

# Sword and Spirit

The Journal of Itten Dojo

February 2024



## — Benefits of Budo —

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

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

*These are exactly the benefits membership in an authentic dojo provides.*

Copyright 2024 Itten Dojo, Inc.  
701 W Simpson Street, Suite C  
Mechanicsburg, PA 17055-3716  
[www.ittendojo.org](http://www.ittendojo.org)

## Ukemi: A Comparison

In a Facebook/Instagram post from December 2023, I wrote about yet another fascinating aspect of our introduction and ongoing transition to training in Nihon Jujutsu. We decided to make this transition rather than attempting to maintain/correct our legacy *taijutsu* (“body art”—i.e., unarmed practice). For a while, we had a dojo saying, “If it’s baroque, we’ll fix it.” That approach lasted right up to the point of our first real experience of Nihon Jujutsu *waza* (techniques), as described in “The Art of Letting Go,” in the February 2023 issue of this journal. During a June 2022 visit to JMAC, Alan Starner and I were forced to recognize that Nihon Jujutsu versions of *waza* that had direct analogies in aikijutsu were simpler to apply and astonishingly more effective, especially against active resistance. That’s when I knew we needed to pursue the path that Suino Sensei had suggested. Walking that path has resulted in a continuing series of revelations. Here’s what I posted last December:

*Ukemi (“receiving body”) is the art of getting down safely when thrown, by means of a roll or a breakfall. We have decades of experience in ukemi and have published major articles on the subject. We’re credibly expert in this area. But expert does not mean knowing it all; it certainly doesn’t mean that there isn’t always more to learn. (That “always more to learn” aspect is one of the very best things about martial arts training—budo is inexhaustibly fascinating.)*

*We’re now learning a new world of ukemi, courtesy of our increasing involvement in Nihon Jujutsu under the direction of Suino Sensei. Two of the major components of Nihon Jujutsu are pre-WW II judo and aikibujutsu (in the Takeda Sokaku —> Ueshiba Morihei —> Tomiki Kenji lineage). The ukemi used is a judo-style approach, very different from the ukemi we used in our legacy, aikijutsu training. What I’m now learning is that the NJJ ukemi, as conveyed to us by Suino Sensei, is more intuitive and, overall, more functional—not just for facilitating learning in kata practice, but especially for use in unscripted or unanticipated situations. One of the more serious training injuries I sustained in aikijutsu, at the hands of someone showing off, would have been completely avoided had I known an NJJ ukemi that is so simple and*

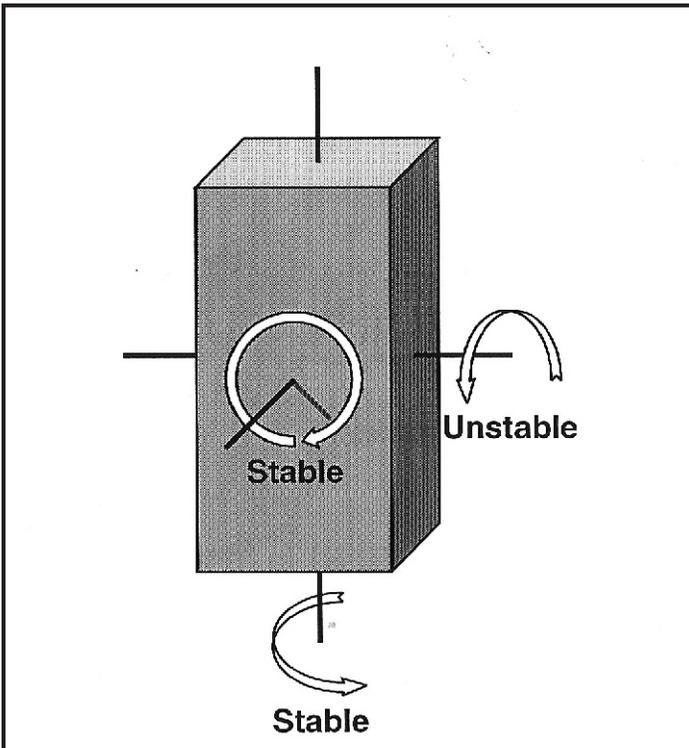


natural that it's one of the easiest for beginners to execute.

