

On Ukemi – Sensei Sylph Dominic Hawkins - Sept 2017

You often hear the term “ukemi” in every class, and while it is related to “rolling”, it is a concept that goes far beyond the act of “rolling from a technique”. It is used in the context of physical training to mean “to receive the impact”, but its interpretation can be in mental, emotional and spiritual contexts as well. Extending the interpretation to things such as “to receive well” or “to receive appropriately”, we can see how this idea can also be the basis for a good mental life strategy, but it begs the question, what do we mean by “appropriately”.

For this short blog post, I am going to focus on the physical martial art context of ukemi.

In our style our ukemi comes, almost entirely, from the different lineages of Bujinkan Budo Taijutsu. This is due to the ancestor of our style, The Hoshin Roshi Ryu Jutaijutsu from America with Dr Glenn Morris, having a strong background in Bujinkan (and namely the “Tokagure Ryu” and “Takagi Yoshin Ryu” lineages) among other things, and is directly due to my training for many years with the group teaching the Australian variation, Hoshin Jutsu. My teacher, Geoff Smith, had a particular knack for this kind of “Togakure Ryu” style of ukemi and rolling, and a lot of my memories of his Taijutsu are of his particularly athletic Ukemi.

All martial art styles are born out of a particular context, and this is often very evident in the style of training, and the way that partners “receive” techniques (the “uke”). Our style tends towards an interest in learning how to best counter a technique, as well as using rolling skills to get away fast from situations, gymnastically use rolling to evade objects and to use rolling to pick up weapons/dirt/rocks and anything that might be used to defend ourselves, even if as a last ditch effort after having already been thrown.

We study both “High rolls” and “Low rolls”, in both “Tucked roll” and “Dive roll” versions, often training to control rolling so that a standing forward-roll can be executed within ½ meter of space, or become a dive-roll that can jump over an object such as a table, 2 metres long by 1 metre high. Rolls should be able to be turned into “Breakfalls” or “Breakrolls” as well, if the roll needs to be stopped in the middle to avoid danger on the ground such as broken glass or spine-injuring rock edges.

The context within which our style's ukemi shines is in modern street self defence in cities and urban areas, and students will notice that a feature of our ukemi is getting ourselves as low to the ground as possible before executing the roll, to allow us to roll easily over hard solid surfaces, and to perform no-hand rolls so that the hands are available to pick up rocks, sticks, gravel or other “throwable” items.

This feature can be seen in all of our roll forms, be it forward-rolls, backwards-breakfalls/rolls, side-rolls, roll's from seated-in-chair, and so on.

Of all the skills that martial arts has taught me, I use ukemi and rolling skills the most, and students often hear my stories in class of falling off bicycles, rolling and breakfalling from electric-bike accidents, and the “more common but less flashy” use of ukemi to keep my children safe when they go flying off of swing sets and playgrounds, or when they jump onto me napping on the couch.

Some of my high grade students also have their own stories of where rolling skills and ukemi has, very literally, saved their lives in car accidents, motorbike accidents and dangerous falls. The importance of ukemi skills can not be over emphasised, and it is for this reason, that we study ukemi, in some form or another, in every single class, from the youngest Kids Classes, all the way through to the Advanced Adults Classes.