

UKEMI

Beginners often ask “How long has it taken you, Senseis Pete and John to ukemi so well?” I cannot speak for our senseis, but I’m still working on them.....

When I started aikido and saw aikidoka making impressive ukemi, flying through the air and rolling and returning for more punishment with a smile on their face, and when I witnessed a dramatic high fall for the first time I thought “Wow! How do they do that without hurting themselves? I’ve gotta have some of that.”

Now, many years later I think I have nearly achieved that goal. I say ‘nearly’ because every now and again through lack of concentration, I am reminded to stay focused during training when I make a bone-jarring ukemi.

Even now during our warm up ukemi at the Zenshin Club I am constantly assessing myself, striving to hone, improve, develop and perfect my ukemi. I am sure Sensei John and Pete are doing the same too.

As a novice, I used to practice like crazy. In my living room, on the lawn (I swear I wore a thread-bare path across my Mum’s carpet, an earthen track across her lawn) and even during lunch time on a construction site in London (albeit, a carpeted office under refurbishment). As with most things in life, ukemi can only improve through repeated diligent practice.

It is difficult to express in words the buzz of being on the receiving end of a well executed technique, and to be able to complement that technique with a well executed ukemi. Equally so, aikido is probably at its most enjoyable when you can commit 100% into a technique and be safe in the knowledge that your uke will ukemi without injury.

So, what are the secrets to good ukemi? I’ve tried to relay my own tips in the following paragraphs:

FORM: Our Senseis teach us the basic form and shape of each ukemi. Depending upon your sex, height, weight and build only you can tweak the angles and round off the corners of your body entering and leaving ukemi until you are happy and comfortable. Feel the mat with all your body and listen to what it is telling you. Some may comment that you have an unorthodox fall, but if it works for you that’s OK.

Also remember that while others will try to assist you with tips of their own, what works for them might not necessarily work for you.

RELAXATION: No matter what type of ukemi you make, relax your body. The only strength in your body should be your unbendable spirit.

NEVER HOLD YOUR BREATH!! If you do not relax into your ukemi you will inevitably injure yourself. Breath out as you reach the ‘point of no turning back’ as you enter into ukemi, because you will naturally relax with your outward breath. I also am of the belief that through the outward breath you will be returning to the Universe the power that nage (your training partner) has taken from it and transmitted to you through his technique.

Perhaps that is why you will sometimes hear me 'kiai' when taking ukemi from a powerful throw. I did not consciously think about letting it out, one day it just seemed to happen and has not stopped since.

BLEND: Learn to blend with and not resist nage's technique. Aikido is about harmony, so harmonise with your training partner throughout the technique. Try taking smaller steps around nage when he leads you, bend when he wants to bend you and co-operate. Your partner will appreciate your co-operation because it helps him to perfect his technique, you will benefit because you will find ukemi easier to perform because you will be in the correct position to enter the fall, and thus not injure yourself.

Resistance to a technique is not aiki, does not help you or your partner and will lead to your own injury. Physical resistance is generally exercised only at advanced levels to test your partner's technique.

SPIRIT: Aikido would not be aikido without the 'ki' component. Many Westerners find the concept of ki (or 'chi' as the Chinese refer to it) difficult to grasp. Personally, I believe what the Asians believe: its existence in all living things. It is a flow of energy that perpetually flows through and around our bodies, and when it can be harnessed and directed it is incredibly powerful (take a look at Sensei Tony Sargeant for real life proof). Try to imagine your ki flowing from your fingertips like water out of a fire hose as you make your forward rolling ukemi, it will help keep that smooth crescent shape and prevent you from bending your arm as you enter the ukemi.

CONFIDENCE: Confidence comes with repeated practice. As soon as you feel comfortable with a kneeling forward ukemi, progress to a standing ukemi, then to a flying ukemi etc. One cannot leap over 4 aikidoka lying on the mat and expect to ukemi safely if you have just mastered a kneeling ukemi, because if you injure yourself it is not as simple as 'getting back on that bicycle' to try again.

Our Senseis sometimes give us the option of attempting a more challenging ukemi or staying with one you are comfortable with to develop your confidence, so don't try the challenging one unless you are pretty sure you can do it. We all started same way, but when you decide you can take that first step of progression towards higher grade falls you'll find your learning and confidence will soar.

So, before our classes start and after we finish training don't be shy, get out there practising, pick the brains and experience of our Senseis and senior grades (if they haven't already disappeared to the bar), experiment and try to enjoy.

Sooner than you think you will be making spectacular ukemi look simple, find them exhilarating and hear others gasp as you literally fly, roll and return for more – with a smile on your face.....

Good luck,

Doug