

HOW TO BECOME A GOOD UKE

By Doug Edwards

On a training night a few weeks ago I was performing a kote gaeshi on Feathers. I applied the technique with perhaps 70% power and heard him yelp and fall to the ground in a heap holding his wrist.

I felt really bad because I had nearly caused him a wrist injury, the last thing I'd want to be responsible for is anybody to miss training because of my carelessness. I was also disappointed in my own lack of ability to identify that we were not blending, and that I was too focused on my own technique to look after my uke.

“Not good enough Edwards. Try harder next time, deduct 12 house points and see me after class!”

“Hai Sensei!” ☺

However, when it was my turn again, I told Feathers how I thought our previous effort could be improved upon, and I'm pleased to report that his fall was much better and was not such a painful experience for him. But, looking around the mat at that time I noticed all of you were repeating Feathers' problem. It was what happened that night that inspired me to pen this article (thanks Feathers!).

Many of our club students have now been training in Aikido for about two years, and as a result are advancing well through the grades, many recently achieving 3rd kyu (green belt) status: Congratulations to all those that successfully passed your grading in November (and to Steve Nester for his awarded 4th kyu, orange belt).

This article is primarily for the benefit of those green belts and proficient orange belts. By no intention of my own it also just happens to naturally follow on from my previous article, 'UKEMI', from early 2004. I know this sequel has been a long time coming, but I wanted to be sure you were ready for it in order to reap the benefits and put into practice its content.

However, that is not to say beginners may not benefit. Try incorporating some of the theory into your training now, and then it will be easier to apply as your aikido develops.

Becoming more proficient in Aikido does not mean you should only be more confident of neutralizing an attack, or feel more comfortable swinging your 'sticks' around. Part of the green belt syllabus is 'high-grade fall'. At your level, the more you train with advanced grades, whether within our club or with aikidoka from other clubs (on seminars and courses) the more it will be expected of you to take high-grade falls.

Obviously, some students feel more comfortable, are braver (or to re-phrase that, perhaps lacking a few more brain cells than most ☺) or just bounce more than others.

The form and technique for taking a high-grade fall is, for all of you green belts (and some orange belts), by now fairly straightforward and you perform them quite well during our ukemi practice/warm up. The next stage, and it is a difficult one, is to apply that practice to take a fall from a technique.

In order to take high falls effectively and without injury, you must learn to be a good uke. To be a good uke is under-rated, and is rarely taught, but it can be a great help in improving your aikido.

These are what I consider the fundamental ingredients of being able to accept a powerful technique from an advanced aikidoka, to be a good uke and to take a successful high-grade fall:

- i. **BLEND**
- ii. **POSITION**
- iii. **RELAX**
- iv. **BREATH**
- v. **TRUST**

I'll tackle each of them individually:

i. **BLEND**

I touched on this in my previous article, and it is very important to incorporate into your aikido. If you do not blend well, your aikido will evolve much more slowly than that of an uke that does blend well.

As some of you may have read, heard or, as a complete novice (Louise) saw at our club and commented following training: Sensei John was demonstrating techniques using me as uke: "It was lovely to watch Sensei John as he performed those techniques on you, you moved so smoothly together, it looked very much like dancing."

Louise hit the nail right on the head – Aikido is just like dancing. There is even a superb book with a similar title.

Blending begins as soon as you and your partner bow to each other prior to training. 'Key' into each other's psyche, spirit and body language. Take all of your partner's body into view with a soft focus, it will help you detect any small movement by uke or tori, the moment it is made. As your uke initiates the move by attacking (e.g. tsuki, yokomenuchi), or tori initiates by drawing you out (e.g. shomenuchi), you should both move and blend as one.

Do not resist. If you feel that you are going to lose your balance, correct it to stay on balance. If you do not make that correction you will be off balance (e.g. stretched beyond your own centre of gravity, bent over, balancing on one leg etc).

Why should your partner bother trying to complete the technique when all he need do is lightly push you more off balance to make you fall to the ground? Let's face it; if this were to happen in a real situation out of the dojo, would you want to complete the technique when it isn't necessary? In the dojo we complete the technique for our mutual practice and benefit, i.e. for us to practice our ukemi, practice the movement of the technique, to blend and to enjoy training in the spirit of aikido.

So, as your partner (tori) leads: you follow; as he advances: you retreat; as he leads you to your left: adjust your balance to your left, and so on.

If you look at all the 'good ukes' out there, you will find they follow their tori by taking small steps. It enables one to turn or change direction easier and to maintain balance.

