

Sword and Spirit

The eNewsletter of Itten Dojo

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— Why Budo? —

Regardless of the times you live in, or the circumstances of your life, success largely depends on things you actually can control:

- **Building strong relationships in a community of achievement.**
- **Forging a disciplined and positive mindset.**
- **Enhancing your physical health and capabilities.**

These are exactly the things membership in a dojo provides.

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701 W Simpson Street, Suite C
Mechanicsburg, PA 17055-3716
www.ittendojo.org

A Deeper Exploration of the Martial Arts...

Ukemi 101

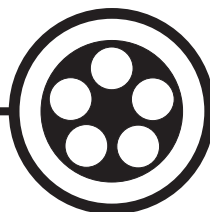
Applying Lovret Sensei's Method

Most people have a natural fear of falling, and new students of aikijutsu are no exception. In fact, one of the biggest challenges a new student faces is becoming comfortable with his or her ability to receive a throwing technique and stay in one piece. From the instructor's point of view, it's important that a new student learn *ukemi* (literally, "receiving body," but usually translated as "rolls and breakfalls") as quickly as possible, so that he or she can practice safely and become an active member of the class.

Although I will use terms such as "fall" or "breakfall" in this essay, I avoid the use of such words when instructing because of the negative images that can be invoked. "Fall" has immediate, anxiety-provoking connotations for many beginning students, and a word like "breakfall" can be even more disturbing. Exotic sounding, previously unknown words like *ukemi* or *kaiten* ("rotation" or "roll") hold no emotional content for a beginner. Additionally, the use of English analogs for the proper, Japanese terms often fails to convey the full or accurate sense of a concept. In the case of *ukemi*, the term really embodies a far greater range of potential actions than just rolls and breakfalls.

When the late Lovret Sensei attended his first aikijutsu class as a teenager, the only instruction in *ukemi* he received was being told to "make round" just prior to being sailed across the mat by one of the more spectacular throws in the repertoire. Sensei survived, barely, and swore that if he ever became an instructor, he would develop a systematic and safe method to teach *ukemi* to his students. He certainly made good on that resolution. More than once, in fact.

Lovret Sensei's original instructional system involved a more or less conventional progression from rolls to breakfalls — and it worked very well — but in the mid-1990s he hit on a departure from conventional methods that works even better. In Lovret Sensei's method, we teach breakfalls first, and rolls second.



The theory is that since new students are intimidated by breakfalls, and because it's unlikely that practice of rolls will alleviate that fear, conventional rolls-to-breakfalls instructional methods will, at best, only delay the point at which a student must confront his or her concerns. A great deal of time and frustration can be saved if the student is immediately carried through the point of most significant discomfort, to emerge with ukemi skills rivaling those of students with as much as months of conventional training in ukemi.

More importantly, because of the active role in ukemi the student takes on from the start, his or her perception of ukemi is formed as, "something I control," rather than as, "something that happens to me." Such a state of mind facilitates understanding the ultimate purpose of ukemi, which is its use as a counter to techniques.

My 1999 article describing the original form of this method was published in the *Journal of Asian Martial Arts*, and a download of that article can still be purchased, at www.journalofasianmartialarts.com/product/japan/other-systems/the-science-of-ukemi-rolls-and-breakfalls-detail-192. (Please note that I don't receive royalties, and am happy to help Mike DeMarco recoup some of his investment in what was a very fine and dearly missed publication.) With lessons learned over the course of decades and hundreds of applications of the methodology, we've made several modifications that increase effectiveness and safety — departures from the original form will be noted, along with the reasons.

PREPARATION

At Itten Dojo, we've found this methodology works best when it's applied individually. Even if an instructor is faced with a group of beginners, it will be worth the time to take each student through the drills, separately. We have successfully used the method in group settings, but the pace of instruction must be constrained to the slowest member of the class. The instructor may be tempted to push the student who is lagging, but that's a huge mistake that risks injury and runs contrary to the goal of instilling a sense of comfort and confidence in the student. We work with new students during open mat periods, or off to the side of the mat during a regular practice.

When working with a new student, the instructor should go through each of the drills in the prescribed order, and not combine any of the steps. Never advance to the next stage until the student is clearly ready. Young and frisky students will usually complete the cycle of drills quickly — I witnessed Lovret Sensei take a 14-year-old skateboarder all the way to solo, aerial breakfalls (completely unassisted, full flips, in mid-air) in six minutes start to finish, but that accomplishment is highly unusual. More mature students typically take 20 – 30 minutes for the process. In some case, more time is required. If it seems necessary, instructors should present the drills over the course of multiple sessions. In any case, complete the entire cycle, addressing one side of the body at a time (i.e., teach only the right-side forward breakfall cycle first, start to finish, and then start over for the left side).

