

Why Ukemi?

A New Years Resolution

12/30/04

At this time with the New Year before us it's the perfect time to look forward to the opportunities of New Year's resolutions regarding our training. What kind of promise can we make to ourselves to improve our training over the next year, so that a year from now we can look back and be gratified in our own development? For many of us we need look no farther than our ukemi.

We ask ourselves, why is ukemi, the practice of falling, so important to our training in a martial art? After all, isn't taking ukemi simply a resignation of defeat, where countless generations of martial attitude has dictated that defeat is not an option and that resolute victory is all that matters? Understanding the value of ukemi in aikido practice is the first step to improving your ukemi. Without an understanding and respect for the art of falling we cannot hope to make progress.

There are essentially 5 different ways that I value *my* ukemi practice. As I consider each of these elements I notice a gradation in the level of awareness of each new emphasis and motivation, where the emphasis shifts from me, to my partner, to my community.

Ukemi as Self-Defense

Ukemi is initially taught as the most basic form of self-defense. How can I *receive* (as the word *uke* indicates) an attack without receiving damage to myself? The answer is, of course, through graceful ukemi. In order to practice throwing people in the context of a martial art we need to first be able to receive such throws. Without good ukemi we'd soon run out of partners to practice our techniques on. First we look at how to receive the throw from a back roll. And then with a forward roll. We progress to rolls in every direction and going to our belly gracefully from an ikkyo. And finally we progress to break falls.

But what does this mean in regard to street-defense in contrast to dojo-defense? Is it still meaningful and beneficial? The answer should be *yes* if you're practicing with correct intent. If you're being thrown with an ikkyo or shihonage, as unlikely as that may seem on the street, preservation of shoulder is critical to the outcome of the conflict... as is the preservation of your wrist, your elbow, and your head. Practicing ukemi actively with sensitivity and intent will allow you to calibrate the power, balance and center of your aggressor. This sensitivity will teach you when to take ukemi and when to move into kaeshiwazi or reversals.

Ukemi as Grace and Balance

Ukemi offers a elegant lesson in grace and balance. It teaches you to be sensitive to your own balance points and how to gracefully regain that balance. Equally, it offers insight as to how to upset your partner's balance in practice. Your 4 turns receiving ukemi are a planning opportunity to understand how you'll steal your partners balance in the following 4 turns of throwing.

It's also important to notice that your ukemi is your calling card and how others will perceive you. If you want to make a good impression, can you do it more effectively by throwing your partner with great power or by receiving your partner's powerful throws with the ease and grace of Gene Kelly? The answer should be obvious. Time and time again, when I find myself sitting up and taking notice of other aikidoka, it's invariably as a result of their wonderful ukemi, not their ability to bring people crashing down.

Ukemi as Partnership

Ultimately aikido needs to be a partnership. Not about getting what you want, but about sharing with your partner, so together you can discover the next miracle around the corner. By being present for your partner, your partner chooses to be present for you, and reaching for the goals together is infinitely more fun then grappling for the goal on your own.

Ukemi as Joy

The more I practice ukemi, the more I love it. I've come to find great joy transforming the art of falling into the art of flying. My partner throws me through the air and by the time they look up, I'm standing before them attacking again. I must admit, part of that joy comes from the look on their faces.

I recall reading a short story when I was young about river creatures that lived their lives clinging to the rocks. It was their belief that whenever their grip would slip they'd be beaten by the whitewater and smashed against the rocks or gobbled by the fish. And, they clung to the safety of the rocks their entire lives rather than exploring the river fully. Then one enlightened creature decided to test that belief and, as predicted, he did get smashed, bumped and bruised only as long as he resisted the flow of the river. Soon he learned that by letting go and gracefully following the flow of the river... he could fly!

Ukemi as Communication and Understanding

The best aikido instruction I've ever received has been through receiving ukemi. If you ever have an opportunity to take ukemi from a shihan at a seminar you should take it. I've watched countless demonstrations from Saotome, Ikeda, or Doran where I see the technique... I see the technique... <okay, I've got it>... then I receive the technique... <whoa!> and I realize only then what I couldn't see with my eyes. Our feeling senses, tactile input into our proprioceptive and vestibular systems is a form of data input many times more sensitive and accurate than any of our other senses. This is often referred to as *tactile learning* and it's the only way to draw true insight into an art based on motion and

interaction.

Working with senior students (sempai) we can gain incremental insight into the technique that we may not have yet discovered ourselves, or hints of subtly different perspectives on the meaning of these techniques. Working with junior students (kohai) we can understand where their weaknesses and lack of understanding reside, and hopefully help them discover it. It also provides insight where we might be making the same mistakes and exhibiting the same weaknesses.

Taking ukemi provides insight, not only into the technique, but into our partner's heart and mind. With one throw, we can sense what they are feeling and what they are thinking. Imagine the power of this kind of insight, in the real world, interacting with the people that surround us daily, and the effect it can have on how we behave and interact with others for the rest of our life.

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If you've made no other New Year's resolutions yet consider making an aikido resolution for the New Year. Every day, in every moment of your training consider opening your eyes and seeing what you may not have given yourself the opportunity to notice before. Observe and improve your ukemi. Then use that channel to discover aikido in new ways you've yet to understand.

Happy New Years,

Sensei Dan