If you follow by taking big steps, you will, as sure as I sit here in Hong Kong typing this, sipping a wee dram of Bushmills Irish whiskey while my wife and daughter watch some Chinese kung fu soap on TV: LOSE YOUR BALANCE! I kid you not!

Being big in stature is no excuse either: Watch Sensei Pete, he is an excellent example of a good uke.

Blending however does not mean moving before you are led, entering the technique to take a fall before it has been applied, falling at the slightest touch. That was the main reason why I did not train when I worked abroad, the attack from many of my ukes (some of them Dan grades) was not sincere, and sometimes they would ukemi out of techniques before I had even applied them. It felt as if I was not achieving anything, and I could not for the life of me see how it was going to help my aikido develop and evolve.

If you blend well it will really help and set you up for.....

ii. POSITION

The problem I discovered during that training session with Feathers was that, as I applied the kote gaeshi my uke was out of position. This was partly my fault because I lost concentration and left him behind, and partly his fault for not keeping up, or not blending. Because of this his arm was very nearly straight, making a high-grade fall nearly impossible to achieve.

When we practice high fall at the beginning or end of a class, how many of you throw yourselves over a nearly straight arm? It is really difficult, if not impossible without hurting yourself, so for the purposes of this article we shall say it would be none of you.

So, to get into the correct position:

- Keep your arm relaxed and bent at the elbow.
- Try to keep a feeling of tucking your elbow into your body, or keeping your elbow as close to your body as possible.
- Face the direction in which you are going to be thrown. If you can help it, especially with kote gaeshi, do not enter the fall sideways on (some people feel this is the natural thing to do).

If you follow these points your body will naturally be closer to your partner's and it will be within his dynamic sphere, resulting in you both becoming a single body of blended movement.

Arguably the most challenging technique for most people to take a high fall from is shihonage (others do not like tenchinage as you cannot see where you are going, another is jujinage as you cannot free your arms to help break your fall).

Shihonage is a beautiful technique, but the fall from it appears daunting because the technique is applied at what appears to be shoulder height. For the inexperienced the thought of taking a high-grade from it would be "Bloody hell! How can I throw myself over my arm when it's up here?"

In actual fact the projection of the technique commences at shoulder height, but there is no reason to fall at that point. Your arm will reach a stage where it can no longer take the leverage on the elbow joint, that point will be at about abdomen level (just like the finish of a bokken 1st suburi), it is also the moment you must enter into the high-grade fall. Therefore, the fall is taken towards the end of the cut/technique.

I remember on a seminar many years ago, Sensei Ray Gardiner (then a blue belt) as Sensei Sargeant's uke, taking high fall from shihonage. It was beautiful to watch. When I paid more attention I realized that Ray got so close to Sensei before the throw, that his free hand/arm seemed to go behind Sensei's back to effectively hug him just before being thrown. This action effectively brought Ray into Sensei's dynamic sphere, rather than being on the periphery of his sphere where we would be trying to race around Sensei's body to keep up with the technique.

Since then I've followed Sensei Ray's form, and it has never failed me. For kote gaeshi my free hand frequently grasps or makes contact with my partners forearm to help me turn to face the direction of the projection. I've noticed Sanya's hand sometimes makes an audible *slap* against Sensei Sargeant's back as she blends to take ukemi from his kote gaeshi. It can't be helped owing to the power Sensei is using, but it also demonstrates she is blending well to face the direction of the projection or fall.

When taking a fall from iriminage, try to wrap your leading arm (the one closest to your partner) around tori's shoulder from below his armpit. This will help your hips to twist and prevent your head from hitting the mat before your body. It also assists in preventing you from landing flat on your back and possibly winding yourself.

iii. **RELAX**

Once you have achieved 3rd kyu status, you shall begin to feel and realize that relaxation plays a primary role as part of your development, as a result your aikido will become more effortless and much more satisfying. You have no chance of blending well or taking a painless high-grade fall unless you are relaxed.

If your body and mind are relaxed, you will automatically blend better and therefore get into position quicker. If you wish to be sincere in your attacks (and you should at this stage in your development), be strong but do not use upper body strength. Confused? Read on.

For static attacks: Grip firmly primarily using your little and ring fingers (as you should when holding the weapons), hands and (as little as possible) your forearm muscles. Try to leave your biceps and shoulders relaxed, this will then allow your upper body to move freely.

