

Ukemi: The art of safe falling and rolling in Aikido, Judo and Ju-Jutsu

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Ukemi (受け身) is a central part of many Japanese martial arts and literally means "receiving the body." It describes the ability to fall, roll, and receive throws safely without injury.

In the Japanese martial arts Aikido, Judo and Jujitsu, great emphasis is placed on avoiding injury. Ukemi encompasses various rolling and falling techniques that allow the practitioner to safely dissipate the energy of an attack. Ukemi is so essential that it is one of the first lessons in the dojo and a fixture in every training session.

Ukemi enables practitioners to fall safely, avoid injury, and fully utilize the techniques of their art or sport. Through regular practice of Ukemi, practitioners develop not only physical abilities but also mental strength and resilience.

The following techniques are distinguished:

- **Mae Ukemi (前受け身):** Forward roll, in which the exerciser rolls forward over the shoulder to distribute the impact.
- **Zenpo Kaiten Ukemi (前方回転受け身):** Zenpo Kaiten Ukemi is a more advanced forward roll in which the practitioner performs a full rotation. The practitioner rolls over the shoulder while rotating around his own axis.
- **Ushiro Ukemi (後ろ受け身):** Backward roll, in which the practitioner falls backward and dissipates the energy through the back.
- **Yoko Ukemi (横受け身):** Sideways fall, in which the practitioner falls sideways onto the floor.
- **Tobi Ukemi (飛びけ身):** Flying or jumping: A gentle falling technique that avoids the hard landing of hands and feet when falling.
- **Haneochi (羽落ち),** Also known as "featherfall," it is used to land gently and safely, similar to a feather floating to the ground. This technique is often taught in advanced classes and requires good body control and coordination, as it requires falling backward while moving forward.
- **Breakfall:** All ukemi variations in which the fall is to be cushioned by using as much body surface as possible. Furthermore, there are all possible variations of the basic techniques mentioned above, and ultimately, any variation that allows you to safely and gently absorb a throw or fall is a good solution.

Techniques, philosophies and goals:

1. Aikido:

- **Techniques:** Aikido focuses on redirecting or dissipating an attacker's energy. It incorporates numerous throwing and locking techniques, all of which should be used in a way that avoids injury to the opponent.
- **Philosophy:** Aikido places great emphasis on harmony and self-defense without harming the attacker. It is often considered a peaceful martial art.
- **Goal:** The goal is to de-escalate conflicts and change the mindset of the attacker so that no harm is caused. It is a distinctly defensive martial art.

2. **Judo:**

- **Techniques:** Judo is known for its throwing techniques and ground fighting (ne-waza). It also includes holds, chokeholds, and locking techniques.
- **Philosophy:** Judo means "gentle way" and emphasizes the use of technique and leverage over muscle force. It also has a strong athletic aspect and is an Olympic discipline.
- **Goal:** The goal in Judo is to throw or control the opponent on the ground in order to score points or force him to submit.

3. **Ju-Jutsu:**

- **Techniques:** Ju-Jutsu is a versatile martial art, combat sport, and self-defense form that combines techniques from various disciplines such as judo, aikido, and karate. It includes throws, locks, strikes, and kicks.
- **Philosophy:** Ju-Jutsu emphasizes flexibility and adaptability to defend against different types of attacks.
- **Goal:** The goal is effective self-defense in real situations, whereby techniques can be adapted as needed.

In comparison, Ju-Jutsu is the most aggressive of the three disciplines. Strikes and kicks that can severely injure or disable the opponent are fundamentally part of the training repertoire. Even opponents already prone or pinned down using locking techniques are often brought down with a "final" blow (indicated in training).

In Judo, however, the primary goal is to control the opponent. Holds and chokeholds are usually executed in such a way as to force the opponent to submit (by high-fives). It is important to constantly guide and hold the opponent close to the body.

The principle of Aikido differs fundamentally in this regard. In Aikido, there is no competitive spirit, and secondly, the goal is not to defeat or even destroy the opponent, but to force them to cease their actions. It is purely about de-escalating a threatening situation, ideally without even escalating into a fight.

Ideally, an aggressor abandons his intentions before the actual attack and goes on his way peacefully, just like the supposed victim. In reality, this ideal is probably often just a wish, but it is the fundamental philosophy of many martial arts and the difference between them and competitive sports.

This brings us to a fundamental distinction between judo and jujitsu and aikido: While in martial arts the opponent is thrown, e.g., over the shoulder or hip, in aikido he is guided onto a different path (in the figurative sense, a change of mind). If possible, without injuring him. Controlling an opponent to the bitter end, e.g., by applying a ground lock that forces him to submit, has the opposite effect. It leads to victory for one and humiliation for the other.

Nevertheless, techniques for restraining an opponent are also practiced in aikido – but even these are in relatively safe versions for uke.

Ukemi (受け身)

Ukemi encompasses various falling and rolling techniques designed to ensure safe landing and avoid injury. The person performing the techniques is called "nage" (投げ) in Japanese, or the thrower.