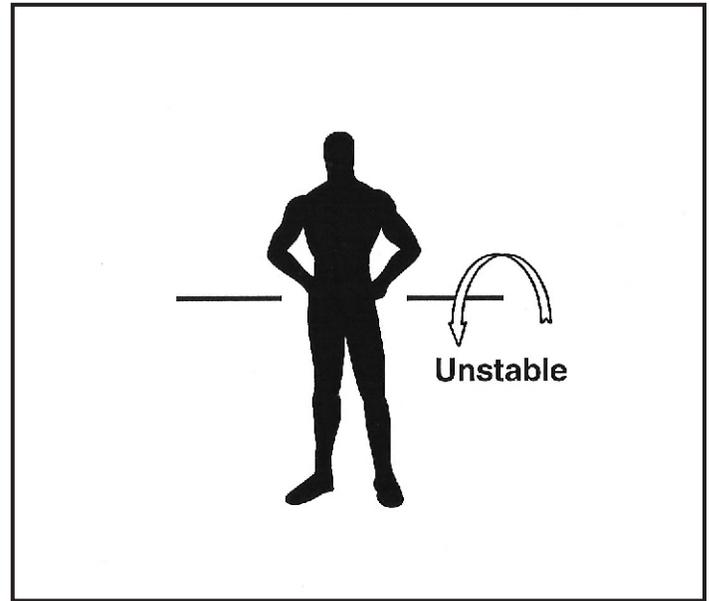
The more I see of Nihon Jujutsu, the more excited and grateful I am for our dojo to have been allowed access to this incredible art.

My post drew a question from Mr. Chris Gonzales, in which he asked, "Can you elaborate on how you believe the NJJ ukemi is more functional than your legacy style of ukemi, either here or in an issue of *Sword and Spirit*? I'm always interested in finding ways to improve how I teach practical skills to my students. I originally learned ukemi through aikido/aikijutsu but also have a lot of cross-training in judo."

To understand my assertion of greater intuitiveness and functionality requires a quick lesson in physics, one that I originally presented in my article "The Science of Ukemi," published in Volume 8 Number 3 (1999) of the *Journal of Asian Martial Arts*. The important point is that a rectangular solid is stable in only two of three potential axes of rotation.



In effect, the human body is a rectangular solid, and the axis that is unstable is the rotation that is used in *zenpo-kaiten*, a forward-roll.



The vertical axis is engaged when little kids are rolling down a hillside, sideways. Totally stable. The front-to-back axis is engaged when executing *yoko-kaiten*, a sideways roll from standing. This type of ukemi is typically a bit unnerving for new students because it is quite unfamiliar. But it's actually easier to perform than a proper, *zenpo-kaiten*, because of the inherent stability in the rotation.



You can demonstrate the above, using any small, rectangular object, by flipping it into the air. You can spin the object on its side and it's stable. You can spin it sideways; same thing. But if you spin the object on its side-to-side axis, it will complete one rotation and then start to tumble. Although, in a *zenpo-kaiten* a person really only completes a single rotation, the instability actually starts to manifest prior to the conclusion of the roll. Consequently, for optimal effectiveness, a forward roll must be "managed" throughout the entire evolution, with



purposeful inputs. And that requires attentiveness and precision, things that might be hard to come by in an emergency or unscripted situation.

The following photos illustrate our legacy zenpo-kaiten, as executed in the Ukemi-no-kata. Notice that I am aligning myself squarely to the front, an action that ensures I will rotate on the axis that is unstable. This is how, in the past, we would enter any forward roll, whether in kata or more freestyle practice.



Within the roll, I have to make micro-adjustments in order to come out of the roll on the prescribed *embusen* (performance line) of the kata.

In contrast, the judo-derived zenpo-kaiten used in Nihon Jujutsu is a hybrid, essentially halfway between a forward and sideways-standing roll, so the roll is stable through a much longer interval. The following photos are screenshots, used by permission from Suino Sensei's "JMAC Intro to Ukemi" video, available at his instructional website, <https://permission.thinkific.com>.

Notice that when Suino Sensei sets up for his forward roll, he is not square to the front, but rather angled to the line on which he will roll.



Within the judo-style roll, Sensei doesn't have to make micro-adjustments, nor does he have to decide anything other than whether to stop with the execution of a breakfall or continue through to standing. Physically, between those two options, the process is virtually identical.

A lot more could be written on this topic, but I'll conclude this discussion by noting that there are aspects of our legacy ukemi that were definitely advantageous. For instance, using the power of the rear leg to lift over a wrist-break as seen in Kote Gaeshi Nage, or employing the same principle in learning to perform a solo, "aerial" breakfall. Happily, those aspects are also incorporated to the JMAC approach.

We're not losing anything in this transition to Nihon Jujutsu; we're just gaining a whole lot more. 🌀

**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 with his senior student Alan Starner founded Itten Dojo in 1992. His articles on martial arts have been featured in numerous publications, including the *Journal of Asian Martial Arts* and *Bugeisha*.**