For dynamic attacks (e.g. tsuki, yokomenuchi) make your hand tense at the point of contact, do not make your complete arm tense. If boxers and karateka fought with stiff arms it would be like Pinocchio having a bundle with Captain Scarlett: Wooden (no pun intended) and with no fluidity.

If you think about it, this is also true in a practical situation. An attacker is not thinking of punching once and finishing that strike with a stiff arm, he will be relaxed just after having delivered his punch and making ready his follow up punch.

What we aikidoka aim to master is how to neutralise that first punch so that the second punch cannot be delivered.

Other advantages of being relaxed are that the falls are not painful (or at least only a little bone jarring); as long as you have stamina you should be able to keep taking the punishment, getting up and returning for more (a word of warning though, high-grade falls are very tiring). Immobilizations are less painful too, you will find through relaxing your complete body, your joints will become more flexible and less painful.

iv. **BREATH**

Breathing out helps you to relax. Admittedly, if you want to grip something strongly you will initially breathe out. But once the grip has taken hold you will find that you can relax and maintain the strength of grip by using the lower arm muscles and hand/fingers only.

Because of the dynamic nature of aikido, as uke it is difficult to maintain physical strength throughout a technique. As soon as we think about maintaining our balance, we relax to allow our bodies to move. Strength should only be used when instructed by your sensei (or requested by your partner) during kihon practice.

Never, never, never hold your breath during a technique, while taking a fall or while an immobilization/pin is being applied

v. **TRUST**

As uke, what is the most daunting thought that enters your head when training free style kokyunage or jiyu waza?

I would edge my bets that you all find the most daunting part of being uke is attacking and not knowing what technique is going to be applied, or how it is going to be applied (e.g. soft or full power; projection; pin; omote; ura; a henka; is an atemi going to be used etc).

I realize that in the middle range of grades to remain relaxed can be very difficult, you want to prepare yourself for the fall because you do not want to get hurt. In order for you to avoid getting hurt, you try to read what technique is going to be executed and you prepare your mind and body for what you believe is coming.

The fault with this is that many aikido techniques are similar at one point or another within their movement. This is what makes aikido unique, adaptable and very nearly infinitely variable: GREAT! Unfortunately it also makes anticipating or reading the technique very difficult.

Don't worry; I am sure most of us advanced grades can testify to having been the same at some stage in our training.

As difficult as it is, you must trust your tori (unless of course he/she is inexperienced and does not know what to do) and allow your mind and body to relax and become a void.

I recommend that when your partner signals which attack they want, give it with 100% sincerity.

Tori asks for ryote kata dori: don't go for him half heartedly, dawdling with arms wide open, what are you going to do, hug him? Go grab his shoulders as if you want to pin him to the wall. He asks for a tsuki: punch straight at him and take no prisoners.

A sincere attack gives your tori something to work with and worry about. If there is no threat why bother evading the attack, completing the technique?

Because at your grades you are now performing your techniques with more enthusiasm and power, it is dangerous for both you and your partner not to be sincere in your attacks.

If uke's attack is too strong or too fast, ask them to ease off or slow down. Allow the strength and speed of the attack to progressively increase as your ability and confidence improves. Uke can remain sincere even though his attack is weaker/slower.

If, as uke or tori you feel you cannot trust your partner, ease off on the enthusiasm gas and take a ukemi rather than a high-grade fall, slow down while executing the technique to allow yourself some thinking space to analyse, 'feel' the technique or spot ways in which you can polish your technique.

Well, that about wraps it up. Have I waffled on or what?

Sorry all, but to convey all the thoughts I have in my head onto one or two sheets of A4 is just not possible. I hope these words of guidance help you on the path to becoming a better uke, and hence improving your aikido.

One last word of advice: Always, always respect your uke and tori, and maintain awareness of all the other aikidoka around you.

As most of you are young in comparison to me, do not be deceived into thinking your stamina is limitless. Fatigue is dangerous. If you have been taking a lot of falls there will come a time when your body cannot keep pace with your spirit and enthusiasm. Listen to your body and curtail your enthusiasm accordingly. Slow down or take a rest.

Far too many injuries are picked up in aikido, mainly by the middle grades through over enthusiasm. If you see there is not enough room to fall, stop your partner and wait until there is room, try changing orientation to throw in a different direction.

After all, if you do pick up an injury it could be a while before you can train again. You may find it difficult to get back onto the 'aikido bus' and continue your journey from the same stop you were forced, through injury, to get off at!

Enjoy your training, I'll see you on the mat soon. If you want any help or advice, don't hesitate to ask Sensei Pete or John, or any of the senior grades.

Doug Edwards
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