STEP 1: POSITION

The instructor directs the student to lie down on the mat, and positions him or her for a perfect landing (1). The student should be tilted toward their left side, with the left arm extended at a 45-degree angle relative to the line of the body. The right arm is raised to protect the face, and the right leg is bent with the knee pointing upward and the foot flat on the mat. The left leg is slightly bent — we use the direction to "image you're scooping wet sand with the outside edge of your foot" — with the toes pointed toward the knee. This alignment will keep the ankle bone clear of contact with the ground (not a big deal on a soft mat, but quite a different matter on concrete).



Once the student is positioned correctly, the instructor tells him or her to take a deep breath and hold it for a count of ten while tensing every muscle in the body — this will aid in memorizing the position.

STEP 2: SLAPPING

The student should practice raising the left arm from the shoulder (2-A) and slapping the mat vigorously (2-B). The arm must be straight, with no bend at the elbow. The instructor should encourage the student to slap as hard as possible, and explain that scientific experiments in physics laboratories have shown that in a breakfall, the slap can absorb as much as 30% of the force of the landing.



STEP 3: SIMULATE LANDING

Next, the instructor should have the student go to his or her hands and knees. The instructor takes a position on the left side of the student, squatting deeply, and reaches under the student's torso to grip the uniform at the end of the right sleeve and at the knee of the right leg of the pants. (3-A).



Lifting with the legs and not the back, the instructor flips the student over, so that the student can slap on the landing with the left arm (3-B). We tell students at this point that the impact they just felt is as much as will be experienced in a proper breakfall (in other words, not a big deal). In the original form of the training, this section was part of STEP 2; we split the steps to emphasize what will be experienced during a proper landing.



STEP 4: LEG LIFTS

The instructor directs the student to stand facing a wall, right foot slightly forward, as close to the wall as possible while still allowing space to tilt forward. The student places his or her hands on the wall for balance and practices lifting the left leg as high as possible (4). It's critical that the student keeps the leg straight, with no bend at the knee — allowing the knee to bend will compromise the power of the lift. At least ten repetitions of this exercise will be necessary. The instructor should remind the student to keep their back slightly arched and to left the leg with the back and buttocks.



STEP 5: TIPPING

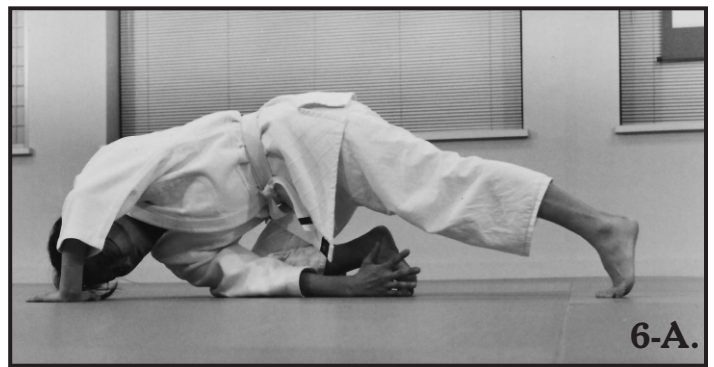
The instructor has the student stand in a natural stance, again with the right foot forward. Taking a position on the left side of the student, the instructor grips the student's uniform jacket with both hands, firmly, at the shoulders. The instructor should hold tightly during this stage of the training, and make it clear to the student that the instructor will not allow the student to fall. The student practices tipping forward, lifting the left leg high to the rear, and attempting to maintain a relatively straight line from head to foot. It's important that the leg-lift tilts the body forward, rather than the student bending forward at the waist and then lifting the leg. The instructor tells the student to increase the power of the lift gradually, until the leg is raised well above horizontal (5). As the student gains confidence in their control, the instructor can

decrease the strength on the grip on the uniform to the point the instructor is helping the student maintain balance with just a gentle touch.



STEP 6: TUCKING

We have modified this step slightly from the original methodology, with better results. Originally, the student is positioned on hands and knees, such that the alignment is square to the front. The student extends the left leg as far as possible to the rear, and reaches toward the left foot with the right arm, reaching so deeply that the back of the right shoulder is in contact with the mat (6-A).



Two factors led to the modification: In execution of ukemi, whether for rolls or breakfalls, we do not cross the line of the body with the lead arm (6-B, next page); in execution of this step of the training, tucking the arm inside allows the student to bend at the waist, seriously degrading the ideal alignment of the ukemi.





Instead, we direct the student to place the lead arm *outside* the right knee (6-C). You might suppose this position would be awkward and uncomfortable, but it's not, and no additional load is placed on the shoulder. Most importantly for the effectiveness of the training, the student in this position cannot bend at the waist.



The instructor directs the student to keep the left leg straight and lift it over completely — the student will roll forward and finish in a proper, breakfall position (as described in STEP 1), with a slap.

STEP 7: OVER

Resume the position used in STEP 5, student in a natural stance with the right foot slightly forward and the

instructor on the left side of the student. Instead of gripping the student's uniform, the instructor and student grasp each other's arms, above the right wrist (7-A).



