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AIKI SHUREN DOJO

Iwama Takemusu Aikido

Soft Strength

Ukemi – To Receive Without Obstruction

Awase – To Blend

Ukemi

In Aikido the term *ukemi* is usually understood to mean the falling and rolling techniques we train in order to have a given technique done to us without being injured.

In Japanese, *Ukemi* is comprised of two words: *uke* which is the verb stem of *ukeru* - meaning to receive, and *mi* meaning body; in essence – to receive through the body.

In Japanese grammar, you also find the exact same term. It means “the causative-passive form.” For those who are not well-versed in grammar (I am one of this tribe!) this verb form would be, for instance: “I was asked by my sister” in comparison to “My sister asked me.”

This piece isn't going to be about grammar but it is a way to indicate that the word *ukemi* in Japanese means more than just falling or rolling in martial arts; but the underlying feeling of the word has to do with compliance and non-resistance.

Another meaning of *ukemi* has to do with attitude.

I remember very clearly when I first met my wife-to-be (she is Japanese), we went to a small, local place to have a drink and meet some of her friends, in her hometown in Japan. We were all having a good time when one of the customers – he was one of the group, but not a close friend - came up to my wife and I and started getting a little belligerent. It seemed like he wanted to create a scene, or possibly a fight. I didn't speak Japanese at that time, but I had 8 years of Aikido training under my (still white) belt.

I was training very intensively as Uchi Deshi (live-in student) at the Iwama Dojo at that time, so all in all, I felt that if push came to shove I would be able to handle a physical confrontation fairly well. But this outcome would surely put a not-so-pleasant end to an otherwise very enjoyable evening. The guy was getting more and more loud and pushy, towards both my future wife and I,



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but I didn't take the bait. I stood firm and, smiling at him, just indicated with my hands up (open-handed, with the palms facing towards him) that we wanted peace. This open-handed position is, by the way, a very good way of both signaling non-aggressive intent and a very good covering posture if you need to defend yourself. After a while he realized that the situation wasn't going to turn into a fight - he couldn't get a rise out of me, but he wasn't feeling any fear from my side either. This seemed to diffuse the situation and he left soon after.

When we were leaving, the bartender came up to me and said "Ukemi ga jōzu da, ne." I only got the "ukemi" part. My future wife translated, and said "He said that you are good at ukemi." I thanked him, but didn't really understand what he meant. I hadn't done any falling or rolling techniques – so how could he know that I was good? It dawned on me much later that this was another meaning of the word *ukemi*: to deal with a situation by receiving without obstruction.

By not letting the aggressor get me riled up I was doing *ukemi*.

Awase

The term and concept of *Awase* and *ukemi* have many points in common.

Awase means to fit together, to harmonize, to coordinate and much more.

Awase has to do with the timing of our movements, and this is probably the interpretation we mostly think about when doing our aikido techniques: blending with our partners movements, so that we fit together as one – without separation. When our partner comes to grab we blend with this attack, and without separating we enter into our aikido technique.

But *awase* is not only about timing. On a physical level, when two parts fit together, for instance two gear sprockets, you say that these parts *awaseru* (dictionary form, present tense) or *awasemasu* (polite form, present tense).

So, in aikido, *awase* refers to, in its physical form, how things fit together, such as how your grip fits snugly and firmly onto the wrist of your partner.

So, the concepts of both physically and mentally coordinating, blending, harmonizing, fitting together are all a part of the concept of *awase*.

In everyday situations in Japanese social communication you very often hear the term *awase* being used. In social settings, when you are trying to agree upon a meeting time with another person, before you even suggest a specific time, you may hear from your counterpart: "Itsudemo ii desu, yo. Awasemasu." *Itsudemo iidesu, yo* means anytime is fine. *Awasemasu* means that they will fit their schedule to the time you suggest. They are showing that their first and most foremost intention is to fit with your schedule: Soft compliance in action.



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So, both terms - and concepts - *ukemi* and *awase* are good examples of what one might call soft strength.

In martial arts, the example of the young bamboo branch being able to be flexible and soft; to bend in the wind, where the stiff branch will quickly break is an image that is often used when comparing soft strength and hard strength. These concepts of receiving force without trying to fight against it are very inherent not only in martial arts but in the Japanese culture in general.

O-Sensei said that physical strength has its limits – there will always be someone stronger than you. But spiritual/mental strength – *ki* – has no limits. And to receive and blend with the oncoming force (be it physical or otherwise) and then redirect it away without doing harm to the person from which it came is the goal of our training.

So, by training the non-physical aspects of *awase* and *ukemi*, we will be able to deal with the many various obstacles that we may come across in our life – by receiving without obstruction – and redirecting what we receive.

In aiki,

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