

Sword and Spirit

The eNewsletter of Itten Dojo

June 2019



— 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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A Deeper Exploration of the Martial Arts...

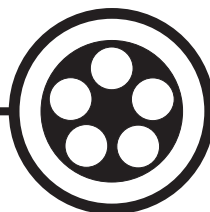
Ukemi 201

Teaching the Solo, “Aerial” Breakfall

Persons watching their first aikijutsu practice might be tempted to exclaim, “Hey, that guy wasn’t thrown...he went with the technique.” Actually, that perception is correct. In reality, there are few throws in Daito-ryu aikijujutsu derived arts — most techniques are actually *kansetsu-waza* (joint destroying techniques), designed to break a wrist or neck, or dislocate a shoulder or elbow. *Ukemi*, usually translated as “rolls and breakfalls,” but more accurately translated as “receiving body,” is the means of countering a *kansetsu-waza*. In our practice, we allow a window for ukemi and execute the techniques as throws, so that we can get up and do it again. Ideally, *uke* (the person being thrown) strives to stay about ¼-inch ahead of the technique, and learning the *hirate-ukemi* (the solo, “aerial” breakfall) is one of the best ways to insure uke can always get themselves above and over a potentially dangerous situation.

An instructor can’t blame some students for avoiding aerial breakfalls, however, when it is often the lack of a systematic means to teach the technique that proves to be the primary barrier to learning. It’s one thing for a kid who’s practically a professional skateboarder or an adult with an extensive background in gymnastics to go for an aerial breakfall just on the basis of watching and imitating, but it’s something else entirely to expect the same level of daring from the typical beginner.

When new students join our aikijutsukai, they are introduced to ukemi through the teaching method described in “Ukemi 101 — Applying Lovret Sensei’s Method” (*Sword and Spirit*, February 2019). Once a student has become reasonably proficient in basic ukemi, and has demonstrated consistent ability to bring their rear leg straight over the top in forward rolls, they can be introduced to the *hirate-ukemi*.



When I execute a hirate-ukemi, I always perform a very specific, precise, and consistent series of actions to set up and complete the sequence. The steps can be summarized as follows:

To start, stand in a relaxed, ready stance (in this example, chudan-gamae).



Raise your lead arm until your hand reaches the level of your eyes, and, arching your back a little, turn the line of the hips and shoulders slightly, such that your torso is facing squarely to the front. Adjusting the alignment of the body at this point helps insure that landing forces will be received on the muscle groups of the spinal erectors, and not to the outside of the torso, on the ribs. Raise the rear heel slightly to concentrate weight on the ball of the lead foot. The lead foot establishes the base leg directly under the center of rotation, to assist with the launch.



On a one-two count, drop your hand vertically and lean straight forward, such that your upper body stops at an angle about 20-degrees above horizontal. Transfer the energy derived from dropping the arm, to your base foot. It's imperative your back remain slightly arched — curling under will place your head closer to the mat during the rotation phase, and is *very* dangerous. Also avoid rolling the upper body sideways when the arms are dropped, which will cause you to undercut the launch.

As your weight loads onto your lead foot, vigorously swing your rear leg up, toward the ceiling. The rear leg is the main source of power for a hirate-ukemi. Since the strength of the upward kick is the primary factor in determining the amount of altitude you will have available as you complete your rotation, be certain to kick straight up, not allowing the leg to bend at the knee. Think of striking the ceiling with the heel of your rear foot.

Augment the power of the upward kick by “punching off” with the ball of your base foot. The direction of this push should be up and a bit toward the rear, again to maximize altitude. Your intent must be to raise your backside over your head, rather than to tuck your head under your hips.



As you complete your rotation, relax, look for the mat, and position to execute a proper breakfall.

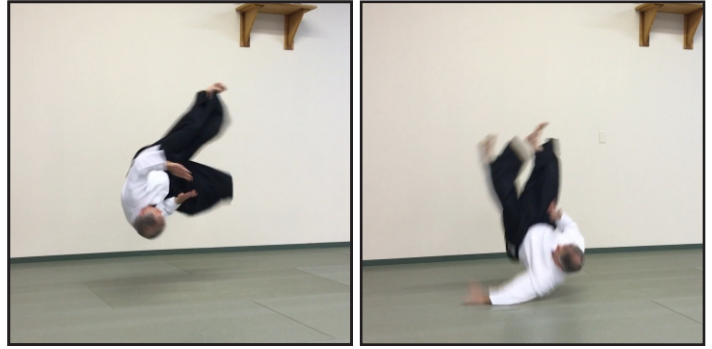
Your slapping arm will impact the mat first, followed by your back, buttocks, and kicking leg/outside edge of rear foot. Make the landing phase last as long as possible, since the top priority at that point is maximum distribution of impact forces, both in terms of time and over portions of the body.

