

## *Ai-uchi vs. Ai-nuke*

*Ai-uchi* is mutual striking with the implication of mutual killing. *Ai-nuke*, on the other hand, is mutual escaping, literally “mutual passing through”.

The samurai would go into the battle having accepted his own death so that, even if he were defeated, he would take his opponent with him. This may have paved the way for Kamikaze pilots, but was decidedly not an attempt at simple self-sacrifice for the overlord. Rather, the samurai knew that if he fought without care of personal survival, he would petrify his enemy and thus have a fighting advantage. That advantage would more than likely lead to victory, the most desired end; but if it did not, it would lead to one less enemy on the battlefield.

This *ai-uchi* attitude did its job. For centuries Japanese warriors were considered the most fearsome of foes. The *ai-uchi* attitude has its weaknesses, however. First, if one’s forces are vastly outnumbered, even a fierce warrior who sacrifices himself to take out two or three of the opposition might still not sway the battle. Second, if one’s opponent has the same *ai-uchi* attitude, the attitude itself will mean nothing and, skills being equal, numbers will win the day.

Japanese karate sparring is based on the *ai-uchi* attitude—that’s why it can be so exciting to watch. Like two bulls, two elk, two rams, or two *sumotori*, karate-ka wait for an opening and rush in with a *kiai* hoping to score a split second before their opponent scores, showing guts, determination, that never-say-die-attitude, and a decidedly lack of tactical smarts. If you circle or side-step well, you can frustrate an over-eager charger, teasing him with a target until he feels he must take it, then countering from an angle, playing both matador and picador at the same time (albeit without the cape, the horse, or the swords).

In modern sport budo, however, we don’t have enemies but opponents. In traditional budo for self-defense, we don’t have opponents, so much as training partners. Yes, we have to be ready to mentally downgrade the partner to opponent and the opponent to an assailant, (which implies an enemy in most circumstances), but training with the *ai-uchi* attitude is likely to result in trainees who see enemies and assailants where opponents exist, and opponents where partners exist. I was once teaching judo matwork at a large seminar where I wanted to offer a suggestion to a student performing an insecure *kesa-gatame* (scarf hold) on a larger, stronger partner. I took his position and showed him how it would be to his advantage to leverage his partner’s head upward so that it would be more difficult for him to struggle. The partner passed my elbow while I was talking and swung into a mount. I guess he was trying to prove me wrong, but the speed and fierceness of his counter made it clear that he was less interested in technique and more interested in winning. Of course, the win was only in his head since it was clear that countering a technique that had not been secured, while the teacher was talking, when you are 20 years younger and 40 pounds heavier does not add up to an even contest.

Testing a technique is not only reasonable but also desirable. Testing it while gradually increasing the skill and size of the opposition is also reasonable and desirable. Switching to a battlefield attitude is, to say the least, inappropriate. Testing doesn't happen during teaching; it happens after teaching, after studying, and during a simulated battle. To many students (probably some of these are in your own dojo), there are only two gears: ai-nuke (letting one's opposite number pass through) or ai-uchi (fighting as if you were on a medieval Japanese battlefield).

Would the ai-uchi enthusiast be wiser to adapt an attitude of ai-nuke? Yes and no.

*More on Ai-uchi vs. Ai-nuke next week.*