

## Ukemi in Aikido

The word *uke* in Japanese translates as “to receive” which is at odds with many people’s assumption that taking *ukemi* primarily involves acting out the losing role of an attacker. “Receiving the technique” evokes a more active and collaborative role for *uke* within the *kata* execution, where the attack and subsequent breakfall are used as a learning experience<sup>1</sup> for both *tori* and *uke*.

Those that train in *aikido* will quickly realize that half of their time training is spent receiving the aikido techniques and taking *ukemi*. When we first start *aikido* training, it is while being *uke* that we feel stiff and clumsy. Later as we progress in *aikido*, it is often while working with a good *uke* – one who is able to adapt their movements to maintain a feeling of connection and lightness throughout the technique – that we often improve our understanding of the *aikido* techniques. When watching *aikido*, it will often be a good *uke* that gives the movements the dynamism and flair that characterize a good *aikido* demonstration.

With so much of our training time on the *tatami* taken up carrying out the role of *uke*, it is important that this aspect of training is also developed as a learning tool. However, in many *dojos* around the world, it is still very common to see a practice where the emphasis on *ukemi* is very small or, in some cases, completely absent.

There are several good reasons to work hard to improve our *ukemi*. First and foremost, *ukemi* abilities are developed so we are able to safely receive the locks and throws seen in *aikido*. The techniques of *aikido* are done in collaboration with a partner where both parties work together to execute a known attack and technique. For *tori* to be able to execute their techniques fully and dynamically, it is first necessary for *uke* to have the capacity to receive them. While a poor or inexperienced *uke* is a fantastic learning experience, a good *uke* allows *tori* to fully explore their techniques with varying levels of power, speed and dynamism. This is even more apparent when being *uke* for senior graded instructors at external *aikido* courses. These events are great opportunities to “steal” knowledge but are reliant on students first having the *ukemi* level to experience or feel the teacher’s technique. While a teacher can verbally explain certain aspects of their technique, the “globality” or overall sensation of the technique can only be felt if you are able to receive this physically. A good instructor will modify the power of their technique to match the level of their partner and ensure no-one is hurt but there is also a responsibility on the side of *uke* to develop their *ukemi* so that this, eventually, is not required.

There is also a key body conditioning aspect to *ukemi*, which is appreciated more over time. Suppleness and spontaneity are developed through repeated *ukemi*; we obtain an improved control and awareness of our bodies enabling freer movements in our training; the repetition of getting up off the floor quickly builds strong legs and centre. These concepts cannot be intellectually understood and immediately integrated into your practice. Concepts such as “relaxing” or “staying connected” are abstract and mean little to the beginner student. These ideas must be physically understood and integrated over time and it is why Edinburgh Aikido students continue to do repetitive *ukemi* each day on the run up to any grading.

Finally there are strong martial reasons for developing a high level of *ukemi*. Remaining “connected” with *tori* throughout the technique offers the opportunity to exploit openings or even reverse the techniques (*kaeshi-waza*). In comparison, a heavy and static *uke* runs the risk of becoming too fixed in their attack and being unable to respond to sudden changes in the techniques. This is most apparent in weapons work (where any size or strength difference between *tori* and *uke* has minimal impact) where any heavy movements or contact can be easily perceived and quickly exploited.

The attributes of a good *uke* – responsive, light, dynamic, flexible – eventually transfers over to the role of *tori* where an improved control and perception of the body results in more dynamic and effective techniques. Simply, a stiff *uke* will likely have rigid techniques while someone that gives a lot of themselves as *uke* will develop a more flexible and adaptable approach to their aikido.

Many of the modern aikido greats (most of whom, unfortunately, have passed away now) such as Tamura Sensei and Chiba Sensei, were regular *ukes* to O-Sensei and developed very high levels of *ukemi*. As a consequence, their level of *aikido* reached a level that is rarely, if ever, seen these days. These teachers, in turn, pushed their early students to develop their own *ukemi* so they were able to

receive and experience their own expression of the *aikido* techniques. A cursory search on the Internet will reveal demonstrations from this era involving a level of vigor, energy and dynamism that is, unfortunately, rarely seen these days. While most people will not have the inclination or physical capacity to mimic these demonstrations, I believe that those serious about their *aikido* training should, to the best of our ability, continually strive to improve their *ukemi*.

As we advance in *aikido*, the role of *uke* should be used as a teaching tool when working with more junior training partners. A good *uke* can guide the *kohai* through the technique, moving their body to allow the beginner to understand the shape and rhythm of the technique with little or no verbal explanation. In contrast, an *uke* that gives nothing will generally leave a junior confused with little idea of how to execute the technique, even if detailed verbal explanations have been provided. At the extreme end of this spectrum are *ukes* who deliberately block a technique when training. While this approach may be used to point out obvious errors, a senior student should be very clear on the end-goal when doing this – most people after a few years of aikido training will, to a certain degree, be able to block a known technique and blocking repeatedly simply runs the risk of the same being done back to them while also disheartening an enthusiastic student.

*Ukemi* is a rich and varied component of *aikido* that merits serious study and effort. Repeated *ukemi* training in the dojo will, over time, produce a more supple and connected body, which will positively impact all aspects of a person's aikido. Attending external seminars with other aikido groups will also expose the serious practitioner to other styles of *ukemi* that should be studied and integrated to help develop a more spontaneous and adaptable practice. But almost more importantly, improving your *ukemi* will allow you to train dynamically with your peers and friends in the dojo which is a fun and exhilarating aspect of training that no-one should miss out on.

<sup>1</sup> Dave Lowry, *Uke: Receiving*, "Sword and Brush, the spirit of the martial arts" ([http://www.fightingarts.com/content01/uke\\_receiving.shtml](http://www.fightingarts.com/content01/uke_receiving.shtml))

Scott Reed  
Edinburgh Aikido Club