The proper landing position will be with your body slightly angled to the side, with your slapping arm on a 45-degree angle out from your body, your opposite arm guarding your head, the foot of your base leg flat on the mat and the knee raised (also a guard position), and what was your “kicking up” leg extended, slightly bent at the knee, with your foot placed on edge to protect the ankle.

This is the pattern we use as the basis for a systematic method of teaching the aerial breakfall, sometimes over several sessions, and usually during open mat periods and/or prior to regular classes.

To start, we introduce the student to the hirate-ukemi by having them slowly walk through the first five steps in the sequence. The student is specifically told to gently raise the rear leg just a foot or two from the mat, rather than to kick, so that there is no chance of actually leaving the ground.

We sometimes have the student name the steps aloud as they are performed, so that we have assurance the student has memorized the pattern and can repeat it flawlessly before we move on to the next phase of training.

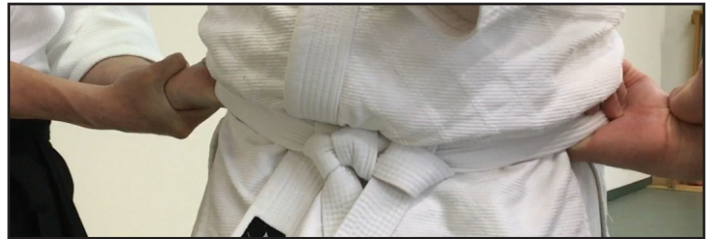


In our dojo, we have an exposed, steel beam that is ideal for the purpose, but any surface against which a student can place their hands to brace themselves is fine. The instructor demonstrates, and then the student practices putting power into the upward swing of the leg and punching up from the base foot. The student can kick hard enough to raise themselves off the mat, but still feel safe in the process. Once the kick is working smoothly, with the requisite power, we move on.

Important Note — Always use as many repetitions as needed to be absolutely certain the student is ready for the next step. Don't rush, and risk an accident!



The next phase involves the use of spotters — assistants who are responsible for catching the student and preventing injury in the case of a botched ukemi. We always used spotters in my high school gymnastics days when learning new moves, so it seemed reasonable the concept could be applied to ukemi.



After tying the student's belt with extra half-knots on both sides of the main knot, a spotter stands to either side of the student and takes a one-handed grip on the belt, at the point of the student's hip. The spotter's free hand grasps their own wrist. Spotters grasp the belt with hands palm-up, such that their forearms can turn over, following the direction of the ukemi rotation without strain on the spotters' joints.

It's very important that spotters understand they must maintain a tight grip until the student is on the mat — I once made the mistake of trying to let go halfway through a good repetition (on the notion I could allow the student to complete the final third of the ukemi entirely on his own). As I released my grip, my left, middle-finger caught in the student's uniform and I strained ligaments in one of the joints. Dumb.



But as long as everyone understands what they need to do, the next phase is easy.

The student takes one or two warm-up reps, naming aloud the steps in the sequence, and kicking only hard enough to lift up on the toes of their base foot. When instructed to do so, the student adds full power to the upward kick, and executes the hirate-ukemi. If necessary, the spotters lift to keep the student well clear of the mat during their rotation. The spotters may also have to sink to a kneeling position to maintain their balance and secure grips. We check the student's obi frequently, to make sure it's not coming untied.



As soon as the student is comfortable with the process, and the spotters can tell the student is not depending on their support to complete the ukemi, we switch the manner of spotting.

Instead of holding the obi, the spotters place the palm of their same hands on the front surface of the student's hips. The spotters are now providing less direct support, but are still in position to save the student from a serious mistake. Just as importantly, the student feels the contact of the spotters' hands, and is reassured.



If all continues to go well, the student will soon be placing virtually no weight on the spotters' hands. At that point, one spotter can be dismissed, and the practice continues.



Although the single spotter still establishes hand contact prior to each repetition, he gradually lightens his touch on subsequent reps so that the student, without realizing it, will actually be executing the entire ukemi without assistance. The spotter remains poised to catch the student, if necessary.

After the student has completed several repetitions (with the spotter's hand progressively removed), the student is informed that they're doing everything on their own. If the student seems unduly surprised, we might spot the next several repetitions, with the spotter's hand in constant contact, to be certain the student doesn't choke once they know they're flying solo.



Another sequence of progressively less spotting is usually all it takes for the student to be comfortable and confident, at which point a consciously unassisted ukemi can be executed. From there, the student will be authorized to execute proper, hirate-ukemi at the conclusion of the Ukemi-no-kata (instead of forward rolls with a slap), and we have the satisfaction of knowing another member of the aikijutsukai has added considerable assurance of safety to their practice. ☺

Detailed, video presentations of how we instruct students in the art of ukemi are available on the Itten Dojo YouTube channel:

“Teaching Ukemi: The F. J. Lovret Method”
(<https://youtu.be/vVsVmudvIJE>)

“Teaching the Solo, ‘Aerial’ Breakfall”
(https://youtu.be/ScV_fw6BVvk)



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*.

