

## **Ukemi is about Trust**

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Since my first day on the mat aikido has spoken to me due to its multiple layers of meaning: physical, martial, interpersonal, psychological, spiritual. I have gained insights in all of these areas through my aikido practice. It has helped me maintain my balance and calm during difficult times and has taught me important lessons about myself and about the nature of conflict. This is the story of one of the lessons I have learned.

My aikido technique was choppy and ragged, with lots of small (and not so small) starts, stops, and hesitations. It is still very often this way. This was particularly true with my ukemi. I would attack and stop, wait for nage to move, then I would try to follow or try to anticipate where nage would go. This would lead to all kinds of additional points of disconnection, and even to my attempts to control the technique and its outcome as uke.

With practice I was able to lengthen the periods of connection and minimize the periods of disconnection, but they were still always there. And they were still always the same errors: strike and stop, feel then move, catch-up, anticipate...Oh! You're going that way I'm going this way!

My senseis have often pointed out that progress in aikido begins with attention to and improvements in ukemi. That is what I experienced, and what contributed a deeper understanding in my life.

I was preparing for my test and training with my sempai, a sandan. She had nearly fifteen years more training experience than I. We were

working towards higher energy techniques and my ukemi was improving, but we both became frustrated with my moments of disconnection right when the technique was about to move from a smooth blend to a smooth, effortless throw.

She paused and said to me warmly and patiently, but directly, “Phil, ukemi is about trust.”

I don’t think I said it, but I thought, “But I do trust you, that’s why I’m attacking so hard and allowing you to throw me so hard.” Of course, she was not really throwing me “so hard”. Indeed, she was protecting me. Had she continued with no attention to my disconnection then there was a chance I would not be in the correct position for safe ukemi. I could be injured.

As I attacked on the next technique I consciously thought to let go of any apprehension that she would be too strong or too quick and that I may be injured. My ukemi was better - smoother, softer, more fluid. But, there was still a “bump”, a disconnection, along the way.

As I attacked the next time the thought came to me, “Trust yourself. Your body knows what to do.” I flew. I could feel her turning and I my body rotating around her, my feet off the ground, yet my movements were connected to and led by hers. I landed softly.

Yes! We laughed and immediately went through several more throws, each as smooth, fluid, and connected as the last.

Afterwards, I realized that I had been holding back a little, even if it was less and less, I had still been holding back out of fear that I wasn’t in control of the fall. But, once I let go of my fear and trusted that I would

respond appropriately regardless of what happened, there was no separate blend, throw, fall. There was just aiki. I had to trust... myself.

I learned that I had to give up trying to control the outcome (the fall) and trust myself to engage the technique as it unfolded. No rush, no wait, no catch-up, no anticipation.

Reflecting on this afterwards, I realized that my senseis had made the same point many times, in many different ways. They had told me to empty, to relax, to not do. For some reason the statement, “ukemi is about trust” at that moment was the catalyst that crystallized the lesson.

This new realization allowed me to feel and eventually move with small changes in nage’s movements and in nage’s body. As I was able to embrace these changes my sempais could lead me more easily into throws different than I expected, when they changed technique or improvised.

I then began to understand the importance of maintaining connection. It allowed me to begin to feel the various possible outcomes in every blend. Something I “knew”, but was only beginning to feel. Nage could move in multiple ways regardless of the attack or blend and I could smoothly follow without my internal struggle over controlling my fall.

After gaining this insight I began to feel it as nage, as well. When I flubbed the intended technique, I could feel there were still multiple options. As long as I maintained my own balance, my posture (integrity), my connection to uke, and a calm and sensitive attitude I still had multiple techniques available. I practiced with these thoughts in my mind.

This lesson from aikido became an insight for me about the nature of adversity, in general. It is this: There is always a solution to every problem, conflict, or challenge.

Usually, a problem has a multitude of possible solutions. But it always will result in some outcome. In aikido practice the technique will end with uke on the ground. But there are multiple ways for that result to develop.

Every challenge we encounter will unfold in some manner in which it either ceases to be a problem (it dissolves) or it develops into new conditions (it resolves). The outcome may not be the one you prefer, nor even one you considered, but every problem has at least one way that it can be solved.

In order to face adversity in this aiki manner you must first give up on trying to control the outcome and trust yourself. This will allow you to maintain your calm, balance, integrity, and connection to the adversity, which increases the chances that the solution will be consistent with your desires (your center). You cannot control the adversity and you cannot choose the outcome. But you can choose how to engage the conflict.

A few months after I accepted this aikido lesson as a valuable insight for my life I applied it at work. I am a community college instructor. In my department we have a testing center, which allows faculty to give exams outside of the classroom. At the time we had a new coordinator running the testing center, who was both highly competent, on top of all the details of her job, and highly anxious about problems that inevitably

develop when you are responsible for giving hundreds of exams every week from dozens of different courses and faculty.

It was Thursday of finals week and she came to me with a problem. One of my students' exams was unaccounted for. It appeared the student had checked in to take one of my exams but there was no record of it being turned over to me. She was beside herself with worry. I think she felt responsible and feared I, or worse, the department chair, would be angry with her. Also, since it was finals week we did not have much time to deal with it.

After giving me all the details she asked me, "So what are we going to do?"

"I don't know," I said.

"You don't know?! The center's only open one more day, and the term ends in two days!"

Without any thought about aikido initially I said, "Don't worry, there's a solution."

She shot back, "There's a solution? Then what is it? Let's do it now."

"I don't know what the solution is yet. But there's always a solution."

She looked at me incredulously, "There's always a solution? No, there's not! We don't know if the exam was lost or if the student snuck out with the exam. You can't pass him without a grade on the test, and you can't flunk him if we lost it! He may have left town for the break already!"

“It’s okay,” I said. For the first time I thought about aikido. “Yes, there’s always a solution. I’ll try to reach him. If I have to I’ll come in Saturday and give him the exam myself. And if we can’t reach him I’ll come in over the break or give it to him the first week of next term.”

“You’d do that? Come in Saturday or over the break?”

“Well, I don’t want to, but it would be a solution. He’d get a grade. I’d get the test. And we wouldn’t have to open up the testing center. It’s a solution even if it’s not what I want.”

As it ended up the student volunteered to come in first thing the next morning to re-take the exam. But in the meantime the exam turned up in another instructor’s pile of exams.

But, the real end to this story is that a couple of months later I passed an instructor’s office who has the reputation of both being a bit disorganized and bit excitable. As I approached I could hear her complaining loudly about a software glitch in a computerized exam. As I passed the office I overheard the testing center coordinator say, “Don’t worry we’ll deal with it. There’s a solution. Really, there’s always a solution.”

For this lesson and others, for the opportunity to practice, and for aikido itself I am most grateful to O Sensei, and to all the shihans, senseis, sempai, and kohai I have ever had the good fortune to practice with and learn from. Thank you.