

Most will agree that ukemi is at least fifty percent of budo training. The purpose of ukemi is to protect your body, and learning good ukemi is just as important as learning the throws. Eventually, ukemi, like technique, becomes an art.

When training in the dojo, **the cardinal rule is that partners should always work at the level of the least experienced or least physically fit. No one should be thrown harder than s/he can handle.** We should remember these things: "we must crawl before we can walk", "respect your partner" and "**there are learning opportunities in every moment.**"

At any time in any class, there could be students who are nursing an injury, visitors who are orienting themselves to the style of the training, or students who wish to train in a deliberate manner while working on a particular aspect of study. Since at one time or another, each of us has been in one of these situations, we can appreciate the value of being a perceptive and considerate uke.

In addition to acknowledging the condition of your partner, another condition that calls for awareness is that of the mat population. Big, space-consuming rolls and breakfalls are obviously inappropriate and potentially dangerous on a crowded mat. **Awareness on the mat is a part of budo training, and everyone's safety depends upon it.**

Daily training

In ordinary daily training, the kind of ukemi you take depends upon the level of the class and the person who is your nage. For example, in a beginner class, two beginner-level partners should practice cooperatively with minimal resistance, each learning the movements of each role. If you are an intermediate or advanced student in a beginner class, you would find it appropriate to follow along with nage and to "fall", even though nage's performance may not have actually compelled you to go down. You, the person taking ukemi, are assisting the beginner nage in understanding the flow and form of the kata being studied. Clean, precise and cooperative ukemi can provide good feedback for nage, and of course, you also have an opportunity to improve your own skills.

In an intermediate class, the pace typically picks up and training can be lively. Students by this time are quite comfortable with both kata and ukemi. At this level, cooperative training continues for the most part. However, with the mutual understanding of both partners, it is generally considered appropriate to "test" each other, to provide more resistance, to explore technique, and to begin to require that the techniques "work." If a move is not executed properly, a fall by uke is not obligatory. This provides appropriate feedback at the intermediate level.

In advanced, physically intense classes, good ukemi skills are obviously essential. Things can happen very fast. It is appropriate to give your partner "a hard time" in order for both uke and nage to explore new dimensions of "strength," balance and counter-balance, connections, "take-aways" or reversals, timing, and all the other elements that comprise the essence of dynamic budo.

Uke / Nage cont.

In the most advanced levels of training, there are no predetermined kata, and therefore ukemi cannot be predicted. Nage is constantly strategizing, throwing uke in unexpected directions, as he or she works to keep uke off-balance, both physically and mentally. Uke, then, must physically respond correctly in the moment, like water descending over and around obstacles, while simultaneously calculating how to gain control. Both uke and nage are in "neutral", living in the moment. This is where ukemi becomes art.

Demonstrations

Being called upon by the class instructor to take ukemi for demonstration purposes calls for "demonstration ukemi". In this case, your ukemi should be as clear and as precise as possible to facilitate the teacher's lesson to the class. Techniques are usually demonstrated several times, in order for the students to observe the movements of both nage and uke. The teacher will indicate the speed s/he requires for the demonstration, including attack, technique and ukemi. Usually in beginner classes, demonstrations are performed in slow motion, since students are developing their observation skills. The speed and intensity of the demonstrations predictably increase in intermediate and advanced classes. Taking ukemi for a teacher is a lesson in awareness and perception. As uke, you should be ready to adjust to whatever the teacher might want or do, including being aware of when NOT to attack.

Testing

Testing is another situation that requires knowledgeable ukemi. It is generally accepted that uke who are assisting in kyu tests should give determined, precise attacks that will allow the candidate to perform to the best of his or her ability. Of course, if you assist as an uke in a test, you should be certain you know the names of all the attacks and how to execute them.

Taking ukemi for dan tests requires a level of experience, and for the most part, it should be yudansha who serve as uke, although occasionally an upper level kyu-ranked student may be called upon. Dan tests are often intense, with nage amped up, tired, and/or nervous. The uke must be prepared to give one hundred percent of his/her attention and energy to the task, from initiating the attacks to taking the falls. Anything less could easily interfere with the test or become the cause of an injury.