

Ukemi

In looking back on my Aikido training, I can see ukemi has had a great influence on me. My ukemi has not always been the same, but has gone through several distinct phases. In each I have learned important lessons that I try and take outside the dojo.

In the dojo I was introduced to the brilliant uke/nage system of training. At first, it seemed to me that nage was the one 'doing Aikido'. I felt uke's role was akin to pushing the swing on the playground while nage experienced the joy of being on the swing. I dutifully fell down or rolled, anxiously awaiting my turn. Like many beginners, I thought uke's job was to fight and compete, grabbing hard and pushing strongly. I also competed with other beginners in any way I could, from the number of rolls I could do to how long I could sit in seiza.

This beginner's phase led to what I call 'sport' ukemi which seems to be typical of young aikidoka. I desperately wanted to learn high-falls, prided myself on my smooth and quiet rolls, and enjoyed being thrown about, sometimes jumping into high-falls unnecessarily. While this helped me develop my skills and was a necessary part of my training, it was still self-centered and competitive. I had little regard for my partner except their ability to throw me, and often worked with other beginners with ill-concealed impatience.

As I continued in my training and following my Sensei's directions, I eventually began to understand the importance of using my ukemi to protect myself. I became responsible for myself when I stepped onto the mat. This sense of personal responsibility taught me I could no longer blame my nage if I got hurt. By accepting responsibility for my training, I focused on adapting my aikido to fit my partner's aikido. The flexible, flowing ukemi I used to keep from getting hurt on the mat helped me to practice a flexible, flowing attitude in situations off the mat.

Though I was told countless times that there was only one instructor on the mat, I was always trying to be 'helpful' and telling the beginners what to do. My Sensei introduced me to my next phase of ukemi, suggesting that I could best help the new students by moving properly for them rather than instructing. This is a very helpful form of ukemi, and one I still enjoy a great deal as I struggle to keep my mouth shut. Gradually, while trying to move properly, I began to pay more attention to nage's technique, becoming sensitive to not just the gross movements, but also the smaller movements. This sensitivity slowly grew and allowed me to feel the subtlety of some techniques. I began to learn more by taking ukemi from the higher ranking students and from Sensei, feeling the parts of the techniques I could not see and trying to incorporate them into my own techniques. I also became aware of places in nage's technique that didn't quite stay connected, or allowed me free movement. This taught me that, since a beginner's openings might also be mine, I could learn from anyone, both on and off the mat.

While I am not quite fully in the next phase of my ukemi training, I can see how increased sensitivity to openings leads naturally into kaeshi waza, or reversals. As I learn to move into these openings or create them, the role of uke blurs with that of nage.

The sensitivity I develop as uke leads to a greater sensitivity to my partner and less forcing of the techniques. I no longer compete with my partner as I did when I was a beginner, but take a "let's see where this goes" attitude with them. Keeping this attitude has helped me be more cooperative and productive off the mat as well.

Ukemi has taught me that though there is no way to ever repay what I have been given, I can give back to others the best of what I have been taught and keep progressing, no longer for myself but for the dojo family. Though uke 'receives the technique', I believe ukemi is ultimately a question of giving. You are giving your partner a body to work with, and the honesty of your generosity dictates the quality of your ukemi.

This essay is dedicated to my Sensei, Calvin Koshiyama and all my fellow students at Aikido North who have given selflessly to my aikido training.

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