

UKE: RECEIVING



When the conversation leads to the subject of toughness, as inevitably it will among young men and women in transit on the Way, opinions will flow liberally. This master, it will be recounted, knocked an opponent senseless with the briefest riposte. That one, someone will say, uprooted young trees with his bare hands. Still another will be said to crush stalks of green bamboo with his hands. Comparative feats of strength are presented as proof of toughness in these conversations, especially those among younger bugeisha. The more senior exponent, however, tends to have a different way of measuring toughness. With experience comes, too, the knowledge that toughness is less a matter of dishing it out and is really more in the ability to receive.

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Uke is a pictographic kanji, one written to depict two hands, one reaching down, the other stretching up, and between them is placed the character for “boat”. This “conveyance of goods from one person to



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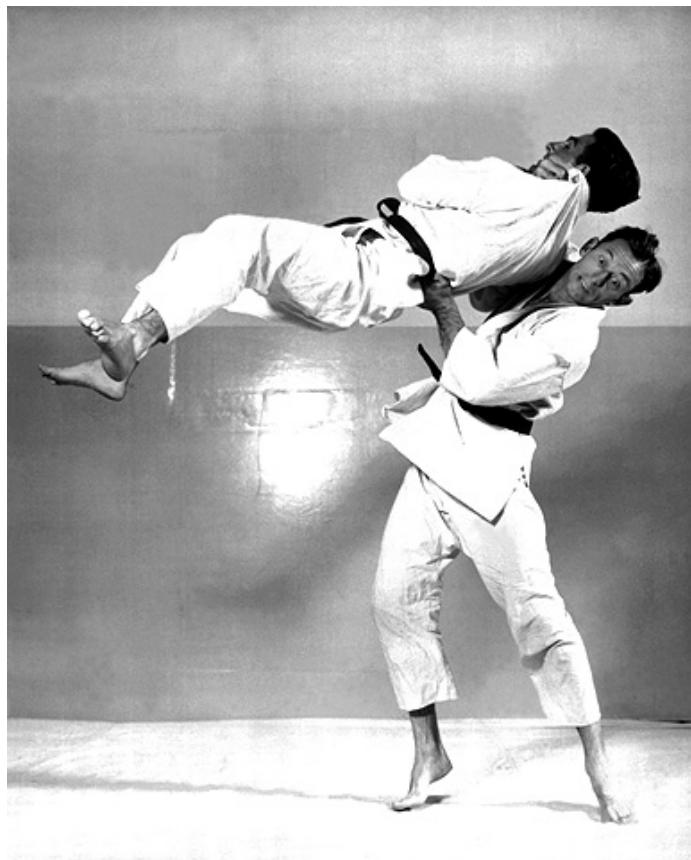


another" became, over the centuries, the kanji to indicate the act of "receiving". The bugeisha uses the word frequently. In the grappling bugei, the methods of falling safely are collectively called ukemi, the "receiving body". In judo terminology, the exponent thrown is uke, the "receiver". Of the pair in karate practice, the one under attack is the ukete, the "receiving hand". In kendo, the defender is the ukedachi, the "receiving sword".

In these and other expressions in the bugei lexicon, the importance of the term uke is significant. It is commonly mistranslated in judo circles as the "taker" of a technique. Uke is thrown and so is considered the "loser" in this way of thinking. To understand that uke means more exactly "to receive" opens new views for the practitioner. To be on the uke end of training is not to be passively accepting of the technique. It is instead the attitude of receiving, meeting the throw on one's own terms. The mentality of the uke is not one of resignation or, worse yet, of stubborn resistance. The uke flows, absorbs the force of the throw, and while he does fall, his ukemi does not necessarily signal defeat. His fall is one he controls. He receives - and bounces up again.



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The terms ukete in karate and ukedachi in kendo are subject to a similarly misleading translation. Here they are thought of incorrectly as designating the participant who “blocks” an attack. Not so. The ukekata, or “receiving forms”, of kendo and karate requires receiving of the incoming force in order to redirect it away or to use it to come back against the attacker.

In the mature training hall will be very senior bugeisha, older men and women, and they can be seen happily taking falls or blows, over and over, from children trainees. Against adolescent members, young and full of themselves, the seniors will be just as complacent, mildly taking all the excess energy of youth without a bruise or wince, until, among the brighter of the youngsters, will come the realization that there is something more to all this activity than it seems. They will, some of them, begin to suspect that the toughness of these older bugeisha is a thing yet to be discovered out there along the Way. They will have begun to see the true toughness of receiving.