The partner receiving the technique is called "uke" (受け), or the receiver. "mi" (身) is the body. Uke must know how to accept the technique without sustaining physical harm. This is called "ukemi"—receiving with the body.

A more detailed analysis of ukemi lies in the distinction between rolling and falling.

Rolling and Falling

A. Westbrook and O. Ratti compare the rolling in "Aikido and the Dynamic Sphere" with the "Dynamic Sphere" itself. The spherical shape was often considered the perfect shape by the ancient masters of the martial arts.

"Our body must, when necessary, become such a spherical shape, ... and thus become a mechanism of movement that we use both for strategic reasons and for our own safety."

The major difference here from falling is that when falling, one simply attempts to land safely on the ground, whereas when rolling, one can quickly regain an upright and stable posture.

In English, there is a better distinction between the terminology than in German. While in German-speaking countries, soft falling, which usually refers to rolling, is often distinguished from hard falling, in English there is still the term "breakfall." This is further differentiated into soft (tobi ukemi) and hard breakfalls (ukemi). The word breakfall comes from the "break" or stopping of the fall. Specifically, this means that if you fall forward, for example, you catch yourself with both forearms and as much surface area as possible, instead of just falling onto your palms. In martial arts that control throws by holding on and simultaneously imparting force, this is the only way for Uke to cushion the fall. A smooth roll is not possible due to Uke's immobilization (e.g., holding the arm) with Nage.

The "hard" fall should therefore be seen as a last resort to mitigate damage to one's own body. It is also very unlikely that injuries will not occur outside the dojo. But even in the dojo, breakfalls can cause lasting damage, especially if they occur from great heights. While in Judo and Ju-Jutsu, throws are executed close to the body, often using the mass of the thrower's body, in Aikido there are few levers that require such close body control or even clasps.

If Aikido techniques (e.g. Shihonage) are performed with a breakfall, critical situations can arise. This requires precise guidance by both Nage and good body control by Uke. One variation to reduce the impact on the ground is Tobi Ukemi. Here, the "hard" breakfall is transformed into a softer one by rolling as far as possible and finally assuming the position of a hard breakfall. This allows for spectacular demonstrations, but they are still not entirely safe, as the jump usually involves jumping over the head, which is freely suspended above the ground. In extreme variations, a somersault is practiced. The question is to what extent this corresponds to the true spirit of Aikido. On the one hand, this Ukemi is not a realistic application in real conflicts, and on the other hand, the resulting show aspect (= "sporting mentality") contradicts the spirit of Aikido.

Kenshiro Yoshigasaki writes in his book „Aikido in Real Life“: „One of the particularities of Aikido practice is Ukemi. In fighting sports Ukemi means to prevent damage when you receive the technique from the other, but in Aikido the Ukemi is different, because Aikido is not a fighting practice.

In the Dojo, Uke falls in a way that allows Nage to keep practicing many techniques. However, you should also practice how to protect your body when falling in real life. So, the falling form is different. In real life, you should fall sideways. “

Another aspect of Aikido is that control over Uke is secondary. To avoid injury, Uke should be guided as gently as possible and given the opportunity to move safely after the technique has been executed. Otherwise, it would be considered a fight.

Giuseppe Ruglioni describes Ukemi in his book „Aikido – the Art of Perception in a Practice of Peace “: „Not to fall – the art of Ukemi “:

„Contrary to the other martial disciplines, as for instance Judo which is based on the unbalancing of the partner, in Aikido, the techniques develop in a way that Uke rolls and then promptly gets up and attack again. “

This means that any interruption in the flow of the technical reception is a hindrance. Therefore, the optimal ukemi variation is the soft, flowing one. Breakfalls don't fit into the picture here, but should only be used when you have no other option..

Ukemi problems in modern Aikido

Comparing older Aikido videos with current ones, it's noticeable that ukemi seems to have become a stylistic device. Spectacular and artistic breakfalls may be eye-catching and impressive, but the idea behind them is purely for effect. Even videos of founder Ueshiba throwing his uke show breakfalls, even more hard than soft. However, they are almost always due to the situation and not to make the technique appear spectacular. In general, one can say that the softer ukemi is performed, the better for one's health. If possible, one should maintain as much contact with the ground as possible and perform ukemi as quietly as possible so as not to harm one's health.

Today, we see two extremes in Aikido: those who don't want to do ukemi at all, and those who use ukemi incorrectly for the sake of presentation. This is a problem, because one could say that ukemi is the essence of Aikido and has many benefits for real life.

General benefits of Ukemi

Ukemi is of great benefit in everyday life. Studies show that more people die from movement-related accidents, falling in the home, on slippery roads in winter, falling from ladders in the garden, etc., than from duels. However, healthy rolling is rarely taught. Aikido is a major exception.

In Germany, significantly more people die each year from tripping or falling than from duels.