad situation.

Ukes and exams: I have examined many Kyu ranks and Dan exams. For most of the black belt exams, Tori gets to pick his Uke. Usually, it's someone he has worked out with from a neighboring dojo, a friend of his. Kyu ranks usually get a member from their own dojo. For the most part the Uke is about the same size and weight. After all, we want to look good and pass, right? And the Uke doesn't want to make his Tori look bad. This makes the exam real easy, as long as Tori gets all the arts right, or does it? I've seen some exams where the Uke taps out when the art is not working, such as an ineffective choke, and fly through the air when there was no kazushi (bad Uke). To the experienced examiner this is obvious and Tori usually fails the exam. And if for some reason he doesn't fail, he now has a false sense of security on how good his arts are.

So for Uke, on an exam you are to remain neutral, unless told not to, and not give Tori the art or counter it. If you are put in a submission hold that has worked on you many times before, but is not working now, don't tap. Or if you have fallen many times because of a particular throw, but know the throw won't work unless you jump ("ukeing"), don't jump. On the other hand, you know what's coming, so don't counter. There's that fine line between good Uke and bad Uke.

In some cases Tori will not bring an Uke to his exam. And people show up just to serve as Uke (good job). Uke should be in fairly good health, and make sure he has a few minutes to get acquainted with Tori before the exam. The Tori might be used to working with someone with a high pain tolerance and who is very limber. You, on the other hand, might not be as limber and have a lower pain tolerance, thus leaving you prone to injury. Remember that your Tori is under a lot of pressure during the exam, so let him get to know how you react to his arts.

When it comes right down to it, we need just as much practice on being an Uke as we do being Tori. I always feel privileged when an instructor uses me as Uke. I get to feel how the art works and get a firsthand, front-row experience in the classroom.

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