The student practices another series of leg-lifts, tipping forward onto the instructor's arm. Once the student is consistently lifting his or her leg strongly above horizontal, the instructor directs the student to keep their eyes on their left foot, kick up even harder, and roll directly over the instructor's arm (7-B). We often employ a three-count ("Hard...harder...hardest!") cadence for the first few times over.



If a student balks or freezes during the introduction to ukemi, it will typically be at this step of the process, and



usually when they're halfway into the ukemi and more or less vertical. By maintaining a secure grip and control, the instructor can prevent an accident by pulling on the student's arm, even stepping back into the pull if necessary, thereby rolling the student into horizontal alignment and a reasonably proper landing. Most of the time, in such instances, having gotten through the first attempt even though it was somewhat botched, the student will have enough confidence to continue with more determination and proper form. If not, the instructor can either return to earlier steps and try again, or suspend the training and resume at the next opportunity.

STEP 8: UP AND OVER

Assuming all is going well, the instructor directs the student to add at the peak of the leg-lift, punching up from the ball of the right foot (8). This will add altitude to the ukemi, and the instructor should explain to the student that, counterintuitively, greater height in this exercise makes for a softer landing. Ideally, the student completes rotation, and lands dealing only with the vertical acceleration of gravity.



AT THIS POINT, A MAJOR MODIFICATION

In Lovret Sensei's original method, at this point the student would attempt a solo, aerial breakfall. To be honest, this is not a step we typically employed, even in the 1990s when new members of the dojo tended to be younger and liability concerns were not as a great an issue.



An aerial ukemi is the equivalent of a fairly sophisticated gymnastics move, and carries far greater personal risk for the student than any other portion of the instructional methodology. Lovret Sensei's reason for incorporating this step was to insure the student would recognize his or her own responsibility for ukemi, and not develop a habit of relying on energy or assistance from *nage* (the person executing a throw) to complete a roll or breakfall. We believe we're able to instill that same recognition in what we use as the next step in the process.

Aerial breakfalls (*hirate-ukemi*) are the last technique in the "Ukemi-no-kata," as it's practiced in regular classes, and we have developed our own method of teaching solo, aerial ukemi. The method will be presented in a future issue of *Sword and Spirit*.

STEP 9: APPLIED UKEMI

The instructor uses the fundamental technique *kote-gaeshi* ("returning the wrist") to introduce the student to using ukemi in application. The instructor establishes a wrist-lock and begins to apply torsion. The student turns into the technique (i.e., squares-up to the front, bringing the left shoulder forward) and boosts up and over his or her own arm, using the leg-lift to propel the ukemi (9, next page). The instructor points out that the intent of the *kote-gaeshi* is to break the wrist, not throw the opponent, and that the ukemi is very specifically a counter to that technique, thereby emphasizing the student's responsibility for their own ukemi.





STEP 10: ROLLS

Once the student is proficient with breakfalls, the instructor directs the student to practice tucking his or her left leg, tightly in, at the mid-point of the ukemi. The instructor releases the student's hand, allowing the student to turn the breakfall into a roll (10).



The instructor explains to the student, “If things are happening fast — nage is holding on throwing hard — keep your leg straight and execute a breakfall, but if things are happening slowly enough that you have time to think, you have the option of tucking your leg and executing a roll.”

CONCLUSION

At this point, the student has foundation-level skill at ukemi adequate to facilitate participation in a regular class of moderate intensity. We explain to the new student that, in aiki-based arts, *uke* (the person receiving the technique) can control the intensity of any given exchange by governing the intensity of his or her “attack.” Punch with full speed and power, and uke will be coming out the other side of nage's counter with the same speed and power — ultimately, that's what you want for realistic training, not to mention that being able to fly across the mat makes class a lot more fun. But with an inexperienced student, it's very important for their own safety that they understand the physics of the situation and know that they can go as slowly and deliberately as their capabilities demand. This does not in any way inhibit training, because a slower pace simply means that nage has more time to focus on finer points of detail.

During his or her first few weeks of training, the new student is introduced to backward rolls and other fundamental forms of ukemi, and is able to polish those skills as an active member of the class, rather than finding themselves relegated to the “just learning how to roll” side of the mat. Everyone benefits, especially the new student who has an immediate sense of accomplishing something completely unexpected. As one of our newest students exclaimed, “In the very first lesson, I found myself going from zero to ‘WHOA!’ in about 20 minutes!”

As an instructor, witnessing the excitement and enthusiasm of a new student exceeding their own expectations is some best fun you can have. 🌀

Robert Wolfe, chief instructor of Itten Dojo, began martial arts training in 1975 while attending Bucknell University, where he earned a degree in Japanese Studies. Mr. Wolfe has taught since 1985, and founded Itten Dojo in 1992. His articles on martial arts have been featured in publications such as *The Bujin*, *Budo Shinbun*, the *Journal of Asian Martial Arts*, *Bugeisha*, *Aikido Today Magazine*, *Inside Karate*, *Martial Arts Training*, and *Martial Arts Professional*.

